

Neighboring Food Co-ops Focus on Cross-Sector Collaboration

BY ERBIN CROWELL

On a bright, beautiful February day in Putney, Vt., members of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) gathered at the Putney School's Calder Hall. "It's always a privilege to spend time with this amazing group of forward-thinking cooperators," said Robyn O'Brien, general manager of the Putney Food Co-op, our host for the day.

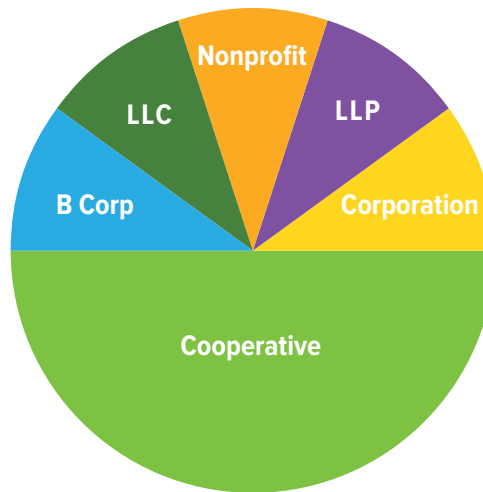
The gathering marked an exciting milestone for the NFCA: our first annual meeting as a formally incorporated cooperative of food co-ops. Participating in the gathering were nearly 50 representatives of the 28 NFCA member co-ops and startups across Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. About a third of the NFCA members are startups and recently opened food co-ops, and it was exciting to see representatives from these groups connecting with managers and staff from established co-ops.

One of the greatest strengths of our association is the diversity (in location, size, and structure) of food co-ops represented. NFCA member gatherings are a key opportunity for networking and information sharing among member co-ops and a tangible example of collaboration among co-ops.

Other co-op sectors

Collaboration across sectors is also woven into NFCA activities and is a central plank in our vision of "a thriving regional economy, rooted in a healthy, just, and sustainable food system, and a vibrant community of cooperative enterprise." To promote dialog on shared goals, our annual meeting included guests from partner organizations representing the wider cooperative economy of our region, such as Cabot Creamery Cooperative, CDS Consulting Co-op, Cooperative Fund of New England, the National Cooperative Grocers Association, the New England Farmers Union, Organic Valley, and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-ops.

Together, we considered the challenge presented by Chuck Gould, executive secretary of the International Co-operative Alliance, to transform the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC) in 2012 into a Cooperative Decade.



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Recent studies show that a billion people worldwide are members of co-ops—an estimated three times more numerous than individual shareholders in corporations. Here in New England, there are an estimated 1,400 co-ops with about 5 million members and operating in all sectors of the economy. What will be different for our co-ops and communities because of the International Year of Cooperatives? How might we work together to achieve the vision of a cooperative decade? How can we demonstrate that cooperative enterprise is an option in all aspects of our lives? What can we accomplish, together?

Ideas generated from small group dialogs included everything from cooperative media outlets to ensuring that the cooperative business model is taught at all of the colleges and universities in our region. Working together across sectors was a common theme, with one group proposing that co-ops "occupy" our local economies by expanding our impact in food production, health care, housing, finance, and education. And one group shared its vision, in

graphic form, of the cooperative as the preferred business model of the future.

IYC 2012 is an unprecedented opportunity to grow our food co-ops and make connections with other co-ops' sectors as we build toward a wider vision of a cooperative economy. The NFCA has a priority of helping our member food co-ops make the most of the IYC, creating a special section on our website that includes resources such as sample press releases, and profiles of other co-ops in our region to reprint in our member food co-ops' newsletters, as well as ideas for action (visit nfca.coop/iyc).

Identifying products on our shelves that are supplied by other co-ops is an easy and effective opportunity for education that demonstrates the impact of co-operatives across the economy. The NFCA provides its member food co-ops with "Go Co-op" shelf talkers to identify co-op products in their stores, supported by an online list of supplier co-ops (nfca.coop/co-opproducts). This initiative is consciously linked with the "Go Co-op" website hosted by the National Cooperative Grocers Association, which offers educational resources on the wider cooperative movement. We also created a searchable map on our website that provides a visual representation of the shared strength of co-ops in our region (nfca.coop/co-opeconomy).

Our advertising in 2012 is focused on the IYC message that "Co-ops Build a Better World," and we have worked to publish articles in regional press on the contribution of co-ops across sectors to our regional economy. At regional conferences such as state gatherings of the Northeast Organic Farming Association and the Slow Living Summit, we have organized workshops in collaboration with other co-ops to promote the Year of Co-ops and educate the public on the impact of co-ops across our economy. Partners in these panels have included representatives from national co-ops such as Organic Valley; worker co-ops involved in food production and distribution, such as Diggers Mirth and Valley Green Feast; and regional produce co-ops such as Deep Root Organic Co-op.

Regional sourcing, using our shared buying power to catalyze change in the food system, has been a major focus of our work over the

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past year, and Deep Root has been a key partner in this dialog. We worked closely with this co-op in sourcing products for our frozen fruit and vegetable pilot, "Farm to Freezer," last year. As this project moves forward, we have been discussing how food co-ops and farmer co-ops can work together in the sourcing and distribution of regional products.

Responding to natural disasters also presents opportunities for collaboration, and when Hurricane Irene devastated New England in 2011, wiping out crops and destroying infrastructure, the NFCA worked with the Cooperative Development Foundation, Co-op Fund of New England, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association to launch the "Hurricane Irene Recovery Fund" to help ensure the continuing ability of co-ops in our region to serve their members and the wider community. Recipients

of grant funds to date have included food co-ops, farmer co-ops, and their individual farmer members.

Co-op curricula

We have been working closely with the New England Farmers Union to develop educational resources on cooperative enterprise and to integrate co-ops into the curricula of local universities. In addition to my course on the cooperative movement at the University of Connecticut, we have worked with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-ops, faculty and students from the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) Economic Department, and other partners to launch the U-Mass Cooperative Enterprise Collaborative. This evolving certificate program includes a core course, "The Economics of Cooperative Enterprise," as well

as an internship program for students with area co-ops.

Valley Alliance of Worker Co-ops has also been a key partner, along with Franklin Community Co-op and the U-Mass Five College Federal Credit Union, in the launch of the Valley Cooperative Business Association, a cross-sector organization that is working together to promote the cooperative economy of western Massachusetts and southern Vermont.

The sixth principle of the Cooperative Identity asserts that collaborating with other co-ops within and across sectors and industries is one of the most effective ways that we can serve our members. Working together, we can increase business success, communicate our differences and demonstrate our shared impact across the economy. This is our opportunity to lay the groundwork for the cooperative decade ahead. ■

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