Notes from the Field
Expanding Regional Capacity for Fresh Produce
By Alex Arroyo

Food banks in rural areas of Washington face many challenges when working to make fresh produce more available to clients. How do we approach solving these challenges? Several new innovations have the potential to increase regional cohesion where rural economies thrive through a rich interchange between producers and consumers, and all have access to an exceptionally nutritious diet.

Food banks in rural areas of Washington face many challenges when working to increase the amount of fresh produce available to clients. In addition to limited operational resources and volunteers, programs have to overcome difficulties transporting, distributing, and storing fresh produce. Over the last several years, technologies have been developed through the vision and work of people all around Washington that have the ability to address those challenges.

Mike Hannum is an entrepreneur and businessman who has always been interested in sustainable agriculture. His Social Purpose Corporation, HarvestScape, works with local designers and a regional manufacturing company to develop a variety of products that aim to help solve challenges of regional food production and distribution.

One of those products is called the HarvestNode, and is an up-cycled shipping container that could revolutionize regional storage capacity and food system dynamics. With many customizable features – such as cold storage, dry storage, and food preparation – the HarvestNode is a promising technology for food banks, gleaning organizations, food distributors, farmers, and others who may be limited in size or capacity.

Kendra Dean, a Harvest Against Hunger VISTA working with the Spokane Edible Tree Project, has been able to utilize a HarvestNode for storing the large amounts of fruit she gleans from trees around the Spokane area.

“I think the HarvestNode is just about the greatest thing ever. It provides us with 24-hour access for food drop off; the produce is able to last a lot longer since it goes straight into cold storage; and we can see where our produce is going, which is something that isn’t necessarily as easy when donating to Second Harvest. Overall, I think it’s a pretty amazing asset for the local food distribution system because there are so many options and possibilities.”

She also notes how the HarvestNode’s flexibility makes it perfect for use by multiple organizations, enabling easy cooperation and collaboration. “We are able to use it to help distribute healthy food to low income and food insecure individuals, but also a for-profit organization, LINC foods, is able to use it to carry out their CSA program. So it’s touching a lot of people.”
Currently, the HarvestNode’s cost may make it outside the reach of many individual programs. However, the large size of the container, and the potential for multiple agencies to utilize it, allows for the possibility that programs could pool resources to acquire one and use it as a shared storage and processing facility. This is the strategy being used by multiple programs in Okanogan county, who have pooled resources and collaborated with Catholic Charities Spokane to purchase a HarvestNode for their county-wide Farm-to-Food Pantry work. Additionally, the Node is classified as a ‘mobile piece of equipment,’ and as such qualifies for USDA loan programs.

Another exciting technology is micro-scale refrigerated trailers, to be used as nimble and scale-appropriate transportation for fresh produce.

Nils Johnson is the Agriculture Program Coordinator for WSU Extension in Stevens County and has worked closely with the Harvest Against Hunger program in eastern and central Washington.

His work with food pantries and small-scale growers led him to a key insight: the volume of produce being transported from farms to food banks was often small enough to fit in the back of an SUV. In partnership with HarvestScape, Catholic Charities Spokane, and NW Farm Credit Services, Nils designed and built a refrigerated trailer using readily available and inexpensive materials. The ‘CoolBox trailers’ (or ‘pup trailers’ as Nils describes them) are designed to fit a bit more than a pallet’s worth of produce and can be towed by a passenger vehicle.

The trailer immediately proved its effectiveness, being used to quickly transport a small farm-to-school produce order, appropriately scaled to the size of the school. By matching the scale of the delivery to the scale of need ultimately means better quality and will result in less wasted food. By the end of the 2016 growing season, the trailer was being used to transport produce between Stevens and Okanogan counties, expanding the capacity of both regions and increasing the variety of produce available to clients through in-kind trades.

In their first applications, the HarvestNode and CoolBox trailers displayed their high potential for use aiding the transporting, distributing, and storing of fresh produce in rural areas of Washington. All involved hope to build on the successes of 2016 and expand the use of these innovative technologies.

There is also potential for these technologies to have a significant impact in other regions of Washington where hunger relief programs face similar limitations - such as the remote western Olympic Peninsula, where distance between programs poses a significant challenge; or in urban areas, where programs are typically small in size and are further removed from traditional farming areas. There are a multitude of ways that these technologies can effectively expand the capacity of individual programs and provide solutions for traditional limitations to increasing the amount of fresh produce, and their potential is just being explored.

*Right: This image, produced by Nils Johnson working with the Providence NEW Hunger Coalition, displays a vision for multi-dimensional cohesion around food production and consumption. Many possibilities for agricultural enterprises, social investment, and improved nutrition are able to emerge through a systemic design around food and equitable access.

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email growingconnections@northwestharvest.org, or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423