

NORTH CAROLINA SUSTAINABLE LOCAL FOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL (NCSLFAC) LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

March 28, 2013

Ten listening sessions conducted by the NCSLFAC Subcommittee on Economic Development & Infrastructure with 31 partners across North Carolina drew 391 participants from October 2012 through March 2013. The purpose of the meetings was to hear from farmers and entrepreneurs active in the North Carolina local foods community, support institutions and other interested parties about 1) Regulations or policies that are barriers to continuing growth of the state's local foods economy; 2) Economic development opportunities ripe for investigation and/or investment; and/or 3) Forms of support and/or coordination that would benefit the state's farmers or entrepreneurs seeking to thrive in local foods.

This summary has been prepared for review by the Executive Committee and the Economic Development & Infrastructure Subcommittee of the NC SLFAC. Written summaries of each meeting as well as a summary of all sessions will be shared broadly with partner organizations, audience members and other interested parties.

Debbie Hamrick, Chair, Economic Development & Infrastructure Subcommittee helped to facilitate all 10 sessions. Shivaugn Rayl, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association acted as facilitator at 9 of the sessions.

For most meetings, planning groups met by conference call prior to the listening session to coordinate securing space, publicizing the meetings and to discuss potential topics that may arise. In many instances, regulatory or other expertise was invited to attend meetings so that as issues arose they could be addressed by an expert. The facilitators acknowledge and thank NCDA&CS for generously providing experts from the following Divisions and areas: Administration, Agribusiness Development, Farm to School, Food&Drug, Marketing, and Meat&Poultry Inspection. Thanks are also due to the North Carolina ABC Commission, North Carolina Department of Revenue and the North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services Division of Public Health Food Protection Branch and USDA FSIS for generously providing their expertise and outreach to North Carolina's local foods community.

Each meeting was an assembly of the people who were interested and able to meet at the location and time, as a result, each meeting had its own culture and personality. Many issues that surfaced were not specifically germane to local foods from an agricultural or entrepreneurial perspective. However, topics of great interest to small farms in general and to small business were frequently raised. Additionally, food access issues and public health issues were consistent themes.

Most frequently recurring topics included easy access to accurate information regarding regulation of local foods production, processing and marketing. Additionally, marketing assistance for farmers and entrepreneurs was discussed at all meetings. Tagging closely onto this topic is the need for training—both agricultural/farming skills for beginning/new farmers and business management skills for

farmers and entrepreneurs. All meetings also involved audience members across multiple stakeholder communities seeking to increase opportunities to sell North Carolina grown local foods into state-run institutional markets, such as public schools and universities.

BACKGROUND ON THE MEETINGS

NCSLFAC Listening sessions 2012/2013

October 22, Western NC, Blue Ridge Conf. Hall, Western Carolina Univ., Cullowhee

November 15, Charlotte, Charlotte School of Law, Charlotte

December 4, NC Choices Carolina Meat Conference, Winmock Center, Kernersville

January 7, NC Brewers Guild, Fullsteam Brewery, Durham

January 25, Burgaw, Pender County Extension Office, Burgaw

January 31, Eastern NC, Telecenter, Williamston

February 1, Lumberton, Robeson County Extension Offices, Lumberton

February 12, Forsyth County, Forsyth Extension Office, Winston Salem

February 23, ASAP Marketing Conference, Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa

March 14, High Country, Family Central, Jefferson NC

Partners

Advantage West; Albemarle Commission; Appalachian District Health Department; Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project; Ashe County Cooperative Extension; Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture; Cabarrus County Food Council; Carolina Farm Stewardship Association; Center for Community Action; Feast Down East; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Food Policy Council; Charlotte School of Law; Forsyth County Farm Bureau; Forsyth County Cooperative Extension; Forsyth Futures; Heifer International; High Country Workforce Development Board; Martin County Farm Bureau; Mecklenburg County Cooperative Extension; Mid-East Commission; NC Brewers Guild; NC Brewers Cup; NC Choices; NC Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services; NCDA&CS Meat&Poultry Division; NC Farm Bureau Federation; NCSU & NCA&T State Cooperative Extension Service*; Pender County Cooperative Extension; Robeson County Cooperative Extension; Seeds of Change Appalachia; Upper Coastal Plain Council of Government; Watauga County Cooperative Extension and Western North Carolina Food Policy Council at Western Carolina University, Public Policy Institute.

**Many County Directors and Extension Agents participated in meetings. Some counties joined in partnership to host the meetings, those are listed individually.*

VIPs and elected officials in attendance

Town of Burgaw Mayor Kenneth Cowan, US Representative Virginia Foxx, USDA Rural Development State Director Randy Gore, NC Representative Charles Graham, NC Representative Garland Pierce, Dean School of Agriculture NCA&T State University Bill Randall, and NC Senator Michael Walters.

Additionally, field office staff from Senator Kay Hagan's and Senator Richard Burr's offices attended multiple meetings.

Expertise

Audience members included a wide range of expertise including: *Mecklenburg Soil & Water Conservation District, NC ABC Commission, NC Brewers Guild, NCDA&CS Administration, NCDA&CS Marketing Division, NCDA&CS Food&Drug Division, NCDA&CS Meat&Poultry Division, NC Department of Revenue--Property Valuation, NC DHHS Division of Public Health Food Protection Branch, NC Present Use Value Advisory Board, NC Real, NC Support Center, NCSU Crop Science Department, Robeson County Community College, UNC-Pembroke, USDA FSIS* and city and county staff from multiple locations.

NCLSFAC Member Participants

Many NCLSFAC members participated in meetings, including: *Uli Bennewitz, Weeping Radish; Nancy Creamer, NCLSFAC Co-Chair, Center for Environmental Farming Systems; John Day, ShiDay Consulting; Debbie Hamrick, North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation; Mac Legerton, Center for Community Action; and Margaret Newbold, Conservation Trust for North Carolina.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE TAKE-AWAYS

Empowering the individual. Farmers and entrepreneurs expressed the need for information access and transparency regarding existing rules/regulations, marketing programs and training resources. The state's continued efforts to provide high speed internet access in rural areas is critical to their success. They would like technical assistance in areas such as understanding how to compete in the bid processes for state contracts, in adhering to rules/regulations and in developing marketing plans and programs.

Communication/outreach. Every listening session was characterized by lack of knowledge of existing programs available to help farmers, entrepreneurs and services providers. Searching for technical assistance or marketing programs online is hit and miss. When farmers and entrepreneurs reach out by phone to ask questions many times they roll into voicemail messages that provide no indication of how to get answers, or even when the responsible person will be in the office; there was a specific suggestion that all agency staff should indicate their office hours in their voicemail greeting. There is no one-stop website for farmers or local foods entrepreneurs to find the information they need. While we heard of success stories of individuals who reached out for assistance from regulators and others (especially NCDA&CS Agribusiness and NCDA&CS MPI staff) before beginning a new venture, the more likely route to start-up is self-directed online research. Currently that's just not easy. Unfortunately from the stories, many farmers and entrepreneurs encounter state employees who believe they are already reaching out to new, nontraditional farmers and entrepreneurs, but that was not the way nontraditional farmers and entrepreneurs see it. Many players in North Carolina's local foods economy communicate in ways that government seems to be lagging behind.

Suggestions for improving communication include but are not limited to:

- Promote direct connections among players in local foods in North Carolina through the CEFS-hosted Local Foods List Serve and other outlets to facilitate information exchange and direct contacts.
- Promote cross-agency outreach from NCDA&CS and other agricultural services providers to: NC Department of Commerce (Travel and Tourism, Business Development and Community Development); NC DENR, NC DHHS and other relevant state agencies. Currently outreach is conducted by individuals within specific divisions of the major governmental departments/agencies. As a result, there is a lack of broader understanding among senior, mid- and lower-level regulators and services support staff about how to leverage cross-departmental and cross-agency resources to obtain better results. One example: Lumberton

Visitors Center could tie into NCDA&CS website for restaurant and roadside stand lists rather than reinventing their own website and populating it.

GAPs/food safety training. Cooperative efforts from NCSLFAC members, especially NCDA&CS, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and NCSU/NCA&TSU CES to work with our state's small farmers on training for food safety and Good Agricultural Practices are vitally important. Such training empowers the farmer to access markets that require passing third-party audits. At every listening session we heard concerns about Produce Safety Rule implementation mandated by the Food Safety Modernization Act.

Farm-centric training. North Carolina's local foods farmers and entrepreneurs may choose from a plethora of training programs from NCDA&CS, NCA&T, NCSU, NCSU-NCA&T CES, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, NC Real and Mountain BizWorks, to name a few. However, these training efforts are currently uncoordinated. As a result farmers and entrepreneurs may or may not learn such training exists. At most listening sessions we heard farmers express concerns regarding profitability: Empowering them with basic business and marketing skills is imperative to their long term success. Specific modules on topics such as "Running a successful CSA," or "planning planting to meet market demand" would be very helpful, especially if providers can coordinate course offerings.

Increasing Farm to School. Nearly every listening session included comments regarding increasing the amount of fresh North Carolina products in NC Public Schools (and to a less frequent degree, universities/other public institutions). NCDA&CS Farm to School program is very well received, although it was not well known among all listening session participants. Expanding NCDA&CS Farm to School program with more infrastructure and delivery, coupled with greater outreach to farmers, the public health community and schools/school nutritionists is needed. Conducting workshops that showcase success stories of how school systems are using more local foods would help to spark adoption at nonparticipating school districts.

Protect vital outreach infrastructure. While the listening sessions identified the need for better communication and coordination among those agencies and organizations providing outreach and service to farmers and local foods entrepreneurs, a consistent theme from all parties is that the support of NCDA&CS, NCSU/NCA&TSU CES and staff from other agencies within DHHS, DENR, Commerce, etc. is vitally important to North Carolina's farmers and entrepreneurs as they seek to develop the state's local foods economy. At most listening sessions the audience was sure to point out that agriculture in North Carolina is economic development and local foods allow individual farmers and farm families to make a living by working the land.

SPECIFIC ISSUES AND IDEAS

Regulatory Issues

- Form a local meat regulatory discussion group to facilitate communication among all players in the local meat chain.
- Ensure local food producers have access to Farm to School markets and programs with food safety education and GAPS audit support.
- Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs). Many concerns were raised about the costs of GAP audits and certification, citing travel costs and audit fees, especially where the auditor requires a visit for each individual product to be certified. Many participants also expressed the need for additional GAP training for farmer's market vendors, for direct-market growers, and for those who want to sell into wholesale markets or to institutional buyers. Ensure that all parts of the state are covered with GAPs auditors.

- Ensure regulatory agency staff includes hours of operation in voicemail messages and online. Include information on an alternative way to reach a person to get help. One example to follow: NCDA&CS MPI.
- Explore the opportunity for mobile processing for cattle, sheep, and goats.
- Share positive business development examples from WNC where farmers and entities have reached out to regulators from the start, which helped to ensure their success. Two examples include a goat cheese dairy and Smoky Mountain Native Plants (processed sustainably harvested ramps products at Stecoah Food Ventures).
- Develop a white paper and web resource for farmers markets to help them determine jurisdictional lines of authority for City, County and State regulations. Include FAQs and links to additional resources.
- Food Safety Modernization Act implementation will also cover small food processors, who may be required to implement Hazard Controls. Include training and technical assistance to help processors of value added products with FSMA compliance.

Opportunities for Investment

- Explore options for increasing local food buying flexibility and/or establishing a mandate for in-state purchases. Farmers and entrepreneurs expressed frustration with developing sales to UNC-Systems institutions, such as UNC-Pembroke, Appalachian State, NCSU, Western Carolina University and UNC-CH. In addition, buying flexibility for public school systems should be included.
- Continue focus at the national, state and local level to increase high-speed internet access to help local foods entrepreneurs and farmers. A lack of consistent internet service hampers local foods entrepreneurs and farmers from accessing online business and marketing resources and from growing business through online markets for sales diversification.
- Explore a far-western NC meat processing center. There is demand for local meat produced in far western NC for sale in major markets in Georgia and Tennessee. Producers are currently using mobile processing facilities to capacity and in order to grow to meet this demand are interested in establishing a USDA multi-species processing facility that would serve the far western region of the state (e.g., Clay and Cherokee Counties).

Local Foods in Schools

- Develop a North Carolina Standard Blueprint for school gardens and curriculum for incorporating food production into lessons that connect positive health outcomes and healthy food choices.
- Step up promotions of the NCDA&CS Farm 2 School Program to increase the number of schools buying NC product and to raise awareness of the program to current and potential farm suppliers; offer produce to schools all weeks that schools are in session by expanding program infrastructure.
- Facilitate cross district communication for schools to pool storage and centralize fruit/vegetable processing/preparation so that more schools can participate in Farm 2 School Program.
- Conduct a statewide meeting to share best practices from districts with high utilization and/or creative ideas. (Beaufort County, ASAP work, etc.)
- Develop institutional scale recipes for schools using North Carolina local foods with youth friendly appeal and presentation.
- Connect GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices) audited farms to schools who can buy from them.

Marketing: Farmers markets

- Develop a peer-to-peer network of Farmers Markets statewide to share best practices and resources such as grant writing, training on food safety, marketing, zoning, engaging elected and regulatory officials, governance, etc.
- Continue NCDA&CS Farmers Market Manager training programs and offer them on a regular schedule so managers can be assured of training and networking opportunities. Include NCSU/NCA&TSU CES as a full partner.
- Foster cross-county and cross-governmental communications to improve farmer's market development and permanence.
- Develop and enforce policies for product source and validating farmer credentials at the state-run farmers markets. Also enforce the rules on the minimum amount of product that the farmer actually grows. Additionally, listening session participants believed that space at the Farmers Markets should be used exclusively for farm products, with preference for NC grown products, not for craft and gift shops.
- Charlotte Regional Farmers Market. Develop a revitalization plan for the Charlotte Regional Farmers Market using a stakeholder group.

Marketing: Empowering the Farmer

- Develop outreach to non-traditional farmers for NCDA&CS agricultural marketing programs, especially those that build awareness and demand for NC products. Many farmers attending the listening sessions were generally unaware of existing NCDA&CS Marketing Division resources available to them through the marketing division.
- Conduct seminars on understanding and navigating the state bidding process.
- Continue outreach to North Carolina's growing local meats producers, processors and marketers through NC Choices.
- Assess the size of local foods in North Carolina to enable farmers to develop business and financial planning for farming operations and in developing marketing plans.
- Provide contacts for product liability insurance for producers.

Marketing: Community Supported Agriculture

- Document CSA best practices and provide training and outreach for farmers that helps them with marketing, production planning, developing policies/rules, etc.
- Include CSAs in Got to be NC programs.
- Encourage county extension offices and others to conduct CSA fairs that connect farmers with potential customers.

EBT and Food Access in the Community

- Form a statewide EBT Local Foods networking group to share best practices. Include farmers markets, retailers, farmers, nonprofits and state agencies. The listening session participants identified creative ways to leverage EBT for local foods, but those ideas are sequestered at the local level.
- Include links on the EBT application process, etc. on NCDA&CS website. Develop FAQs on EBT for local foods. Form a working group at the agency level that meets regularly through the year to discuss issues and work on solutions.
- Expand NCDA&CS marketing outreach to include the food access community by allowing food banks and other non-profit entities handling North Carolina farm products to be listed in online databanks.
- Local food projects initiated at the state, regional or local level should include EBT/SNAP and WIC acceptance from the outset. Some audience members advise renewed investment in providing WIC and Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) funds that are earmarked for

purchase of fresh local produce; these funds were distributed to qualified families by the county health departments in the past.

Craft Brewing/Distilling

- North Carolina's burgeoning artisan beer industry offers new markets for grain crops such as barley, and for NC-grown hops. Continued support at NCSU for cropping systems and from USDA for breeding is important to helping this industry realize potential. Including business economics expertise into the technical mix would help farmers and artisan brewers.
- NCDA&CS Marketing Division should include hops and brewers grains on marketing portions of the website to facilitate buyers and sellers making connections.
- Conduct an assessment of the market potential for brewer's grains, malted grains and hops for the state's growing beer industry.

Education & Business Support

- Develop and broadly publicize a one-stop spot online for agricultural and food business start-up business support.
- Organic farmers have received federal cost share for organic certification in the past. Is anything being done currently? Does NCDA&CS Marketing Division have flexibility to help farmers with certification costs? In addition, participants suggested the state could support an in-state certifier as a resource for organic growers.
- Work with Cooperative Extension agents to extend existing new farmer training programs (Such as the Piedmont Farm School in Davidson County) to new areas of the state. Leverage the NC Real agricultural business program to include new areas of the state for trainings to form a working group of farm training expertise. Ensure business skills development workshops are targeted for farmers including computer training, grant writing skills, QuickBooks training for agriculture, and ag-specific business management information. Where appropriate, leverage NC A&T SU's Farmers Adopting Computer Technology (FACT) program.
- Explore partnership with the state's Community College system for new farmer training and ongoing agricultural business training. Some individual community colleges are already thinking along these lines, such as Robeson Community College. Some participants asked could the state's seven Bionetwork Centers offer an opportunity. In addition, explore offering food business and small farm agricultural modules through the state's business center training at community colleges.
- Support and leverage NCA&AT's new Urban and Community Ag degree.

Land

- Continue to include local foods and beginning farmers in farmland transition and preservation efforts.
- Identify ways to accommodate smaller parcels of land into PUV as smaller tracts preserved for open space in the face of continued growth in urban areas can be important for water quality and quality of life. Explore whether or not population density could be a factor in determining when to allow smaller tracts of land into the PUV program.
- Encourage cities and counties to create clear points of contact in planning/zoning who can answer questions about how their ordinances apply to local food production and agriculture.
- Develop outreach to the urban and peri-urban regulatory community for zoning/land use for agriculture crop and animal husbandry and farming issues. Consider developing an Urban Agriculture Working Group. Explore opportunities to create knowledge within urban planners regarding agriculture through NC APA (American Planning Association, NC Chapter). Audience members pointed out that land use issues are vastly different across the state.

- Explore ways to strengthen Voluntary Ag Districts (VAD) to strengthen farm landowner rights in eminent domain situations so that it provides stronger protections for farmland. (DOT is widening road and will go through middle of farm. The state is threatening eminent domain.)
- Document emergent farming systems such as the combination of livestock and forestry or wild cultivated herbs and forestry and develop language that presents the enterprise in more traditional farming language so that regulators and government entities are able to assimilate new farm formats into existing programs such as Present Use Value.
- Department of Transportation Planning: Small farms have little leverage against large agencies such as DOT. There is little recourse—in Southeastern North Carolina several farms have experienced issues following road construction that altered water drainage patterns.

Networking Local Foods Stakeholders

- Many participants described local food as a part of sustainable economic development; however agriculture is rarely recognized by that community. One person highlighted that large companies are looking at corporate sustainable responsibility models and are including food in those conversations. There likely unexplored opportunities for building the local food economy that grow from commitments by local companies to support the sector.
- Facilitate coordination and communication between and among local and regional food councils.