8 Actions Taken Regarding Food Systems Across the Country

Food as a commodity and an industry touches all 2.6 million residents in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region as sustenance, as a business, as a crop, or as a specialized piece of the logistics and transportation system.

The trends affecting food production in Southwestern Pennsylvania are similar to the U.S. trends:

1. Fewer reported farms
2. Fewer medium-sized farms, but more large farming operations
3. Older farm owners/operators
4. High land prices create a barrier to younger farmers entering the business
5. Shortage of labor

Nationally, over 35 food councils and state plans have been created to examine the topic. The American Planning Association issued a Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning.[1] Many local and regional food plans/strategies have been promulgated. In the areas surrounding Southwestern Pennsylvania, four areas have adopted plans and actions to mitigate their food related challenges.

[1] Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning, American Planning Association, May 11, 2007

"Greater Philadelphia Food System Study" Delaware Regional Planning Commission, 2010.

A description of the complicated regional food system that feeds Greater Philadelphia. DVRPC's food system study focuses on the agricultural resources, distribution infrastructure, regional economy, and stakeholders acting within the regional food shed. Includes barriers and recommendations.

Top Advantages of the Greater Philadelphia Food System:

- Proximity to Markets
- Abundance of Support
- Climate and Soils
- "Critical Mass of Farmers"
- Beneficial "Policies" as one of Greater Philadelphia's Advantages [2]

"Sysco's Journey from Supply Chain to Value Chain: 2008-2009 Final Report", April 1010, Wallace Center, Winrock International.

The report documents the results, lessons, and strategies learned in a pilot study focusing on meeting new consumer demands for diversified foods and sustainable farms.

Lesson: One of the key changes that Sysco has made is the seemingly small but actually big step of labeling products from existing regional suppliers as "local."

Re-branding existing products and suppliers could seem counter to the intent of the Sysco/Wallace partnership, which is largely to make a place in the market for farms and products that the current system excludes. Yet Chicago's Lower Lakes™ brand, Grand Rapids' MIPROD brand, and Kansas City's Buy Fresh/Buy Local offerings are part of realizing that intent. Now, instead of saying "no" when motivated customers ask for local products, the three regions involved in the Sysco/Wallace partnership can say "yes."[3]

"Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan", Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, April 2010.

The Central Ohio Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group is a multi-county team convened by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) to promote the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food within the region. The 12 county local food assessment and plan is a tool to collect and analyze regional agriculture and food data. Also, the plan is a resource for public policymakers and business leaders to learn about the value of local food to the regional populace and economy.
Barriers listed in the report:

- Producers often do not have the quantity or consistent quality that retailers demand, or labeling that traces food sources and will need training and guidance to meet those demands.

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[2] Greater Philadelphia Food System Study" Delaware Regional Planning Commission, 2010, pp.134-137

[3] "Sysco's Journey from Supply Chain to Value Chain: 2008-2009 Final Report", April 1010, Wallace Center, Winrock International.p.9

- Cooperative businesses are one way for small farmers to get a large enough supply to satisfy distributors and retailers, but independent-minded farmers are reluctant to enter such ventures.
- Some farms will need to extend the growing season through such methods as high tunnels/hoop houses in order to make fresh local produce available longer.
- Farmers who diversify into local food production may have new equipment needs, and will have to find financing.
- Newcomers to agriculture will need knowledge to get started and training to be ready for marketing.
- The state needs a program to link prospective new farmers with those who are retiring and don't have heirs interested in the farm.
- Growing and processing food for local consumption will create jobs, but there are challenges in finding and training workers.
- Institutions that incubate new businesses tend to focus on other industries, primarily those viewed as —high tech, whereas food processing facilities, while essential, are typically viewed as low tech and of little or no interest to conventional incubators.[4]

"West Virginia Food System: Opportunities and constraints in local food supply chains", Prepared for West Virginia Food & Farm Coalition, prepared by Downstream Strategies, September, 2012.

The report, the second in a series, outlines the opportunities and constraints of meeting the growing demand for local food products in West Virginia, particularly at levels that extend beyond farm stands or farmers markets. The five most important findings were:

Finding 1: There is significant demand for local food in West Virginia, but increased production and stronger supply chains will be essential to meeting the demand.

Finding 2: New marketing outlets and new local food supply chains are already starting to move more local food to West Virginia consumers

Finding 3: Volume buyers, including restaurants, hospitals, and schools, offer sales opportunities throughout the state

Finding 4: Regulations, certifications, and requirements often impact producers' and other supply chain participants' access to distribution channels and large markets Numerous federal and state regulations impose requirements upon participants in the supply chain.

Finding 5: Expanded food processing infrastructure could help food producers produce more high-value products and access more customers year-round.

[4] Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, April 2010, p.27

“THE 25% SHIFT, The Benefits of Food Localization for Northeast Ohio & How to Realize Them”, sponsored by the Cleveland Foundation and others, December 2010.[5]

The study analyzes the impact of the 16-county Northeast Ohio (NEO) region moving a quarter of the way toward fully meeting local demand for food with local production. It suggests that this 25% shift could create 27,664 new jobs; increase annual regional output by $4.2 billion and expand state and local tax collections by $126 million. The study noted key barriers.

Barriers

What are the key barriers to expanding the NEO region’s local food system? Respondents were asked to identify, from a list, the most significant barriers to expanding the local food system. In the top tier of barriers were the following:

- Food distribution and warehousing are not adequate.
- Consumers need to better understand the benefits of local food and get more help finding it (perhaps though local branding or broader distribution).
- Finance for local food businesses is in short supply.
- Facilities available for value-added processing are not adequate”[6]

[5] “West Virginia Food System: Opportunities and constraints in local food supply chains”, Prepared for West Virginia Food & Farm Coalition, prepared by Downstream Strategies, September, 2012. pp.ix-xiv.

[6] “THE 25% SHIFT, The Benefits of Food Localization for Northeast Ohio & How to Realize Them”, sponsored by the Cleveland Foundation and others, December 2010. p.46

Local Food Systems as Regional Economic Drivers in Southern Minnesota, prepared by Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, June 2012 [7]

The Study suggests "that a modest shift in growing choices of farmers and purchasing choices of consumers can result in significant economic impacts on local communities." (page 7) "With the right support, it could mean more profitable family farms, robust value-added food businesses, and increased tax bases for small towns, cities, and counties." (page 5)

Research concluded "that emerging markets such as local food distribution, organics, urban agriculture and alternative farming techniques offer opportunities for small business ownership and employment." (page 7)

Listed Challenges

Rural grocery stores can't compete with large chains on local foods (page 10)

Lack of adequate, farmer-friendly systems to aggregate, store and distribute product (page 14)

Cost of inputs: labor, land, and equipment

Lack of money, time, and sufficient markets

State laws and regulations

Advancing age of vendors,

Lack of interest in expanding [7]

Summary

The examples above from other regions demonstrate what they have learned from analyzing their local food systems. Increased knowledge of the agriculture and food production industry cluster in Southwestern Pennsylvania will enable the region to create better links between the key sectors to enhance economic competitiveness and sustain local food jobs.

SPC is proposing to conduct an analysis to answer the following:

- How can the region increase economic activity (jobs and investments) by supporting the local food system and value-added components of the system?
- What is the economic impact of increasing local food consumption?
- How can increased activity and/or producing value-added products increase incomes for people involved in the local food system?
- How large is the food supply chain in the region and what are the components?
- What regional actions and policies are needed to promote the local food supply chain?

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[7] Local Food Systems as Regional Economic Drivers in Southern Minnesota June 2012, pp5,7,10,14,39