

SOUTHWEST ITBEC

Late 2012 and 2013 Activity

The Southwest ITBEC Board reaffirmed their role to act as an umbrella organization in the region to foster collaboration, to stimulate and promote economic growth. Working partnerships continued between the Southwest ITBEC and regional organizations including the 7 Rivers Alliance, Wisconsin Rural Partners, Outdoor Recreation Alliance, Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club, and Hidden Valleys.

- The Southwest ITBEC awarded the Fifth Season Cooperative matching grant dollars that will fund a seasonal Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) auditor. Fifth Season Cooperative coordinates moving local food from producers and processors in the region into cafeterias of restaurants, hospitals, schools and universities. As a Fifth Season Co-op member, Reinhart FoodService is the major distributor and opens markets to 3,500 buyers of local food produced and processed in our 7 Rivers region. Fifth Season's coordination is putting local food on the plates at Gundersen Lutheran, UW-La Crosse, Western Technical College, and K-12 schools throughout our area. The co-op now supports 36 small family farms, 3 farmer producer cooperatives, 11 processors, and 2 distributors. Many schools in the 7 Rivers region will be working exclusively with Fifth Season to source their local purchases in 2013/14, including Norwalk/Ontario/Wilton, Tomah, Sparta, Viroqua, La Farge, De Soto, Hillsboro, Westby, West Salem, Wisconsin Dells, Rio and Portage. Fifth Season also increases the business capacity of producers by accessing new markets, and providing a \$10 million liability insurance for the producers and processors, required by Reinhart for food safety. (Businesses cannot afford this insurance by themselves, but can come under Fifth Season's umbrella). A major part of this food safety is to conduct audits on the farms to be sure they are complying with proper growing and handling procedures, known as a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audit. Education with the growers is also a key component of the audit. Every producer or processor must pass this audit before they are eligible to become a member of Fifth Season and move food through the cooperative. There are already 40 farms that must be scheduled and audited for this season. The part time auditor, dedicated to working with the producers and processors, is critical to maintaining the standards of food safety and to increasing the amount of available food by bringing in new members.
- The Southwest ITBEC will be sponsor of Sparta's *Holiday Lights*, a community volunteer program, for the 2013 - 2014 holiday season. The major undertaking of *Holiday Lights* is to update the outdated incandescent lighting to energy efficient LEDs.

- The Southwest ITBEC was proud to be a sponsor again in 2013 of Monroe County's "Exploring Economic Opportunities" summit held this past February. Over 200 people attended the conference that was held on Feb. 28th in Sparta. Along with the sessions, the event featured 22 exhibitors booths. The highlight of the one-day Conference were speeches by Governor Scott Walker and Tourism Secretary Stephanie Klett.
- The Southwest ITBEC donated funds to offset costs related to Juneau County serving as a host to 5 delegates and one group facilitator from Kazakhstan through Open World's Leadership Development Program in partnership with World Services of La Crosse. The delegation arrived on December 1st just in time to watch the Christmas Parade making its way through the downtown streets of Mauston. The Kazakhstan delegation stayed in the area until December 9. The group visited various governmental, municipal and educational venues throughout Juneau County arranged by Gary Kirking of the Juneau County UW-Extension Office during their stay. Congress established the Open World Leadership Center in 2000. To date, over 14,000 young political, community and cultural leaders from all 89 regions of Russia and other Eurasia Countries have participated in the program. The Center's programs aim to forge better understanding between the U.S. and other nations by creating opportunities for developing leaders to observe and experience American political, business, human services, community development, and community life.
- The Southwest ITBEC maintains a website, www.southwestwisconsin.net. The website acts as a portal to the region and helps direct people to local government websites, economic development organizational websites, and tourism related websites.
- The Southwest ITBEC has continued its membership in the Wisconsin Agriculture Tourism Association since 2011. The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association promotes and preserves the rural lifestyle, fosters partnership opportunities within the ag-tourism community, and provides tools which encourage sustainable economic growth while creating awareness of Wisconsin agriculture.
- The Southwest ITBEC's grant of \$5,000 to the La Crosse based Outdoor Recreation Alliance (ORA) was applied to the branding and marketing segment of the project - specifically the funds were used to produce a video clip for the ORA website that showcases the numerous silent sport recreational opportunities that the 7 Rivers Region has to offer. The Outdoor Recreation Alliance then undertook an asset identification workshop that was used to gather information for the base mapping portion of the marketing phase.
- The Southwest ITBEC has undertaken maintaining, and expanding out region-wide, the former Monroe County *Create It!* endeavor that lapsed December 31, 2011. What is *Create It!*? *Create It!* is a program for all types of creative entrepreneurs – including visual artists, musicians, writers and other artistic individuals, as well as agricultural producers involved in direct marketing. The goal of the program is to increase awareness of the many talented artists and entrepreneurs in the Southwest ITBEC service area.