

Midlands Local Food Summit Summary
Thursday, November 8, 2012
Columbia, SC

Approximately 35 farmers, restaurateurs, retailers, distributors, and support organization representatives attended the Midlands Local Food Summit on November 8, 2012 to evaluate the status and envision the future of the midlands local food system. In an introductory visioning process, participants expressed a need for a sustainable, equitable, accessible, and healthful local food system. A summary of participants' vision statements is included in the Appendix.

During the keynote, Tony Kleese, Food System Design Consultant and former Executive Director of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, presented the ideal of a sustainable, environmentally sound, economically viable, socially just food system. He described seven components of such a system (land, water, farmers/labor, inputs, infrastructure, consumers/markets, and waste), then facilitated a locally-focused discussion of each. During the discussion, participants identified challenges and opportunities related to each component.

Land: The midlands region boasts an abundance of undeveloped land with well-drained, prime agricultural soil types. However, development and other non-agricultural uses are reducing the amount of arable land available for production. Issues of land ownership, including heirs' property disputes and unclear titles, as well as zoning and tax policies, prevent some would-be farmers from farming. Participants identified a need for improved comprehensive planning, land use education, and funding for farmland preservation and protection in the midlands. Land linking programs could be used to connect willing but landless farmers with unfarmed land, and community and school gardens could increase the amount of farmed land in the area. Participants acknowledged the need to foster political will in local government by building relationships with elected and appointed officials and engaging with agricultural committees and advisory groups such as the Food Policy Council.

Water: Participants acknowledged a diversity of surface and ground water sources in the midlands and celebrated the activity of local watershed groups and other support organizations to promote and protect clean water. However, water is not equally distributed throughout the region and farm-level irrigation infrastructure is expensive. Water quality concerns in the midlands exist and are caused by multiple, diffuse urban and agricultural sources. Improved water management education and water use strategies are needed, particularly given the potential for adverse effects on surface and groundwater supplies caused by drought and climate change.

Farmers/Labor: This generation is blessed with an energetic and diverse corps of interested, well-educated prospective farmers. Research and education programs such as the New and Beginning Farmer Program, apprenticeships, internships, mentorships, and other university and local education efforts are available to support these young workers, as are agricultural education opportunities for youth. However, farm labor concerns include the increase in the average age of farmers, the cost of labor, poor labor quality, and unclear, ignored, or problematic immigration and labor policies. Opportunities exist to build collaborations between farmers, provide entrepreneurial and business skills training, and to facilitate the exchange of low-cost labor for education and training opportunities.

Inputs: Local groups are conducting heritage seed research and breeding, and there is a local repository of knowledge of regional heirloom seeds that should be nourished and expanded. Accessible sources of local, organic livestock feed are needed. Financial resources for farm inputs are available through the FSA farm-loan program, AgSouth Credit Union, and even Whole Foods (micro-loans). Local SWCDs offer low-cost conservation tillage equipment rental. Opportunities also exist for farmers to create equipment-sharing cooperatives.

Infrastructure: Summit participants identified a need to address regulatory issues concerning cheese production, meat processing (including rabbits and goats), and commercial kitchen requirements. They also expressed support and desire for a local food aggregator/distributor. Participants identified opportunities for producers to aggregate to make meat processing a more profitable prospect, and some participants highlighted the potential in alternative markets (e.g., direct sale of goats for on-farm barbeques).

Consumers/Markets: The midlands are blessed with a large, hungry population. Currently, only 10% of South Carolina's food consumption is produced in-state, and midlands residents are perceived to exhibit low food awareness (particularly compared with residents in Greenville and Charleston). Consumer education was identified as the key need in this area, and several initiatives were identified as already working to address this need. Food safety training and GAP certification support through the SCDA can help farmers overcome institutional barriers and increase the market for local foods. In some cases, institutional procurement policies may need to be modified in order to expand the market for local foods. Marketing training for farmers through the Market Ready program and publicity options such as MarketMaker are available. Participants identified a need for collaboration and data-sharing across agencies.

Waste: Current composting and organic waste recycling regulations pose challenges for farmers who hope to reuse farm waste. Recycling infrastructure needs to be enhanced throughout the region. Opportunities exist for in-vessel composting and the capture of food waste for value-added products or livestock feed. Farmers who use compost or manure as an on-farm input should engage in farm nutrient management planning and soil testing.

Next Steps: Kleese recommended the participants create a food system council with seven working groups—one for each of the seven elements of a sustainable local food system—and meet two to four times per year to set priorities and review progress. Summit participants identified three action priorities:

- Create a food aggregator/food hub that runs on a business model. Successful examples of this type of aggregator exist and should be consulted and emulated. Tony Kleese suggested production coordination, an 80/20 profit sharing system, and annual sales of \$500,000-\$750,000 are needed for the aggregator to be successful.
- Create a comprehensive, data-based regional food system analysis.
- Address farm labor concerns.

Reminder: A Market Ready Training will be provided on February 27, 2013.

