Food Connects: Radically Rural

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Food Hub founded in 2009 with a vision of a 30 mile radius food system.  
Started small, with visionary farmers and strong community partnerships focused on wholesale.  
Added strong “anchor tenants” with high production capacity to help cover rural transportation costs.  
Trial and Error, learning mentality, evolving as outside world also evolved.  
Lean and green model, shying away from ownership.  
  ○ Shared vehicle  
  ○ Same day pick up and delivery, no inventory!  
  ○ Lots of mistakes  
  ○ Modest impact
At a glance

● Part of a 501c3 with educational programming
● We make it easy to buy wholesale from over 75 farmers and food producers, with one online ordering platform, one delivery, one bill and one customer service experience.
● Our food is source identified from the farm to dock
● Maximize return to producers: they set their prices. Not price takers!
● Sell to over 150 wholesale customers, independent retailers and institutions are top.
● 4 Vehicles
● ~4,000 sq ft facility
  ○ 2 Walk-in coolers, walk-in freezer, dry storage
  ○ Office space
● ~ 9 FTE
Lessons Learned

○ 2017, tired of being on a shoestring!
   i. highly vulnerable to disruptions
   ii. not serving producers and customers as well as should be or wanted to.

○ 2018 to-date, big push on growth!
   i. Sales doubled from 2017-2019
   ii. And doubling again in 2020

○ Partnerships of all kinds really important esp in Rural areas!
   i. Learning networks of similar business models
   ii. Collaborative funding opportunities to meet shared outcomes
   iii. Be open minded
Changes needed to ensure the success of your food hub

● Start small, build success and momentum
● Take the next step up from a strong foundation
  a. No trucks, to owning a truck, to 4 vehicles
  b. Shared cooler, to our own facility, dry storage, walk in coolers and freezers, equipment
  c. Software updates, to improve systems.
  d. Hiring from passion and training, adding more relevant professionals
● Continue to learn and evolve, network with similar enterprises.
Food Hub Networks

- Share information
  - Nuts and Bolts
  - Market Trends
  - Etc
- Transactions
  - Move surplus around the region
  - Unique value added products
  - Leverage competitive advantages
  - Increase seasonal availability
- Bigger Impact
  - Fundraise together
  - Collaborative marketing
  - Advocacy
  - Etc.
Transitioning from local to regional

- Transition to regional continues to be challenging, but tons of opportunity!
- “We want to sell to other places but not have them sell into our area.”
- Also, financially, logistically, and environmentally, we want to have full trucks all the time, so exporting to another area requires importing something to have full trucks.
- Clear on decision making, amount, product types, competition
- Can’t be everything to everyone
Advice?

- As the saying goes, when you’ve seen one food hub... you’ve seen one food hub.
- Do what makes the most sense based on assets and needs in your community.
- Build strong and diverse partnerships
- Take calculated risk. Be bold but do your homework!
- Learn from your mistakes!
- Remember, it's not easy or profitable!
- But NOW is the time for this type of meaningful work!
Resources to recommend

Wallace Center: [National Good Food Network](#)

[New England Food Hub Network Study](#)

Kathy Nyquist: [FOOD HUB NETWORKS: THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT’S FUTURE?](#)