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Co-op Launched to Link Local Farms and Institutions

The official launch of the Producers & Buyers Co-op will take place Friday, June 12, from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce Breakfast in the Valley (held at the Eau Claire County Exposition Center, 5530 Fairview Drive). The Co-op, which links local farms with institutions, is sharing a booth with its business partner, Sacred Heart Hospital. Co-op board members and organizers will be available to answer questions about the new organization and its services.

The launch will provide information to:

- **Members of the public** on Co-op stock investment opportunities (to help cover start-up costs and build the business)
- **Farmers and processors** on Co-op producer membership opportunities
- **Institutions** for Co-op buyer membership opportunities

The Co-op facilitates buying and selling for farmers in Eau Claire, Chippewa, Barron, Dunn, Pepin, Trempealeau, Buffalo, Clark, Jackson, Polk, Pierce, and St. Croix counties. Sacred Heart Hospital is a founding partner in the project and committed 10% of its \$2 million food budget to purchasing local food products in order to provide a market to help the organization get off the ground.

“Having a stable market price allows me to do more long-range planning with my farm operation,” said Darrel Lorch of Lorcrest Farms, Inc., in Blair, Wisconsin. Lorch also serves as an ad hoc member of the Co-op board.

The Co-op intends to bring new buyers on board as products are sourced and serves institutions such as:

- Schools
- Universities and colleges
- Hospitals
- Businesses that provide cafeteria services

Currently, the Co-op is working to facilitate the production and purchase of locally produced:

- Meats (Beef, Buffalo, Chicken, Fish, Pork)
- Fruits & Vegetables
- Dairy & Eggs
- Dry Goods
- Other Locally-Produced Food

“Co-op stocks are an opportunity to invest in the local community and to support sustainable products, local farms and jobs,” said Co-op coordinator Mary C. Anderson, a value-added farmer with extensive direct sales experience. “Support of the Co-op also helps rebuild the local processing infrastructure (i.e. for processing meats, dairy, etc.), and expand local food production by providing a stable market.”

The idea for the Co-op began in January 2008, when representatives from River Country RC&D and Sacred Heart Hospital met with area farmers at the Midwest Value Added Agricultural Conference and Wisconsin Local Food Summit. Barriers to purchasing local food (seasonal production, quantity, transportation, processing, pricing and delivery) were first discussed and meetings followed to plan how barriers could be removed for institutions. In June 2008, Sacred Heart Hospital’s CEO, Steve Ronstrom, pledged 10% of the hospital’s \$2 million food budget to buying local food.

A month later, on July 17, 2008, Governor Jim Doyle visited Sacred Heart Hospital to announce the statewide “Buy Local Buy Wisconsin” (BLBW) grant awards. Governor Doyle chose Eau Claire as the city to announce the grants due to the innovative local food partnership between Sacred Heart Hospital and River Country RC&D Council. (A BLBW grant was awarded to River Country RC&D to pioneer the best way to get local food to local institutions.)

After many planning meetings with local farmers, March 26, 2009 marked the State’s formalization of Articles of Incorporation to create the Producers & Buyers Co-op. To date, the Co-op facilitated the purchase over 26,000 pounds of locally grown product from over 14 local rural communities.

“There have been profound changes over the past century for farm families and rural communities, and in the 1990s alone Wisconsin lost almost 40% of its dairy farms. It’s our responsibility to buy local food to support our local agriculture industry,” said Rick Beckler, Co-op organizer and Sacred Heart Hospital’s Director of Hospitality Services. “We have had an outpouring of warm compliments on our food from patients, our Meals on Wheels patrons and employees.”

The Co-op has already facilitated over 26,000 lbs. of locally grown product from:

- Alfred Bautch Farm (Augusta)
- Augusta Meats and Catering (Augusta)
- Blue Collar Café Jams (Hixton)
- Bullfrog Fish Farm - Eat My Fish (Menomonie)
- Byron and Lorna Anderson (Ettrick)
- Castle Rock Organic Farms (Osseo)
- Coon Creek Family Farm (Mondovi)
- Deustch Family Farm (Arcadia)
- Galen Koxlien (Galesville)
- Gunderson Meats (Mondovi)
- Indee Locker (Independence)
- JerDon Farm (Ettrick)
- Lambalot Acres (Augusta)
- Ledebour Meats (Winona, MN)
- Lorcrest Farms (Blair)
- Pats Country Market (Arcadia)
- Romar Greenhouse Farm (Augusta)
- Sunnyside Meadow (Dorchester)