

Land & Table: Cultivating Sustainable Agriculture and Resilient Food Systems in Virginia's Region 2000

In many localities across the nation and the Commonwealth of Virginia there is emerging a connection between economic development and the cultivation of sustainable, ecologically-minded agriculture and local food systems that contribute to the economic, social and environmental health and resilience of our communities.

Traditional farming has played a major role in the history of Virginia's Region 2000 and today with an emerging shift towards sustainable methods and direct-to-consumer distribution models, agriculture in our region is regaining it's role as a major force in our local economy.

Region 2000 is home to a wide array of agricultural and local food enterprises as well as correlating trends:

- rising consumer interest in ethical and local eating/buying
- small-scale, ecologically-minded farmers & food producers
- new wineries and established orchards
- farmer's markets and CSA's (community supported agriculture)
- restaurants and food-based businesses focused on local sourcing
- interest in community gardens
- farmer-to-consumer food sales
- food co-ops & buying clubs (ex: Frankfurt Farms, raw milk herdshares, etc)
- grass-fed beef and other sustainable land management/animal husbandry
- agri-tourism
- sustainable forestry and other related products (ex: Royal Oaks' compost)
- food-themed or food related festivals
- seasonal (ex: Christmas tree farms)
- pick-your-own (berry farms like Scott's and TLC, etc.)
- etc.

(Examples: Lynchburg Grows, Mountain Run Farm, Forest Farmer's Market, DISH and many more)

Many regions across the nation and state have developed initiatives to create re-localized food systems and have aided farmers in the transition to a more sustainable and diverse agriculture. Virginia's number one state industry is agriculture according to the Virginia Cooperative Extension and it is in need of support within our region.

Will we recognize that new opportunities are emerging in the intersection of economic and community development- to grow a robust local, living economy? It is time we begin to explore and cultivate the future of local, sustainable agriculture and a resilient regional food system.

Quick Quotes:

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“Purchasing locally grown produce can mean more bang for the buck, Maureen Kelley, the Nelson County Tourism and Economic Development Director, said.

“Buying local food keeps your dollars circulating in our community and getting to know the farmers who grow your food builds relationships based on understanding and trust, which is the foundation of strong communities,” Kelley said.

National Trends

“Sales of locally grown foods are expected to reach \$7 billion this year [2011], up from \$4 billion in 2002.” [Source: Emagazine.com: <http://www.emagazine.com/magazine/by-the-numbers-food-miles>]

Direct-to-consumer marketing amounted to \$1.2 billion in current dollar sales in 2007, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, compared with \$551 million in 1997.

The number of farmers' markets rose to 5,274 in 2009, up from 2,756 in 1998 and 1,755 in 1994, according to USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

In 2005, there were 1,144 community-supported agriculture organizations (CSAs) in operation, up from 400 in 2001 and 2 in 1986, according to a study by the non-profit, nongovernmental organization National Center for Appropriate Technology. In early 2010, estimates exceeded 1,400, but the number could be much larger.

The number of farm to school programs, which use local farms as food suppliers for school meals programs, increased to 2,095 in 2009, up from 400 in 2004 and 2 in the 1996-97 school year, according to the National Farm to School Network. Data from the 2005 School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment Survey, sponsored by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, showed that 14 percent of school districts participated in Farm to School programs, and 16 percent reported having guidelines for purchasing locally grown produce.

[Source: USDA's report: Local Food Systems Concepts, Impacts, and Issues: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR97/ERR97.pdf>]

Virginia (State) Trends

Virginia's consumers spend \$14.8 billion dollars buying food each year. \$8.1 billion dollars to eat at home, \$6.7 billion dollars to eat out.

Ken Meter of the Crossroads Resource Center suggests that if Virginia consumers bought 15% of their food directly from local farms, farms would earn \$2.2 billion in new income.

According to the 2007 Agricultural Census, 2,855 farms in Virginia sell \$28.9 million dollars of food directly to Virginia consumers.

Since 2005, there has been a 94.3% increase in the number of Virginia farmers markets.

Therefore, there is increasing interest in supporting local agriculture and great potential for selling local foods to Virginia consumers!

What if each household in Virginia spent \$10 per week of their total food budget on fresh local food and farm-based Virginia products? How many dollars would be generated on an annual basis and be available to be reinvested in local independent businesses and communities? What would be the direct economic impact?

Total # of housing units in city, county, district, or state X \$10 per week X 52 weeks
Statewide economic impact: \$1.65 Billion
(Annual dollars generated by a small conscious consumer decision are based on 2000 U.S. Census data and 3,176,777 total housing units in Virginia.)

[Source: Food, Farming, and Community: Local and Regional Food Economy - Eric Bendfeldt Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2010 Environment Virginia Symposium: <http://www.vmi.edu/Work-Area/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=4294973615&libID=4294973612>]

In the Local Media:

Locavore Movement Alive and Thriving in Lynchburg Area

"...Abell has been a dedicated locavore for about four years. He grows about 10 percent of his food, and buys about 80 percent from the community market and local farms. If a product is not made locally, he'll opt to buy it from a natural foods store, like Fresh Air Natural Foods in Lynchburg. If Kroger is the only option, he tries to buy fair trade, organic products....The locavore movement is spreading in Lynchburg, from the development of community gardens at local colleges to the growth of the community market downtown."

[Source: News & Advance: <http://www2.newsadvance.com/lifestyles/2011/jul/27/locavore-movement-alive-and-thriving-lynchburg-are-ar-1201642/>]

Saunders Bros. Adds Meat to Local Offerings

Local produce is something Saunders said the customers who come to the market are looking for.

"We've been seeing that if we can tell people it is our stuff, they're much more likely to buy it," Saunders said. "Not just because it's Saunders, but because it's local. They want to know who grew the produce."

Purchasing locally grown produce can mean more bang for the buck, Maureen Kelley, the Nelson County Tourism and Economic Development Director, said.

"Buying local food keeps your dollars circulating in our community and getting to know the farmers who grow your food builds relationships based on understanding and trust, which is the foundation of strong communities," Kelley said. "For every dollar spent locally, that dollar is recycled throughout the community six times. Dollars spent at big box stores generally do not even spend a night in the community."

Saunders Brothers began growing its own produce last year as a trial run and the demand was high enough that it has now tripled the amount of vegetables produced for its market, Bennett Saunders, the produce farm manager at Saunders Brothers, said.

[Source: News & Advance: <http://www2.newsadvance.com/business/2011/jun/22/saunders-bros-adds-meat-local-offerings-ar-1125961/>]

Horse and Hound Festival showcases Bedford's growing wine industry

Bedford County now has five wineries within its borders. Each works together in a promotional effort called the "Bedford Wine Trail."

"We get a lot of visitors who come, just to do the wine trail," said Drema Sylvester, co-owner of White Rock Winery in Goodview. "The wine trail has really helped us increase our traffic flow."

Central Virginia alone now has 17 wineries. That fact has become a major promotional point for tourism officials.

"Attending wine events like tastings or going on wine tours is one of the top ten things people do when they visit an area," said Beckie Nix, Director of the Lynchburg Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau. The Horse and Hound Festival draws hundreds to Bedford County. Many come from nearby states to see and taste Virginia's emerging commodity.

[Source: WDBJ7: http://articles.wdbj7.com/2011-07-09/wine-industry_29756949]

Supper club promises new dining experiences

"Over the weekend, Lynchburg's Underground Supper Club took a group of about 50 of us out to Auburnlea Farms for what I can only describe as one of the most unique dining experiences I've ever had... The man behind the magic is Chef Preston Cravey, a Lynchburg transplant and longtime foodie who started the Underground Supper Club here over the summer... He'll usually open up ticket sales to the public a week or so in advance (prices depend on the menu, but it's usually \$50 per person). ...In his food, Cravey uses as many local ingredients as possible. He goes to community markets in Lynchburg and Bedford and usually visits the farms — like Auburnlea, where the Bennett family raises all-natural pastured beef and poultry, or Melrose Bison Farm, also in Gladys — from where he gets his meat." [Source: News & Advance: <http://www2.newsadvance.com/lifestyles/2010/oct/27/supper-club-promises-new-dining-experiences-ar-611821/?referer=http://www.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fnewsadvance.com%2Far%2F611821%2F&h=19b40&shorturl=http://newsadvance.com/ar/611821/>]

In the National Media and Beyond:

Entrepreneurs Keep the Local Food Movement Hot (Local food businesses play a much more critical role in economic development than commonly thought, a new report shows)

Entrepreneurs are flocking to local food, starting businesses devoted to producing and delivering food within their communities. Just as consumers focus new attention on what we eat and where it comes from, farmers, foodmakers, restaurateurs, retailers, distributors, and processors are rethinking the business models behind it. They want to create enterprises that will succeed in the long run for local food to be more than just a fad or a luxury for wealthy Western consumers.

A report, "Community Food Enterprise: Local Success in a Global Marketplace," spotlights 24 ventures around the world that are pioneering models for local food. They range from the sprawling Organic Valley farmer co-operative, which ships more than \$500 million in dairy and other products annually, to a caterer in Zambia that has branched out to selling processed food and equipment. The examples include private companies, co-ops, and nonprofits. Whatever the form, all the enterprises are locally controlled and aim to be sustainable business operations, not dependent on grants or government subsidies.

The 190-page report, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, highlights the role local food businesses play in economic development—creating jobs and bringing money into a community. Michael Shuman, an economist at the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies and co-author of the report, sees economic development intertwined with developing local food systems. For example, the Appalachian Harvest Network in the Appalachian region of Virginia and Tennessee helps mostly poor former tobacco farmers switch to growing organic fruits and vegetables for specialty stores and grocers, replacing a shrinking market with a growing one. Likewise, researchers found that the majority of the small farms that sell their crops at New York City's green markets could not survive without the access to the city's customers that the program provides.

Staying economically viable can be a challenge for food enterprises. Consider the growth of small farms in the U.S. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of American farms increased by 76,000, according to the latest data from the U.S. Agriculture Dept.'s Census of Agriculture, compared to a decline of 87,000 in the five years before that. But half of all farms in the U.S. have sales of less than \$5,000, and just 5% have sales above \$500,000.

[Source: Business Week: http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/dec2009/sb20091217_914398.htm]

Local Food as Economic Development

"Local economic studies show that many U.S. regions lose hundreds of millions of dollars each year because they import food from far away, or because farmers spend more money raising food commodities than they get back from the marketplace."

[Source: Crossroads Resource Center (Minneapolis): <http://www.crcworks.org/lfcd.pdf>]

Promoting Local Food Systems for Community and Economic Development

"By now most people have at least heard of the "local foods" movement. Thanks to Michael Pollan and his compatriots, terms like "locavore" and "foodshed" have made their way into our lexicon. The idea here is to create "more locally based, self-reliant food economies." The argument is part of a larger one about sustainability, that "sustainable local food systems" are better for public health, the environment, and the local economy. Thus developing local foods systems can be seen as a strategy for sustainable community and economic development. This post discusses why this may be the case and offers several examples of how local governments and other community institutions can play an active role in developing local food systems.

First of all, the why. There are many arguments in favor of local food systems. First, local foods are fresher and less processed, and therefore thought to be more healthy. A major research effort at MIT recommends a reorientation toward local food systems as a key strategy in addressing an epidemic of childhood obesity. Local foods are also seen as better for the environment as less fossil fuels are consumed in transporting them. Furthermore, local food systems emphasize smaller-scale farms that employ more sustainable farming methods. The local food movement is also viewed as a way to strengthen local economies by supporting family farms and keeping money circulating in the community. Furthermore, the components of a strong local food economy such as farmer's markets, community gardens, and grocery stores and restaurants that feature local foods can be seen as amenities attractive to the creative class.

[Source: UNC School of Government: <http://sogweb.sog.unc.edu/blogs/ced/?p=891>]