

Research & Extension to Support Local Food Systems

In the South, local food systems face numerous complex issues, such as barriers to entry, fragmentation, and racial injustice. These issues can keep producers and consumers from fully participating in local food systems. Strengthening local food systems can improve food access for consumers, increase farmer profitability, stabilize and/or grow local economies, and enhance community viability.

Land-grant universities are uniquely positioned to help make local food systems more vibrant, resilient, and just.

Since 2016, a multistate team has spearheaded efforts to support research and Extension related to local food systems in the South.

Working together, researchers and Extension educators at land-grant universities across the South are:

- Determining the most pressing issues in local food systems.
- Identifying successful models and standardizing methods for local food system research and Extension.
- Developing learning communities, webinars, and resource banks to share best practices and training.

This interdisciplinary, multistate collaboration enhances the capacity of land-grant universities to respond to the needs of the South's local food systems. Coordination reduces duplication of efforts, distributes the workload, and supports long-lasting, synergistic outcomes.



GROUP ACTIVITIES & IMPACTS

The group identified the biggest issues related to local food systems.

Group members interviewed expert faculty and staff at participating institutions and led workshops with producers, specialists, food companies, and other stakeholders to identify priority issues. University of Kentucky scientists are testing a model to measure local food system vitality and residents' perceptions of their food system. Information from these efforts will direct future research and Extension activities and guide investment of resources. This helps ensure that research and Extension activities are meeting local needs. Targeted research and Extension activities can also provide the evidence needed to influence public policy changes that support local food systems.

Group members developed an online resource bank for land-grant university professionals working with local food systems.

This group developed and distributed a survey to identify the content and features the database should have. Following survey results, the group engaged undergraduate students at Virginia Tech to develop a website (<https://sera-47.extension.org/>) and populate it with resources, including curricula, trainings, funding opportunities, links to granting agencies, and more. Group members are also working with Iowa State University Extension to create a directory of personnel associated with local food systems. Increasing the visibility and availability of these resources enhances potential for collaboration and facilitates consistent use of best practices in local food system research, Extension, and teaching.

The group created a learning community to share knowledge and training about local food systems and discuss emerging issues.

To encourage communication among stakeholders, the group hosts a webinar series about local food issues. Recent webinar topics included racial injustice in local food systems, building local and equitable food systems from farm to institution, marketing strategies, and managing a business during a pandemic. In 2021, over 230 university faculty, researchers, Extension staff, USDA staff, community-based organizations, non-profit organizations, and farmers attended the webinars. The group also held virtual "Tea and Coffee Hour" meetings to bring together farmers, specialists, Extension agents, and consumers. A recent meeting focused on understanding how COVID-19 impacted consumers and growers, how growers adapted, and how Extension helped or could have done better.

The group identified ways to objectively measure the state of local food systems.

Group members surveyed existing literature and worked with librarians at participating institutions to compile a list of over 200 metrics that have been used in state and federal reporting systems, in academic and professional literature, and by other stakeholder groups. The group refined this list to 20 indicators that will be recommended for use across the South. Consistent use of common measures will make it possible to track and report the combined impact of land-grant universities' work with local food systems.

Group members interviewed administrators, faculty, and staff to identify, document, and evaluate current organizational and staffing models at participating institutions.

Survey results will show how land-grant universities are addressing local food system issues and identify which models work. So far, interviews have been completed in three states; two more are in progress. Virginia Tech is assisting with interviews, transcription, and data analysis. The group is also analyzing the web presence of Extension related to local food systems. Each state will receive a "report card." Findings may help the university improve their reach.

PROJECT FUNDING & PARTICIPATION

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