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## **RUTGERS FOOD INNOVATION CENTER HOSTS FIRST-EVER NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF FOOD BUSINESS INCUBATORS**

New Brunswick, NJ- Cook College at Rutgers University was the location for the first-ever national summit held on food business incubation. The *Food Business Incubation Summit – First National Conference and Education Symposium* was held on September 18 and 19, 2002, and hosted and organized by the Rutgers Food Innovation Research and Extension Center. Rutgers partnered with Cornell University and the University of Vermont, through the Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship, and the University of Colorado. Representatives of university-based and non-profit food business incubators and venture centers from across the country were in attendance.

Lou Cooperhouse and Margaret Brennan, Co-Directors of the Rutgers Food Innovation Research and Extension Center conceived the concept of this summit about one year ago. "We established the conference so that Food Business Venture Centers and Incubator facilities nationwide could share their experiences, and maximize economic impacts to the agricultural and food processing industries in their respective communities", noted Mr. Cooperhouse.

According to Dinah Adkins, President and CEO of the National Business Incubation Association, "Growth of business incubators has been on a fast track since the mid 1990's. Two decades ago few cared about the entrepreneur and small business, but our research has identified that small business is of great importance to the US economy." As documented by the US Small Business Administration, 47% of the nation's workforce is employed at businesses with less than twenty employees. Currently, approximately one thousand incubators exist across North America, but only about thirty incubators focus exclusively on the food industry.

The Summit commenced with a keynote address by Dr. Adesoji Adelaja, Ph.D., Executive Dean of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Executive Director of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, and Dean of Cook College, Rutgers University. According to Dr. Adelaja, "the food industry is \$1.7 trillion in size and projected to grow at 1.6% per year. Food incubators linked to universities will help

to usher in the next generation of food science and technology to meet the evolving needs of our consumers”.

Charles Kuperus, Secretary, New Jersey Department of Agriculture, expressed his department’s commitment and desire to partner with local communities for the growth and viability of the New Jersey food industry.

Editors and publishers from several food trade associations and publications presented their views on trends and opportunities for small food businesses. “Emerging specialty ‘boutique’ companies must have a point of difference to be competitive in the market. They cannot not be built on marketing gimmicks in order to be successful”, advised Lee Smith, Publisher, Deli Business Magazine and Food Distribution Magazine. Ron Tanner, Editor, Specialty Food Magazine and Vice President Communications and Education, The National Association for the Specialty Food Trade, also pointed out that the Specialty Food Industry is vast and growing. This market segment is currently estimated at \$30 billion in annual sales.

The conference continued with presentations from existing Food Business Centers and Assistance Programs sharing their experiences and providing recommendations on getting a food venture center or incubator started. In addition, advice on financing strategies, facility design and client protocol were discussed.

According to Bill Reynolds, Provost, Washburn Culinary Institute, City College of Chicago, “The conference exceeded my expectations. It provided me with the information I need to fine tune our plans to include an incubator in our new culinary facility.”

The Rutgers Food Innovation Research & Extension Center was created in 2001 by the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (NJAES) at Rutgers University. The Center’s mission is to provide research, education, outreach and business development services to New Jersey’s agricultural and food industry, including New Jersey-based farmers, start-up food companies and existing food companies. Rutgers Food Innovation Center offers its client companies a full range of services that include business development, market development, product and process development, quality assurance and food safety assistance, regulations and compliance support, and workforce development and training programs. The NJAES committed to locating the Food Innovation Center’s office in Bridgeton, located in Cumberland County. Bridgeton is in the hub of the southern New Jersey agricultural industry and is an area where the unemployment level has been the highest in the state. Mayor Michael Pirolli of Bridgeton confirmed, “The Food Innovation Center is a valuable way of providing access to expertise to those people who otherwise wouldn’t have it. A Business Incubator and Food Processing Facility will enable the Food Innovation Center to fully realize its impact on the community, and will translate to considerable economic development for the surrounding region.”