



Developing Regional Food Hubs in Central Florida

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This paper provides a survey of organizations, businesses, and initiatives engaged in building capacity for Central Florida's localized food system by developing regional food hubs. Regional food hubs aggregate food system services like procurement, processing, distribution, warehousing, marketing, and retailing of localized and source-identified food products. The results of the survey show that, while no single entity vertically integrates all of these services, the handful of existing initiatives in Central Florida are nonetheless building noticeable capacity for the region's source-identified food products.

Over the past several years, through policy and practice, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Wallace Center's National Good Food Network have been codifying the definition of the term "regional food hub" to mean "a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand." In particular the organizations recognized by the USDA as regional food hubs are strongly focused on the small and mid-sized producer of their food-shed (Barham et al., 2012).

A survey of Central Florida shows several food system trends that, while not fully embodying the emerging definition, tackle many of the aspects of a working regional food hub. This paper discusses the existing and proposed organizations and initiatives currently serving the regional food hub role in some capacity. Chiefly this paper searched for those entities that combined several portions of the regional food system value chain in one location or operation. The food hub components explored were: Producing, Processing, Distribution, Warehousing, Marketing, and Retailing.

Important caveat: I am a stakeholder in the local food movement in Central Florida and this is by no means a rigorously researched survey. Instead it is a boots-on-the-ground view of Central Florida's source-identified food system, based on my experience. At some future date a more rigorous study, worthy of the peer review process, should be undertaken, but until such time, getting this preliminary survey out to spur further dialogue on the topic seemed prudent.

Central Florida's Emerging Food Hubs

Lake Meadow Naturals (LMN) on-farm retail store in Ocoee is one of the best examples of how several food hub services are aggregated at one facility. LMN produces free-range eggs, hydroponic produce, and ruminant proteins for local distribution and sale at their farm store. As demand has grown, they began supplementing their farm store shelves with produce, proteins, and value-added products from up to 25 regional producers.

Thanks to their brand identity and the marketplace their retail store provides, neighboring producers are able to leverage LMN

retail traffic and brand recognition to add value to the products they sell through LMN's farm store. Additionally LMN has been able, through partnership and contract husbandry, to divert a portion of wholesale bound proteins into its premium value chain. With some consulting from LMN, local producers have changed their on-farm practices to increase their quality and thereby qualifying for inclusion as a LMN offering.

This is one of the strongest examples of how food hub services can build capacity for formerly commodity/wholesale-focused growers/producers. By applying some thoughtful changes in their on-farm practices a new and more profitable market opportunity can be made available.

LMN does not process off-farm products and doesn't create any value added products from off-farm producers' offerings. They may break down a wheel of cheese into more consumer-friendly portions, but there is not a commissary/commercial kitchen on the property where value added products could be created. They do a small amount of warehousing and cold storage, mostly to keep a steady supply for their retail store shelves.

Finally LMN utilizes their e-newsletter and social media (<http://lakemeadownaturals.com/>) not only to tell the narrative of the farm but also to promote and market specific deals in their retail store. For instance, around July 4 they offer a "Grillers Value Pack" of specialty cut meats ideal for grilling. For all of the reasons mentioned above, LMN is one of Central Florida's strongest current examples of a regional food hub. They are actively bridging the gap between local producers and consumers hungry for source-identified foodstuffs.

What LMN is to west Orange County, Homegrown Co-op is to the urbanite population of Orlando. Homegrown is a grower and consumer cooperative founded in 2007. Homegrown has been at the epicenter of consumer interest in source-identified regional food. They have gone from sourcing from 10 local farms at their inception to over 50 farms at present. Their more than 800 members utilize an online shopping cart system (<http://homegrowncoop.org/>) to place orders for weekly pick up at Homegrown's Princeton Street storefront.

This web ordering system has made it possible for many regional small-scale producers to market and sell their products directly to local consumers. However, Homegrown does not process any of these products on site. The typical path to market is as follows: Once the online order is finalized for the week, products are delivered "made to order" to the co-op by the producer, or

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picked up by the co-op's delivery trucks. This model keeps the warehousing needs to a minimum and enables the co-op to service its members with less than 500 sq ft of cooler/freezer space and 1,000 sq ft of dry storage.

Homegrown has several consumer drop-off locations for the online orders and does provide home delivery for an additional fee. Members and non-members may also visit Homegrown's retail store and purchase items from their in-store coolers and shelved dry goods.

Eat More Produce (EMP) farm stand was established in 2008 to create a retail location for a Kingsville, Ontario, farming and wholesaling operation. Affordability and cost competitiveness is a core tenant of EMP's operation. Regionally produced food has been finding its way onto EMP's shelves when it is in season and thereby more cost competitive. When a product is local it is labeled as such and promoted. EMP does some value added processing of in season local produce to make salsa and other deli centric spreads and sides.

EMP has established several mobile farmers market operations in Central Florida YMCAs as well as a weekly farmers market in the Fashion Square Mall's food court. In 2013 they opened a second farm stand in Orlando and though not a traditional food hub by definition, they are nonetheless providing an important path to market for the region's small-scale producers, who are always welcome.

Audubon Park Community Market (<http://audubonmarket.com/>) is a weekly producer-only farmer/community market that takes place in the parking lot of an Audubon Park retail strip center in Orlando. Since its 2009 founding, the market has exclusively served local producers and strictly prohibits resale of wholesale purchased products. It aggregates the fewest food hub services of the regional examples but it has played an important role in providing a marketplace for source-identified local foodstuffs. In addition, the market manager is taking on the role of managing director of an up-and-coming regional food hub under development in the Audubon neighborhood.

East End Market, slated to open in Fall 2013, is a property under development a few blocks from the Audubon Park community market. Its stated objective is to create Central Florida's first comprehensive regional food hub. The project is an adaptive reuse development of a 14,000 sq ft former Baptist church. The project has 3,500 sq ft of public market space, 750 sq ft commissary kitchen, 1,450 sq ft event space with attached demonstration kitchen, 3,000 sq ft market garden, 2,800 sq ft farm-to-table restaurant, and 5,500 sq ft of mixed use office and retail space.

East End Market will fulfill each of the core services of a regional food hub. The market hall tenants were hand-selected by the developer because of their support of local producers.

Several of the tenants are creating micro-processing facilities in their booths and East End's commercial kitchen can accommodate up to four simultaneous chefs/producers processing or creating value added products.

Local Roots, the most grocery centric of East End's tenants, is a farm-to-restaurant distributor. Once the market hall comes online they will add products created in the commissary and by the other market tenants to their distribution list. Taking advantage of East End's 200 sq ft walk-in cooler/freezer, some warehousing and cross-docking can take place, creating more flexibility for the distributor.

East End has a well-established brand identity and like Lake Meadow Naturals is able to leverage its brand to incubate and bring attention to emerging food entrepreneurs and local producers. Through social media and its e-newsletter (<http://eastendmkt.com/>), East End tells the narrative of the local food movement and editorializes the stories of local producers and consumers. Additionally, through the market garden, event space, and demonstration kitchen East End will offer programming that educates more consumers about the bounty of Central Florida's producers.

There are at least two additional Public Markets slated for development in Central Florida in 2013–14. Likely the first to open is the Oak Ridge Market at Artegon (Festival Bay). Oak Ridge is designed like a traditional public market to showcase Florida's local and regional purveyors of fresh produce, meats, fish, and dairy as well as other locally produced foods and natural products. The market will also include a licensed community kitchen and classroom, Florida-fresh dining and prepared foods, to serve the International Drive region as a food distribution hub and more! The other market is the Central Florida Public Market, a 150,000 sq ft market with a mission similar to that of Oak Ridge Market. The future site of the Central Florida Public Market is 8 miles southwest of Disney, and seeks to provide food hub services to the Four Corners region of the state.

In summary, while there is presently no single entity fully embodying the USDA's regional food hub definition, there are nonetheless several businesses and initiatives that have built noticeable capacity and viable markets for the small-scale regional producers of Central Florida. In turn, projects slated for 2013–14 are, at least on paper, looking to more directly aggregate the services of a regional food hub.

Literature Cited

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