

Farmers attend food hub interest meeting



Emily Edmonds, a Masters student in public administration with experience in food systems, speaks to attendees about the feasibility to provide a central aggregation and distribution point for produce destined for wholesale markets, including grocery stores, restaurants and other buyers Tuesday afternoon at the Onslow County Government complex in Jacksonville.

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The Daily News – Jacksonville, NC

<http://www.jdnews.com/news/local/farmers-attend-food-hub-interest-meeting-1.445533?page=0>

Published: Wednesday, March 4, 2015 at 06:44 AM.

In the next three to five years, Onslow County could be home to a food hub that would help local farmers aggregate their produce.

About 20 farmers from surrounding counties including Carteret, Duplin and Lenoir attended an interest meeting on Tuesday to help determine the feasibility of creating a food hub in Onslow County.

According to Emily Edmonds, a graduate analyst at the Kenan Institute for Private Enterprise with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the proposed food hub would function as an aggregation and distribution point for local farmers to sell their produce to wholesale markets such as grocery stores and restaurants.

“The one thing that food hubs do is aggregate,” said Edmonds, who also facilitated the meeting. “So you take a lot of product from a lot of different small producers and make one big order, and the benefit of that is that you can get into wholesale markets that you can’t if you’re on your own.”

In North Carolina, there are about 17 food hubs or produce aggregation centers currently in development or in existence, Edmonds said.

Edmonds said the size of a food hub can range from as small as 1,000 square feet to 15,000 square feet but typically, no two food hubs or produce aggregation centers are identical.

“They tend to develop very uniquely because they’re based on what a community already has and what a community needs, so they all look a little bit different,” she said. “... Some food hubs will also

do processing, packing, washing, distribution, those kind of things; but you can have one as simple as it just does aggregation and storage.”

Among some of the feedback solicited from farmers during the interest meeting Tuesday were the types of products or produce each farmer has, the amount of acreage currently yielding produce and the amount of acreage that could potentially be used for production.

Edmonds said gathering information from local farmers prior to starting a food hub is important.

“The biggest thing that’s going to impact whether a food hub is successful or not is how much volume you can do,” she said. “So if everybody is already doing all their acreage ... and has no plans to change it, then there’s no point in building a food hub to begin with.”

Edmonds said the proposed food hub could also bring benefits on a consumer level.

“The way that would impact you as a consumer is that you would be able to see more local products in your grocery store chains,” she said.

While the food hub aims to help local farmers sell their products or produce, Edmonds said a successful food hub could also spur local job growth in the long-run.

“There’s a lot of job creation that goes along with them because you have jobs in distribution, you have jobs in operating the plant,” she said. “There is also typically a lot of marketing to be done.”

Joe Merrell, a farmer with Merrell Farms based out of Beaufort, said the idea of a local food hub is “intriguing.”

“I think depending on the way they set it up, it has a lot of possibilities, potential to increase the ways I can distribute my produce,” Merrell said.

For Catherine Elkins, owner of Underground Farms in Carteret County, the idea of creating a food hub in Onslow County is something she welcomes with open arms.

“I think Onslow is a great location that deserves to be a central hub,” Elkins said. “I’m from Carteret County and it makes a lot of sense that we shouldn’t duplicate our efforts.”

Elkins, who grows as many as 45 different vegetable crops on her farm in a calendar year, said the food hub would help increase demand for her produce.

“Currently, we’re doing three acres and it could be as much 15,” she said. “... We would love to ramp that up, but we don’t have enough demand.”

Elkins said she is looking forward to having the facility in the

“It’s exciting to think that this could be a real, viable microenterprise for Onslow County and it could help Carteret County too,” she said. “We all work together.”