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# 'Bon appetit, y'all': Oklahoma Food Cooperative links local farms and ranches with eaters in cities and towns

Rich Heffern | Apr. 14, 2011 Eco Catholic

The Oklahoma Food Cooperative is one of the many efforts around the country that links local farmers and other entrepreneurs with eaters who want tasty, nutritious food in cities and towns. The OK Food Co-op only sells Oklahoma-grown or value-added food and non-food products. It operates with an innovative online order system coupled with a mostly volunteer delivery system.

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Organized in 2003 with 60 members and four pick-up sites at its first order in November of that year, the coop today has nearly 4,000 members and 45 pickup sites. Last year's sales totaled $850,000, a 20 percent increase in 2010 over 2009.

A growing number of cooperatives in others states and nations are organizing under the ?Oklahoma Plan.? The Oklahoma group freely shares its online ordering software, the Local Food Cooperative Management System, and provides other technical assistance to groups interested in starting a local food cooperative. Besides the United States, there are two local food co-ops in Canada (Ontario) and one in Australia, with a second Australian coop in the works and a third Canadian organizing campaign (Manitoba).

This project originated when members of the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House in Oklahoma City started buying most of their food from local farmers. Epiphany parish in Oklahoma City, where the founder and first president and general manager Bob Waldrop worked as director of music, helped jump start the project by joining the co-op and providing space for meetings and the co-op's monthly delivery day.

Three years ago the group found a fixer-upper warehouse building, successfully renovated it, and uses it now for their operations center. Waldrop resigned as general manager two years ago, citing the fact that the coop had grown beyond his ability to manage given his other responsibilities as a pastoral musician and Catholic-time general manager, the co-op's first full-time employee.

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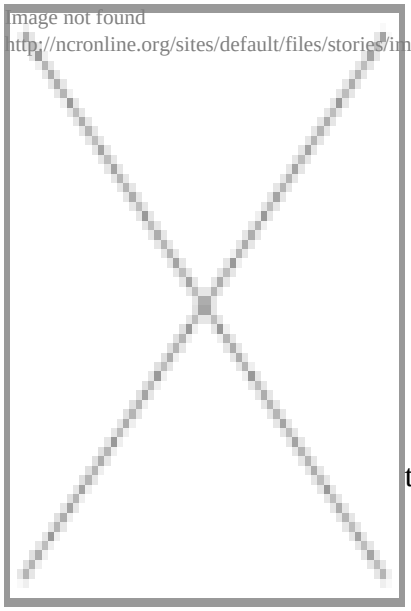

to a newer group of leaders, with most of the original leadership remaining active in one way or another in the co-op's activities. This summer it will roll out a complete rewrite of its online ordering software.

From the beginning, the cooperative has embraced three core values ? environmental sustainability, social justice, and economic viability. The viability is expressed in the fact that it is still there, eight years after its founding, and going strong. The group offers low income and minority entrepreneurs access to an active market place on an equal footing with more established production operations. It does not limit how many farms may sell in any given product category. The co-op gives farmers a financial incentive to use more sustainable and humane agricultural production practices. As Waldrop says, ?It's been a bon appetitin good time these past few years, and we are expecting many more to come.?

As past president, Waldrop remains on the board of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. He is also now working on a new social entrepreneur project, the Oklahoma Worker Cooperative Network, which is seeking to do for Oklahoma what the Mondragon cooperatives have done for the Basque region of Spain, by helping workers to form worker-owned business.

The Oklahoma Food Cooperative is found online at www.oklahomafood.coop . The Oklahoma Worker Cooperative Network will be online soon at www.okie.coop.

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