



The History of Fifth Season Cooperative



FIFTH SEASON COOPERATIVE HISTORY

In the spring of 2009, information gathered through a regional 18 month food assessment process conducted by the Valley Stewardship Network indicated that there is a lack of coordination to market and distribute local food, including meat, produce and dairy that is produced in the region.

In the summer of 2009, Sue Noble, Executive Director of Vernon Economic Development Association, was meeting with institutional cafeteria food service buyers, such as UW La Crosse, Western Technical College, Gundersen Health System, Viroqua Schools, and Vernon Memorial Healthcare who wanted to buy local food but didn't know how to make it happen. It was obvious there needed to be a way to match producer supply with food service market demand, connecting what the growers are producing with what the cafeterias want to serve.

In January 2010, Vernon Economic Development Association submitted and was awarded a \$40,000 grant through the Buy Local Buy Wisconsin program to hire a part time coordinator and establish a cooperative business structure that would provide the missing link of coordination between producers, processors, distributors and buyers.

The first six months of the grant were spent developing the mission, bylaws, articles of incorporation and first board of directors. Margaret Bau, USDA Cooperative Development Specialist, was instrumental throughout the development of the cooperative. The Fifth Season Cooperative officially

became a business on August 10, 2010. The seven-member interim board of directors, representing each of the classes of membership, met every two weeks for a year to work on policies, procedures and pricing, business plans, build memberships, establish an investor stock option, address staff needs and oversee all aspects of the start-up phase of the business.



In July 2011 they hired an operations manager as the first staff. Reinhart Foodservice, a leading national food distributor based in La Crosse, also joined the co-op as a distributor member in 2011, providing critical distribution capacity and access to thousands of buyers in institutional foodservice markets.

In December 2012 a capital campaign “Help Us Grow” was launched, offering opportunities to help build equity for the business by investing in Fifth Season’s Class B preferred stock. Community members who are interested in supporting Fifth Season’s regional model and the businesses and communities it serves are welcome to participate in this investment option.

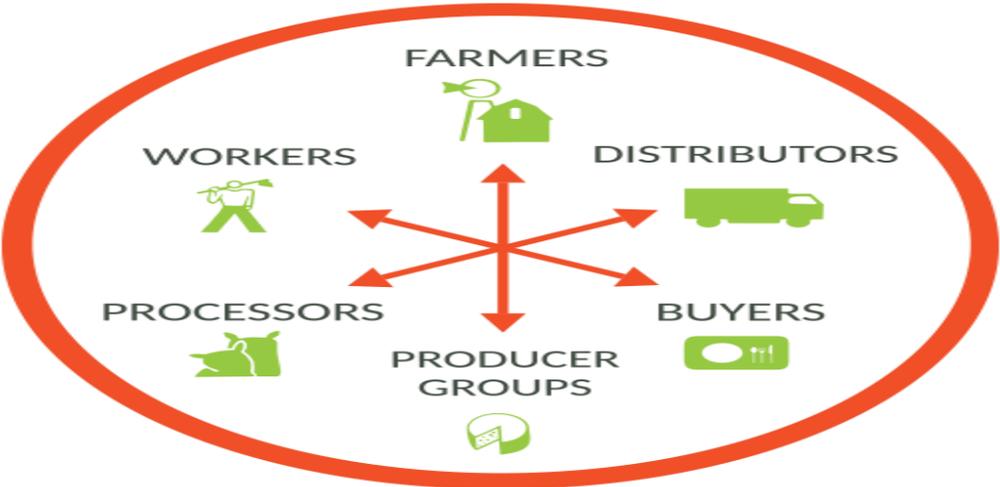
In December 2013, Fifth Season partnered with family-owned frozen food processor member Sno Pac Foods in Caledonia, Minnesota, to begin offering FSC’s two frozen vegetable blends, “Winter Moon Blend” and “Wisconsin Potato Fusion.



The cooperative's new direction and success received national recognition by the Wallace Center at Winrock International in Arlington, Virginia, on behalf of the National Good Food Network.

FSC's success at operating a regional food hub has also received other attention, both state and national. In May 2014, the local cooperative was chosen from almost 200 applicants to be among 11 food hubs across the United States to receive a \$75,000 Wallace Center Food Hub Development Grant. In August 2014, FSC received a \$197,696 grant through the USDA Rural Development's Value-Added Producer Grant program to expand its quick-frozen vegetable blends to institutional market channels.

The cooperative brings together farmer/producers, producer groups, processors, distributors, buyers, and workers within 150 miles of Viroqua. Its current membership, listed on the last page of this newsletter, includes 34 small family farms, 3 farmer/producer groups, 15 processors, 2 distributors and more than 2500 buyers.



FSC aggregates and distributes locally grown produce, meats, dairy and value-added products through distributor members to hospitals, schools, and businesses in the greater Driftless Region,

Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Madison and Chicago. Some fresh produce is brought to the Food Enterprise Center in Viroqua and stored in a cooler for pickup by Reinhart trucks. Other local food products are shipped directly from various processors to Reinhart's distribution center and then to institutional buyers throughout the region and beyond.

"Our total sales have increased from \$40,000 in 2011 to \$130,000 in 2012, to \$230,000 in 2013, and to \$360,000 in 2014. We expect sales to hit \$475,000 in 2015," says FSC Board President Brian Wickert. He adds, "The cooperative continues to grow in 2015, bringing on new products and members and further developing value-added frozen vegetables geared toward institutional food service needs and expanding into retail."

The co-op is governed by a board of directors, elected from the membership, including distributor member Mike Dvorak from Reinhart Foodservice, worker member Ben Eby as FSC Sales Manager, producer member Toril Fisher from Second Cloud on the Left Farm, processor member Pete Gengler from Sno Pac Foods, buyer member Tom Thompson from Gundersen Health System, and producer group member Brian Wickert from EZ Farming. The Fifth Season offices are headquartered at the Food Enterprise Center in Viroqua with Office Manager Jamie Deaver, Sales Manager Ben Eby, and GAP/Food Safety Auditor Linda McCann. Sue Noble, Executive Director of Vernon Economic Development Association, continues to provide daily oversight and grant writing assistance.