Selling to Schools: Challenges and Opportunities

Agricultural Trades Show January 16, 2020

Notes from School Nutrition Directors (SNDs):

juggling, formalities and documentation, need fair and open process because federal and tax dollars

Micropurchases- directly with farmers (buying a smaller amounts from multiple farmers) $10k or under

Small purchases- 3 bids and a buy, up to $25k (looking at 3 options and choosing best value)

Bigger purchase- more formal, RFP, greater than $25k

Purchase thresholds can be smaller in smaller districts

Produce is the only thing school nutrition directors can buy using geographic preference

Notes from producers:

Distribution systems more efficient than farmers driving all over the place. HYPERlocal makes sense (i.e. delivering to the schools in your town) but beyond that becomes tricky

Both distributors and direct sales can be successful depending on the farm business

Q from producer-when is best for SNDs to plan with farmers

-April/May for the coming school year for SNDs (ongoing too)

-Midwinter works best for producer

-continuing to have dialogue (quick convos) year round

Communication styles that work:

-emails are most used tool among both groups

-texts work well especially during height of growing season (Jun-Sept)

-Forager program (plus other online buying platforms)

-most say phone calls (Especially longer than a few minutes) do NOT work

Distributor perspective:

-volumes as most important info that producers and buyers can provide their needs on.

-whole product works best with distributor (Shelf life of fresh cut items is more tender)

Creating MOU in January for the year—Forward purchasing contract template (Falmouth and Portland Public Schools working on a draft template right now)

-setting up agreement in advance, then its on the farmer to communicate crop fail etc.

Buying co-ops (SNDs)-how to leverage

creating farm hubs to funnel farm products to one place

Dept of Education Child Nutrition:

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)—encourage to use unique produce

Local produce fund- reimbursement program through the state (~1K/school)

How can schools find out when there is a surplus of crops on farm? Child nutrition DOE email updates + DOE child nutrition website

GAP does not apply to a school buying from a local farm

Nutrient Dense Food and quality—not just local, but what's happening on the farm is becoming more important

-need for buyer education about seasonality

Farmers AND SNDs as teachers for school community

-doing education, farm trips etc

-SNDs having farm promo materials in cafeteria

-Harvest Lunch Week

-Getting youth participation in Open Farm Day

-Bringing farm to classroom—Red Hat example

Big picture vision items for moving this work forward in Maine:

-streamlined communication

-reimbursement to farmers for selling to schools

-value added processing

-MOE/forward contracts (to know what schools are seeking)

-allowing schools to use USDA commodity $$ to buy local food

1 question to survey all the SNS folks—if you aren't purchasing locally, why not? Anonymous submit box at tabling?