

Williamston Listening Session
North Carolina Telecenter
January 31, 2013

Partners: Albemarle Commission (Bert Banks), Mid-East Commission (Timmy Baynes), Upper Coastal Plains Council of Governments (Greg Godard), Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (Shivaugn Rayl).

About 25 people attended. NC Sustainable Local Food Advisory Council member present: Debbie Hamrick, NC Farm Bureau.

Geography: This region is poor and rural, and has a high incidence of diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease and diabetes. This congressional district is also considered the second largest food desert in the country. Most people agreed that they view healthy fresh local foods contributing to local food demand, improved health outcomes, and economic development. They also agreed that access to healthy foods was the biggest barrier in the region. One participant suggested that if we “put some real dollars in farmers’ pockets” we could make inroads with these health issues.

EBT/SNAP/WIC/FMNP:

The group agreed that whatever local food projects get going, they must be able to accept EBT/SNAP and WIC. The group also agreed that there needs to be a 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. Another person suggested that local meat producers should accept all public benefits for their products, to ensure access to healthy meats, whether pasture or free range swine, poultry.

Technical assistance and education: some farmers need additional training in business planning and computer training. Farmers also

need training in preparing their product for sale to some bigger volume buyers (e.g., clean, quality, size/grade standards). Buyers could also use some education about how to interact with local farms.

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs): Area schools, under the Department of Public Instruction require that any farmer who sells into the cafeteria have a third party GAP audit. Schools food purchasers in Beaufort County want to know what farms in their area are GAP certified to ensure that they get the bid documents for the farm to school program. GAPs certification is not commonly acquired by growers in the region; this is an area for capacity development. There were several questions about GAPs including: whether training was sufficient, whether an audit is required, and whether third party certification of the packing house was sufficient to cover the products coming from non-audited farms.

Farm2School program: NCDA is the distributor for fresh produce, grown within the state, to NC schools. The NC farm2School cooperative is comprised of farmers from across the state and any farmer can participate as long as they are GAP certified and pay the membership fee. The program runs 23 weeks throughout the school year. Nutrition Directors place orders online; there are no minimum order and no additional fees for handling or distribution. If schools buy from US Foods, F2S can deliver product to US Foods to hold and deliver w/regular delivery.

Food storage and transportation in schools: Schools in the northeast generally do not participate in Farm2School primarily because they don't have storage. Once per week deliver creates barriers for schools that do not have storage or prep facilities. Some districts are trying to get grant funds for refrigerators, steamers, or trucks. The group discussed collaboration across schools and/or districts using centralized preparation/storage facilities. Beaufort County Schools received a Farm2School grant and is working in the community on options to increase local foods in Beaufort County schools.

Market development: In this region, small producers are trying to reenergize the farmers market, but their relatively low-quantity production does not justify the market fee for the season. There is an opportunity for collaboration with other producers. Growers need commitments from the local restaurants in order to plan their growing season, but the local restaurants want local product to put on the menu but want the lowest price and will not commit to buying volume. The demand side has to be steady to allow the supply side to invest and grow. Generally, there are very few food crop producers in the region and they are hindered by the lack of infrastructure support for collective marketing, and their distance from high-value markets. Several projects to address these issues have failed in the last few years.

Regional food policy council: Participants discussed the idea of starting a conversation to hone in on the issues regionally, using the same model that funders do to identify priorities. The discussion stressed a collaborative approach, including funders (e.g., Kate B. Reynolds, Blue Cross Blue Shield NC Foundation, USDA, local farm bureaus).