



A regional nonprofit plans to turn “Produce Grown Here” into a bestselling brand.

How do you tell if an ear of sweet corn is just-picked and juicy or days-old and starchy?

You take it home and eat it, says David Eson, former program director for the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture. Shopping for corn and other produce can be a hit-or-miss affair. Sometimes you strike gold. Sometimes you strike out.

Soon, consumers in western Pennsylvania will have another way to tell which produce is freshest. The Progress Fund, a nonprofit economic development organization, plans to brand local fruits and vegetables, distinguishing them from shipped-from-afar fare. The fund’s Produce Grown Here (PGH) program posits that local farmers can sell more product at better prices if they do what auto manufacturers, cola companies and toothpaste makers have been doing for decades: build brand loyalty.

“The idea of branding local produce so consumers can recognize it in the store came to us in 2004,” says Rita Resick, whose family owns Laurel Vista Farms in Somerset County. She and her husband, Rick Stafford, conducted a feasibility study for The Progress Fund. “We’d been growing green beans and onions and selling them to grocery stores. How could we make our products stand out? That was one question that arose. If we were successful in doing that and created a demand for local produce, how would we service that demand? We’d probably have to work with other farmers. If we were really successful at doing all this, we could have an impact on the viability of family farms.”

Pennsylvania’s family-owned farms are an endangered breed. Most of the produce consumed in this state comes from mammoth industrial farms in states such as California, Florida and Texas. “There’s this huge exodus of capital out of Pennsylvania to these other states,” says Eson, who’s now project manager for PGH. “Our farming infrastructure has been lost. The number of producers has dropped. A hundred years ago, we had over 70,000 farms in western Pennsylvania. Now there are about 17,000.”

Exodus of capital isn’t the only downside of Pennsylvania’s reliance on imported crops. Much of the produce that arrives in Pennsylvania by truck or boxcar is grown for hardiness rather than flavor. The tomatoes were picked while still green. The green beans spent three or four days in storage and transport. The strawberries look great but lack zing. Then there’s the environmental toll. It takes some 400 gal-

Loyal to Local

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lons of diesel fuel to move a truckload of produce across the country, according to Eson.

“Everybody agrees that buying local food makes sense,” says David Kahley, president and chief executive officer of The Progress Fund. “The problem is that America’s food network is set up on this huge scale to move lots of product in trucks across the country. It’s not set up to move a smaller amount of product from a hundred-acre farm in western Pennsylvania to a marketplace in western Pennsylvania.”

That’s one problem the Produce Grown Here project aims to fix. PGH will connect local farmers with each other and with wholesalers, retailers and restaurateurs.

Farms in Allegheny and surrounding counties grow different crops, grade them differently and package them differently. Their production and delivery protocols vary. That inconsistency puts off large buyers. “Giant Eagle has been out there looking for local farmers for quite a while to buy their product, and they were having trouble finding it,” Kahley says. “They can pick up a phone, say we need X amount of tomatoes, and some broker will have them delivered from California. You can’t do that in Pennsylvania. You have to call a farmer who’s growing 10 acres or 30 acres. Then you need to call 50 more farmers.”

Farmers who join a PGH “product network” will grow the same varieties to uniform standards and coordinate their harvesting and delivery schedules. They may also share storage, packing and shipping facilities. “If you can identify the farms

around the region that have facilities and a willingness to cooperate with farms that don’t, boy, you could really start to improve the prospects for farmers,” says Laurel Vista’s Stafford, whose 350-acre farm includes a storage building with loading dock and one delivery truck. “We’d love to be part of the distribution system for smaller farms.”

On the other end of the distribution chain are consumers, and PGH will endeavor to reach them too. “It’s not enough to create the supply chain, even though that’s a Herculean task,” Eson says. “Once we’re in the marketplace, we need to have a solid presence.” That requires consumer research. What sort of packaging do shoppers like? How should branded local produce be displayed in stores? PGH will try to answer questions such as these, then work with retailers and restaurateurs to craft marketing campaigns that draw consumers to local foods. Coupons for PA corn may become as commonplace as coupons for whitening toothpaste.

The Progress Fund has partnered with two homegrown companies – Giant Eagle and Eat’n Park Hospitality Group – for the pilot phase of Produce Grown Here. Before the year is through, a handful of Giant Eagle supermarkets and Eat’n Park restaurants will highlight local apples and potatoes under the PGH banner. Next year, branded tomatoes and sweet corn will be introduced. If consumers bite – and farmers can provide a predictable flow of local produce – the program will be rolled out to more retailers.

“Certainly, those of us who like local foods can go to a farmers market or on a Sunday drive to the small farm stand, but that’s an occasional treat. It’s not something you can do with regularity,” says The Progress Fund’s Kahley. “You need that regularity. You need the farmer to be able to sell the product to the restaurants and grocery stores that want it because the customers are demanding it. That’s what we’re trying to do: build that distribution system.”



Upper left: Rick Stafford and Rita Resick

Lower right: David Eson connecting with farmers