United States Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service

Helping People...

...Help the Land.

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Online Clearinghouse Connects Residents to Locally Sourced Food

Navigating the world of specialty agriculture and organics can be overwhelming. Indiana has a wealth of resources and agencies available to provide assistance and answers to many of the questions that individuals may have about organic and specialty crop farmers, but it can be hard to know where to go, or even the questions to ask. There is a general disconnect between our local food growers and potential customers. There is an even bigger disconnect in how food is grown in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way. This is even true in one of the largest organic and specialty crop counties in Indiana - Monroe County.

When a former Monroe County SWCD university fellow began her quest to find organic, locally grown food, she hit a brick wall. Frustrated, she approached the SWCD board of directors with an idea to make it easier for consumers to connect with local growers. The idea – to create an online clearinghouse where community members can go to find locally sourced food at the touch of a button.

Because the Monroe County SWCD staff had very little knowledge about how to create an interactive web and mobile application, they contacted a local service-learning group at Indiana University for assistance. Monroe County SWCD was privileged to work with an amazing group of students through the university's Serve-

IT program. Serve-IT exists to serve local non-profit organizations with a wide range of technological services provided by a staff of students, faculty, and employees dedicated to furthering the mission of those organizations. This program provides students with unique real-world learning experiences while helping local non-profits. In addition to their existing course load these students take the opportunity to get first-hand experiences in assisting organizations with their technological needs.

The Monroe County SWCD collaborated with the Serve-IT team to develop a web and mobile application called Mark-IT that connects producers and consumers, promotes conservation and organic efforts of the producers and educates the general public about sustainable agriculture. Anyone in Monroe County or the surrounding areas can log on to Mark-IT and type in the local food item they wish to purchase. Mark-IT displays a map of local vendors that have registered on the site and are selling the particular food item requested along with information about how it is grown and if conservation practices are used on the farm.

The Serve-IT team began working on this project in the spring of 2016 and completed it with the application going live in the spring of 2017. Seven Earth Team

Volunteers spent 1,248 hours designing, developing and executing this program. These volunteers spent hundreds of hours above and beyond their course time developing, creating, testing, fixing, editing and executing this unique application, all the while learning about the Conservation Partnership and what we do to provide direct financial and technical assistance to farmers.

As the year unfolded the team treated this project as a real world experience and provided a top of the line product; they negotiated security issues, web browsing concerns, additional resources needed for future use and other hot topic concerns for this product to be functional far into the future as technology changes occur.

The website is currently going through its final stages of development and should go live by the end of the year or sooner. Once the program is up and running, Monroe County SWCD plans to promote the site at local farmer's markets to sign new vendors up and build the database. Once it becomes successful in Monroe County, the SWCD will pursue an organization to develop Mark-IT further into a statewide clearinghouse. In the meantime, Mark-IT will continue to be housed under the Monroe County SWCD's plan of work. Each school year, new Serve-IT students will continue to update the online clearinghouse as needed.