

**Summary Minutes from the
“Renewing an Agriculture-of-the-Middle” Task Force
Second Meeting, February 20-22, 2004
(Wingspread Conference Center, Racine WI)**

Friday Evening (2/20/04)

- Following introductions of the Task Force Members assembled, Fred Kirschenmann presented new data from the 2002 Census of Agriculture highlighting the continued erosion of “middle” farms in the U.S. (Data to be placed on website.)
- Chuck Benbrook & Chuck Hassebrook provided introductory comments to the discussion question “What’s It Going to Take to Change This?”
- Benbrook emphasized: 1) being clear about what is “the middle” being targeted, 2) pointing out the “real costs” of the dominant food system, and 3) building models of alternative food chains that are efficient and distribute rewards fairly.
- Hassebrook emphasized: 1) understanding that the dominant food system is not inevitable, but the result of particular policies and technologies, and 2) organizing farmer collectives that coordinate the production of high quality food products and bargain for fair prices from food processors and distributors.
- Highlights of the discussion that followed included questions regarding: 1) the balance between constructing new food chains and critiquing the dominant ones, 2) the strengths and weaknesses of new generation farmer cooperatives, 3) the role that off-farm income plays in farm families of the middle, 4) the importance of identifying the “market makers” that can be joined in food value chains with middle farmers, and 5) the importance of engaging policy.

Saturday AM (2/21/04)

- A suite of case studies was presented for discussion and adoption for use in the project.
- Cases representing each of the four regions were presented in more detail.
- Highlights of the following discussion of case studies included: 1) understanding these cases as “rich stories” rather than as technical case studies, 2) including more cases of proven enterprises with strong track records, as well as cases where failure would be particularly instructive, and 3) adding cases with emphases on retail enterprises, institutional buying, and collective bargaining.
- Assignments were made regarding the writing of these additional cases.
- Tom Lyson shared the working outline for the research volume that will accompany and support the project’s final action plan. Discussion followed regarding how to strengthen the volume within the parameters of current commitments from authors.
- Larry Yee updated the Task Force on the status of Association of Family Farmers, a proposed framework for creating middle market food value chains. Larry will continue developing the AFF framework from his position in California, with a first example to be developed in the state of Washington.

Saturday PM (2/21/04)

- Discussion began on the question “What Do We Want to Come Out of the National Initiative?”
- General agreement was reached that the National Initiative should broadly focus on the construction of new food value chains that provide significant opportunities for farmers and food enterprises of the middle....and policies that support such value chains.
- Furthermore, emphasis was placed on: 1) identifying and removing barriers to the development of such value chains, and 2) identifying and strengthening the relationships on which such value chains can be created.
- Other highlights of the discussion included: 1) the importance of heavy debt among farmers of the middle, 2) the bases for new value chains are often product, process, or place, 3) meaningful standards must be constructed for new value chains similar to those being constructed for “fair trade” relationships, and 4) indicators need to be constructed to measure the degree to which value chains successfully distribute rewards to farmers and rural communities.
- A beginning list of important dimensions for new food value chains was developed.
- Research opportunities were identified with many of these issues.
- The remainder of the afternoon’s discussion focused on “Political Realities & Potential Strategies,” with introductory comments by Randy Green and Ferd Hoefner.
- Randy Green emphasized: 1) the highly politicized landscape at the federal level and the impacts of the peaking budget deficit, 2) the importance of the Task Force being clear on how broad or how targeted are our goals, 3) that short term/limited goals are best supported through congressional “earmarks,” while longer term and significant program authorization takes much longer, 4) the important resources that will need to be assembled for an ag-of-the-middle initiative, including recruiting congressional “champions”.
- Ferd Hoefner discussed a series of existing federal programs through which the Task Force might secure initial funds, including the IFAFS section of the National Research Initiative (NRI). Also discussed were linkages with the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture and the Farm to School Program.
- General agreement was reached that further clarification of goals for the national initiative was needed before selecting political strategies, though a joint research proposal to IFAFS/NRI may be realistic and wise. Such a proposal should productively frame the following kinds of projects: research, demonstration/education, and value chain development.
- Discussion also addressed the wisdom of seeking short term funding from private foundations.

Sunday AM (2/22/04)

- Continuation of discussion from the previous day included the following suggestions: 1) develop some kind of publicity event to unveil the Task Force’s action plan, perhaps a conference, 2) use the action plan to spur attention to ag-of-

- the-middle issues in land grant universities; 3) develop capacity in each region to analyze recent Census of Agriculture data related to the middle (with support from Mike Duffy), and 4) develop a concise vision/mission statement for the ag-of-the-middle effort.
- A framework/matrix was developed for tasks to be emphasized in the action plan. One dimension of the matrix contains the key orientations of research, education/demonstration, and value chain development. The second dimension contains the activities of barrier identification, opportunity identification, market/consumer engagement, and policy change.
 - The majority of the morning's discussion focused on "bold" action items that could be accomplished in the near future and would give important visibility to the project. Such action items ranged from establishing criteria and a pledge for value chain participation, to obtaining commitments from one food company in each region to publicly commit to participate in the creation of a new value chain, or obtaining agreement from food service directors at high profile universities to source food through new value chains. Responsibility for exploring these and other action items were assumed by various Task Force members.
 - The meeting concluded with discussion of how the ag-of-the-middle effort would be best structured following the Task Force's final meeting on July 16-18, 2004. Task force members were assigned to explore the options.
 - These final decisions were made: 1) a completed list of action items will be placed on the secure page of the project's website, with identification of responsible persons, 2) any new research proposals submitted in the name of the Task force should be screened by Fred Kirschenmann, Eileen Brady, and Steve Stevenson, and 3) the draft action plan will be shared with Task Force members at least 2 weeks prior to the July, 2004 meeting, including comments from outside consultants who will be participating in the final meeting.

Minutes submitted by Steve Stevenson, March 4, 2004.