

TIP SHEET: Food To Bank On

These tips are based on Sustainable Connections' experience helping establish over 20 local farm businesses by providing beginning farmers with training, mentorship, and contracts to grow food for those in need in our community.



1. Choose Who, Where, What and Why

The true work of a Food To Bank On project is expanding your local community's supply of fresh, local food. It is building food security and providing for those in need. To do this, it's essential to help beginning farmers build growing, thriving farm businesses. Some key questions to ask at the beginning include: Where exactly is our local foodshed? Where are the farmers who are selling their products directly to our local community? What niches are open that could be filled by local producers? Do we need more suppliers of a particular kind of product? For more months of the year? At farmers markets, grocery stores, or schools? Chances are there is lots of room for growth in your local food community, and you can encourage overall growth at the beginning, and then target specific areas with the farmers in the program as your local food system becomes more robust.

2. Recruit a Steering Committee of Mentor Farmers

One of your most important first steps will be compiling a team of about 4-6 experienced farmers to help you design the program, guide its development, select beginning farmers, and mentor them through their first few years in the industry. It's important to choose mentor farmers who are well respected in the farming community, and who have a wide variety of experience and skills to offer. These farmers should represent different products, scales of production, and marketing outlets. To successfully build your local food system, they need to have extensive experience with direct, local marketing. It's also essential that these farmers have a strong desire to cultivate the next generation of farmers, and don't feel threatened by new people joining the industry. It's possible also to have other members of the local food community on your steering committee, though in our experience the mentor farmers provide all the guidance the program needs.

3. Develop the Structure of the Project

Once you have a good sense of the needs of the local food system and experienced farmers to help develop the project, you need to decide the different components necessary to producing ecologically, socially and economically sustainable farm businesses. Our Food To Bank On project works with 8-10 farmers every year, and each farmer participates in the program for three years. The programming has three primary components: education, mentorship and contract for food. See the sidebar on the next page for details.

FOOD TO BANK ON'S INTENDED OUTCOMES:

- 1) To help beginning farmers build ecologically sustainable, socially responsible, and economically viable businesses.
- 2) To provide fresh, local food for those in need in our community.
- 3) To expand our community's supply of fresh, local produce, increasing our long term food security.

EAT LOCAL BUY FRESH

FOOD TO BANK ON
CHANGING NEW FARMS

FEED THE HUNGRY: Beginning Food To Bank On farmers are paid to grow fresh food for local food banks, soup kitchens and senior's shelters.

CREATE NEW FARMERS: Food To Bank On farmers help beginning farmers transitioning into growing viable new farms that will feed our community long into the future.

GIVE SUPPORT: Food To Bank On farmers are paired with experienced mentor farmers who give them support and guidance throughout their three year Food To Bank On.

CONTACT:
21135 Francis Rd.
Moose Wagon, WA 98237
360 820-8335

SALES METHODS:
Restaurants & Retailers

HIGHWATER FARM is a small family farm, raising organic fruits and vegetables in the Skagitlow Valley.

"It is a joy to take part in a cycle of healthy soil, people, animals, and plants that produce great food. Give thanks!"
-EMERILL WOODS, OWNER

Sustainable Connections **COMMUNITY PARTNERS** **SANITIA** **EMERILL WOODS** **EMERILL WOODS** **EMERILL WOODS**

Connect local businesses taking action for a healthy community. www.eatlocalbuyfresh.org

One of our Food To Bank On Farmer Profiles showcasing Highwater Farm

4. Develop a Budget & Funding Plan/Partners

To be able to hire a program manager and pay beginning farmers for the food they grow for local food banks, shelters and soup kitchens, you'll need to come up with \$10,000-30,000 annually (start small, and contact Sustainable Connections for a sample budget). The numerous benefits of this project make it a compelling candidate for sponsorships, donations and grants. There are no limits on where project funding can come from, though we've found success with the following:

- a. Sponsorship by local restaurants and retailers that rely on local farmers for the fresh, local food their customers are after.
- b. Support from local and regional natural food companies. Several local grocery store sponsors give us shelf space next to supporting companies' products to thank them for their support, making it an attractive marketing opportunity for aligned companies.
- c. Grants from various organizations and foundations.
- d. Personal donations from people who love eating local, helping grow new farms and feeding the hungry.

5. Recruiting Business Participation

Once you have developed the structure of the program and secured funding to make it possible, you'll need beginning farmers! The first step is creating an application to assess candidates and learn about their farming plans, and circulating it through organizations that work with the local food and agriculture communities, farmer list serves, local retailers and farmers markets, and more. Once applications are returned, mentor farmers select participants for the year based the project's criteria. Our beginning farmers are selected based on:

- a. Their long-term commitment to producing food locally
- b. The product they're producing and market they're targeting
- c. Their commitment to making the most of business planning, mentorship, and food deliveries
- d. Their commitment to collaboration over competition
- e. Experience farming and crucial access to land and resources

6. Launching Your Campaign

You can launch your Food To Bank On project through a similar series of events year after year. The first piece is posting applications and selecting beginning farmers in the fall. Then during the winter, begin the business planning series when farmers are planning for the next season. Springtime they'll turn in their completed business plans and delivery schedules. And late spring or early summer, they'll start delivering product to local food banks, shelter and soup kitchens. During peak production, beginning farmers' sole responsibility to the program is providing their partner organization with food.

7. Our Top 3 Recommendations

- Choose a great steering committee of mentors excited about growing the next generation of farmers.
- Identify open niches in your foodshed and focus your energy there. You'll reduce competition, give the businesses you're supporting a greater chance of success, and build a more robust food system.
- Remember ecological, social and economic sustainability are all crucial components of an abundant, thriving local food system.



PRIMARY COMPONENTS of FOOD TO BANK ON:

EDUCATION: All beginning farmers complete a series of business planning assignments and attend mentor-facilitated workshops to develop strong, focused business plans. Business planning education is crucial and common to all farmers, whether they produce veggies, fruit, mushrooms, meat, eggs or dairy. Farmers also have access to an educational fund to attend outside workshops pertinent to their specific type of farming.

MENTORSHIP: After meeting the mentor farmers through the business planning workshops, each beginning farmer selects a mentor farmer to work with through the season. Mentor farmers are available throughout the season to answer questions, help with emergencies, give feedback, and exchange farm tours.

CONTRACT FOR FOOD: Each farmer receives a contract with our organization to grow food for a local food bank, soup kitchen or shelter. Early in the season, farmers write delivery schedules to provide for the organizations of their choice. They deliver food throughout the year, submit their invoices to us, and receive payments for their deliveries. The system mimics a wholesale market relationship, and gives farmers experience committing to and fulfilling a planned delivery schedule.