

Rappahannock-Rapidan Farm & Food Plan

Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission

October 20, 2015

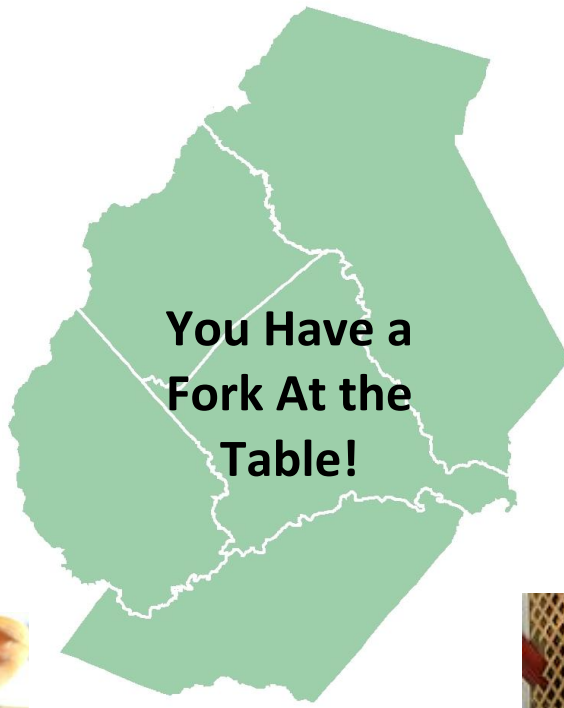


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DISCLAIMER

Funding for this project was made possible by a Planning Grant through the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development’s (DHCD) Community Development Block Grant Program, and the Local Food Promotion Program managed by the Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The contents of this report reflect the views of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission, which is responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of DHCD or USDA. This report does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of ongoing efforts to foster sustainable agriculture, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission (RRRC) conducted a comprehensive study of the region's food system, culminating in the development of a Regional Food System Plan. A food system is a collaborative network that includes everyone involved in putting food on our tables, whether that table is located in our homes, a restaurant or our children's cafeteria. An asset assessment, economic analysis, stakeholder interviews, focus group meetings and a producer survey were conducted to document the conditions in the region's farm and food economy as well as stakeholder's challenges and resource needs. The goal of the plan is to strengthen the local food economy in order to retain more local dollars within the region, while also promoting citizens' health, encouraging preservation of local farmland and enhancing farmers' quality of life.

The study found four core obstacles the food system needs to overcome in order to be sustainable:

1. Lack of labor
2. Lack of farmers
3. Lack of infrastructure, including need for community kitchen for value-added products
4. Need for local food promotion/consumer education & preserving integrity of truly local foods

To address these obstacles, nine priority projects were then developed through a public strategic planning process:

- Regional Food System Council
- Local Food Regional Marketing Plan
- Community Kitchen and Food Processing Center
- Food Node/Aggregation Center
- Farmer Mentorship Programs
- Farm Labor Internship Programs
- Regional Farm Labor Needs Assessment
- Mobile Slaughter Unit
- Promote Existing Resources

The recommended first step in plan implementation is the creation of a Regional Food Council to act as an advisory body and ensure the continuation of this effort. The Plan suggests that the council's first major task should be development of the regional local foods marketing plan in collaboration with key stakeholders such as local tourism and economic development directors, Piedmont Environmental Council's Buy-Fresh-Buy-Local Program Staff, and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents. These steps will lay the groundwork for implementation of the other projects.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Project Goals

As part of ongoing efforts to foster sustainable agriculture, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission (RRRC) conducted a comprehensive study of the region's food system. An asset assessment, economic analysis, stakeholder interviews, focus group meetings and a producer survey were conducted to document the conditions in the region's farm and food economy as well as stakeholder's challenges and resource needs. The goal of the plan is to strengthen the local food economy in order to retain more local dollars within the region, while also promoting citizens' health, encouraging preservation of local farmland and enhancing farmers' quality of life.

To kick-off its regional sustainable agriculture effort, RRRC held a workshop on Fostering Sustainable Agriculture for Economic Development in April 2012. Responses indicated strong interest in this topic throughout the region and among a broad range of stakeholders. Two major issues were also raised, however. When pursuing projects, stakeholders needed detailed data on the regional food system from a trusted source that they could reference when approaching elected officials and potential funders. Secondly, there was a lack of focused goals and priorities among the stakeholders. RRRC's food system planning effort seeks to address both issues.

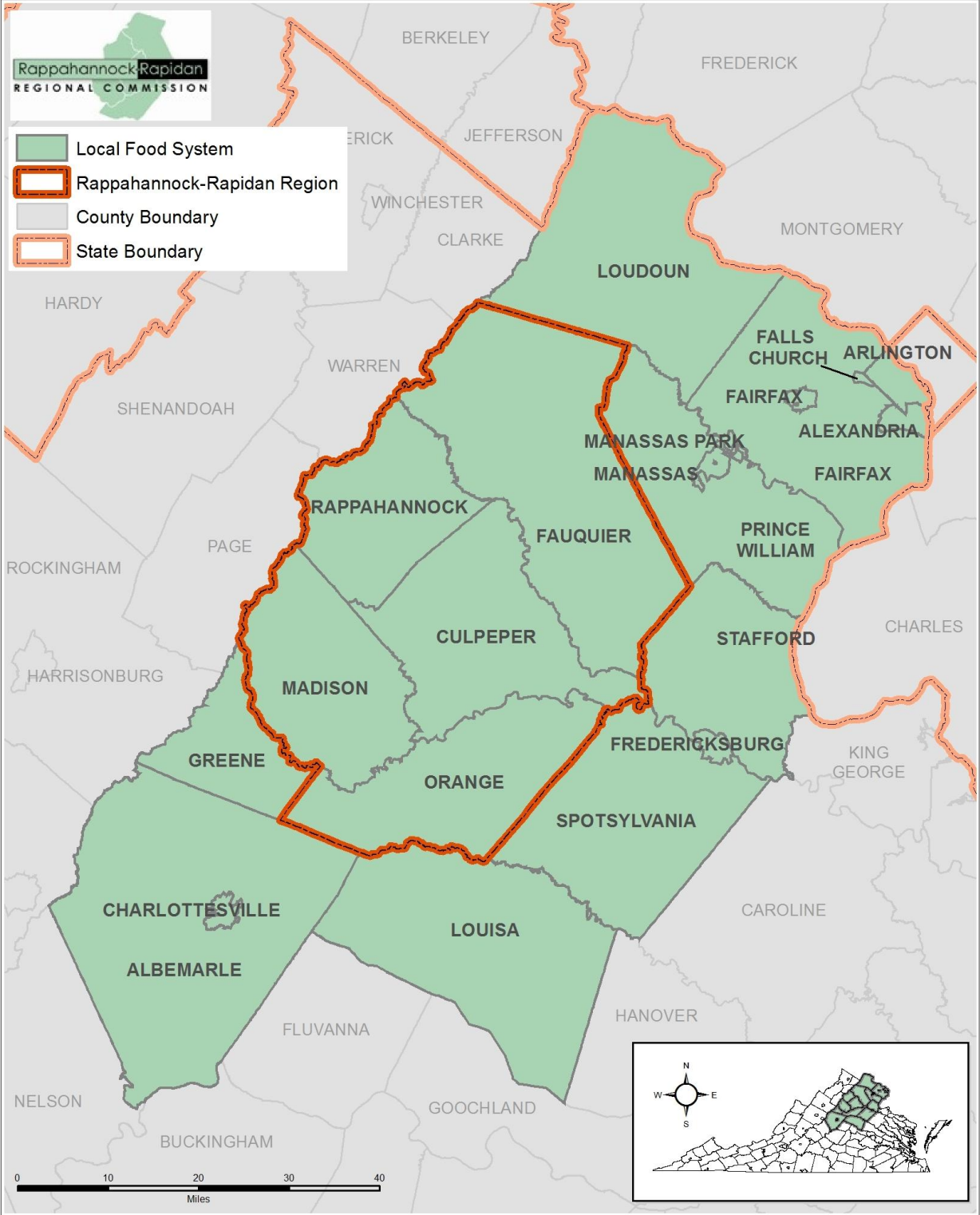
What Is a Food System?

A food system is a collaborative network that includes everyone involved in putting food on our tables, whether that table is located in our homes, a restaurant or our children's cafeteria. The system integrates food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management in order to enhance not only the regional economy but also the environmental and social health of the region.

Study Area

The study area for most aspects of this project is comprised of RRRC's planning district: Rappahannock, Fauquier, Culpeper, Orange, and Madison Counties and the towns within them (see Figure 1). However, the study area for the economic analysis also included Loudoun, Fairfax, Prince William, Fauquier, Stafford, Greene, Spotsylvania, Albemarle and Louisa Counties, and the cities of Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas, Manassas Park, Fredericksburg, and Charlottesville. This larger area encompasses the region's food system as defined by the project's stakeholder committee. Thus, "local food" must have its origin and final market within the food system boundaries for purposes of this study, but the food system could expand into the Washington D.C. market as it grows.

Figure 1. Map of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region and Its Food System



A predominantly rural region, agriculture and related business remain key components of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region's economy. Approximately 15% of Virginia's farms are within the region's food system, and of those, half are less than 50 acres. The main agricultural products are commodities, including beef cattle, hay and grains; and specialty crops, such as greenhouse-grown products, apples and grapes. Small vegetable farms are beginning to emerge in modest numbers, and agri-tourism is also a key component of the economy. However, according to Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents, local farmers and other experts, the region's agricultural economy is in decline. Mid-sized farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with larger operations, and while there has been a surge in new farmers coming into the region, their operations are small and frequently fail. This project seeks to pinpoint the reasons for this decline and develop potential solutions, while acknowledging that local food is only part of the equation. Both local food production and commodity agriculture are needed for a sustainable agricultural economy.

Other than small operations, few fruits and vegetables are currently produced in the region. Much of what is currently produced are commodities that are shipped to external markets. This creates a lack of fresh, healthful food in the region. Rappahannock County, for example, could be considered a "food desert," since it lacks a grocery store, and traveling on steep rural roads to nearby counties can prove treacherous in winter. Most of Orange County and a portion of Fauquier County are also considered food deserts by USDA standards of low income and low access to a supermarket. According to Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents, there are many small-scale farmers in the region that may scale-up with assistance, through promotion of agricultural and rural economic development, local foods and tourism.

Compiling trusted quantitative data allows the region to pinpoint the issues with its local food system. The region can establish a baseline to better understand the workings of the regional farm and food economy, as well as the economic impact of community-based food systems. This information is critical to local efforts to foster sustainable agriculture in the region, because it will assist stakeholders in making a case to decision makers and potential project funders to begin to address the symptoms noted.



Senterfitt Farms, Madison County

CHAPTER 2. STUDY METHODS

Development of this regional food system plan was comprised of three phases:

1. Conduct a baseline assessment of the region's food system (Fall 2014)
 - a. Inventory of existing local assets
 - b. Economic Analysis
2. Conduct surveys and interviews of the region's agricultural producers to fill gaps in existing data found during the economic analysis (Winter 2015)
3. Develop a strategic plan for the region's food system through a series of public meetings and focus group meetings, based on the economic analysis and survey results (Spring/Summer 2015)

In 2013, the Commission created an ad hoc Agriculture Working Group to oversee this project and the Commission's other sustainable agriculture efforts. This group is made up of the region's local government staff, agricultural producers, Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents, and representatives of the Farm Bureau, Virginia Food Enterprise Centers, Carver-Piedmont Agricultural Institute, Piedmont Environmental Council, and other applicable organizations.

Asset Assessment

Following a series of public meetings, the Commission's newly formed Agriculture Working group took the first step in the effort by conducting an assessment of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region's food system assets, such as processing facilities, educational programs and potential institutional markets. A list of these assets was compiled by county for each of four categories: natural capital, built capital, human and social capital, and financial and political capital (see Appendix A). An overview of localities' related policy and regulatory programs is provided within the latter section.

No value judgments were made in determining whether to include an entity on the list. Assets had to be located within the five-county region, or directly serve the region. Agri-businesses outside of the region that our producers utilize were not included unless they have some physical presence within the region. Other organizations may choose to use the Asset Assessment as a starting point in developing a resource guide for producers; however, the assessment is not intended to serve that purpose.

Knowing what facilities, programs, support organizations and other assets exist within the region then allowed the group to determine where there were gaps in the system. These gaps and other observations are discussed within *Chapter 3. Results* of this plan. The initial draft of the assessment was provided to the Working Group and posted on the RRRC website for comment in December 2014, and the final document was published in April 2015.

Economic Analysis

In order to further establish a quantitative baseline of the conditions in the local farm and food economy, Ken Meter of Crossroads Resource Center was contracted to conduct an Economic Analysis of the region's food system. The analysis compiled existing state and national level agricultural production and food consumption data to pinpoint gaps between supply and demand. On February 3 and 4, 2015, three public meetings were held in Culpeper, Madison and Fauquier Counties to present the draft results and gather feedback. Fifty attendees participated in these meetings, and RRRC published the final report on April 8, 2015 (see Appendix B).

Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Group Meetings

To supplement the results of the economic analysis, focus group meetings and interviews of the local agriculture sector were also conducted during the winter and spring of 2015.

The Agriculture Working Group developed a list of twelve stakeholders to be interviewed, including six producers, and all accepted the request. The interviewees chosen were located within the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region except for the Charlottesville Food Hub, which is the only food hub serving the region. Ken Meter and Michelle Edwards of RRRC conducted the interviews in January 2015. The interviews were performed in-person except for the interview of Barboursville Vineyards due to scheduling constraints. The results are summarized within Ken Meter's report, "Key Findings and Recommendations for Next Steps in Local Food Systems Implementation for the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region of Virginia" (see Appendix B). Interviewees' responses were used to ground-truth the economic analysis data and provide a local context for Ken Meter's subsequent recommendations for the region.



Moving Meadows, Culpeper

RRRC staff conducted six focus group meetings within the region to get a better sense of stakeholders' challenges and resource needs. Three were held following the public meetings to release the draft results of the Economic Analysis. One was held during the Commission's Agri-tourism Symposium. Attendees of these meetings consisted mainly of producers and other agri-business representatives. The final focus group was a stand-alone meeting specifically for Institutional Buyers. Discussion questions used were developed by the Working Group. Summaries of these meetings can be found in Appendix C. An additional meeting was conducted at the Fauquier Farm Bureau, but since only board members were in attendance, the results were not published. Ninety-four stakeholders total participated in the six meetings. Results of the focus group discussions were then used during the strategic planning process.

Producer Surveys

A sixteen question survey was sent to 1,052 producers of edible farm products within the

Rappahannock-Rapidan region in March 2015. The mailing list included Piedmont Environmental Council’s Buy Fresh – Buy Local participants and contacts of the region’s Cooperative Extension Agents. RRRC staff sent the surveys via email or mail, utilizing email where possible. Producers were given two weeks to respond and approximately 15% participated.

Similarly to the focus group meetings, the Working Group designed the survey questions to supplement data gathered from national sources via the economic analysis as well as to gauge local producers’ needs and constraints. Unlike the focus groups meetings, the survey instrument allowed the Working Group to attain quantitative results. Most questions were multiple choice. While basic operational data was collected to ensure a representative sample, most of the questions sought to address specific areas not adequately addressed in the USDA Census of Agriculture (e.g. value-added products, agri-tourism, marketing), or to gauge producers’ interest in potential programs and projects. The summary of survey results can be found in Appendix D.

Public Strategic Planning Meetings

The baseline information and stakeholder recommendations gathered during the previous phases served to inform the subsequent strategic planning process. RRRC and Virginia Cooperative Extension staff facilitated three regional “Community Conversations” in the Town of Culpeper during the spring of 2015. Culpeper was chosen due to its central location within the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region. RRRC staff presented the results of the Working Group’s previous efforts to attendees. Then, through a series of public meetings, stakeholders developed a community vision for the region’s agricultural economy and a detailed list of priority projects for achieving that vision.

The Working Group expanded upon these priority project concepts where more details were needed. The community vision and priority projects can be found in Chapter 5 of this document.

For further information on project activities, including meeting summaries, handouts and presentations, please visit RRRC’s Regional Food System Plan Initiative webpage at www.rregion.org/foodsystem.html.



CHAPTER 3. RESULTS

Supply versus Demand

The analysis of the Rappahannock-Rapidan region's farm and food economy concluded that there is far more demand than supply of local food within the food system, and even within the region itself. The region produces roughly half of the food demanded by its residents, and most of that food is sold outside of the region and the food system. If we expand the market to include the Washington D.C. metro region as many local producers have, the gap becomes enormous, with 1.5% of the potential market being met.

Food Purchases:

- In the region = \$421 million/yr
- In the food system = \$7.5 billion/yr (\$4.5 billion for home-use)
- DC metro region = \$14 billion/yr

Food Produced in the region = \$210 million/yr

Lost Revenue

Additionally, local consumers are purchasing very little food grown within the region. The economic analysis found more than 90% of the food consumed within the food system is produced outside of it, which equates to \$7 billion/year. This is an enormous loss of potential revenue for local farmers and the regional economy.

Furthermore, farmers are losing a great deal of revenue via their operations. Farmers within the region sold \$225 million of crops and livestock in 2012. However, they spend an average of \$47 million more producing crops and livestock each year than selling them, with 70% of the region's farmers reporting a loss in 2012. Ken Meter reported that this is a higher loss than he usually sees in similar studies across the country, and more than the state average of 62%. While the Agricultural Census data does not reflect recent improvements in the beef market, it is representative of long-term trends. When their agricultural operations are not profitable, farmers becoming increasingly dependent on off-farm income or savings. This also decreases the opportunity for investment and expansion of their farms.

Growing production expenses explain part of the reason for farmers' lack of profits, with a 35% increase from 2007 levels. Almost half of these costs were spent on purchasing essential farm inputs from external sources, creating a loss of potential revenue to the region of \$110 million/year.

Combined, this amounts to a total loss of \$7.1 billion of potential wealth lost to the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region each year.

Total Revenue Losses

\$7.1 billion of potential food system revenue is lost to the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region each year.

Food System Assets

The Rappahannock-Rapidan Region's food system boasts many assets, including a longer growing season than many of the country's other agricultural areas, as well as moderate rainfall combined with plentiful, high-quality surface and groundwater sources. The value of the region's water resources cannot be emphasized enough considering the dire drought situation currently plaguing California's agricultural system.



*Liberty Mills Farm
Orange County*

The region is also connected to major transportation corridors leading to large urban markets, which makes reaching these areas with high demand quicker and less costly. These urban markets also tend to place a higher value on local food and are willing to pay more.

The region has a long agricultural tradition and a booming tourism market. The region's proximity to Washington D.C., Charlottesville and Richmond, combined with civil and revolutionary war historic sites and access to Shenandoah National Park are major benefits for the region's agri-tourism business, both on and off-farm. With travelers' increasing interest in unique experiences, what better way to experience local culture than by sampling local food?

Due to the key role agriculture plays in the region's economy, including tourism, local governments in the five-county region are generally supportive of local farms and local food. This does not mean that policy conflicts have not arisen, but for the most part, farmers and policy makers both have the same goal: a sustainable agricultural economy. See Appendix A for a discussion of local government policies, and programs related to agriculture. Of particular note, Fauquier County has a Purchase of Development Rights Program that has proved very successful in preserving local farmland with over 10,000 acres under conservation easement as of April 2015.

Additionally, many organizations and national, state and regional programs exist to help farmers and promote local foods. These are listed in chapter 3 of the Asset Assessment, *Human and Built Capital* (See Appendix A).

A fair number of small meat processing facilities serving local smaller livestock growers exist within the region and nearby. Several larger slaughter facilities are also located nearby for commodity farmers.

Direct-to-consumer sales (e.g. farmers markets, pick-your-own, CSAs) are a small but growing component of the region's farm product sales. In 2012, 353 farms sold \$2.8 million of food products directly to consumers, which is a 27% increase in the number of farms selling direct compared to 2007. While only amounting to 1.3% of farm product sales within the region, this is four times the national average. The percentage for the food system is even higher at five times the national average. Clearly, direct-sales is an area of strength for the food system with considerable room for growth.

Gaps in the Food System

The analysis of the region's farm and food economy found several core obstacles the food system needs to overcome in order to be sustainable. These findings were also backed up by the other components of this study.

Core Obstacles for the Rappahannock-Rapidan Food System

1. Lack of labor
2. Lack of farmers
3. Lack of infrastructure, including need for community kitchen for value-added products
4. Need for local food promotion/consumer education & preserving integrity of truly local foods

Lack of Labor

Lack of farm labor was a key issue brought up repeatedly by farmers during the producer survey, interviews, and focus group meetings. It is also the largest single expense for farmers in the region, amounting to approximately 17% of their production expenses (19% within the food system), and an expense that has been increasing. Farmers need reliable labor willing to do strenuous, physical work at wages the farmer can afford to pay while maintaining profitability. Typically these are low-paying jobs, since farmers' profit-margins are low. As a result, young people generally do not aspire to become farm workers. Also, the migrant labor pool has dwindled due to stricter national immigration policies, exacerbating the problem. Thus, more creative thinking is needed to address this critical and very complex issue.

Lack of Farmers

While the number of farms within the region has increased as farms have become smaller, much of that growth has been in ornamental growers rather than food production. The majority of farmers within the region are commodity farmers whose food is transported to markets out-of-state. As the economic analysis found, "the marketing channels that are easy to reach involve long-distance transport of low-margin commodity foods sold over long distances." There has been a small influx of niche farmers producing foods for local markets, but not in sufficient numbers to meet demand.

Several of the farmers who responded to the producer survey mentioned they planned to retire within the year, and approximately ten who did not complete the survey responded they had already retired. While age was not a survey question several respondents mentioned they were over eighty. The average age of principal farm operators for every county within the region is one year higher than the state average and two years higher than the national average, with a regional average of 60.4 years old (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2012). The average age of operators in Madison and Rappahannock Counties is over three years higher than the national average at 61.7 years old. The average age of the region's farmers has been

steadily creeping up over the last twenty-five years, a trend very worrisome as more farmers approach retirement without a family member willing to take over the operation.

Development pressure and high land prices further exacerbate the issue. While there is a continual stream of retiring farm owner/operators and a large pool of beginning farmers within the food system, they are often not within the same family. The farmer or his family are frequently tempted by developers offers, which are typically more than a beginning farmer can afford. In other cases, the difficulty lies in matching farmers looking to buy or lease land with land owners, or negotiating a mutually agreeable long-term lease. A state farmland matching program, Virginia Farm Link, exists, but is currently not widely used within the region.

There are several existing training programs for beginning farmers in the region that provide excellent practical education, but most do not provide the on-going support many beginning farmers need to achieve success. Two state programs have arisen to address this need. The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition launched the Virginia Farm Mentor Network statewide in 2013, which it operates in our region through the Northern Piedmont Beginning Farmer Program. This program is currently struggling to match beginning farmers with mentors and needs further development. Additionally, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and the Virginia Farm Bureau started the Virginia Certified Farm Seekers Program in 2012 to “help interested farmers produce a business plan and resume, as well as demonstrate on-farm experience.” Only fourteen farmers state-wide have completed the program, indicating this program may also need further development to make an impact.

Lack of Infrastructure

The analysis of the region’s farm and food economy concluded “the few farmers that have dedicated themselves to addressing the emerging demand for local food have found reliable niche markets, but report significant difficulty in (or lack of interest in) reaching larger markets since supportive infrastructure does not exist.” According to the producer surveys, focus groups and interviews, an aggregation and distribution center ranked high among producers’ needs, particularly among vegetable growers who ranked it as their greatest resource need in the regional survey. The need for a community kitchen and processing for value-added products was another frequent infrastructure request among producers, especially among smaller fruit and vegetable growers.



*Heritage Hollow Farms,
Rappahannock County*

A slaughter facility was the top request among cattle farmers surveyed. When discussed in greater depth during interviews and focus group meetings, however, the majority of producers’ concerns centered on quality issues rather than capacity. Furthermore, local meat processors stated demand did not warrant expansion within the region. The same could not be said for large-scale cattle operations, which generally send their livestock out-of-state for processing. As stated in the economic analysis, a slaughter facility large enough to handle such volume might be cost-prohibitive at this time and would likely undermine current facilities. Additionally, such facilities typically come with considerable opposition from local residents.

Need for Local Food Promotion/Consumer Education

During focus groups and surveys, producers complained that local consumers desire for low prices often drives local farmers to sell outside the food system or the state. This issue is not solely economic, but a symptom of a deeper issue in the region.

Virginia Cooperative Extension, Piedmont Environmental Council, local governments and other organizations in the region have implemented local food promotion efforts with varying degrees of success. Yet, consumer interest, awareness and demand for local foods are still significantly lower in the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region than surrounding regions, according to anecdotal evidence received from stakeholders in this study. In fact, the region has become known as the “local food donut-hole” in some circles, particularly institutional and commercial food buyers. Local food festivals have been very popular, but that success has not translated into a significant increase in local food sales beyond the event date. Thus, there is a need for a radical change in how the region promotes local food that learns from past efforts. As the economic analysis found, “If each Northern Piedmont region resident purchased \$5 of food directly from farmers in the region each week, this would generate \$793 million of new income for the region’s farmers.” This may be a good goal for such an effort.

Most restaurants in the region that use local products, even those that tout themselves as farm-to-table, are not advertising local farms or local ingredients on the menu, website or elsewhere. This presents a missed opportunity for the restaurant owner in capitalizing on the use of local ingredients through increased sales to customers interested in local foods; for local farmers the restaurants source from in missed publicity; and for the customers interested in buying local foods.

In late 2014, Piedmont Environmental Council launched its Farmer-Chef Express online tool, where local food producers and buyers can post availability and wants respectively. There are currently many more producers than buyers posting on the site, but this may change as the site grows. Most of the buyers on the site are selling meat and dairy products, while buyers are looking mainly for produce. Additionally, Market Maker recently expanded into Virginia, providing a state-wide database for local producers and buyers. It is too soon to gauge its success, but certainly outreach to raise awareness is needed at this stage for both sites.

Furthermore, several of the largest institutions in the region are not only unwilling to pursue local sourcing options, but declined to come to the table to discuss their challenges and concerns during this study. In speaking with other farm and food-related organizations in the region, this is a consistent issue, largely caused by the institutions’ food service director. While there are many case studies of similar institutions within the state sourcing local, these success stories cannot possibly sway the institutions in the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region if food service directors are not open to the conversation. Pressure from upper-level management and/or a large number of customers is needed to open lines of communication with these institutions. For example, the adjacent Page County School System achieved great success mostly due to a single local champion, David Sours, who is both a farmer and a parent.

Preserving the Integrity of Truly Local Foods

There is also a vast difference in how agri-businesses, retailers, farmers and consumers within the region's food system define "local food." For some, local food is grown within their county or state, while others consider local food to be anything grown on the eastern seaboard or even the United States. To further complicate matters, livestock may be birthed in Virginia, yet finished and processed out-of-state, while still labeled Virginia beef in the grocery store. Future implementation efforts will need to come to a consensus on a workable definition of "local food" in order to support local farms and gain consumer trust.

Other Concerns

Other concerns raised by stakeholders during this effort included high business taxes and cumbersome food safety policies. While outside the scope of this study, these issues deserve further research by a regional food council or other local or regional bodies.



Yoder's Country Market, Madison County

CHAPTER 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Vision for Our Food System

Through the series of Community Conversations, stakeholders developed a vision for the region's food system. This shared vision served to focus discussion and development of priority projects, and will serve as indicators from which to measure success in the future.

Food System Vision Statement

Our region has a thriving and inclusive food system that:

1. Provides affordable and abundant healthy food for our informed families and community
2. Provides a competitive financial return, respect for our farmers, and good jobs for our community
3. Protects and regenerates the health of our farmland and natural resources

Priority Projects

A list of priority projects was also developed through the Community Conversations with further details provided by the Agricultural Working Group. Recommended projects include facilities, policy changes, education and marketing programs, and opportunities for private investment, all which address core obstacles found by the economic analysis.

1. Regional Food System Council

As the first step in the implementation effort, a Regional Food Council should be created to act as an advisory body and ensure the continuation of this effort. The council would be tasked with fostering implementation of regional food projects, assessing and providing recommendations on local food policy, and other related duties as needed. Members should be appointed by each county government, and also include local experts and representatives of key stakeholder organizations.

Staff of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission may assist with the council's development and operations at least initially. As duties' grow, a part-time or full-time staff person will likely become necessary, and could serve as a local foods coordinator for the region, as recommended by Ken Meter's analysis (see Appendix B)

2. Local Food Regional Marketing Plan

As its first task, the Regional Food Council should develop a regional local foods marketing plan in collaboration with key stakeholders such as local tourism and economic development directors, Piedmont Environmental Council's Buy-Fresh-Buy-Local Program Staff, and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents. An assessment of past marketing efforts within the region should be conducted as an initial step in plan development.

The plan would provide on-going, diversified marketing with programs targeting the general public, local schools, restaurants, and other key stakeholder groups. Slogans and delivery must be fresh and attention-grabbing, tailored to each audience. Social media should be utilized where possible. Welcome packets for new residents, population of Market Maker, and check-off for farmers markets participants should be considered for inclusion in the plan. The plan should also incorporate strategies to market the region to farmers seeking to purchase land or relocate.

Creation of a regional brand should be explored as part of this effort to determine whether it would be beneficial compared to utilizing existing labels. Creation of a regional brand would allow for a clearer definition of “local food.”

A phased approach to plan implementation should be taken with phase one focusing on raising general awareness of the region’s local foods and phase two directed at consumer education and regional farmer/business marketing. Implementation of this marketing plan will lay the groundwork for implementation of the other projects.

3. Community Kitchen and Food Processing Center

The development of a centrally located commercial kitchen/food processing center in the region should be fostered. As one possibility, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission is currently conducting a feasibility study for developing such a facility at the Carver-Piedmont Center in Culpeper County in conjunction with Virginia Food Enterprise Centers and the Carver-Piedmont Agricultural Institute. Additional information about this study is available on the Commission’s website at www.rregion.org/carver.html.



*Honey at Orange
Edible Fest*

4. Food Node/Aggregation Center

Explore the feasibility of developing a food node in the region to act as an aggregation center. This node would be smaller in scope than a food hub, but would connect with existing facilities such as food hubs, value-added processing centers, and institutional markets. Such a facility should include storage and freezer space. Siting the facility in the same location as the community kitchen/processing center would take advantage of shared resources and should be considered.

5. Farmer Mentorship Programs

For beginning farmers to succeed long-term, holistic and ongoing training is needed. Mentorship programs that pair beginning and well-established farmers together should be further developed to establish a source of long-term support with real-world knowledge. To take this concept one step further, several incubator farms should be created around the region that include business planning, mentors, equipment, and beginning farmer training, for a complete holistic program.

6. Farm Labor Internship Programs

An internship program for seasonal farm work should be developed with specific learning experiences provided. The Internship program would include a curriculum with clear goals and objectives, and potentially include sub-sets targeting returning veterans, ex-offender reentry, high-school students, etc. A certification program for mentors and interns should be established to provide proof of job skills and program skill development. In conjunction with this effort, a training class on labor laws for farm employers should be developed to assist employers in wading through the legalities and ensure they are meeting minimum standards.

7. Regional Farm Labor Needs Assessment

Due to the complex nature of the issue, further information is needed to determine how best to address the regional food system's lack of farm labor beyond creation of training programs. Therefore, the Regional Food System Council should collaborate with regional Virginia Employment Commission Farm Placement Specialists, local VEC staff, local economic development directors, and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents to assess current resources and develop a regional strategy. Creation of a regional job farm labor job bank/directory is one possible outcome.

8. Mobile Slaughter Unit

While there is a great deal of interest in an additional slaughter facility among cattle farmers in the region, there is currently not sufficient evidence to support a large-scale processing facility. As an alternative, the feasibility of mobile meat processing should be explored in the short-term. The USDA's Food Service and Inspection Service defines a Mobile Slaughter Unit as "a self-contained slaughter facility that can travel from site to site." For more information on MSUs, including regulatory compliance information, costs of operation, case studies, and videos of the MSU slaughter process visit the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network, sponsored in part by USDA, at www.nichemeatprocessing.org.

9. Promote Existing Resources

Many great resources for farmers and local food buyers already exist (e.g. Farm Link, Farmer-Chef Express), but are not yet widely known or utilized. Rather than duplicating efforts, all stakeholder groups should promote these tools, and the Food System Council should consider developing a web-based resource guide.



Early Mountain Vineyard, Madison County

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Amy Hudson, Moving Meadows Farm & Store

Wally Hudson, Moving Meadows Farm & Store

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Erik Plaksin, Waterpenny Farm

Michael Rodriguez, Fauquier's Finest Meat Processing,

Mark Seale, Blue Ridge Produce

Ken Smith, MooThru Dairy

Kristen Suokko, Local Food Hub

James Wedderburn, Fauquier Hospital

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