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Food hub: Connecting farmers to customers

Concept would help provide central location for commerce

By Rachel McCrea Daily Journal correspondent

Aug 14, 2023





Brisa Ranch in Pescadero is one of three organizations with which the San Mateo County Resource Conservation District are partnered to set up a central food hub for small farmers and ranchers.

Cole Mazariegos-Anastassiou



San Mateo County’s diverse agricultural community may be geographically close to tech companies and suburbs, yet it is still challenged to meet the demands of nearby buyers like restaurants, grocers and wholesalers.

A county food hub may help, according to the San Mateo Resource Conservation District, which is spearheading its early stages. The hub would help aggregate goods from small farms and ranches and market them to customers these producers couldn’t reach on their own.

Still in its early stages, the general vision is one of a building in an accessible location that would be a central hub for transporting, processing, storing and distributing goods. It could also function as a brick-and-mortar storefront where customers could come and shop for locally farmed food.

“Broadly speaking, the point of a food hub is to address collective challenges,” said James Nakahara, a business advisor at Kitchen Table Advisors, an organization that provides business advising and support to small farms.

The RCD is collaborating with Kitchen Table Advisors, Brisa Ranch and TomKat Ranch Educational Foundation. A grant was submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for funding to create a business plan and, in the meantime, the search is on for local money too.

The idea of a food hub came from a working group of farmers convened by project leadership to address the local agricultural community’s shared challenges. The conversation had come up before, Arko said, but it gained momentum within the past two to three years.

Verónica Mazariegos-Anastassiou, a co-owner of Brisa Ranch in Pescadero, said the disruption of supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fragility of our food system alongside the importance of collaboration between producers.

“It became apparent that there was a lot of room for growth and opportunity there, in coming together,” she said.

Agriculture has been on the decline in San Mateo County and nationwide, Arko said. Changes in the industry, economic challenges, and the next generation of family farmers leaving agriculture have contributed to declining numbers and acreage in the county. Drought has also been a problem, and total agricultural production shrank by almost 6% in 2022, according to the 2022 San Mateo County Agricultural Crop Report.

Challenges in developing the food hub have included finding time for producers to meet, as well as accommodating the wide range of producers with varying crops and farming practices. There is also the “mental hurdle” of creating something on such a

large scale, and the challenges of permitting and development, Mazariegos-Anastassiou said.

However, the food hub has also brought the local agricultural community together. From large conventional farms to smaller organic ones, “this idea of a food hub seems to be a unifying thing now,” she said.

There is also a potential environmental benefit to supporting local farmers and ranchers.

“Yes, we grow food, but [we’re] also managing a huge chunk of the county’s natural resources,” Mazariegos-Anastassiou said. “By supporting the businesses, we’re also sort of supporting that stewardship.”

Hopes are high. Arko wants a plan that can benefit as many farmers as possible, while Mazariegos-Anastassiou is hoping for a system that helps producers reach a new section of the market. Nakahara wants the food hub to be a lasting benefit for the county’s agricultural community, when similar attempts have fallen through in the past.

“The goal here is to have something that won’t fall through, because it’s being led by farmers in the region, because the farmers are the ones who are saying ‘this is what we want. This is what we need.’”

Nakahara emphasized the resilience of the agricultural community, which has already weathered the pandemic, the 2020 CZU Complex Fire and last winter’s heavy storms.

“In all of those instances, the agricultural community really rallied together and showed how resilient they can be,” he said, “and what the benefit of mutual aid can look like for a small community.”

