

## **Creating a Statewide, Web-based Product Availability and Ordering System to Improve Consumer Access**

**Heart of Maine Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.** of Bangor, ME, received \$70,740 to develop an online “virtual farmers market” for direct marketing of farm products. The proprietary software allowed farmers to offer products directly to consumers in a variety of ways, including consumer buying clubs, and gave the ability to place advance orders at farm stands, CSA’s, and farmers markets.

### **Final Report**

**“Creating a statewide, web-based product availability and ordering system to improve consumer access to locally grown farm products directly from the producer”**

**Final Report**

**Project Duration**  
**September 2008 - December 2010**

**Submitted By:**

Heart of Maine Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.

1423 Broadway, Suite 2

Bangor ME 04401

Contact: Paula Day, 207-696-8377, [pday@hciwireless.net](mailto:pday@hciwireless.net) or

Chris Brewer, 207-947-6622 x 113, [chris.brewer@me.nacdnet.net](mailto:chris.brewer@me.nacdnet.net)

**Project Summary**

The idea for this project was to create a statewide, web-based marketplace where Maine consumers could browse the products available from Maine farms. Consumers cite convenience, access and price as barriers to buying local. Previous surveys and focus group studies had shown Heart of Maine a need for an online, one-stop shopping center for local consumers who want to buy locally but are stymied by lack of information on what is available, where to find it, and what it costs.

In 2008, Buying Clubs were popping up around the state but many were struggling with the amount of administrative work involved in sourcing member orders from multiple farms, as well as the difficulty of running a “store” - weighing, bagging, invoicing, taking money from buyers, reimbursing the farmers - all done by unpaid volunteers.

At the same time, farmers were becoming more and more aware that online buying was a growing trend but many lacked the time, the skills or the resources to develop their own websites and online order/delivery/payment systems. While many farms do, today, have websites, most are for information only and lack the capability for online ordering.

This project was meant to streamline the process of putting local farm products in the homes of local consumers; a single website with a statewide list of farms and the products they had available for direct sale to the consumer, as well as a list of food buying clubs for consumers interested in that purchasing possibility and online credit card purchasing ability.

**Project Approach**

Heart of Maine began the process by researching online ordering systems that were already operating. A list of the organizations or businesses directly contacted:

- Farm to City, [www.farmtocity.com](http://www.farmtocity.com)
- Idaho’s Bounty, [www.idahosbounty.org](http://www.idahosbounty.org)
- Fresh Fork Market, [www.freshforkmarket.com](http://www.freshforkmarket.com)
- Local Dirt, [www.localdirt.com](http://www.localdirt.com)

- Local Orbit, [www.localorb.it](http://www.localorb.it)

HOM Executive Director at the time, Tessa Burpee and John Harker, consulting from the ME Department of Agriculture, met with representatives from Farm to City, Idaho Bounty and Fresh Fork Market in early 2009 to ask questions, to review software functions and to determine which features would best suit Maine farmers and local buying clubs. Tessa and John then developed a list of features that they felt necessary for the software in mind and then put out a request for bids, with flexibility for applicants to either build from scratch or adapt an existing program.

Two bids were submitted; one for building from scratch and one, from Fresh Fork Market, that would adapt a system that already had most of the necessary features. HOM entered into a contract with Fresh Fork and work began in July 2009.

At the same time, John and Tessa met with farmers and consumers in two separate geographic and demographic areas of the state - central Maine and Down East. In Bangor (central, urban, middle-class), they met with farmers and consumers who were interested in starting a new buying club and who expressed an interest in the software potential. Down East (rural, coastal with a small scattered population mostly below the Federal poverty level), they met with farmers and consumers who were already part of four buying clubs that had been in operation for approximately one year. Both groups were helpful in pointing out features that were important in fine tuning the software as it was being adapted.

In addition to in depth research on the various software firms likely to be candidates for developing this new system, Heart of Maine conducted continuous outreach to farmers during 2008 – 2009, to both tell them about the possibilities of online sales and to gather their input on the sort of system that would work for them. Farmers Down East were approached and agreed to trial the new system in a pilot project with three food clubs and Heart of Maine installed the necessary freezer and refrigeration units at those clubs to allow for increased product collection and distribution.

Four focus group meetings were held to gather input from farmers and food club coordinators and representatives from Fresh Fork Market were on hand to explain their ordering system and gather feedback on how their software could best be customized to meet Maine farm needs.

Tessa Burpee and John Harker also gave presentations at various agriculture venues throughout the fall and winter of 2009-10 on the new ordering system.

Heart of Maine also worked with graphic designers to create a visual representation of the project which was officially named “Farm Fresh 4 ME” in late 2009.

[In addition to the online ordering system, many farmers saw the need for on-farm cold and dry storage systems for the new market as well as regional hubs that would serve as drop-off and distribution points. To meet those needs, Heart of Maine secured a \$125,000 grant from the Walmart Foundation. Those funds are currently being used to build refrigeration and storage facilities at two regional food hubs, one in Penobscot and one in Somerset County, and to supply refrigeration and freezer space for one of the largest food pantries in Maine which works closely with local farms to provide food for the needy in Penobscot. Up to twenty farms will also be provided with matching funds to create on-farm cold storage facilities.]

## **Problems and Delays**

The selection of Fresh Fork Market for the software development so crucial to this project had seemed the best possible choice at the time. Started by a young entrepreneur, a recent graduate of Case Western with excellent references for business acumen and computer expertise, Fresh Fork Market is a successful online farmers’

market program serving the Cleveland area. Adapting the program to suit Maine farmers and the food club buying model seemed relatively straightforward and Fresh Fork Market owner Trevor Clatterbuck began work on the revisions and re-programming in the summer of 2009. Educational and training resources for the online ordering system were also in development at that time but by September of that year, it was apparent that the work was falling behind schedule.

The first iteration of the new ordering system was up and running by late summer 2009, and put into operation as a pilot program with the food clubs and farmers in Down East, Maine. The result was not satisfactory; neither the farmers, nor the consumers nor the food club coordinators were satisfied and the system was sent back to Fresh Fork Market for overhaul. From October to December, Heart of Maine worked with the developer to make the necessary modifications in the system and in late December '09, the second iteration was trialed. It too was unsatisfactory and in February 2010, the decision was made to scrap the system and start fresh.

An entirely new program was developed by a Maine company during the spring and summer of 2010, and it was trialed successfully at a new food club in Readfield, Maine, from October to December of that year.

### **Goals, Outputs and Outcomes Achieved**

**Goal** - The goal of this project was to introduce a new marketing protocol for a wide range of Maine farmers.

Consumers are looking for convenient access to local foods at competitive prices and food buying clubs are one way to make the connection. Heart of Maine successfully created software that can be used by individual farmers, farmers' markets, food buying clubs and others to coordinate orders from multiple consumers to multiple suppliers. Suppliers can create an account, list products, descriptions, prices and photos. Consumers can log in, see what is available, sort by type of product or supplier, purchase products and pay online. Food club coordinators can manage all aspects of the order cycle: invoices, adjustments and payments.

**Outputs** - Increasing the local market for Maine farm products changes the face of local agriculture from commodity to food. This trend has been growing steadily for twenty years but the momentum now is escalating. Small farms need new young farmers to meet the demand and one way of drawing them in is to give them the technical tools they are familiar with. We hope this new online ordering system will be part of that process.

Focus groups and presentations were discussed above.

**Outcomes** - Four order cycles were successfully completed with the new software. Over 80 people created consumer accounts, and an average of 20 ordered each week. Feedback from consumers shows that they are excited to see what is available and to have the ability to order local food that is delivered nearby. The farms involved – from all over Maine – supplied produce, value added products, meat and dairy.

### **Beneficiaries**

The software can be easily used by other groups, buying clubs, individual farmers or farmers' markets. Plans are in the works to continue to improve the system so that feedback and messages can be left within the system, to amend the home page to have more information about what is happening locally each week, to add workshops and educational features and recipes.

## **Lessons Learned**

Developing regional food systems is an on-going process that will not be accomplished overnight. Indeed, it took decades to shift this country from regional food systems (pre-WWII era), to the global commodity system we have today, and many say we cannot go back. But “going back” is not what the effort to put locally grown and produced food in the hands of local consumers is about. For reasons ranging from national security to food safety to consumer health and agricultural economic stability, producing what we eat where we eat it is an important plan for the future.

This project is one element of that plan. Using modern technology to give both consumers and producers one of the conveniences we have come to expect in 21<sup>st</sup> century life – the ability to find and purchase anything we need online, including food – combines the best of two worlds – hands on food production and marketing ease. We think Heart of Maine’s effort has been very successful in that regard.

We have learned, however, that the virtual world can only go so far in selling something as real as food. Consumers still want to see what they are buying before they put their money down. Our customers used and seemed to enjoy the online ordering process but they waited until pick-up or delivery, when they could actually see their food, before paying. One element of the online system appears to be unnecessary.

Also, we have relied to a great extent on farmers to give us links or the photos and text necessary to really promote their farms. This did not work for the majority of the farms involved; most of them do not have websites nor do they have the time to create and illustrate their own public relations. To make the website a truly attractive draw, there must be a “story” for each farm with photos of the farmer, the property, the crops or livestock. This is will be the focus of the next improvement of the website and we are enthusiastically anticipating that next phase.

## **Additional Information**

[www.farmfreshforme.com](http://www.farmfreshforme.com)

### Contact Person

Paula Day, Chair  
Heart of Maine RC&D Area, Inc.  
1423 Broadway, Suite 2  
Bangor ME 04401  
Tel. 207-696-8377  
[pday@hciwireless.net](mailto:pday@hciwireless.net)