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Growth and Representation

Decreasing Barriers and Creating Networks Supporting Food Producing Farmers in South Carolina's Midlands

By Katie Welborn & Carrie Draper, MSW

Executive Summary: *Access to capital, processing regulations, the need for skilled labor, the labor pay scale, and food safety certifications are the top obstacles of food-producing farmers in the Midlands of South Carolina. Despite these barriers, Midlands farmers are experiencing growing consumer demand for their products while networks to steward these enterprises and represent these farmers are lacking. Food hubs, tax incentives, schools purchasing locally, and increased representation of food-producing farmers through entities like regional food policy councils and the SC Department of Agriculture would foster agricultural entrepreneurship and sustainability in the region.*

The Midlands Farmer Survey was conducted with 77 Midlands farmers producing food for human consumption between August 2013 and July 2014. The main purposes of the survey were to: identify barriers farmers face in producing and selling food for human consumption; the level of demand for locally farmed foods; and the potential need for a food hub in the region. **The findings of the survey tell us that farmers see access to capital, processing regulations, the need for skilled labor, the labor pay scale, and food safety certifications as the top obstacles to farming in the Midlands.** Farmers are also feeling pressures from distributors and grocery stores who are raising their standards in the name of food safety and increased liability which has created a much larger barrier to entry in these markets for the food-producing farmer. The lack of Midlands residents willing to work in the fields and the cost and paperwork that comes with immigrant labor also make it difficult for fruit and veggie producers, in particular. How might these farmers' issues be addressed from a public policy perspective? The SC Department of Agriculture, grassroots local food networks and policy councils, if developed, and the SC Farm Bureau Federation have the power to develop and implement policies and programs involving food hub support, tax incentives for local food retailers and distributors, and Farm to School initiatives to support local food production and consumption in the Midlands.

"There needs to be a legislative mandate that makes some entities buy local. We don't need to be selling California produce in stores during times when local growers can grow the same things." -Midlands Farmer

Several Key Findings from the Midlands Farmer Survey:

- ⇒ 77% of farmers are interested in selling through outlets they do not currently use.
- ⇒ 88% of farmers were not GAP certified, with many not knowing what GAP was.
- ⇒ 30% of farmers said they would hire farm labor (or more farm labor) if it were accessible.
- ⇒ 62% of farmers surveyed are Certified SC Grown. Other than 'Word of Mouth', Certified SC Grown was the #1 way that farmers marketed themselves.

Over the past 5 years.....

- ⇒ 50% of farmers have seen their profits increase.
- ⇒ 67% of farmers have seen an increase in their number of customers.
- ⇒ 58% of farmers have increased their production.

"I started to sell to Piggly Wiggly 20 years ago, but now grocers can't buy from the little guys anymore because of all of the laws now." -Midlands Farmer

"Transportation is a HUGE issue for me. How do we create efficiencies with delivery and distribution?" -Midlands Farmer

"Would love to have products in bricks and mortar so that we don't have to physically sell it ourselves. We could focus on the farm." -Midlands Farmer

Decreasing Barriers to Local Food Entrepreneurship:

Food Hubs: A food hub serving as an aggregator and distribution point would assist Midlands farmers and food business entrepreneurs in overcoming many barriers to market entry. How does a farmer jump from selling at farmers markets to meeting the large quantities and specifications of a large distributor or grocery retail outlet? Food Hubs connect farmers collectively with cafeterias, grocery stores, restaurants, etc. and also open up opportunities for commodity crop farmers to **diversify** and begin producing food for direct human consumption. The Midlands Farm Survey shows farmer interest in selling to more outlets, including a Food Hub to assist with processing, food safety, and distribution.

Farm to School: The Certified SC Grown campaign has encouraged customers to purchase locally. How much more of an impact would government food-buying institutions be able to make in fostering local food production if encouraged to do the same? South Carolina school district food procurement practices, such as utilizing the Food Service Alliance to obtain produce cheaply through a distributor-based bid, are not always conducive to local food-producing farmers. The SC Department of Agriculture should work jointly with the district food service coordinators, farmers, distributors, students, and food service employees to determine what works best for each district, incentivize each school to source locally, and outline **clear steps for farmers wanting to sell to schools**.

Tax Incentives: Tax credits for grocers, restaurants, and other food retailers for selling a certain percentage of SC-farmed product would help incentivize these institutions to request local products from their **distributors** and work even closer with food producers within South Carolina's border.

Increasing Local Food Advocacy and Cooperation :

Organizations currently representing farmers such as the SC Department of Agriculture and the SC Farm Bureau Federation are tasked with the difficulty of representing all farmers across the spheres of agribusiness and agricultural entrepreneurship, not just the interests of farmers producing food

"It's difficult to navigate what you can and can't do in terms of growing, zoning, etc. with different levels of government's laws, rules, and regulations."

-Midlands Farmer

for local human consumption. According to the Midlands Farmer Survey, marketing assistance from these organizations has been helpful to farmers, but communication regarding policy is lacking with many farmers surveyed not understanding resources available to them, such as **GAP Certification** and most are not aware of the **Food Safety Modernization Act**. Grassroots networks are needed, possibly in the form of **food policy councils**, to advocate for local food production



and consumption and work on issues such as encouraging local and state policies that spur consumer and government food-buying entities to purchase locally. Fostering groups such as the **Midlands Local Food Collaborative** (<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/midlandslocalfood>) would provide space for entities that work with food-producing farmers on a regular basis to collaborate and close the communication gaps in helping farmers navigate and give their own voices to programs, policies, new opportunities, and regulations that inevitably affect their families and farm enterprises.

For further information contact:

Katie Welborn

Community Organizer

welborn2@mailbox.sc.edu

803.360.3358

Carrie Draper, MSW

Community & Policy Outreach Director

draper@mailbox.sc.edu

803.528.4498

Dr. Sonya Jones

Director

sjones@mailbox.sc.edu

803.777.3892

**University of South Carolina
Center for Research in Nutrition &
Health Disparities**

Discovery Building

915 Greene Street

Columbia, SC 29208

<http://nutritioncenter.sph.sc.edu/index.php>

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