

## Supplier survey in West Virginia aims to maximize use of food hubs for small farmers, ranchers

**AP** By CHELSEA DEMELLO The Journal  
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ADVANCE FOR SUNDAY, AUG. 24, 2014 AND THEREAFTER - This photo taken on Tuesday Aug. 12, 2014 shows Johnathan Lang and his mother Angela Lang picking blueberries in the orchards at Orrac's Farmer's Market in Martinsburg, W.Va. (AP Photo/The Journal, Chelsea DeMello)

MARTINSBURG, West Virginia — As a way to support the growing local food movement, the New Appalachian Farm and Research Center is conducting a supplier survey to assess West Virginia's ability to maximize the use of food hubs for small farmers and ranchers in the state.

In the survey, the NAFRC will receive feedback from local farmers throughout the state who are limited by means of production, distribution and processing, according to Robert Hinton, project manager of NAFRC.

NAFRC is targeting farmers who produce mainly fruits and vegetables. The survey, which is being conducted online, is scheduled to run until Aug. 25. NAFRC recruited Downstream Strategies, an environmental consultant based out of Morgantown, to conduct the

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"We have over 100 farmers who have completed the survey and would love to get more than 250," Hinton said.

Producers who would like to complete the online survey can contact Downstream Strategies.

Although the NAFRC will be using a combination of current data available, the survey is designed to see just how many food hubs West Virginia could support throughout the state, according to Annie Stroud, staff food system coordinator at Downstream Strategies.

Food hubs are a nationwide movement in which several producers collaborate together and try to expand their markets, Stroud said.

"At its core, it's where multiple producers will aggregate their products to sell to a larger buyer, like online," Stroud said.

By selling produce through a food hub, farmers are able to maintain the value of their goods, according to Stroud.

"It's really difficult for institution buyers to deal with really small buyers in terms of wholesale. It's hard to break into those markets. There's an issue of distribution," she said.

In addition, allowing producers to aggregate on a larger scale provides added benefits, such as cold storage for products that are normally unable to be shipped, Stroud said.

"The idea is to consolidate the markets and producers into one contact," she said.

Currently, there are a total of 295 registered food hubs throughout the nation, according to the USDA.

West Virginia has two registered food hubs listed by the USDA — Fish Hawk Acres, located in Rock Cave, and Monroe Farm Market in Union.

With the state only having two registered food hubs, it has one of the lowest productions per thousand ratios in comparison to state population, Hinton said.

"All of the neighboring states that surround West Virginia outnumber us in the amount of food hubs they have," he said.

Virginia has 19 registered food hubs, Ohio has 12, Maryland has five, Kentucky has three and Washington, D.C., has one registered food hub, according to the USDA.

While the survey will not guarantee the future implementation of food hubs, Stroud said the results of the survey will aid in the future development for potential food markets throughout the state.

Although they are not registered as an official food hub, Orr's Farmer's Market is just one of a select few markets in the Eastern Panhandle that provides produce to local businesses and residents.

For nearly 19 years, the orchards at Orr's Farmer's Market have been open, and since then the business has grown into a permanent establishment of wholesale products, educational opportunities and year-round seasonal events.

As one of the only permanent farmer's markets in the Eastern

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Panhandle, Orr's Farmer's Market is also one of the largest, said Kelsey Sams, manager at the farm.

Sams said the added benefit of having a year-round farmer's market is the "pick your own produce" option in which guests can go through the orchards themselves and learn more about produce.

"I think it adds a lot because it is more to offer the kids and it shows the public how things grow," she said.

While Orr's sells a number of items at the home location on Orr Drive in Martinsburg, the farmer's market has moved to an online wholesale market as well.

Currently, the family-owned operation sells peach and apple products, said Sams.

Sams said that cold storage was a contributor to the produce Orr's has available.

In addition, Orr's has sold to local businesses such as Wal-Mart.

"Most of our products are picked the day of," she said.

Sams recalled one experience in which she went into a local Martin's and saw zucchini.

"You couldn't even tell how long it had been sitting out," she said.

Yet, in addition to providing produce to businesses and customers throughout the Eastern Panhandle, over the years, families have come to frequent Orr's as a way of spending time together.

Despite a few rain clouds, Angela Lang along with her son Johnathan Lang, 2, and Victoria Canning, her daughter Kalli Canning, 5, and Laura Cathcart visited Orr's to pick blueberries.

"We aren't weren't going to let a few rain clouds stop us from getting blueberries, they're \$2 a quart. ...Plus they're pre-washed," laughed Cathcart.

Lang, of Charles Town, said the family comes a few times, normally to pick pumpkins in the fall.

"It's a good way to spend time together and enjoy nature," she said.

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