

W.Va. in spotlight for food movement

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With eight in 10 farmers making less than \$10,000 a year, West Virginia will never rival big Midwestern factory farms in producing food. But creative collaborations with food entrepreneurs are seeding a new kind of economy that federal officials say could become a model for 12 other Appalachian states.

Officials with the Appalachian Regional Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Education are meeting with nearly two dozen groups across West Virginia this week as part of an Appalachian Foodways Tour. It began in North Carolina, hit Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, and continues next month in Ohio and New York.

In Romney this week, officials visited a high school where students not only sell and show their pigs but produce sausage for Hampshire County's school cafeterias. In Charleston, they'll learn about a program that trains women in business planning, record keeping, and farm and food safety. And in Philippi, they've seen how an out-of-business IGA is becoming a new kind of supermarket, one where jams, flowers, baked goods and produce are gathered from dozens of sources and sold at a single cash register.

"Instead of 30 people marketing their wares, you have one person marketing the wares for everyone," said Savanna Lyons, program director for the West Virginia Food & Farm Coalition. The concept is called aggregating, and it's catching on.

One place where it is evident is in Huntington, where the local food market The Wild Ramp at Heritage Station in downtown Huntington will mark its one-year anniversary this summer.

"It's going better than we ever could have imagined," said Gail Patton, president of the board of Tri-State Local Foods, parent organization of The Wild Ramp.

The aim of the market is to connect local producers with consumers, she said, and as it stands now, there is far more demand than local farming operations to meet it.

Patton is hoping that will change, and she's encouraged that it will.

Right now, the market has 79 producers who sell locally grown or locally made products at the market. Since it opened in July 2012, the market has returned \$160,000 to local farmers and is hoping to reach \$30,000 in sales just this month. It's sold \$224,447 in local food and food products since July 12, 2012, Patton said.

She knows of farmers who are scaling back their other jobs to part time so they can grow more. She knows of farmers who are thinking about expanding their operations and farmers thinking about retiring because they're selling so well at The Wild Ramp.

"The response has been phenomenal," she said.

She'd love to serve the school system, hospitals and other institutions, but farmers need to grow more first, she said.

"To even dream of that, there's a long way to go to increase the amount of food we produce here," she said. That's why experts come in on a regular basis to teach local farmers about techniques to extend their growing season and other tips.

"We're doing everything we can to help them understand that this stuff is in demand year round and there's a way to grow it here. ... We are looking for a larger space because we want to do more aggregation, which is bringing stuff together and maybe get it out to schools and institutions, to help our farmers sell to even bigger markets.

"We've just scratched the surface and are just getting started, but it has huge potential for economic development. It's not Toyota, you know, but it's a lot of little businesses coming together that can make a difference."

A handful of local restaurants -- including Savannah's, Huntington Prime, 21 at the Frederick, La Famiglia, Backyard Pizza, Let's Eat, and River & Rail Bakery -- shop at The Wild Ramp regularly, Patton said. When one farmer brought in 75 pounds of asparagus the other day, she was concerned that the market wouldn't be able to sell it quickly enough. With the help of the restaurants, it was gone in two days.

Lyons, of the West Virginia Food & Farm Coalition, this week is trying to help federal officials understand the opportunities and obstacles to using food as economic development tool.

"Being small and isolated can be both an advantage and a disadvantage," Lyons said. "When it's harder to get your products out there, you have to organize more. You have to get creative. You have to really talk to each other. It's really a different kind of agriculture than out west, where the farms are so huge and they're wholesaling."

Earl Gohl, federal co-chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, is trying to discern what role his agency can play in supporting such ventures. Already, ARC has funded foodways activities in every Appalachian state, investing \$7.6 million since 2001.

What's happening in West Virginia, he said, is impressive in both scope and enthusiasm.

Though it has just 1.8 million people, the state has emerged as a leader in the local-foods movement. Since 2005, the number of farmers' markets has more than tripled, from 30 to 93. Thanks to the state Department of Health and Human Resources, 18 of those now accept the debit cards that replaced food stamps.

Public health officials are on board because a region beset by high rates of obesity, diabetes and cancer could benefit from having easier access to healthy food. Allowing the use of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP cards, also aims to ensure farmers' markets don't just serve white-collar workers with higher incomes.

ARC officials say West Virginia has also gone further than most in drafting a statewide strategic plan, the "Road Map for a Food Economy." An official who helped schedule Gohl's visit calls it cutting-edge thinking.

ARC officials say West Virginia is recognizing and seizing opportunities where they make sense -- and the demand has been there to support them.

While ARC, the USDA and others can support those initiatives, Gohl said, "the reality is the energy around local foods started in West Virginia, lives in West Virginia and is going to grow in West Virginia."

Lyons, who's been working on local food programs for three years, said the road map encourages investment. At least one bank has made multiple donations to various ventures because it can look at the plan and see tangible benefits.

"There's the economic development half of this, which is often communities looking for a way to create energy, to create excitement, to reflect the character of the place," Lyons said. "On the other side are health advocates and people advocating for food access. And both are equally powerful."

The key to helping West Virginia and other states grow what they've started is redefining expectations.

Investors typically like to see large facilities and large sales, she said, but "that's not how we do things here."

"Here in West Virginia, it's micro. So we have to be willing to invest on a micro scale and in micro-scale infrastructure," Lyons said. "We have to right-size our businesses and grow them gradually and carefully, and help people grow into them."

Reporters Vicki Smith of The Associated Press and Jean Tarbett Hardiman of The Herald-Dispatch contributed to this report.
