

Farm to Table Program offers uncertain solutions

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Small farmers are familiar with the small business way of doing things - building their own identity, creating their own products, and selling their products firsthand to customers. There is a close connection between farmers and their business because they are doing everything themselves.

Some small farmers that were interested in expanding looked to the Farm to Table Program as a way to fund their growth.

The Farm to Table Program, previously Farm to School, attempts to help by connecting farmers not only to schools but also prisons, nursing homes, military bases and hospitals.

This expansion became effective in Missouri on Aug. 28, 2016, and was intended to build agricultural community and spur economic growth, but there’s a flaw. Farmers may actually lose profit by joining the program because there is a disconnect between the farmer and the institution.

Most institutions tend to buy their food from wholesalers or other types of aggregators, leaving the independent small farmers out of the picture. Dealing with one company streamlines transactions and creates consistency that is needed when feeding large groups.

“Schools don’t want 15 different trucks pulling up at their backdoor to deliver food,” said Cindy DeBlauw, associate of MU Extension in Columbia.

In order to meet the high demands of an institution, small farmers would have to sell to an aggregator. The aggregator combines the produce of multiple farmers in order to supply the institution’s needs.

However, some small farmers don’t want to sell to aggregators because they will lose profit and there is no added incentive to do so.

According to the Kansas City Food Hub Feasibility Study, 44 percent of farmers sell their produce at farmers markets. Here, farmers are in control of the entire process from seed to sell and retain full retail revenue from their produce.

Aside from farmers’ concerns of not gaining full profit from their products, they also have doubts concerning the way food hubs manage farmers’ money. Dennis Cramer, owner of Cramer Farms, says he would manage the money himself rather than have someone else do it for him.

“You go through all that process, and then say it goes into a hub, and then the hub distributes it someplace else. He’s got to pay the hub, and then the hub’s got to pay me. Well, that’s kind of risky in my opinion,” Cramer said.

Although some farmers prefer to sell their products at farmers markets, there are some downfalls. The market is not always consistent, so farmers never know how much they will sell.

“At first I sold everything I had. Then I ramped up my volume a little bit to where I wasn’t losing sales, so I’ve definitely come home with stuff,” Jacob Fowler, owner of Fowler Family Micro Greens, said.

Despite the sale inconsistencies at farmers markets, farmers still prefer them because they are in control. When they sell to aggregators, some of that control is taken away.

Some farmers also have concerns with food hubs because they don’t trust aggregators with handling their products. DeBlauw said that an aggregator has a big responsibility.

“It requires a lot of trust on a lot of people’s parts. It’s all about establishing relationships and you have to have some infrastructure behind the hubs in order for it to be successful,” DeBlauw said.

Fresh Farm HQ, a farmer-owned co-op in Kansas City, is an aggregator that provides marketing, sales, and distribution for their farmers. Director of Operations Wayne Parks said they have to pay farmers less than retail price due to operating costs.

Farmers can’t afford to lose money in their business, which is what makes building a relationship with an aggregator so difficult. Fresh Farm HQ is one aggregator that is actively working on building those relationships. However, they still have to make money and small farmers still want to sell at retail price, so the stalemate continues.