

Inter-institutional Network for Food and Agricultural Sustainability (INFAS)

Member Profile: Rich Pirog, Michigan State University

Background

Rich Pirog joined INFAS early in its formation while working as associate director of the Leopold Center at Iowa State University. Since then, he transitioned to become the associate director, then director (in 2016), for the Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) at Michigan State University¹. Rich believes that the formation of INFAS was extremely important, as it “*creates a learning community of centers and institutions and is providing a primary opportunity to convene with and learn from them.*”



Connections to INFAS

CRFS's work has a number of connections and parallels with the commitments to social justice and sustainability that INFAS has made. Although it is not their primary work, CRFS incorporates racial equity and the effects of structural racism present in the US food system into all its work. CRFS staff members have learning and/or programmatic objectives on structural racism incorporated into their annual plans of work. As part of CRFS's commitment to racial equity they organized a fall 2016 workshop on 'undoing racism' for CRFS staff, MSU Extension staff, and local community food systems leaders of color. The workshop was facilitated by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). Rich chose to engage PISAB after he participated in an INFAS activity earlier in the year that included a similar PISAB workshop. He recognized the value of that workshop in enabling INFAS to strengthen its collaborative work towards a just and sustainable food system and felt this approach could provide a similar foundation for CRFS staff and the local extension and community partners they engage.

Value of INFAS

Rich finds INFAS to be an extremely valuable way to connect institutions and centers. Rich describes INFAS as a set of networks, because each member of the INFAS network is connected to their own networks within their universities, communities, and regions. As a result, INFAS has a lot of potential to create partnerships, increase information sharing, and to promote collaboration. Additionally, Rich feels that INFAS serves a crucial role in academia by creating a network of leaders engaged within learning communities in their own fields and institutions. Rich believes that the sustained networking and connections across institutions can accelerate innovation to create positive change within the food system at a national scale.

Local Work

CRFS conducts numerous regional food systems projects including: supporting food hubs, farm to institution projects, food policy councils, and farm to preschool projects. CRFS focuses largely on outreach and research. In 2010 CRFS facilitated the creation of the Michigan Good Food Charter², a policy framework that seeks to improve the equity, sustainability, and economics of Michigan's food system for all Michigan residents. Rich emphasizes the need for a holistic view for CRFS activities. Rather than focus only on increasing food security, CRFS seeks to improve equity, justice, and economics of the entire food system. For example, ensuring that everyone has access to good food will



¹ <http://foodsystems.msu.edu/>; The Center for Regional Food Systems, Michigan State University

² <http://www.michiganfood.org/>

not be possible unless farmers and farm workers in the production part of the food system are treated fairly and are receiving just wages.



The Michigan Good Food Charter also places an emphasis on three overarching goals: a thriving economy, sustainability, and equity. This means that there should diverse people within the food system, diversity in production tactics, diverse access, diverse markets, diversity in hunger relief operations and resources, and a diversity of food products to ensure that Michigan residents are receiving the proper nutrition and a well-rounded diet³. By working to create a food system that is healthy, affordable, fair, and green for all Michiganders, the Michigan Good Food Charter provides a framework for a more sustainable future.

The Michigan Good Food Charter has identified 6 major goals that they hope to achieve by 2020. These goals strive to increase the amount of local food produced and consumed in Michigan, increase the agricultural business, improve food systems education, and to increase food equity: both by increasing food access and by increasing worker and farmer justice. CRFS helps by providing the collaboration infrastructure across dozens of Michigan organizations that have committed to forwarding one or more goals of the Charter.

The Good Food Charter was created in part due to the lack of access to healthy food faced by both urban and rural residents of Michigan. The Michigan Good Food Charter seeks to help support local farmers play a significant role in improving healthy food access, with healthy food incentive programs such as Double Up Food Bucks and HoopHouses for Health.

Rich identified several changes that are needed to create a more viable food system in Michigan, including policy and practice changes across the food value chain and updating market structures. Examples of efforts underway: the Charter is working to address issues in zoning regulations that have made it difficult to grow food in an urban setting; it is working to increase the amount of healthy and local food available to people who are using public benefits such as SNAP; and it is increasing work with farm to institution projects.

The Michigan Good Food Charter works to foster the belief that a system where food is healthy, affordable fair, and green for all will bring about a thriving economy with thriving communities³.

THE 6 GOALS

- 1 Michigan institutions will source 20 percent of their food products from Michigan growers, producers and processors.
- 2 Michigan farmers will profitably supply 20 percent of all Michigan institutional, retailer and consumer food purchases and be able to pay fair wages to their workers.
- 3 Michigan will generate new agri-food businesses at a rate that enables 20 percent of food purchased in Michigan to come from Michigan.
- 4 Eighty percent of Michigan residents (twice the current level) will have easy access to affordable, fresh, healthy food, 20 percent of which is from Michigan sources.
- 5 Michigan Nutrition Standards will be met by 100 percent of school meals and 75 percent of schools selling food outside school meal programs.
- 6 Michigan schools will incorporate food and agriculture into the pre-K through 12th grade curriculum for all Michigan students and youth will have access to food and agriculture entrepreneurial opportunities.

³ Colasanti, K., Cantrell, P., Cocciarelli, S., Collier, A., Edison, T., Doss, J., George, V., Hamm, M., Lewis, R., Matts, C., McClendon, B., Rabaut, C., Schmidt, S., Satchell, I., Scott, A., Smalley, S. (2010). At www.michiganfood.org