



Local Food and Farm Assessment
Columbus, Georgia



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Local Food Research Center
ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project)

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Asheville, NC 28801

About ASAP

ASAP is a nonprofit organization based in the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina. ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. Over the last two decades, ASAP has developed an approach to local food system building that (1) creates and directs demand for locally grown food, (2) builds the capacity of farmers to serve local markets and of markets to source from local farms, and (3) facilitates meaningful experiences with local farms and food in order to increase public awareness, build community relationships, and create "spaces" where community members can come together to talk about the kind of food system they want. With nearly 20 years of local food systems work experience, we understand the challenges and opportunities involved in developing local markets. Our staff have expertise in grassroots organizing, place-based food and farm education, marketing and branding, farmers markets, public outreach and communication, research, and advocacy.

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INTRODUCTION

This report was produced by ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) to provide the Columbus Local Food Fund members and other stakeholders in the Columbus, Georgia region with information they need to develop the local food system in Columbus, Georgia. The contents of the report include a basic analysis of agricultural production and the characteristics of farming for the 62 counties¹ located within a 100 mile radius of Columbus. In addition, the report provides an analysis of food consumption and spending by the 474,650 residents living within Muscogee County and the immediately surrounding counties of Chattahoochee, Harris, Marion, Talbot, Russell, and Lee. These two geographic boundaries will be referred to throughout this report as the “100 mile region” and “seven county region.”

The first two sections of this report focus on statistical data and analysis regarding food and farm conditions, food production trends, and consumption patterns for the respective project areas. The last section of the report provides preliminary recommendations for strategic action and next steps for developing the local food, farm, and agribusiness sectors serving Columbus.



¹ Georgia: Baker, Bibb, Butts, Calhoun, Carroll, Chattahoochee, Clay, Clayton, Coweta, Crawford, Crisp, Dooly, Dougherty, Douglas, Early, Fayette, Fulton, Harris, Heard, Henry, Houston, Lamar, Lee, Macon, Marion, Meriwether, Miller, Monroe, Muscogee, Peach, Pike, Quitman, Randolph, Schley, Spalding, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Taylor, Terrell, Troup, Upson, Webster, and Worth counties.

Alabama: Barbour, Bullock, Chambers, Clay, Cleburne, Coffee, Coosa, Dale, Elmore, Henry, Houston, Lee, Macon, Montgomery, Pike, Randolph, Russell, and Tallapoosa counties.

FARMING IN THE PROJECT REGION

Farms and Farmland

According to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture, which reports data from 2012, the 100 mile region around Columbus is home to 17,596 farms operating on nearly five million acres of farmland. Farms in the 100 county region make up a fifth of all farms in states of Georgia and Alabama. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of farms by size for both the 2007 and 2012 censuses of agriculture for the 100 mile region, and Table 1 provides the numerical data of farms by size, including percentage changes in their numbers between the two census years.

Figure 1. Farms by Size (2007 & 2012)

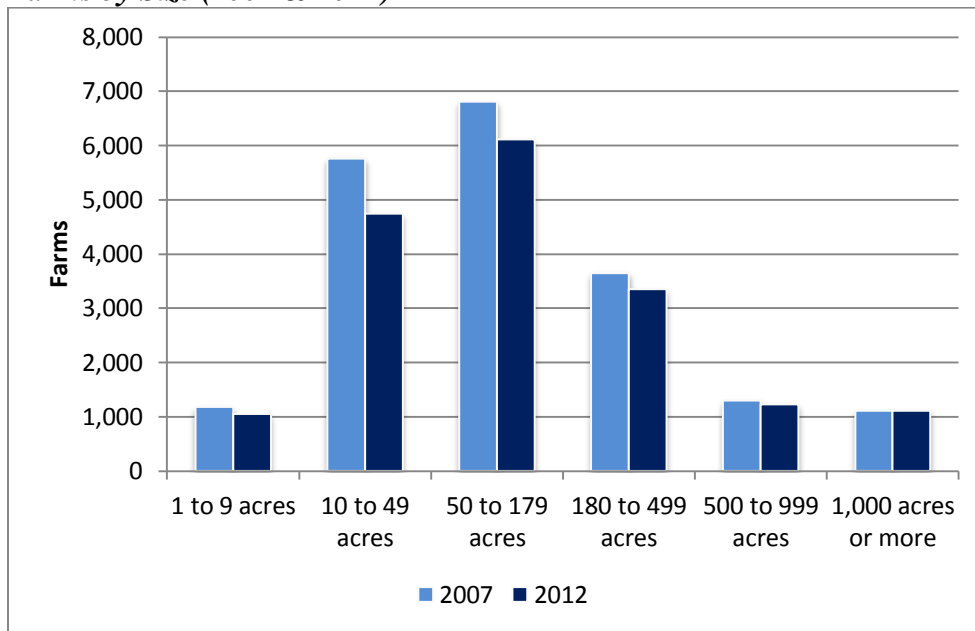


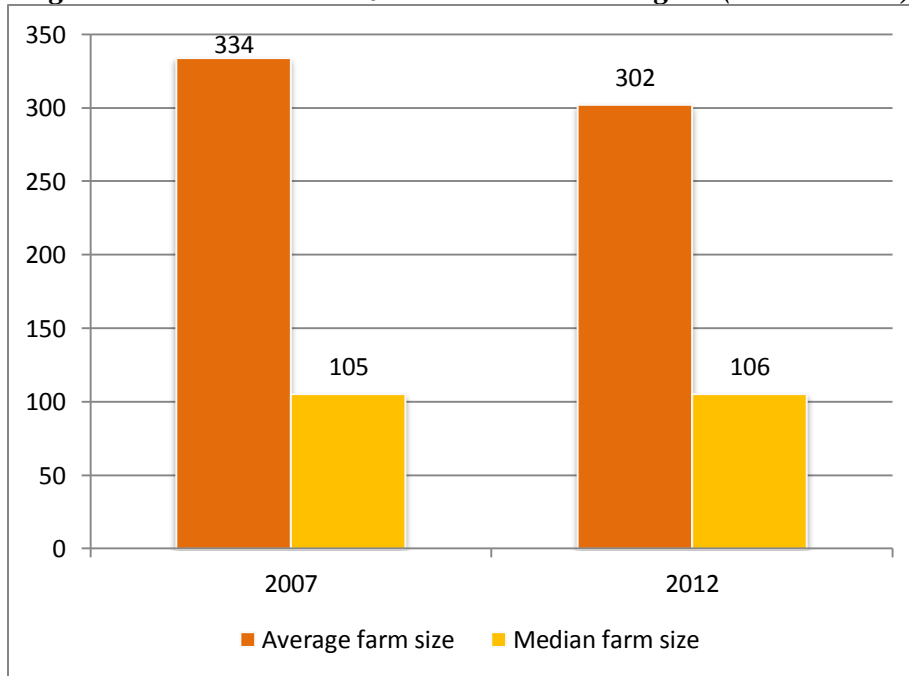
Table 1. Farms by Size (2007 & 2012)

	2007	2012	% Change 07-12
Farms	19,795	17,596	-11.1%
Land in farms (acres)	5,143,570	4,945,054	-3.9%
Size of farm	2007	2012	% Change 07-12
1 to 9 acres	1,175	1,045	-11.1%
10 to 49 acres	5,756	4,748	-17.5%
50 to 179 acres	6,811	6,110	-10.3%
180 to 499 acres	3,649	3,351	-8.2%
500 to 999 acres	1,296	1,231	-5.0%
1,000 acres or more	1,108	1,111	0.3%

Table 1 shows the predominance of smaller farms (under 180 acres) which made up 68 percent of all farms in the 100 mile region in 2012. According to the census, the average farm size in the

region is large at 302 acres (shown in Figure 2). However this average is heavily skewed by the many massive farms in the region (1,000 acres or more). A better understanding of the size of many farms in the region comes from the 100 mile region’s median farm size of 106 acres.

Figure 2. Average and Median Farm Sizes in the 100 Mile Region (2007 & 2012)



For 2012, farms in the 100 mile region were larger than the average size of Georgia and Alabama farms, which measured an average of 228 acres in Georgia (median 70 acres) and 206 acres in Alabama (median 75 acres).

Referring back to Table 1, which shows the percentages of farm and farmland loss that occurred in the region between the 2007 and 2012 censuses, small farms experienced the greatest losses, particularly farms between 10 and 49 acres. Concurrent with the loss in farms was nearly a four percent loss in farmland. The three counties that suffered the largest losses were Dooly, GA (-28,744 acres, -18.5 percent), Harris, GA (-28,400 acres, -46.7 percent), and Taylor, GA (-25,156 acres, -29 percent). Still, there were seventeen counties that reported increased farmland acreage between 2007 and 2012, the top three being Worth, GA (+36,815 acres, +19.1 percent), Crisp, GA (+33,980 acres, +40.8 percent) and Bullock, AL (+30,649 acres, 22.9 percent). These decreases are not too far off from the state-level losses in Alabama and Georgia. Between the 2007 and 2012 censuses Alabama saw an 11.3 percent loss in farms and 1.4 percent loss in farmland while the state of Georgia experienced an 11.7 percent loss in farms and 5.2 percent loss in farmland.

Farm Operators

For 2012, the 100 mile region’s 17,596 farms were run by 25,763 farm operators, 7,485 of whom were women (29 percent). The vast majority, 92 percent, of these operators were white; six percent were black and one percent were Latino. In addition, 45 percent of operators in the 100 mile region reported their primary occupation as farming while the other 55 percent reported a

primary occupation of “other.” Accordingly, many farmers in the project region earn a proportion of their income off farm, but still engage in farming activities for extra income, to qualify for tax exemptions, to carry on a family tradition, because they enjoy it, etc.

The Census of Agriculture provides additional data for principal operators of farms, defined as the person primarily responsible for the on-site, day-to-day operation of the farm or ranch business. One such piece of data is principal farmer age, as shown in Table 2. The average age of principal operators in the 100 mile region in 2012 was 60.5 (compared to the national average of 58.3). A quarter of all principal operators in the 100 mile region are seventy or older, which is a higher rate than the national average where 21 percent of principal operators are seventy or older. The 100 mile region county with the highest average age of operator was Clayton, GA (68.7 years); the lowest was Miller, GA (56.4 years).

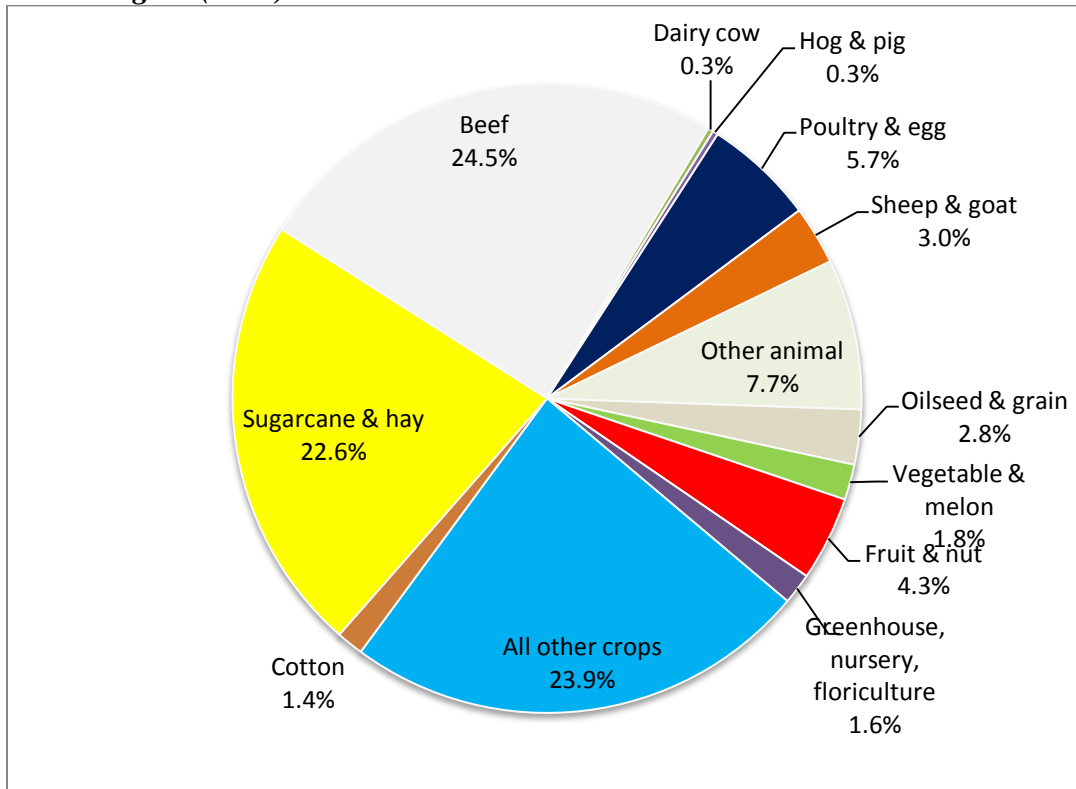
Table 2. Principal Farm Operators by Age Group (2012)

	Total Number	Percentage of all Principal Operators
Under 25	65	0.4%
25-34	672	3.8%
35-44	1,520	8.6%
45-54	3,369	19.1%
55-59	2,475	14.1%
60-64	2,546	14.5%
65-69	2,549	14.5%
70 and Over	4,400	25.0%

Farm Production

The Census of Agriculture uses the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) to classify farms by their primary economic activity. The NAICS system is intended to provide a consistent framework for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of industrial statistics related to specific business sectors. Figure 3 shows that, according to the NAICS coding system, the majority of farms in the 100 county region are primarily engaged in beef, sugarcane/hay, or “all other crop” production. The USDA defines “all other crop production” as establishments primarily engaged in growing crops not included in the other categories or establishments with no one crop or family of crops accounting for one-half of the establishment’s agricultural production, which could include foods for human consumption.

Figure 3. Farm Economic Classification by North American Industry Classification System in the 100 Mile Region (2012)



Two of the most important crops produced in the 100 mile region are pecans and snap beans. Historically and today, the region has been home to major commercial growers who are supported by some of the country’s largest food processing companies like Coca-Cola, Koch, Kellogg’s, and Claxton Farms.² In the 1950’s, pecan processing became commercialized in Georgia, with the industry concentrated in the southwest region of the state, particularly in Dougherty and Mitchell counties.³ Together, Sunnyland Farms Inc. of Dougherty County and Birdsong Peanuts in Worth and Early counties employ 490 individuals and produce packaged gift boxes and tins of nuts, fruit cakes, and candies.

According to University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, snap beans are an important horticultural crop for the state of Georgia in particular and the U.S. as a whole.⁴ As of 2012, Georgia was the second largest grower of snap beans in the U.S. with the Columbus region responsible for a majority of snap bean production. According to a report by the Southern

² Georgia Power. (2014). Food Processing - Georgia’s Top Manufacturing Industry. Georgia Power Community and Economic Development. Retrieved from <http://selectgeorgia.com/publications/Food-Processing-Industry-Report.pdf>

³ Georgia’s Virtual Library (2015) “Pecans.” Georgia Info an Online Georgia Almanac. Retrieved from <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/economy/article/pecans>

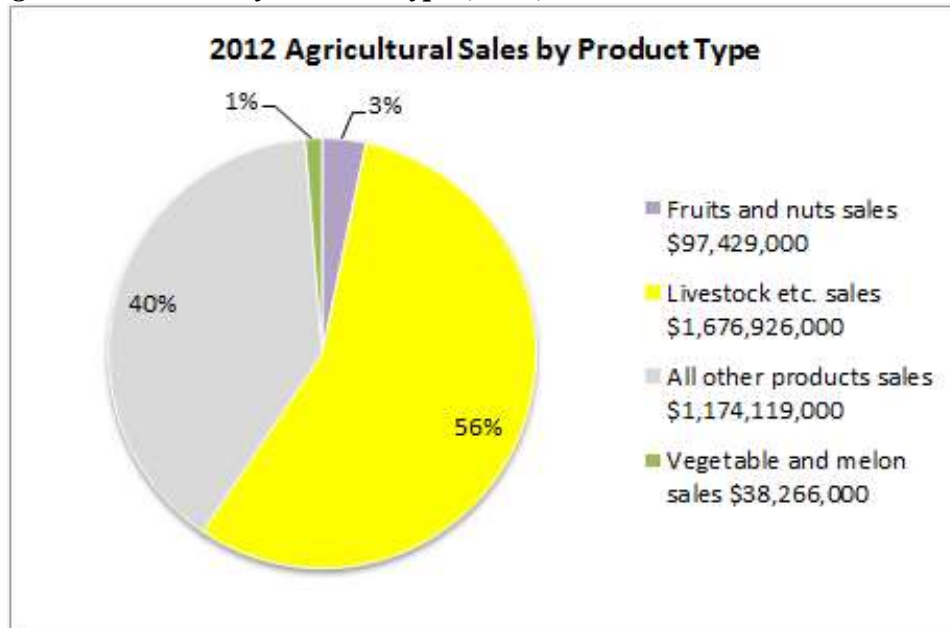
⁴ UGA Vegetable Team. (2013). “Commercial Snap Bean Production in Georgia.” University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. (B 1369). <http://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.cfm?number=B1369>

Integrated Pest Management Center, snap beans are shipped to Texas for processing as the only facility in Georgia closed over a decade ago.⁵

Agricultural Receipts

According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, total combined agricultural receipts reported for the 100 mile region was over \$3 billion, a 43 percent increase over the 2007 total of \$2.1 billion. Four percent of these receipts came from the sale of fruits, vegetables, melons, and tree nuts; 55 percent came from the sale of livestock, poultry, and their products (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Agricultural Sales by Product Type (2012)⁶



As the Census of Agriculture does not distinguish between farms that sell their products to local markets and those that do not, the number of fruit, vegetable, and livestock farms producing for local markets is unclear. The bulk of these products are grown to sell to wholesalers and processors and are not marketed for local consumption.

Though the Census does not reveal the number of farms engaged in local markets, it does report 879 farms (five percent of all farms) in the 100 mile region selling their edible goods directly to customers via farmers markets, roadside stands, or through community supported agriculture (CSA's), as well as 237 farms that report selling goods directly to retail outlets like restaurants and institutions. Though a minority, these farms vending directly to their customers form the foundation for the region's developing local food system.

⁵ Pest Management Strategic Plan Database. (2003). "Crop Profile for Beans (Snap) in Georgia." United States Department of Agriculture Research, Education, & Economics Information System. <http://www.ipmcenters.org/cropprofiles/docs/GAsnapbeans.pdf>

⁶ "All other product sales" includes the sales from field crops like cotton, tobacco, or hay, nursery crops, grains, forest products, greenhouse, floriculture, sod, propagative materials, among other non fruit, vegetable, or livestock-related products.

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE LOCAL MARKET FOR LOCAL FOOD

Despite national trends toward consolidation of the food system, other national trends demonstrate the growth of local, decentralized markets. National market research by firms like the Hartman Group and JWT Advertising have tracked the shift in consumer demand to favor locally grown foods, as have organizations like the National Restaurant Association and the National Grocers Association who have named locally sourced foods top trends in 2013, 2014, and 2015⁷.



According to an August 2013 USDA news release, local food sales through direct and intermediate markets, worth an estimated \$1 billion in 2005, grew to \$4.8 billion in 2007 and reached nearly \$7 billion in 2012.⁸ To better understand how this national movement translates to the local level, we can look at the balance between local food production in the 100 mile region and general food purchasing and consumption of residents in the seven county region.

Though the project area is dominated by industrial-scale agriculture, evidence of the interest in and growth of local food opportunities exists. For example, as shown in Figure 5, direct sales in the region grew 44 percent from 2007 to 2012 from \$2,893,000 to \$4,180,000.

⁷ National Restaurant Association, "What's Hot in 2015? Discover new menu trends," National Restaurant Association News & Research, December 3, 2014, <http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/News/What-s-Hot-in-2015-culinary-forecast-predicts-top>

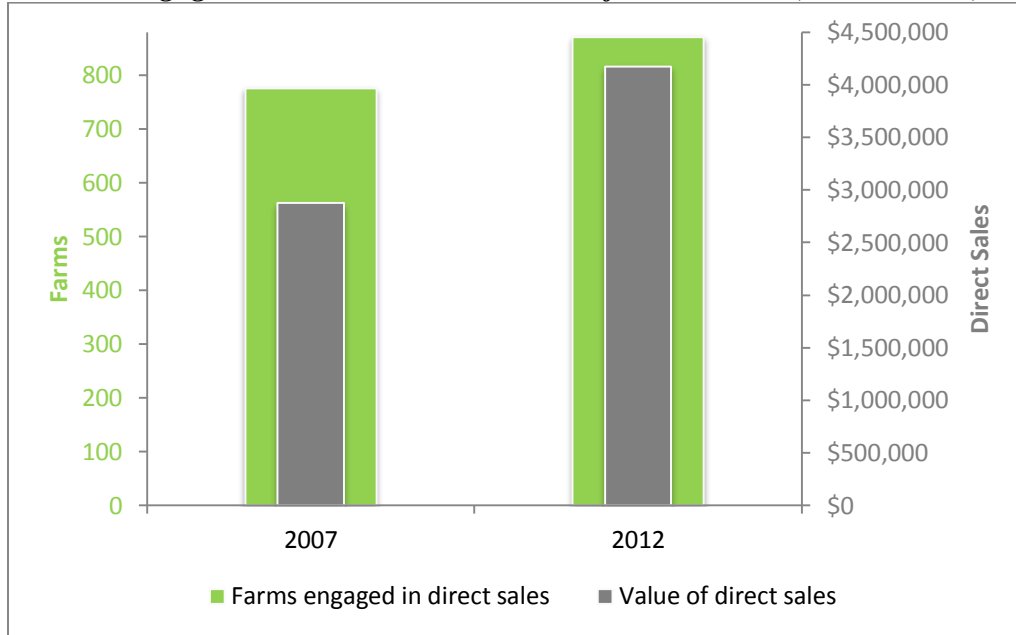
National Restaurant Association, "What's Hot in 2014 culinary forecast confirms sourcing, nutrition trends" Culinary Forecast Predicts Top Food and Drink Menu Trends," National Restaurant Association News & Research, December 3, 2013, <http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/News/What-s-Hot-in-2014-culinary-forecast-confirms-sour>

National Restaurant Association, "National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot in 2013" Culinary Forecast Predicts Top Food and Drink Menu Trends," National Restaurant Association News & Research, December 4, 2012, <http://www.restaurant.org/Pressroom/Press-Releases/Whats-Hot-in-2013-Culinary-Forecast>

National Grocers Association, "2013 National Grocers Association Supermarket Guru Consumer Panel Survey," National Grocers Association, August 23, 2012, <http://www.nationalgrocers.org/resource-center/nga-research/consumer-panel-survey>

⁸ "USDA Celebrates National Farmers Market Week, August 4-10," USDA Office of Communications, News Release No. 0155.13, accessed October 31, 2013, <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdamediafb?contentid=2013/08/0155.xml&printable=true&contentidonly=true>

Figure 5. Farms Engaged in Direct Sales and Value of Direct Sales (2007 & 2012)



The number of farms providing agritourism opportunities (e.g., hunting, fishing, farm or wine tours, hay rides, etc.) increased over the same time period, going from 369 farms in 2007 to 498 farms in 2012 (+35 percent). Income from these activities grew substantially, nearly doubling, from \$2,786,000 in 2007 to \$5,461,000 in 2012. Still, there is ample room for growth and expansion of opportunities for local farms in the 100 mile region to provide fresh food products to area residents.

Local Food System Assets in Columbus, GA

In addition to the farms engaged in direct to consumer sales and agritourism in the project region, the central metropolitan hub of Columbus, Georgia is home to a variety of community associations, institutions, and businesses already interested and engaged in local food system activities. These organizations purchase local food products, provide education and training opportunities to area family farms and agribusiness entrepreneurs, promote local food activities in the community, and help connect residents to local sources of healthy, fresh local foods.

To identify some of these important organizations, a group of stakeholders from the Columbus Local Food Fund contributed their knowledge as well as solicited the knowledge of other stakeholders in the community to develop an asset map detailing the locations, contact information, and local food and farm focuses of these groups. The resulting working document is filled with over 150 individuals, markets, retailers, organizations, governmental departments, restaurants, grocers, farms, and processors who make up the foundation of the local food and farm economy in Columbus and the surrounding area, and the center from which the local food movement will expand.

Local Food Production and Consumption Estimates

No matter how large the demand for locally grown foods, there is an upper limit to the amount of local product residents, visitors, and businesses can purchase from regional growers based on climate and soil-related limitations. Local farmers cannot supply 100 percent of the produce



currently consumed by potential local customers, because they cannot efficiently grow bananas, pineapple, or lemons, for example, no matter how much local food infrastructure is improved.

Farmers of the 100 mile region do, however, produce 25 different types of fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts that account for approximately half of the fresh produce and nuts most frequently and regularly consumed by residents of the seven county region. Table 3 shows production and consumption estimates for these 25 fresh products. The column labeled “Acres in

Production” shows the current capacity for the production of these goods in the 100 mile region as of 2012. The column titled “Sufficient to Supply (x)% of the Local Population” is a calculated estimate, based on per capita consumption of each fresh food item by residents of the seven county region. It is the approximate amount of local demand that could be supplied by local production.

Table 3. Consumption & Production Estimates of Fresh Produce in the Project Regions (2012)

	Acres in Production in 100 Mile Region	Sufficient to Supply (x)% of the Seven County Population
Apples	46	2%
Beans, green lima	48	4%
Beans, snap	3,782	500%
Bell peppers	15	1%
Blackberries	4	2%
Blueberries	178	2%
Cantaloupe	24	10%
Collard Greens	12	60%
Cucumbers	31	3%
Eggplant	11	2%
Grapes	336	15%
Kale	2	3%
Okra	30	70%
Peaches	3,575	400%
Pears	32	10%
Peas	141	5%
Pecans	35,050	2,000%
Plums	3	2%
Potatoes	42	1%
Strawberries	9	0%
Sweet corn	277	9%
Squash	14	0%
Tomatoes	217	9%
Turnip Greens	6	4%
Watermelon	4,221	500%

What is clear from Table 3 is that for some of the fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the region, there is significantly more demand (consumption) than supply (production). For certain produce items, however, regional production levels far surpass regional consumption levels. Two notable examples of this pattern are in the production of pecans and snap beans, both of which are produced in commercial-scale quantities.

Table 4, like Table 3, shows a comparison of current consumption rates versus area production volumes for selected animals and their edible products. As with fruits and vegetables, most livestock are being produced in quantities much lower than regional demand (i.e., hogs, turkeys, and beef cows) but others are produced in quantities much larger than what the local population consumes per year (e.g., chicken).

Table 4. Consumption & Production Estimates of Animal Products in the Project Region (2012)

	Number of Animals Sold in the 100 Mile Region	Sufficient to Supply (x)% of the Seven County Population
Beef cows	264,474	65%
Chickens	401,641,997	9,00%
Hogs	2,929	<1%
Turkeys	2,908	<1%

Though Tables 3 and 4 show large quantities of local food production in the region, as stated previously, a majority of these products are not marketed to local residents but are sold to outside markets through complex national and global food supply chains.

Resident Food Consumption and Spending

This section focuses on fresh produce consumption. Fresh produce requires little processing and is therefore more easily produced and marketed through local marketing channels.⁹ For this reason, a focus on fresh produce consumption and production will yield the most practical assessment of the potential for immediate local food system expansion in the project region.

Based on 2014 population estimates, the residents of the seven county region spend nearly \$1.2 billion on food each year. Regional estimates indicate that the average household in the southern U.S. spends 60 percent of total food expenditures on food consumed at home and the remaining 40 percent on food consumed away from home. For the project region, this figure breaks down to \$689 million spent on food consumed at home and \$470 million spent on food consumed away from home.

Looking at Table 5, in 2013 the estimated retail value of resident spending in the seven county region on a selected variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, and nuts that can be grown in the region totaled \$127 million dollars, or about 11 percent of total food purchasing. For comparison, farms in the 100 mile project region produced an estimated retail equivalent of over \$344 million dollars of the same fruit, vegetable, and nut products.

⁹ Steve Martinez et al., “Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues,” USDA Economic Research Service (2010): 97, http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/122868/err97_1_.pdf.

Table 5. Resident Spending in the Seven County Region and Estimated Retail Value of Selected Products Grown in the 100 Mile Region (2012)

	Estimated Retail Value of Seven County Resident Purchases	Estimated Retail Value of 100 Mile County Production
Apples	\$7,377,400	\$1,545,500
Beans, green lima	\$861,500	\$329,500
Beans, snap	\$783,300	\$41,604,100
Bell peppers	\$2,877,800	\$291,200
Blackberries	\$1,369,200	\$217,500
Blueberries	\$2,289,800	\$5,051,600
Cantaloupe	\$1,281,400	\$1,326,200
Collard Greens	\$125,000	\$718,000
Cucumbers	\$1,666,100	\$556,300
Eggplant	\$3,001,700	\$562,700
Grapes	\$4,166,400	\$5,688,100
Kale	\$666,800	\$168,600
Okra	\$304,600	\$2,190,800
Peaches	\$1,283,000	\$53,602,500
Pears	\$1,108,700	\$1,317,500
Peas	\$2,399,000	\$1,523,700
Pecans	\$964,700	\$171,287,900
Plums	\$260,600	\$57,100
Potatoes	\$71,235,400	\$4,383,000
Strawberries	\$4,301,600	\$261,500
Sweet corn	\$459,700	\$4,284,500
Squash	\$1,681,300	\$631,800
Tomatoes	\$15,431,900	\$13,859,700
Turnip Greens	\$820,800	\$326,000
Watermelon	\$673,500	\$32,055,500
Total	\$127,391,200	\$343,840,800

Food Dollar Considerations

The percentage of each dollar spent on food that goes to the farmer who produced it differs depending on where food is purchased. For instance, if a farmer sells a product directly to a consumer – at a farmers market, through a CSA, or at a roadside stand – the farmer retains all earnings from that product (though they may have more costs, in labor and marketing for example). On the other hand, in the case of grocery store spending, an average of only \$0.18 of every dollar spent on food goes directly to the farmer. The rest of the dollar pays for the processing, energy, packaging, advertising, labor, and other expenses that went into getting the product from the farm to the shopper's grocery bag. It should be noted that the average proportion of the food dollar a farmer receives varies by product. For example, farmers retain an average of \$0.28 for every dollar spent on fresh fruits and vegetables but only \$0.17 for processed fruits and vegetables (like canned fruit or juice).¹⁰

For away-from-home spending, including food purchases at restaurants, hospitals, parks, workplaces, etc. the average proportion of each food dollar that goes to the farmer decreases significantly to just \$0.03. The majority of the food dollar that makes up away-from-home spending goes toward labor (\$0.74). In terms of the local economy, this means that significant percentages of every retail dollar spent in a local restaurant or grocery store may already be in the local economy in the form of payroll for local employees.



Accordingly, calculations of the economic impact of localizing food systems need to be grounded in food dollar economics. While localizing a community's food system will affect the local economy, transitioning to a more locally based food system will not shift the entire food dollar; much of that is already present in the form of community wages. Nevertheless, there are financial benefits that can accrue to local producers and locally owned businesses with the development of local market opportunities.

Since demand for food stays relatively constant (i.e., there is only so much food people can eat), the primary way for food producers to increase their proportion of earnings is to take over other sectors of the food dollar. For example in the case of direct marketing, a producer grows, transports, packages, markets, and sells his or her own product and, accordingly, is able to retain 100 percent of the food dollar. In this way, producers can capture a larger proportion of the food dollar by strategically marketing their products to the local population of consumers and food businesses and can earn greater returns for their products. Likewise, locally owned businesses keep a higher percentage of the food dollar in the local economy by not exporting a percentage of their profits to parent companies that may not be located within the region.

There are benefits other than direct economic impact that accrue to both farms and communities when food systems become localized in the form of improved health, support for local

¹⁰ Randy Schnepf, "Farm-to-Food Price Dynamics," Congressional Research Service (Washington DC: 2013), www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40621.pdf.

businesses, community vitality and resilience, open space, quality of life, etc. When people become knowledgeable of the food system and begin to understand where their food comes from, extra-economic factors like these are more likely to be elevated and to inform consumer purchases and the price they are willing to pay to uphold these benefits.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section discusses key areas of opportunity for local food systems development in Columbus and the surrounding region. The recommendations provided here are general and should be viewed as preliminary. With additional research and with the input of food system stakeholders on regional priorities, planned for subsequent project phases, recommendations may shift and will take on more detail.

Support Direct Marketing Channels

Direct markets are the cornerstone of local food systems activities. Because of the minimal cost required for entry, direct markets provide an easier starting point for farmers new to marketing.

They can provide the highest return to farmers and the lowest barriers to entry in comparison to other types of markets. Furthermore, in providing a direct connection between consumer and farmer, they cultivate customer loyalty and advocacy for local farms and food. People shop at farmers markets not just for food but for the experience of interacting directly with the people who grow their food and for a sense of community. Direct markets put a face with the food and bring heightened visibility to local farms and their products, benefitting agriculture as a whole.



In the study region, demand for direct market products is evident from the 2012 Agricultural Census, which shows a 44 percent increase in direct food sales to \$4,180,000 in 2012 from \$2,893,000 in 2007. Support the sustainability and growth of these markets by promoting and improving existing outlets, assisting with their expansion, or by providing training and technical assistance to farmers on relevant topics—salesmanship and display, best food safety practices, food regulation, marketing and promotion, etc.

Highlight and Develop Connections Between Farms and Local Restaurants

In the community asset mapping exercise conducted by the Columbus Local Food Fund, project partners identified 30 area restaurants, cafes, and caterers currently engaged in local food procurement practices. When diners learn that the food on their plates comes from a nearby place—a farm and a farmer with a name and a face—it gives the meal and the visit more meaning.

Efforts focused on deepening connections between local farms and restaurants might include a farm to chef promotional campaign, organizing farm field trips for chefs and foodservice, and facilitating farmer-buyer meetings. The combination of these activities will simultaneously connect local farms to this market sector, increase the visibility of local food in the community

and build awareness, and provide farmers and chefs with practical information about how to build sustainable business relationships.

Engage Community Members with Local Farms and Food

Citizens who actively participate in and understand local agriculture will become advocates for local food and farms and drive demand for local product in local market outlets. Farm to School, farm tours, farmers markets and CSAs, food and farm festivals, cooking demonstrations, public gardens, and public awareness campaigns are all mediums for bringing farmers and consumers into direct contact, increasing consumer knowledge and awareness of where food comes from, how it is produced, the impacts of the food system on communities and the environment, and the relationship between food and personal health. Accordingly, funding and other kinds of support for regional programs that offer these kinds of activities, resources, and educational materials to community members is essential.

Determine the Local Messages that Resonate with the Public

The successful implementation of a local food campaign strategy in the greater Columbus area will depend, in part, on the ability to define and promote local in a way that resonates with the public. When it comes to tapping into consumers' demand for local, authenticity and trustworthiness of communications are key. The fact that the 7 county region itself spans two states may mean that people in this region have very different ideas about what local means and what counties/areas should be included in a local food effort. It is therefore important to conduct additional research in the region to understand how residents define local, to identify the messages and values that resonate most with them, and to determine the communications channels they use most often. Partner with local media to deliver clear and consistent messaging that mirrors the values and benefits residents associate with buying local food and supporting local farms as revealed in the research findings.



Help Consumers Find Local

With increasing public interest in supporting local farms and buying local food, it is vital that consumers know where to find local food across direct, retail, and institutional market settings. Demand for local can only be realized if consumers can find local products and, in non-direct market settings in particular, be able to identify it in the midst of a crowded market environment. This can be achieved through guides, advertising, promotions, and labeling. Communities can partner with local media (television, radio, newspapers) and marketing agencies to promote what is being grown in the area and where it is being sold to community members, including existing direct-to-consumer outlets (farmers markets, CSAs, on-farm stores and stands), local grocers, restaurants, etc.

Foster Communication and Collaboration Among Diverse Area Stakeholders

In order to create support around local food system development plans, it is critical to collaborate with leaders and local food and farm advocates within the greater Columbus area from the very beginning. Engage stakeholders, e.g., farmers, food entrepreneurs, food industry buyers, decision makers, agriculture specialists, health and human services representatives, in formative planning processes. This step can foster future collaborations, promote community buy-in, and identify sources of unknown local knowledge, capacity, and resources. Moving forward, the Columbus Local Food Fund can take on/assume a prominent role in bringing food system stakeholders together to identify the work that is already underway, talk about stakeholders' concerns and priorities, and develop shared goals.