



North Coast Growers' Association

Humboldt County Farmers' Markets

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Harvest Hub Proposal and Fund Request

Background Information

The North Coast Growers' Association's (NCGA) Harvest Box program has just celebrated its 2 year anniversary in June 2022. This multi-farm CSA began as a response to the Covid pandemic with help from a Humboldt Area Foundation Covid-19 Regional Response Fund Grant. Funding was used to pilot an alternate distribution model for NCGA members' products, using an online ordering system and contactless pick-up option for high-risk customers. Using that grant funding, NCGA has been able to create an entirely new program from the ground up that is self-sustaining, provides community members of all income levels with affordable local produce, and offers an alternative to market shopping.

"I can no longer walk the Farmer's Market due to Parkinson's so I'm very grateful to have this easy access to farm to table produce. You are really making a difference in our community."

Over the past 2 years NCGA has distributed almost 5,000 produce boxes. 1,834 of those were purchased by CalFresh/EBT customers who were issued a "Market Match" incentive which reduces the cost of their boxes by 50%, and 2,158 were made available for free through community partners like the Humboldt Network of Family Resource Centers, Food for People's senior produce distribution, Open Door Community Health Clinics, St Joseph Health's Paso a Paso program, Women Infant Children (WIC) offices, Arcata House, and the Old Town Community Alliance. Distribution began with one location at the Arcata Farmers' Market and has since expanded to the Jefferson Community Center in Eureka, and this summer we are piloting a home delivery option for the Northern Humboldt communities of Trinidad to Blue Lake. The Harvest Box program has generated a total of \$309,296 for our members.

The systems that were developed using HAF's grant funding allowed NCGA to quickly activate Harvest Box donations and distribution for fire evacuees. This emergency response has led to more involvement with emergency planning groups such as the Humboldt COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disaster), where NCGA staff works closely with groups such as Red Cross and the Office of Emergency Services to collaboratively create plans for food response during a variety of emergency situations.

Program Development

The success of the Harvest Box program has sparked the interest of many other local institutions and businesses who are looking for ways to support our local food system. NCGA uses the pre-existing relationships with our farmers to order wholesale produce for the Harvest Box program, so we have begun to aggregate orders to make it easier for farms and wholesale buyers to do business together. Previously, if a restaurant owner wanted to order local produce, they would need to develop relationships with multiple farmers who are large and well

established enough to make deliveries, call each farm each week to find out what is available and place orders, receive orders at the restaurant on the farmers' schedule (sometimes conflicting with busy lunch rushes), and finally pay each invoice. This process takes a lot of time and energy, so only a few local chefs with reliable staff are able to focus on sourcing local food in this way.

NCGA is currently in conversation with several local chefs to create systems that will make the ordering and receiving of produce easy. NCGA will be the entity who coordinates all of the orders, deliveries, and payments, so each farm and wholesale buyer will only have 1 point of contact, 1 delivery to make or receive, and 1 invoice to send or pay. We are also in the beginning stage of transferring local food procurement for school districts from the Humboldt County Office of Education to NCGA and have begun creating systems with Cal Poly Humboldt to help them meet their goal of sourcing at least 20% of their produce locally by 2025.

This new-to-Humboldt food business opportunity is referred to as a food hub. By USDA definition, a food hub is "a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products." In order to meet the demand that has been created by the small number of businesses NCGA currently works with, we will need to expand our operations to a physical location where produce can be delivered to and stored at food safe temperatures.

To implement this concept, NCGA has been working collaboratively with other food focused organizations, businesses, and institutions to engage the community and plan the operational structure and feasibility of a food hub. Through monthly planning meetings with stakeholders including farmers and food producers, chefs, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE), the Humboldt Food Policy Council (HFPC), Del Norte and Tribal Lands Community Food Council (DNATL), Food for People, Humboldt Made, and more, NCGA collaboratively created an operational structure and business model for a food hub. With funding provided by a St Joseph/Providence Health Community Recovery and Resiliency Initiative grant, leaders from NCGA, CAFF, UCCE, and HFPC continued this work through bi-monthly planning meetings where we were able to engage with other rural food hub operators and food systems advisors to continue to craft our vision.

The launch of the food hub will create additional market opportunities for Humboldt's farmers, encouraging them to use the full potential of their arable land. In a 2021 survey of NCGA farmer members conducted by HSU students, 78% indicated a desire to increase their wholesale markets by using a single purchaser and distributor, such as a food hub. Additionally, about 50% indicated they have extra arable land that they would use to increase their production, given an increased market for their products, which will be provided by the food hub.

The creation of a food hub will support our community by:

- Bridging regional supply and demand
- Building farm capacity to make the region more self-sufficient
- Building and coordinating physical spaces and systems that allow our region to meet current and future food needs
- Increasing access to nutritious food options

As an agriculturally focused non-profit organization who has been supporting local farmers and food producers in Humboldt since 1979, NCGA is well placed to use its strong connections with food producers, community partners, and customers to build the necessary systems to meet the growing needs of our community.

Next Steps

NCGA is implementing a regional food hub to market, aggregate, and distribute locally grown, raised, and prepared food items. In order to create a resilient business model, we will include additional revenue streams to help supplement the income of the food hub. There will be a retail space rented by a separate entity (potentially Humboldt Made), a small commercial kitchen available for rent, and space in our cold and dry storage available for rent.

We would like to request funding to help retrofit the food hub location with the necessary food safe equipment for storage and aggregation, and for our first year operating expenses while we grow our customers and refine our ordering and distribution systems so that this new venture can be as successful as the Harvest Box program has become. We are seeking \$350,000 to launch hub operations.

We project \$400,000 in gross income from the first year of operation, estimated by current customers and the start of our local procurement for local school districts and Cal Poly Humboldt. Within 5 years we project our gross income will grow to over \$1,400,000, mostly being reinvested in our local food system through farmers, ranchers, and food producers.