

Emma Sharer | Ecotrust operations director

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FARE itself is not a hub. Krick said the state has some successful small hubs, such as Global Gardens in Boise, “but on the macro level we have not been successful. It takes some regional density to make that work.”

John Klimes, a FARE Idaho board member who owns Agrarian Harvest in Buhl, said a small food hub is succeeding in Bellevue, south of the Sun Valley area. For the much larger Idaho's Bounty, "a big challenge was space and distance. ... When you start putting two hours of drive time in a refrigerated truck on the road, that distance starts costing a lot of money."

A food hub in Astoria is set to open this year.

At the Local Inland Northwest Cooperative, known as LINC Foods, in Spokane Valley, partnerships director Brian Estes said revenues grew more than five-fold between 2017 and 2021, helped by its members and staff and a successful barley malting enterprise.

“Having the right people, both growers and the staff of the co-op, going in the right direction with the right resources, that’s what it takes to seize opportunities effi-

ciently enough to be viable," he said.

At Puget Sound Food Hub Cooperative in Mount Vernon, Washington, general manager Andrew Yokom said they plan to scale up this year. The organization also plans to fine-tune production plans for specific crops so the grower at planting has a better idea where the crop is going, in what quantity and at what price.

The hub will also emphasize “working hard and getting out there, telling people about our work and our mission,” he said.

The Ecotrust nonprofit opened The Redd on Salmon Street, a Portland food hub, three years ago.

"It's beneficial to have food hubs everywhere," said Emma Sharer, Ecotrust operations director.

But, she said, analysis is crucial. “The food hub we built at The Redd is perfect for last-mile logistics — bringing in food from rural producers, aggregating food from small-scale urban producers and distributing it out in a tight radius,” Sharer said. “But if we look at another location in, say, The Dalles, the opportunities look so different.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food hub as actively managing aggregation and distribution, and marketing source-identified food products, mainly from local and regional producers.

The idea is to boost the hub's capability to meet local wholesale, retail and institutional demand.

"A food hub is a response to a community need," said Sydney DeLuna, who coordinates the Oregon Food Hub Network and is a community food systems consultant on contract with Oregon State University.

Needs driving a hub's creation can range from land-use patterns and economic development to scaling up distribution so small farmers can access larger-scale buyers.

One key to success is, “Are you delivering on your programs?” DeLuna said. “If you are about food access, then your key to success is, are you expanding access to quality food, are you serving your constituency?”

All food hubs are not created equal, she said.

“Constituencies are different for each food hub,” DeLuna said. “They are born for different reasons and driven by different community needs.”

Global Gardens, based in central Boise, is a program of the Idaho Office for Refugees and the nonprofit health and human services organization Jannus Inc. Its food hub connects 14 immigrant and refugee farmers with buyers.

To do that, it distributes produce to local restaurants, grocery stores and institutions, and via drive-thru sales at a farmers market.

A separate community-supported agriculture subscription program has eight pickup sites.

Program manager Rabiou Manzo said Global Gardens' volume grew partly because, since COVID-19 arrived, "people have seen how important it is to have local produce."

Global Gardens has challenges — including land availability — and opportunities such as growing more types of vegetables, aggregating food from other local farmers and getting more produce to lower-income consumers.

At LINC Foods in Spokane Valley, Carl Segerstrom, the procurement director, said

an inherent challenge is that local food often is more expensive than food from elsewhere.

“But at the same time, we are very focused on giving a fair return to farmers,” he said.

LINC's Estes said a founding premise more than seven years ago was to help growers increase sales, not simply to act as an intermediary. The team "has been able to work with growers to really seize that opportunity and make sure we are truly creating new value for our producers by opening up those marketing opportunities."

At The Redd in Portland, navigating COVID-19 remains a challenge.

“Our operations and facilities teams hold all these parts together, supporting our anchor tenants in their businesses, filling vacancies through equitable leasing processes and bringing in and supporting businesses that are serving our local food community,” Sharer said.

With FARE Idaho, Baker said, businesses across the state “had an opportunity to come together and share ideas, issues, concerns and to help each other through the process of operating in the pandemic.”

As for selling and delivering local food in bigger quantities, Krick, the restaurateur, said farmers markets could expand on the order-ahead model, which has found success during the pandemic.

He said equipping a farmers market with cold storage, a small processing or packaging area and a shipping-and-receiving setup would be more viable than developing a food hub, and could bring new opportunities for the market and participating producers.

"Local food is going to be more nutritious and sustainable, including when we have supply-chain hiccups," Krick said of the idea.

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