



Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

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*The Institute for Agriculture
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resilient family farms,
rural communities and
ecosystems around the world
through research and education,
science and technology,
and advocacy.*

COMMENTARY October 2, 2007

Area Organizations Expand Midwest Flood Relief

By Carla Kaiser

It was nearly harvest season in southeast Minnesota, yet one dramatic weekend took away hopes and plans for numerous family farms. Over August 18-20, between 8 and 18 inches of rain washed out fields, fences, and moved families from their homes. Seven lives were lost due to the storms. According to the National Weather Service, over 15 inches of rain fell in one day, making it the highest 24-hour rainfall ever reported in Minnesota. The rain has had a disastrous impact on local agriculture throughout the Midwest.

To support disaster relief and the rebuilding of these farms, natural food co-ops, non-profits, restaurants, and grocery stores are working in partnership to raise and distribute money through the Sow the Seeds Fund. The fund is a project of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) to support local organizations and farmers working to build a healthy, equitable local food system. This year, the terrible flooding on so many farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa made it clear that flood relief should be the immediate priority of the fund. A flood relief steering committee of agricultural, food and community leaders has been established to decide on the distribution of these funds. As soon as community partners realized the severity of the floods, word spread quickly and donations poured in. The Sow the Seeds Fund is committed to giving 100 percent of the funds gathered directly to the farms in need.



Midwest food co-ops have demonstrated incredible leadership, immediately raising thousands of dollars from members and shoppers. On September 8th, Slow Food Minnesota and more than 15 Twin Cities' restaurants coordinated "One Big Night Out," where restaurants raised money for the Sow the Seeds Fund and the Red Cross. Common Roots Cafe, a new restaurant in south Minneapolis dedicated to providing local, sustainable foods direct from farmers, donated 100 percent of its proceeds for one night to the fund and raised nearly \$3,000 for flood relief. Peace Coffee, a Minneapolis-based fair trade coffee company owned by IATP, created a "Sow the Seeds Blend" that provides \$2 to the fund for every pound of coffee sold. Perhaps the most touching story is of a group of Minneapolis kids (photo, left) that set up a lemonade stand and raised \$40 for flooded farmers.

All of these remarkable grassroots efforts led to larger corporate donations. Whole Food Market announced a \$25,000 donation, along with a \$10,000 matching fund for all donations made in their Midwest stores. A Wisconsin foundation then provided a \$50,000 grant to the Sow the Seeds Fund, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association announced a \$50,000 matching campaign for any donations made by its vendors. United Natural Foods responded with a \$10,000 donation.

As autumn arrives and more September storms have blown through, the lack of harvest and the loss of income weigh heavily on the region. This income is what farmers rely on for getting through the winter and starting up the next growing season. "Some of our suppliers have lost their entire harvest, others have lost a substantial portion of it, and many have sustained damage or devastation to their homes," said Barth Anderson, research and development coordinator for the Wedge Co-op.

The floods have not only affected farm owners, but also the 10-30 temporary harvesters per farm who are out of jobs this season. Jai Kellum of Avalanche Organics estimates a loss of nearly \$90,000 worth of salad greens. "We were days away from harvesting, and it all went under water," says Jai, a flood relief committee member who was featured in a short documentary on the disaster, available to view at <http://web.mac.com/milhug>.

"The farmers throughout Southeast Minnesota and Wisconsin are not only business partners with the Twin Cities co-ops, they're our friends," said Kim Kusnier, marketing program specialist for NCGA - a business services cooperative, of which Twin Cities natural food co-ops are members. "Many of our member co-ops and their customers are devotees to these farmers' brands and products. Now, we'd like to encourage the community to 'think with their wallet' by contributing to the flood relief fund."

"This is truly a remarkable example of how local food systems support local community, and both give back to each other," said Jim Harkness, President of IATP. "In this time of great need, consumers have demonstrated how much they value their local farmers who provide great quality food and protect the landscape."

Applications are now being distributed to affected farmers and will be accepted until November 21. To donate, download an application, or find out more, go to www.sowtheseedsfund.org.

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