

Midlands Local Food Summit Summary
Monday, June 17, 2013
Columbia, SC

Approximately 25 local farmers, chefs, distributors, resource professionals and support organization representatives gathered for the Midlands Local Food Summit on June 17, 2013. The Midlands Local Food Collaborative organized the meeting in coordination with a statewide formal assessment by the SC Departments of Agriculture and Commerce called “SC Making Small Farms into Big Business,” conducted by food systems consultant Ken Meter, President of Crossroads Resource Center. Partners for the study include the Palmetto Agribusiness Council, The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, the Coastal Conservation League, the Farm Bureau, and other organizations.

The goal of this Local Food Summit meeting, facilitated by Ken Meter, was to provide small farmers and local food stakeholders in the Midlands with an opportunity to express their regional vision and needs as the overall assessment of local food systems in South Carolina is conducted.

Jack Schuler, President of the Palmetto Agribusiness Council, introduced the project “SC Making Small Farms into Big Business” by recognizing the significant potential for small farms to contribute to South Carolina’s overall agricultural wealth. Mr. Meter then began the discussion by asking participants to envision what economic developments would help increase the amount of local food that can be grown for South Carolina markets. The ensuing dialogue included suggestions for economic developments as well as a need for increased education and advocacy dedicated to building a sustainable food system. The complex set of issues expressed by the participants is presented thematically below.

Processing and Distribution:

Processing and distribution of local food is a challenge in the Midlands. The daily operating tasks on a small farm demand long hours, and many small farmers are then responsible for processing and selling their production. Farmers markets, which are time and labor intensive, are common points of sale in the Midlands. The addition of a processing and distribution point could allow small farmers to spend more time on production.

“There just aren’t enough hours in the day.” –Sharon Helms, Carolina Bay Farms

Another suggestion for more efficient processing and distribution of produce was forming a cost-sharing cooperative of small farmers in the Midlands. If farmers could work together on boxing, packaging and refrigeration, individual expenses would decrease and resources could be redirected. The flip side of streamlining the process is a potential brand dilution. Cultivating a strong brand all the way to the consumer was expressly important to chefs and farmers alike to maintain a competitive advantage.

There is only one USDA-certified meat processor in South Carolina, located in Kingstree. Small farmers spend valuable time and resources to get to Kingstree to process their livestock. One participant suggested that the state purchase a mobile meat processor to make processing more time and labor efficient for small farmers in the Midlands.

Communication:

As acknowledged in the first Local Food Summit (November, 2012), participants cited communication as a major problem in connecting local food and markets. Buyers may not know what farmers are growing, and farmers don’t know what and/or how much buyers want, so coordination through enhanced communication is needed to foster systemic local food system change. The local food finder platform MarketMaker has the ability to help bridge that gap, although it isn’t currently being utilized to its full potential.

“You have potatoes?! I’ll take whatever you have.” –Tim Peters, Executive Chef of Motor Supply, connects with Carolina Bay Farms. A restaurant sale is made on the spot.

Furthermore, a suggestion for a statewide agricultural events calendar was proposed, to aggregate information from various organizations, as well as increased rural access to internet communications to access online information.

Food Safety:

The SC Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety Coordinator urged everyone in the room interested in enhancing the local food system to consider food safety as a top priority in strategic planning processes. The FDA’s pending changes to food safety regulations will make it more and more difficult for small farmers to sell and distribute through conventional channels. Currently, many small farms are not GAP certified, which is necessary to be eligible to bid on contracts with schools and institutions. Some worry these federal safety changes could push the older generation of small farmers to retire because they are not prepared for assessments or are unaware of the current standards and regulations.

Participants also engaged in discussion about traceability—under the Food Safety Modernization Act, traceability requires food distributors to label and barcode everything that comes in and out of the distribution warehouse, and systems are expensive. Product liability poses an enormous challenge for distribution companies wanting to work with small, local farms because commercial sales require insurance premiums that are out of reach for many small farmers. Forming a cooperative could possibly help decrease this expense and build capacity of local food distribution.

“We work with small farms, and we want work with more small farmers, but upcoming changes to legislation could make it even harder.” Robert Moore, Senn Bros. Distribution Co.

Regulations:

Participants expressed that SC regulations keep SC “behind” other states that have more prosperous local food systems. There is conflicting regulatory information (sometimes from regulators themselves) that makes it difficult to learn how to do the “right” thing when processing products like meat, cheese, eggs, and milk. Growers seek a reliable and consistent source of information to questions about farming regulations, as well as increased advocacy to change prohibitive regulations that make it difficult to process.

“I asked two different people how to process eggs in the same building and got two different answers.” --Sharon Helms, Carolina Bay Farms

Education:

Each participant, at various times during the meeting, expressed a fundamental requirement for a more robust local food system is education—for farmers, consumers, cooks, buyers, and students alike. While there are various educational programs and initiatives for farmers, consumers, and buyers across the state, there is a gap in culminating this information for the different audiences.

Farmer education: Mustafa Azeez of Asya Organics, a teaching cooperative farm in Sumter County asked, “But where are the farmers? *Where are the farmers?* I don’t see them.” Mustafa has seen growers and farmers disappear all across the state, and we need to foster them through education. Farming can be a viable business option for the younger generation, and we need to cultivate “agripreneur” opportunities. There is a visible disconnect between the land, food, and community. If we don’t educate the new generation, we will lose farming, which is a way of life for the Azeez family, and we will lose the connection to food. SC residents could also become food insecure if farming continues to decline.

Consumer education: From field to fork, it is crucial to increase food literacy in SC. Basic agricultural education such as where food comes from, the seasonality of produce, and nutrition should be integrated in schools and communities. On-the-farm education and building “agritourism” can help build awareness of local food and agriculture and boost the local economy. School gardens and the farm-to-school program offer excellent taste education. Cooking education was also identified as integral to building relationships and community around food and nutrition. Chefs in Columbia are championing local ingredients sourced from small farms, which creates demand and builds awareness among consumers.

Education for Industry Professionals:

Cafeteria workers, cooks, and food managers for schools and institutions need education to incorporate fresh local ingredients on the menu. Institutional food buyers may also need to be connected with resources that can communicate the availability of local food and coordinate processes.

What is a Small Farm?

Councilwoman Julie Ann Dixon asked the group a very important question, “What is a small farm?” There are different definitions based on size and income depending on whom you ask, and the participants had varying answers about acreage and profit determining “small farm” status. A representative from the farm loan service provided the definition they use, which is outlined by profits and number of employees, not acreage. Participants expressed a desire to streamline this definition across various sectors.

Keywords:

farmer, small farm, Midlands, local, sustainable, food system, distribution, processing, communication, food safety, regulations, agriculture, education, consumer, farm-to-table, food security, schools, institution, meat, produce

The Midlands Local Food Collaborative is a partnership of organizations dedicated to a robust local food system in the Midlands of SC. The Collaborative members provide education, technical and financial assistance and community advocacy to promote sustainable agriculture, land stewardship, and equitable food access. Collaborative members include:

