Alaska Subregional Conference Needs and Issues

Compiled by Al Kurki, Western SARE Assistant PDP Training Coordinator

The following is a draft list of the highest priorities among the hundreds of needs, issues and approaches identified by Alaska subregional conference participants. The issues and approaches emerged on the first day of discussion, March 18, 2010, and this focused list resulted from the second day’s group discussions.

The priorities, in order of rank, are clustered under each of the six key questions posed at the subregional conference. The numbers in parentheses are the Day 2 votes each item garnered.

I. What will be needed to create stronger local food systems that are less reliant on imports from elsewhere?

1) Educate the consumer and the market on the advantages of locally grown food. (61)
2) Statewide training for beginning farmers and gardeners. (45)
3) Rebuild/improve infrastructure – e.g., processing, canneries, etc. (43)
4) Cost-effective storage facilities. (40)
5) Season-extension technology research and demonstration. (34)
6) Research into new crop cultivars adapted to Alaska’s climate and best management practices.

Other priorities included decrease the loss of prime farmland in Alaska and change local, regional and national policy to encourage small-scale ag and local processing.

II. What are the local and regional food production trends in your local area?

1) Tie: Increasing demand for local food; supply of local food not large enough to meet demand – most food is imported. (63)
2) Lack of warehousing, storage and processing capability. (49)
3) More small- and large-scale gardens and small animal production. (41)
4) More use of season extension methods – e.g., greenhouses, hoop houses, high tunnels, etc. (36)
5) Still quite bit of subsistence gathering, hunting and fishing. (27)
6) More demand for CSAs and increased consumption of poorly nutritious and processed foods. (21)
III. The SARE program was commissioned, by Congress, to get its research results to the farmer and rancher. How can this process be improved?

1) More local educational presentations (workshops, classes, field days, etc.) to producers and public on local topics of interest. (101)
2) Disseminate more region-specific information (research results, locally adapted cultivars or livestock, big ideas for small places, etc.) (79)
3) Provide more money – stipends to attend conferences, research projects, organization matches, etc. (55)
4) Provide information and help extension do its job better. (48)
5) Disseminate more information on Internet-based venues, such as blogs, email, social networks, online courses, etc. (43)
6) Engage K-12 educators, provide training to kids though ag in the classrooms, etc. (38)

IV. What type of research, education and development projects will be necessary over the next 10 years to help economically sustain farming and the environment?

1) Soil improvement and sustainability, including composting. (76)
2) Developing local infrastructure (processing, freezing, drying, storage, etc.) (54)
3) Energy efficient, low impact farming. (52)
4) Explore alternative food systems including native systems, food sources, new varieties, unconventional farming. (51)
5) Ag economics – identifying, evaluating, reducing, managing the real costs of agriculture. (48)
6) Season extension (greenhouses, hoop houses, storage, freezing, drying, etc.). (42)
7) Basic ag education for the public (workshops, classes, news tips, how-to presentations for new farmers and gardeners. (36)

V) If Western SARE received (from Congress) an additional $1 million (or $1 billion) per region, what types of projects should be targeted or emphasized?

1) Using local sources of nutrients – compost, fish, vegetation, etc. -- to their best abilities. (76)
2) Energy efficiency and alternative energy for sustainable production methods for producers – sustainable energy technology, solar heating/electrical power for producers, do-it-yourself wind, solar electric and hot water systems, biofuels, hydroponics. (72)
3) Education and involvement of youth in SA practices and agriculture in general (includes K-12), internships on farms and in colleges. (64)
4) Garden demonstration projects – local, community, apartments, school, tribal and village. Locally produced food – how to grow your own food and how to add value to products. (58)
5) Agricultural research – including economic evaluations – of all aspects of sustainable farming systems, including permaculture. (56)

6) High tunnel and season extension efforts (including cold frames); greenhouses, including heating questions and commercial producers. (38)

VI. How can Western SARE overcome barriers that may prevent underserved groups, including socially disadvantaged groups, from applying for and receiving SARE funding?

1) More outreach to these groups with a funded position – travel to areas. (87)
2) Education and demonstration projects. (63)
3) Promote farming as a viable vocation and science. (59)
4) Tie: Partner with regional groups, tribes, communities, extension, FSA, etc. Employ a liaison to work with farmers and others on grant applications and help get things going. (58)