
Growing the Appalachian Food Economy

A Forum on Local Food
Systems and
Sustainable Agriculture
April 3 & 4, 2012
Asheville, NC

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Across the Appalachian Region, communities are using local food systems and sustainable agriculture to help revitalize local economies. To advance the collective conversation about this work across the Region, **the Appalachian Regional Commission** brought together nearly 340 participants, representing all 13 Appalachian states, for a two-day meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. This gathering helped leaders and practitioners from a wide range of Appalachian communities develop creative ideas, catalyze new partnerships, and galvanize momentum around opportunities to use **sustainable agriculture** and **local food assets** as the building blocks for sustainable local economies.

April 3 & 4, 2012

Renaissance Hotel, Asheville, NC

Objectives of the Gathering

In addition to bringing together a diverse set of leaders and practitioners from across the region, the organizers hoped this gathering would achieve multiple objectives. First, we hoped to introduce local food activities as economic development tools to new communities, and encourage entrepreneurial investments to strengthen food value chains across Appalachia. We aimed to share evidence-based best practices, disseminate compelling research, and strengthen and highlight successful existing programs. By offering participants the opportunity to network with others across the region, we hoped to develop new partnerships to support local food activities, including public, private and non-profit organizations, and to foster region-wide awareness and collaborative networks across the Appalachian mountain chain.

Participants

Gathering participants included economic and community development professionals, farmers, food producers, processors, and distributors, funders, entrepreneurs, agriculture experts, planners, policymakers, researchers, and other interested community members.



Themes of the Gathering

Though conversations among gathering participants ranged from financing options to fiber processing, several themes emerged as we explored ways in which we can build sustainable Appalachian economies based on local foods and sustainable agriculture. These themes included the concept of **building value chains** that include producers, consumers, and all those in between, the need to **strengthen and connect the broader system** that supports these value chains, and the need to root food systems deeply in the **cultures and communities** of the region.

Building the Value Chain

A value chain is defined as a supply chain that is infused with a set of shared values. Food systems value chains might embody values like local or regional production, support for family farms, or the use of sustainable farming methods. When value chains are place-based and closely connected, they can provide benefits that go beyond financial gain to all those involved. As Anthony Flaccavento, founder of [Appalachian Sustainable Development](#) and [SCALE, Inc.](#), asked, “how do we take the efficiencies of supply chains, but embed in them certain values...like decent livelihoods for farmers and fair wages for workers, and of course, healthy foods?”

Throughout the gathering, participants discussed ways to build and strengthen agricultural value chains in Appalachia, from working with institutional buyers like schools and hospitals to “connecting the dots” through processing, aggregation, and distribution infrastructure. We also explored value chains that provide specific products, like local produce, sustainable meats, bread flour, and even local spirits.

Supporting the System

No value chain can function in a vacuum. Producers, processors, aggregators, distributors, and retailers all need support from a broad and diverse system of players that can provide training, marketing, financing, and other services.

Throughout the gathering, participants discussed the importance of this system and the ways local food advocates and entrepreneurs can use and strengthen these support structures.

*“When we think about bringing
healthy food into
Appalachia,
we need to think about the
entire food system.”*

-David Holben

Over and over again, we heard participants and presenters emphasize the importance of connecting the pieces of this disparate system. Opening speaker Charlie Jackson, Executive Director of the [Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project](#), listed strengthening these connections as one of the most important priorities for continuing to build food systems in the region. “Connections can mean literally, connecting a farmer to a buyer,” he said, “but it also means connecting the importance of local farms and food to other regional economic drivers.”

*“Local food systems **work for America**. When we create opportunities for farmers and ranchers, **our entire nation** reaps the benefit.”*

Culture and Community

We also heard that food systems will be most successful when they are strongly rooted in culture and community.

As Kevin Welch from the [Center for Cherokee Plants](#) put it, “a seed is just a seed and that is all,” until you know the story behind why a group of people adopted that seed, cultivated and used its products, and made that food an important part of their culture.

-President Barack Obama

This focus on community also speaks to the need to build strong, collaborative relationships among partners in the Region. Food systems have a unique power to bring people together across conventional divides; at the same time, building strong, trusting relationships among partners with different perspectives takes time and patience.

Panels and Presentations

Opening Session and Welcome

Scott Hamilton, [AdvantageWest](#). Dale Carroll, [NC Department of Commerce](#). James McCleskey, [State of NC Appalachian Regional Commission Office](#). Earl Gohl, Federal Co-Chair, [Appalachian Regional Commission](#). Bill Yarborough, [NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services](#).

The Growing the Appalachian Food Economy Forum opened with a series of welcomes and remarks from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the State of North Carolina. The opening speakers emphasized that local food systems create jobs, diversify economies, support entrepreneurship, and build healthy communities. Both supply and demand for local food has grown over the past few years, despite the broader economic recession. In 2011, over 85% of consumers reported that they choose a grocery store based at least in part on whether or not

they stock local foods. In 2011, there were over 7,000 farmers markets across the U.S. (up from 340 in 1970) and more than 4,000 Community Supported Agriculture ventures. The USDA estimates that local food sales will reach \$7 billion in 2012.



Local food systems have fully arrived as an important driver of local economies. Earl Gohl, the Federal Co-Chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), noted that local food systems “have direct and significant benefits to rural communities. Local food systems keep income and wealth circulating in local economies.” They exist at the intersection of the ARC’s three primary goals: increasing jobs and income, strengthening community capacity, and improving critical infrastructure.

Local Food Systems as Economic Development: A Framework for Local Leaders

Charlie Jackson, [Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project](#).

Local farms and food entrepreneurs – the major components of a local food system – benefit local economies by supporting job creation, increasing tax revenue, boosting tourism, and helping keep more dollars in a local community. Local food systems have become a key driver of economic development efforts, especially across Appalachia. Charlie Jackson, Executive Director of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, announced that “what once had been trendy is now a trend – local food has arrived. It has become a mainstream movement. Local foods are no longer invisible. Not only are local foods visible, but they are respected.” Further, consumers are seeking local food. Jackson stated that over half of consumers surveyed say that it’s more important to buy local produce than organic produce. Local food systems thrive particularly in Appalachia, with its beautiful farm landscapes, large number of small and agile farms, and strong community support. Jackson noted that flourishing local food systems increase a community’s “health, quality of life, open space, food security, and economic development – you really can’t go wrong by working to build a system that gives people access to local foods.”



Jackson noted that leaders across his local region of Western North Carolina have attempted to unleash the entrepreneurial capacity of the region's web of local farms and food-related businesses by focusing on several keys to building a sustainable, expanded local food system. These include the following strategies:

- Assessing and understanding the realities of a local food system (e.g., mapping assets to match consumer demand with farmer production, mapping how food dollars move throughout a community, quantifying the potential economic impact of local foods.)
- Making sure that the value related to food systems stays in the local economy (e.g., helping communities define "local" food, certifying and branding local foods and getting them into mainstream markets like grocery stores, creating Local Food Guides.)
- Ensuring that local food businesses have the skills and resources to thrive as part of a local food system (e.g., helping local food businesses differentiate themselves, providing farms and businesses with education, loans and access to capital, and support around business and marketing planning.)
- Working to better integrate the components of a local food system that may not yet be connected (e.g., connecting tourism, economic development, and agriculture; connecting parents, children, schools, and cafeterias to local farms and food businesses; helping ensure that all existing parts of a food system can find each other.)

On the Ground in WNC

Many participants had the opportunity to visit Carolina Ground, L3C, a regional food project that embodies all three of the gathering's themes by



building a value chain that is rooted in community and strengthens the broader regional food system. Local food entrepreneurs responded to rising wheat prices by developing the value chain infrastructure needed to keep flour production, and profits, local. The project began as a collaborative effort among seven Asheville-area business owners and received a significant percentage of its funding through community donations.



Growing Diversified Local Food Economies: Models and Resources

Anthony Flaccavento, [SCALE, Inc.](#) Brian Snyder, [Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture.](#) Stacy Miller, [Farmers Market Coalition.](#) Leah McGrath, [Ingles Markets.](#)

Local food systems include diverse elements, from small farmers markets to large regional grocery stores, but all sustainable food systems should aim for the intersection of three crucial elements: the economic viability of farms, environmental protection, and social responsibility.

This panel provided an overview of best practices in developing local food systems and resources for community leaders looking to facilitate the growth of local food economies. Anthony Flaccavento defined the elements of a local food system and stressed the importance of intermediated channels through which food and farm products can pass from producers to consumers. Brian Snyder asked the fundamental question of how we define a foodshed, and suggested an alignment between the concepts of foodsheds and watersheds. Stacy Miller emphasized the importance of farmers markets as integral pieces of local food systems, and stressed the need for accurate qualitative and quantitative measures of their impact. Leah McGrath shared the perspective of a large wholesale buyer and discussed the key role that grocery stores can play in bringing local foods into the mainstream.

*"If a **foodshed** and a **watershed** could be one and the same thing, is that our **definition of local?***

*Does it make sense for **everyone in Appalachia** to be thinking about **downstream?**"*

-Brian Snyder

All four panelists discussed the importance of building strong relationships between the various players in a local food value chain. For example, McGrath stated that Ingles stocks many locally-produced products, but needs organizations like the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project to help them get the word out to consumers. "We're our own worst enemy, because these special products get lost in the shuffle of these 100,000 square foot stores," she said. And Flaccavento spoke of the need for coordinated production planning among farmers. "Farmers will cooperate," he said, "if they find out they need each other to reach a market."



Lunchtime Address

Joani Walsh, [United States Department of Agriculture](#).

The United States Department of Agriculture sees the development of local food systems as an important piece of its strategy to implement President Obama's agenda to put Americans back to work and build an economy built to last. Joani Walsh, Deputy Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, shared that when President Abraham Lincoln created the Department of Agriculture, he could not have imagined the diversity of the agricultural

sector today, nor the diversity of programs and initiatives sponsored by the Department to support farmers and food value chains.

One of the programs Walsh highlighted was the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which encourages the use of fresh fruits and vegetables in the National School Lunch Program and the

*For every farm operator
in the United States
under age 35, there are 6
over the age of 65.*

School Breakfast Program. She described the resources available under the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food program, including the newly available KYF Compass. And she stressed the importance of providing support to a new generation of farmers through partnerships with local and regional

organizations. One way to increase awareness of local food systems among young people is through Farm to School programs; the USDA supports many of the more than 2,000 Farm to School initiatives that exist across the country through grants for infrastructure and training.

The USDA also sees a strong connection between local food systems and increasing access to healthy foods for low-income individuals and communities. The Department's work to locate and target food deserts is one important step in this process; providing funding for farmers markets to increase use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards is another.

The Future of Local Food Systems and Sustainable Agriculture in Appalachia

Jean Haskell, [Encyclopedia of Appalachia](#). Michelle Decker, [Rural Action](#). Roland McReynolds, [Carolina Farm Stewardship Association](#). Leslie Schaller, [Appalachian Center for Economic Networks](#). Kathlyn Terry, [Appalachian Sustainable Development](#).

The Appalachian Region is uniquely suited to the development of local food systems. It is the most diverse foodshed in North America, has a strong heritage of small family farms, many distinctive, multi-ethnic traditions, and a culture of hardworking, dedicated people. Against this backdrop, practitioners from across the region discussed their views on the most important trends and challenges that will impact the future of local food systems and sustainable agriculture in Appalachia.



These trends included the need for increased infrastructure to support expanding food systems, changes in the regulatory environment around food safety, new models for financing food systems work, and an increased intentionality around working together for a stronger collective impact.

The panelists emphasized the importance of capitalizing on the seemingly limitless demand for local and sustainably-produced foods, and the need to move from thinking about individual projects to thinking about the entire value chain or system. Schaller and Terry spoke to the challenges of developing effective infrastructure for processing, aggregating, and distributing local food products, especially in the more rural areas of the region. McReynolds emphasized the need for education, training, and support for new farm and food entrepreneurs. “If we expect this local and sustainable food economy to thrive,” he said, “we have to support these new entrepreneurs.”

*“We’ve got assets that **people want to buy**, and we want to do it in a way that **make our communities and our land really strong.**”*

-Michelle Decker

Funders Panel

Bill Yarborough, [NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services](#). Ray Daffner, [Appalachian Regional Commission](#). Wayne Fawbush, [Ford Foundation](#). William Hobbs, [USDA Rural Development](#). Tim Richards, [Community Foundation of Western North Carolina](#).



Strong funding partnerships are an essential element of building and strengthening local and sustainable food systems. From a funder’s perspective, some of the greatest opportunities available to support these systems in Appalachia today lie in building collaborative relationships (among funders, non-profits, private enterprise, and government agencies) that support the development of new entrepreneurs.

However, funders are limited by their inability to fund entrepreneurs directly and the challenges involved in building the capacity of applicants to submit high-quality, fundable proposals with established sources of capital and strong business plans. Panelists shared important lessons about funding in Appalachia, including the need to build strong networks as a precursor to creating systems-level change, the key role that local and community foundations play in bridging the gap between national funders and the work on the ground, and the importance of collaboration, both informally and through more formal structures such as the Appalachia Funders Network.



Concurrent Sessions

Sets of concurrent breakout sessions occurred several times throughout the gathering. In this paper, we've organized the summaries of these sessions according to overarching theme, rather than in sequential order. Several sessions focused on building specific **local food value chains**, or elements that are common to many value chains. Others provided insight into the **systems that support value chain development**. And several sessions explored the ways in which food systems intersect with the **culture and communities** that are unique to the Appalachian region. Many of the presentations and materials used at these sessions can be found online at www.arc.gov/localfood.

Building the Value Chain

Getting Product to Market: Models of Aggregation and Distribution

Michelle Decker, [Rural Action](#), Eric Bendfeldt, [Virginia Cooperative Extension](#), Robin Robbins, [Appalachian Sustainable Development](#), Debra Tropp, [USDA Agricultural Marketing Service](#).

In order to build strong and resilient value chains, it is important that farmers have access to diverse markets for their products, including direct sales and wholesale buyers. Wholesale markets make up an important piece of a fully-developed value chain, but producers need training and support to be able to access these markets. Food hubs, which coordinate the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of local and regional goods from multiple producers, provide one good model for doing this. "Farmers don't need to work harder," stated Robbins. They already work hard enough producing food; it is crucial that others take on the roles of aggregating, marketing, and distributing. This infrastructure needs to be developed at a scale that is appropriate to the size of the market and the production capacity of the farmers.



On the Ground in WNC

Blue Ridge Food Ventures (BRFV) is an 11,000 square foot shared-use kitchen incubator and natural products manufacturing center with a mission of helping people who dream of starting their own food-based businesses find success. "Without the access to BRFV, a lot of these concepts, visions, and dreams would be parked," says client Joel Mowrey of Smoking J's Fiery Foods.

Developing Shared-Use Food Processing Centers

David Hughes, [Appalachian Regional Commission](#). Kevin Kilburn, [Shoals Entrepreneurial Center](#). Leslie Schaller, [Appalachian Center for Economic Networks](#).
Mary Lou Surgi, [Blue Ridge Food Ventures](#).

“You might think about farmers first, but there are a lot of other entrepreneurs and businesses that want to be part of the food economy.”

–Mary Lou Surgi

Presenters emphasized the need for scale-appropriate infrastructure that is demand-driven and responsive to markets. “It’s not just that bricks-and-mortar, build-it-and-they-will-come idea,” said Schaller. Other services, like marketing and branding, connections to local media, recipe development, support for business expansion, and connections to potential markets, are crucial to the success of individual entrepreneurs and, therefore, to the success of shared-use facilities. Entrepreneurs using shared-use centers may or may not be farmers themselves; it’s important to offer opportunities to become entrepreneurs to a wider segment of the community.

Local and Sustainable Meat Processing

Larry Fisher, [Appalachian Center for Economic Networks](#). Danny Boyer, [Grayson LandCare, Inc.](#) Casey McKissick, [Center for Environmental Farming Systems](#). Smithson Mills, [Researcher and Consultant](#).

Small meat processors are crucial to the success of local and sustainable meat value chains, and they are in jeopardy. It is estimated that only 20% of small processors will remain in business in 10 years, due to significantly higher costs per animal than larger facilities. McKissick emphasized the importance of training and support for processors, stating that “the motto of the small-scale meat-packing industry could be, ‘doing business like it’s 1955.’” All of the presenters agreed that for small-scale processing to be successful, feasibility studies and business plans are necessary, as well as a good understanding of slaughter and processing regulations, which vary from state to state. In addition, processors need to communicate closely with producers around projected supply, especially for larger animals that take longer to get ready for market.

Farm-to-School, Farm-to-College, Farm-to-Hospital: The Value of Institutional Buyers

Pam Curry, [Center for Economic Options](#). Emily Jackson, [Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project](#). Bekki Leigh, [West Virginia Department of Education](#).

The Importance of Relationships

Bekki Leigh could not get local farmers to talk to her about selling to West Virginia schools. “What will it take for us to have these conversations?” she asked. “Bring donuts and coffee,” she was told. After several meetings, with donuts and coffee at each one, one farmer approached her. “Bekki,” he said, “you don’t have to bring donuts to the next meeting – my wife will make a pound cake.” Leigh gives credit for the success of her office’s Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program to the time she takes to build trust and relationships with her partners.

Practitioners shared best practices for working with educational institutions, from pre-school to college, as strong partners in local food value chains. In order to engage with schools and institutions as buyers, it is important to understand how their purchasing and food service systems work, as well as their needs and the capacity of local suppliers. The key to being successful in this is conducting research in advance. Developing

partnerships with schools is a great way to begin to understand “how food flows in your community,” said Jackson, as well as reaching out to a broader market, since parents learn and become engaged from their children’s experiences.

Supporting the System

Models of Innovation: Educational Institutions as Incubation Hubs and Centers for Sustainability

Stuart Rosenfeld, [Regional Technology Strategies, Inc.](#) Walter Hill, [Tuskegee University.](#) Meagan Roberts, [Western Piedmont Community College.](#) Thomas Sewell, [Walters State Community College.](#) Terry Tucker, [Alfred State College.](#)

The population of students interested in learning about agriculture is changing, and programs designed to teach these students need to change with them. Agricultural education is shifting from teaching “the one way of doing things,” to teaching multiple methods and multiple paths to success. This session’s presenters agreed that leadership is crucial, both within the institution and in the broader community. Tucker spoke to the opportunities provided by innovative partnerships with other departments within the institution; he shared the example of engineering and welding students working with local farmers to create new tools that allow them to plant garlic more quickly. “The only way to set off in a new, innovative direction...” he said, “is through partnerships.” Engaging with the community provides students with real-world learning opportunities, keeps farming resources in the community, and gives schools strong advocates when funding or programs are threatened.

Marketing and Branding: Improving the Viability and Integrity of Local Food Markets

Kostas Skordas, [Appalachian Regional Commission](#). Peter Marks, [Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project](#). Stacy Miller, [Farmers Market Coalition](#).

In order for local food systems to expand, “we need to think beyond this loyal, smiling customer base that’s going to be there rain or shine,” said Miller. Food systems have grown exponentially in recent years; with this growth, however, comes increased scrutiny and an increased need for accountability. It is important to define what



your brand stands for, as words like “local” and “green” can mean different things to different people.

Customers can lose trust in a brand if they discover it doesn’t mean what they think it means, and some companies take advantage of the current interest in local foods and farmers markets to advertise products that don’t share the values that their brands imply. The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) defines their “Appalachian Grown” brand as any product from a family farm in an Appalachian county within 100 miles of Asheville.

70% of ASAP survey respondents said they were **more likely** to buy a product that was labeled **“local.”**

Models of Sustainability: The Role of the Agripreneur

Roland McReynolds, [Carolina Farm Stewardship Association](#). Travis Edgerton, [Farmers Fresh Market](#). Dale Hawkins, [Fish Hawk Acres & New Appalachian Farm and Research Center](#). Michael Porterfield, [New Sprout Organic Farms](#).

Successful entrepreneurs, like those represented on this panel, see a market for something and work to create it. Sometimes, the models evolve as they learn from their experiences and mistakes. “It’s the people who are going to buy my product who are going to teach me,” said Porterfield of his new venture, New Sprout Organic Farms. Hawkins’ Community Support Kitchen has evolved as he has come to better understand the needs of his customers, and Edgerton’s online farmers market continues to explore new opportunities to expand. All three presenters emphasized the need to communicate to customers that the terms local and sustainable are not synonymous with being expensive. They also mentioned the challenges of ever-changing regulatory systems with sometimes unintended consequences. For example, changes in immigration laws can lead to agricultural labor issues, and regulations designed to improve food safety can place significant burdens on farm and food entrepreneurs.

Innovative Financing Programs and Ideas for Farmers and Food Producers

Ray Daffner, [Appalachian Regional Commission](#). Carol Peppe Hewitt, [Slow Money NC](#).

Mark Kudlowitz, [Community Development Financial Institutions Fund](#).

Anna Tefft, [Natural Capital Investment Fund, Inc.](#)



Beyond traditional lenders, there are many options for financing agricultural value chain businesses. Some models are still emerging and being developed; some are learning from and adapting financing models that are being used internationally. Presenters gave three examples of non-traditional financing opportunities. Slow Money connects private individuals interested in re-investing in their communities with entrepreneurs who may not qualify for traditional loans. Community Development Financial

Institutions (CDFIs) do the majority of their lending in low-income communities and often provide support and training along with loan funds. Natural Capital Investment Fund (NCIF) is a CDFI with the specific goal of supporting sustainable, natural-resource based enterprises in Appalachia. Presenters emphasized the many possibilities available beyond just bank loans. “We can do this in your community,” said Hewitt. “All we need is people. Got any of those? Do they like to eat?”

Culture and Community

Food Heritage and Culinary Arts as Economic Drivers

Christine Gyovai, Institute for Environmental Negotiation. Rosann Kent, [North Georgia College and State University](#). Mark Sohn, [Chef and Author](#). Kevin Welch, [Center for Cherokee Plants](#).

Appalachia’s strong food heritage is an asset local leaders can build on to develop sustainable food systems and strengthen local economies. In this session, panelists described how communities use local food resources to foster entrepreneurship, preserve community culture and heritage, attract tourists, and diversify local economies. Methods for revitalizing the Appalachian food heritage include capturing traditional recipes and infusing them into our modern food system, preserving traditional and heirloom seeds, and exchanging stories about traditional farming and cooking methods. These strategies can help “reweave the community quilt,” as Gyovai put it, to strengthen communities that are rooted in the region’s culture and landscape.

Increasing Access to Healthy Food

Savanna Lyons, [West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition](#). David Cooke, [Grow Appalachia & Berea College](#). Nikki D'Adamo-Damery, [Appalachian Foodshed Project](#). David Holben, [Ohio University](#). Kathlyn Terry, [Appalachian Sustainable Development](#).

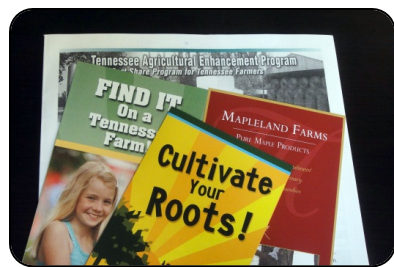
Ensuring broad and equitable access to fresh, healthy foods is an important element of building a sustainable, secure food system. It is a common misperception that if people live in the country, they know how to garden, but the reality is that many Appalachian families need education and training in order to be able to grow their own food. Panelists in this session are working to connect farmers with food pantries through purchasing “seconds,” or produce that does not meet wholesale or retail size or appearance standards. They are working with individual families to teach them how to grow their own food, and with organizations like health departments, domestic abuse shelters, and daycares to reach out to underserved communities, with the goal of increasing food independence, passing on traditional skills, and getting fresh, healthy foods back into people’s homes and on their dinner tables.

“We have a whole generation of people who have forgotten how to garden and put food up.”

-David Cooke

Agritourism: Economic Opportunities for Local Farmers and Communities

Martha Glass, [NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services](#). Pamela Bartholomew, [Tennessee Department of Agriculture](#). Mary Jeanne Packer, [Ghostwriters Communications](#). Monika Roth, [Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County](#).



Agritourism offers opportunities for farmers to share the agriculture experience with visitors while increasing product sales and diversifying their sources of income. “People want authentic experiences that they can have a hand in,” said Packer. They want to “find out what a farmer’s life is like.” On a local level, one of the most important steps is for farmers to build relationships with their community, especially given that 50% of visitors to agritourism farms come from within their own counties. Community partners can help develop and support the tourism aspects of a farm or region, so farmers can focus more energy on farming. Partners can include local tourism agencies, hotels, media outlets, and non-profit organizations. County Extension offices and local Chambers of Commerce can be great resources; farmers are also beginning to use social media to market their farms as tourism destinations. Collaborative tourism efforts, like wine or cheese trails, have taken off because producers see the opportunities that can come from working together to promote a whole region.

Next Steps

This gathering was an amazing opportunity for participants to learn and share information. It was also **just one step** in a much longer conversation about building the Appalachian food economy. During the event, participants had multiple opportunities to share their thoughts on the **critical next steps** to expand the scale and deepen the impact of local and sustainable agricultural value chains across the region. Here, we highlight the **voices of the participants**, the nearly 340 farmers, chefs, business owners, researchers, educators, funders, and advocates that are working every day to build food systems that create jobs, increase economic opportunity, and sustain the communities and environment of Appalachia.

What will it take to build and strengthen agricultural value chains in the region?

- **Facilitated dialogue and connections across the value chain.** Over and over, participants emphasized the need for more communication among the various players in the value chains, from producers to marketing to aggregation centers to consumers. “Knowing who, what, and where is critical for success with scarce resources,” said one participant.
- **Education and training.** In addition to public education about the economic and health benefits of local foods, specific value chain players need education and access to information to ensure that best practices are shared, local governments and planning districts are informed, and existing resources are utilized effectively.
- **Investment.** Mature, highly functional value chains require significant investment in infrastructure. It is important that sources of capital and credit are readily available to new or expanding ventures.
- **Policy awareness.** It is crucial that public policies are appropriate to the needs of small farmers and growth of value chain businesses, and allow for some flexibility within institutional buyers such as school systems.

What will it take to build and strengthen a broader system of support for these value chains?

- **Education.** In this context, education includes everything from offering more sustainable agriculture courses at community colleges to teaching farmers how to access and use new marketing strategies. It also includes education and training for economic

development officials to better understand the potential for local food systems to act as drivers of economic development.

- **Funding.** Funding is important not only to expand the value chain directly, but to increase capacity and to support feasibility studies, business plans, and marketing efforts.
- **Support for value chain intermediaries.** Intermediary organizations connect and strengthen the various components of a value chains by providing training and support and helping to close the gap between suppliers and consumers. These organizations need financial and capacity-building support in order to continue this vital work effectively.

What will it take to ensure that this work is deeply rooted in the culture and communities of Appalachia?

- **Collaboration and connections.** Collaboration is necessary to make the most effective use of the limited resources available for this work. Connecting with diverse stakeholders, including schools, public health advocates, and local development districts, can engage broader segments of the community in local food systems.

*“It is indeed our
Appalachian-ness
that is one of our
best assets.”*

-Dr. Jean Haskell
- **Community outreach and education.** Outreach is crucial to ensure that underserved communities, including low-wealth individuals, very rural populations, and people of color have full access to the benefits of participating in local food systems.
- **Research and information.** It is important to conduct additional research to understand the complexities of the food system and all of the ways it connects with other aspects of our communities, such as land use, infrastructure development, and economic development. It is especially important to continue to explore and make the case for the economic benefits of strong local and sustainable food systems.

While this summary in no way captures the depth and complexity of the work ahead, we hope that it provides some insight into the priorities identified by the diverse participants in attendance. Overall, the message was clear. Local, sustainable food systems are not a passing fad; they are real economic drivers in Appalachia, which are creating jobs and increasing income while also sustaining the natural assets and communities of the Region. In the words of Dr. Jean Haskell, “if the turnout for this meeting and the enthusiasm you all have shown is any indication, we have reason for real optimism about the future.”

Value Chain Tours

Western North Carolina is home to a broad array of locally-based and sustainable agricultural value chains. Gathering participants had the opportunity to experience some of the great **examples of farms and processing facilities** in the region by joining one of three optional **value chain tours** on Wednesday, April 4th.

East of Asheville

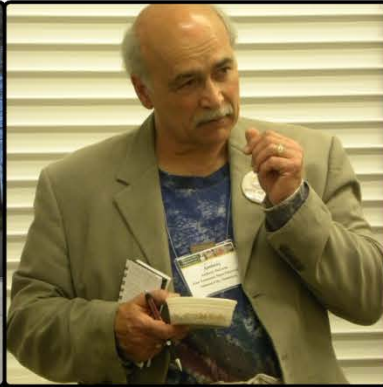
At [New Sprout Organic Farms](#) and [Hop'n Blueberry Farm](#), participants learned about several of the many collaborative efforts underway within WNC value chains. Both farms partner with local craft beer makers [Pisgah Brewing Company](#) to create unique, flavorful beers made with locally-grown hops and seasonal specialties like a pumpkin ale. [Blue Ridge Biofuels](#) closes the loop by turning waste oil from the food industry into useful diesel fuel, that local farmers can use to run machinery and delivery trucks.

North of Asheville

While the phrase “local agriculture” may initially bring to mind vegetables and eggs, participants on the North of Asheville tour had the opportunity to experience two less common agricultural value chains. At the newly operational Carolina Ground mill facility, participants learned about the [North Carolina Organic Bread Flour Project](#) and the [Riverbend Malt House](#), two enterprises created with the mission of keeping grain production and processing local. [Echoview Farm's](#) new fiber mill provides all of the infrastructure necessary to turn locally-produced animal fibers into high-value yarns, fabric, and felt.

West of Asheville

[Blue Ridge Food Ventures](#), a shared-use processing facility that has supported the creation of more than 200 local businesses, hosted entrepreneurs from the [West End Bakery](#) and [Smoking J's Fiery Foods](#). Participants learned about the [FEAST Program](#) (Fresh, Easy, Affordable, Sustainable, Tasty) and sampled many of the products made in the BRFV kitchens. Participants met with farm owners Frank and Jeanette Wilson of [Hominy Valley Farms—Land and Cattle](#), and discussed how the support of the surrounding community helped them expand their multi-generational family farm into a thriving local source for natural beef, broiler chickens, pastured pigs/hogs, laying hens, and summer vegetables.



At Blue Ridge Food Ventures, "we spend hours with every client before they get in here to use the facility," says Chris Reedy.



Blue Ridge Biofuels sold their one millionth gallon of biodiesel in March of 2012.

There are 500 fiber-producing farms within 100 miles of Asheville.



Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a federal-state partnership that works for sustainable community and economic development in Appalachia. The Appalachian Region includes all of West Virginia and counties in 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. For more information about the ARC, please visit www.arc.gov.



For more information about this event, please visit www.arc.gov/localfood.

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