FarmLab Study

Phase 1 - Needs Assessment

Appendix G - Food Localization as Economic Development

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Prepared for the Elkhart County Redevelopment Commission

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1.0 Introduction

Increasing awareness and appreciation for locally produced food is now a familiar trend. The focus on local food has gone beyond directly connecting farmers to customers through farmers markets and roadside stands, to understanding the broader local food systems on which communities depend, and considering how they contribute to overall health and prosperity. Local food systems consider the full value chain from producer to consumer, including agriculture support services and relevant social, ecological, and economic issues at a community level.

The term "foodshed" has emerged as one way of thinking about the complexity of these systems beyond a simple geographic definition of “local,” recognizing that the food we consume is based on relationships between communities as well as within communities. Food systems can also be considered in terms of infrastructure. One analogy is that we have created a wonderfully extensive and efficient "superhighway" for shipping food across the country and around the globe, but have let our local bridges go into disrepair, making it easier for producers to sell wholesale to distant markets than to institutions in their own town.[1] Strategies for “relocalizing” food systems by rebuilding the “middle” (or “intermediate”) infrastructure of aggregation, storage, processing, and distribution at a local or regional level are therefore developing concurrently with the expansion of the mainstream food system to feed rising populations.

This Appendix generally focuses on the economic development potential for local food production and specialty crops rather than for conventional commodity production because the smaller scale of production is more relevant to the level of influence that the FarmLab might reasonably hope to achieve. Economic analyses and forecasts for large commercial agriculture operations are available at the state and national level and are less dependent on locality. Existing institutions such as the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, the Farm Bureau, Purdue Extension, and many private corporations already serve this sector. While Purdue Extension’s Small Farms and Local Foods programs and the Soil and Water Conservation District provide increasing support services for local food systems across the state, there remain substantial service and information gaps at the local and regional level that the FarmLab could be uniquely positioned to fill.

2.0 Food Localization

Food localization broadly refers to efforts to promote community-based food systems by strengthening local connections throughout the value chain. Economist Michael Shuman, author of "The 20% Shift: The Economic Benefits of Food Localization for Michigan and The Capital Required to Realize Them," explains how food localization contributes to stronger community economies:

> "Local food is a critical economic driver for local economies. Every loaf of bread unnecessarily imported means the "leakage" of bread dollars outside the local economy and the loss of local bread businesses that could contribute to community prosperity. Moreover, local ownership of a bread factory matters, because locally owned businesses spend more of their money regionally than do comparable non-local businesses. Unlike outsider-owned businesses, local businesses tend to have local CEOs advertise in local media, hire local accountants and attorneys, and reinvest profits in their community. Numerous studies have documented that a dollar spent on a local business typically yields two to four times the "economic multiplier" – the underlying source of income, wealth and jobs – as an equivalent non-local business. Additionally, there is a growing body of evidence that local businesses are particularly good at attracting tourists and future entrepreneurs, promoting creative economies, and stimulating charitable contribution."[2] (Shuman)

Shuman cites a growing body of evidence that food localization "stimulates the local economy, improves environmental stewardship, boosts healthy diets and public health, and creates a stronger civic life."[3] He sees initiatives working to accelerate this trend motivated by three interrelated goals: "shortening the distance that food travels between farm and the table; capturing more of the value-adding activity associated with the growing, sorting, processing, packaging, distribution, selling, and serving of food; and maximizing the local ownership of all the enterprises involved in these value chains."[4]

Other motivations for food localization include:

- Providing incentives for entrepreneurship and innovation;
- Expanding consumer choice and fresh food access;
- Improving pricing and other market negotiating power for local producers;
- Supporting rural economic revitalization; and
- Protecting the food system against severe shocks through decentralization of production.[5]

In justifying the need for additional support, policies, and economic impact assessments to guide such programs, authors of "The Economics of Local Food Systems" observe:

> "As consumers across the Nation express a growing interest in a closer connection to their food producers—whether through access to more localized markets and/or shorter supply chains—cities and regions have begun to regard the expansion of local food marketing activities as a critical component of their economic development strategies. Rising demand for locally produced, source-identified, and differentiated food products has generated a plethora of new and spin-off businesses in many communities, which aim to increase the range of and accessibility to local food items for both retail and wholesale customers."[6] (www.localfoodeconomics.com)

Reding and Moody, authors of the "Sustainable Local Food Initiative Report," therefore call for policy makers "to realize the value of these local food businesses to a community with respect to rural development and vocation creation," and to help cultivate "a new industry that is married with our natural resources of abundant, productive farmland and quality human resources capable of performing the food production function well."[7]

Fortunately, food localization is increasingly supported by Federal, State and local governmental programs, which frequently serve to address barriers to the development of local food markets such as: capacity constraints for small farms and lack of distribution systems for moving local food into mainstream markets; limited research, education, and training for marketing local food; and uncertainties related to regulations that may affect local food production, such as food safety requirements.[8] Overcoming these barriers is necessary to fuel most of the innovations addressed in Appendix F, such as diversifying production and marketing and selling directly to consumers. In other cases the innovations are a direct response to these barriers, such as the formation of cooperatives and the development of food hubs.

3.0 Local Food Networks and Business Clusters

An overarching strategy for aligning innovation and investment in local food systems is the formation of local food networks and business clusters. The Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership is currently developing a plan for building local food networks in the 11 Indiana counties surrounding the Fort Wayne metro area, including Kosciusko and Lagrange counties.

> "For this initiative, we define "local food networks" to be the commercial, social, and cultural connections that sustain food trade within Northeast Indiana ... these supportive networks are precisely what allow local food business clusters to be cohesive and resilient. Such networks operate through the totality of physical, intellectual, cultural, and other forms of infrastructure. When successful, they foster efficient food production, processing, warehousing, distribution, and recycling of organic materials within the region. They also play strong roles in developing a strong sense of quality of place."[9] (Meter)

In the Phase 1 report, author Ken Meter notes that such networks have been slowly building in the region for decades, providing a foundation for collaboration that should enhance future food localization efforts.

> "Each (local food network) has been launched by farmers who realize that to create more stability for agriculture and local food systems, new forms of farming and marketing must be created, with supportive infrastructure. These pioneering farms produce higher value food items, differentiated from the conventional marketplace. To create sustainable businesses, each builds new social capital that engages farmers, businesspeople, and consumers in a common purpose."[10] (Meter)

While the overall benefits of these local food networks are tangible, they are difficult to quantify and are often left out of typical economic studies. The Phase 1 report included an Economic Base and Competitive Advantage Study and strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of the Northeast Indiana region. The results indicated that "food business clusters may not have as strong a competitive position as other industry clusters," yet "vibrant local food business clusters have been forming all the same, as farmers with the means to do so vertically integrate, therefore gaining greater market power, and building more sustainable businesses."[11]

4.0 Economic Impact Assessments

The emergence of new and spin-off local food businesses in response to rising consumer demand "has sparked a groundswell of financial support and interest from private foundations and public agencies on the assumption that the development of local food systems contributes to positive economic outcomes, especially with respect to local economic development and improved farm viability. Unfortunately, given the nascent nature of local food demand growth and the scarcity of available data, relatively few of these efforts have been guided by rigorous assessments."[12]

To address this need, the USDA brought together a team of regional economists and food system specialists to evaluate market and economic outcomes and to develop "The Economics of Local Food Systems" Toolkit to "enhance the capacity of local, regional, and statewide organizations to scope out relevant information, identify priorities for improvement, and conduct place-based measurements of local and regional economic activity."[13]

> "Community-based economic impact assessments are most commonly conducted to inform policymakers and economic development officials about the potential benefits of local initiatives. While this type of method has been used for decades by economic development specialists to evaluate the cost effectiveness of capital investments, most municipal/local governments and community planners have only recently begun to view agricultural and food systems as an important engine of economic development and sought to link their economic development and assessment work to local food systems activities."[14] (www.localfoodeconomics.com)

While the use of economic impact assessments for developing local food systems is relatively new, studies in nearby regions offer reference points for potential benefits for Elkhart County. Shuman has evaluated the potential economic benefits of food localization for Northeast Ohio, the whole state of Michigan, and Washtenaw County, Michigan (including Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti) specifically. Shuman characterizes food localization as "reducing the level of leakage in each food sector and increasing, commensurately, the level of self-reliance."[15] He therefore studied the potential impacts of shifting a significant fraction of all non-local consumption to local food products, generating an expansion in local production while maintaining current exports.

Shuman uses IMPLAN (IMpact analysis for PLANning) software to track spending patterns and show how much local demand is lost to imports of outside goods and services as "leakage." The models predict how changes in the purchasing practices of local residents, businesses, and government institutions can "shock" the existing economies with increased production, thereby increasing jobs, wages, output, and tax revenue.

Table 1: Potential Economic Benefits of Food Localization

Potential:	**NE Ohio** [(a)]	**Michigan** [(b)]	**Washtenaw Co. MI** [(c)]
Shift	**25%**	**20%**	**25%**
Jobs - total	27,700 (1 in 8 unemployed)	42,500 (1 in 10 unemployed)	2,200 (1 in 5 unemployed)
New annual wages	$868 million	$1.5 billion	$75 million
New output [(d)]	$4.2 billion	$7.3 billion	$392 million
Value added [(e)]	$1.5 billion	$2.9 billion	$132 million
Tax revenue	$126 million	$255 million	$13 million
Capitalization	$1 billion	$3 billion	$147 million

(a) Shuman (2010) “The 25% Shift, The Benefits of Food Localization for Northeast Ohio & How to Realize Them”[16]

(b) Shuman (2013) “The 20% Shift: The Economic Benefits of Food Localization for Michigan and The Capital Required to Realize Them”[17]

(c) Shuman (2013) “The 25% Shift, The Economic Benefits of Food Localization for Washtenaw County and Ypsilanti & The Capital Required to Realize Them”[18]

(d) New output = total new revenues, sales, or the total value of the output needed to fill a shift in demand without decreasing current exports.

(e) Value added = New output - cost of inputs sourced outside the operation.

Shuman notes that while not all of the potential impacts are plausible due to various potential physical, social, and technical constraints, most are feasible and often understated. The estimates for the total capitalization required to finance such shifts are certainly large, but in each case they represent less than 2 percent of all private short-term savings accounts and less than 0.5 percent of all long-term savings accounts.

Even closer to home, the previously referenced Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership (NIRP) study offers useful insights with respect to perceptions of local food production as a driver for economic development compared to local food processing and manufacturing. The study noted that:

> “Over time, the vision has morphed from its starting point, which was to position the region as a stronger player in national food markets, and perhaps attracting new food processors to join the existing cluster of food firms, to the idea of creating a Center for Specialty Foods, to the prospect of opening a Food Innovation Center, to the concept that what really will be important to creating an effective food business cluster is to increase coordination among local food firms, and to increase food trade from local producers to local consumers.”[19] (Meter)

The study also observed that:

> “It is clear that the region contains a vibrant cluster of food industries, and that many of these have national prominence. However, at this stage, food processing firms do not appear to believe they have much to gain from networking with other food firms in the region. Nor do these firms appear to be directing strong attention to the ways in which they might play a role in expanding local food trade.”[20] (Meter)

Extensive previous studies and analyses focused primarily on food processing and manufacturing outputs and much less on increasing the region’s capacity to produce food for itself.

> “The focus had been more on food processing than farming, and an assumption appears to have been made that farmers would willingly supply the processors with needed commodities once a broader vision was established.”[21] (Meter)

Despite the lack of attention to farmers evidenced by the past studies, the NIRP study highlights the successful growth of several local food networks forming in the region, some of which extend to Elkhart County. The landscape of small-acreage, predominantly Amish farms centered in Lagrange County is an important area of overlap between the Northeast Indiana and Elkhart County regions. Strong manufacturing bases are another, and the reports cited for the Northeast Indiana region offer relevant information to inform economic impact analyses for Elkhart County.

As evidence for the value of cultivating a broader base of production in the region, the NIRP study concluded that "increasing direct sales between the region's farmers and consumers could bring positive economic impacts. If each Northeast Indiana resident purchased $5 of food each week directly from farmers in the region, this would generate $198 million of new farm income in Northeast Indiana."[22]

Meter performed a similar analysis for his study of the Elkhart County region. Of the $1.3 billion spent annually on eating at home in the region, more than a quarter is spent in Elkhart County. The same shift of $5 in weekly direct food purchasing would generate a total of $205 million in new farm income for the Elkhart and the surrounding counties.[23]

5.0 Jobs and Entrepreneurship

Most local food system assessments point to the creation of new job opportunities as a primary contribution of food localization to rural economic development. In their evaluation of sustainable local food initiatives for the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs, Reding and Moody concluded that:

> "the local food sector is in a critical and exciting time of growth. The window is open to fill (demand) to the satisfaction of the consumer and at the same time create numerous jobs and vocations that could put young people back on our farms with increased margins and employment ratios per acre than commodity production models offer. Over time, revitalizing the region's small communities and bring the land and those who live on it back together."[24](Reding and Moody)

More than many industries, the small scale and independent operation of most farm enterprises amplifies the value and necessity of entrepreneurship. Reding and Moody add that:

> "The factors now exist for opportunity within the region, to cultivate an atmosphere that supports and encourages local food businesses for (an) emerging group of interested consumers. The window to expand a new generation of food businesses is open for entrepreneurs that can ascertain and execute the relationship marketing and innovate and meet the desires of the end user described in this report."[25] (Reding and Moody)

In the economic impact analysis referenced above for Michigan, Shuman reinforces the potential for cultivating entrepreneurs through food localization while emphasizing the unique challenges this holds with respect to farming.

> "Nearly all of the food businesses in the region right now are small (exceptions include very large food-processing companies). Indeed, except for a few food-processing sectors, the vast majority of food enterprises, such as farms and food service operations, can be started by a good entrepreneur with modest levels of capital. The 20% shift would lead to a region-wide entrepreneurship revolution, with positive spillovers throughout the economy." (Shuman)

> "A particularly important, and difficult, part of entrepreneurship training is to recruit new farmers. In the competitive world of high-tech agriculture, today's farmers must excel at a wide-range of skills: setting up and managing a farm business, raising crops and animals, selling their outputs directly or through attractive intermediaries, maintaining and using proper tools and technology, and preparing sophisticated financial and marketing plans. … New models of farming that emphasize multiple income streams, value-added products, niche marketing, and non-farm production (such as wind-electricity generation) will be necessary to improve their probability of long-term profitability."[26] (Shuman)

6.0 Food Hubs and Aggregation Infrastructure

As discussed in Appendix F, food hubs such as the Hoosier Harvest Market represent one approach to providing opportunities for new food entrepreneurs and existing producers to tap new markets by providing essential aggregation and distribution infrastructure. The initial feasibility study for the Hoosier Harvest Market was performed by Sarah Aubrey of Prosperity Ag and Energy Resources in 2012, including a market analysis with suggested actions for how the food hub might help fill the identified gaps between current production and emerging demand in Central Indiana.[27]

With a specific focus on specialty crops, the study found that "the current size of the local food market in Indiana, primarily the Indy-metro area, as sold through food distributors, is in the neighborhood of $10-15 million. These numbers are for current sales based upon the amount of product they can currently obtain." Furthermore, "distributors acknowledge their local food sales are not even close to maxed out. Simply put, they'd like to buy more product."[28]

Aubrey identified the coordination and connection of local producers to local buyers as the main market gap that the food hub should fill. "Technically, there is product out there to supply the present Indiana local foods market. Much of it is leaving the state and not being marketed as local or sold in the local region." The distributors surveyed in the study indicated a desire to purchase from a food hub "if high quality, traceable product is sourced from reliable growers and if growers have an interest in raising crops that the market demands."[29]

While the distributors surveyed in central Indiana were enthusiastic about supply and saw "plenty" of room for market entry,[30] distributors operating in Elkhart County may not be as receptive. One local, vertically-integrated aggregator and distributor described their operation as already serving the role of a food hub for 20 to 30 area growers. Unless a local food hub were to target the same retail markets, there wouldn't be competition. They have generally chosen not to sell to schools, restaurants, and institutions due to delivery and and contract logistics, but could pack for those markets. They also noted multiple ways in which they already collaborate with growers, farm markets, and other distributors to fill gaps in supply, storage, and distribution.

Potential opportunity costs (from the displacement of current, less locally-oriented food production and distribution activity) should be accounted for in assessing economic impact in Elkhart County. Potential initial supply limitations should also be assessed before launching any brick and mortar food hub operation for varied products and markets. After researching the performance of the Hoosier Harvest Market to date for the NIRP study, Meter reported that engaging farmers has been harder than expected.

> "Although Hoosier Harvest Market was set up with the hope of providing aggregated product to wholesale markets, this goal has proven elusive. One board member (a farmer) cautioned that adding a middleman to wholesale transactions makes little financial sense. Those farmers who produce at scale large enough to attract wholesale interest are often better off selling directly to a wholesaler. Even farmers who have scaled up often are themselves positioning for greater retail sales since these command higher prices. Currently the Hoosier Harvest Market board has set a priority of selling more produce items through home delivery to the eastern suburbs of Indianapolis, where there is considerable spending power and a more densely settled population than in Hancock County."[31] (Meter)

These limitations also featured prominently in Meter's feasibility study for farm to school opportunities in Hancock County, in which he notes that "Indiana's prospects for building sustainable food hubs are limited primarily not by available funding, but by the lack of farmers supplying local markets." He adds that:

> "Building a physical aggregation center or larger food hub will not, in itself, solve the issue of growing new farmers. Indeed, a food hub requires support from enough emerging farmers to cover operating costs, and the farmers in turn require support from the hub. These capacities must be built simultaneously, with supply and demand in balance at all stages. This will require stable long--term investment for limited short-term returns."[32] (Meter)

The key functions required are generally education and value-chain facilitation:

> "While the role of an aggregator or food hub is valuable – in working with emerging growers to help connect them to buyers and ensure that they grow and package their food items in a safe and marketable manner — it is difficult to imagine that hosting this capacity would pay for itself as a business proposition. At this juncture, this is typically a non-profit educational function, one that some for-profit firms have shouldered as an investment in future local food trade. It necessarily will require subsidy, either because private firms build this into their budget, or because philanthropic or public funds pay to maintain this capacity in each community or region."[33] (Meter)

7.0 Farm to School Economic Opportunities

Before introducing how the emergent farm to school movement provides a unifying focus for the needs and opportunities addressed in this study, it is worth examining farm to school activities through the lens of economic development.

Toni Geraci (aka "Cafeteria Man") has directed food service programs for Baltimore and Memphis Community Schools, where he made local procurement a strategic priority. His philosophy for farm to cafeteria programs as a successful business venture is simple:

- Increase average daily participation (ADP) through breakfast in the classroom and supper programs, which tend to increase lunch participation as well;
- Serving more meals generates more revenue;
- More revenue and larger orders enables better purchasing;
- Better purchasing leads to increased ADP and stronger local food economies.[34]

By designing and developing central kitchen facilities to receive, process, and (in some cases) preserve volume orders of local produce, with the capacity to prepare more meals from scratch, his programs claim to have increased profitability while putting healthier and better tasting food on students' plates.[35]

A 2011 study by Ecotrust in Oregon studied the economic impact of allocating an additional $.07 cents per meal to support local procurement for farm to cafeteria programming. $.07 cents represented the cost of one half of a fruit or vegetable serving, and was viewed as significant enough to engage producers and justify additional paperwork and coordination expenses on the part of school districts. Similar to the Shuman analyses referenced above, the study used IMPLAN analyses to examine potential multipliers for the subsidy in two school districts: Portland Public Schools with 47,000 students, and a smaller district with 1,500 students. The study characterized the potential impacts of scholl local procurement as follows:

- Direct effects - purchases by schools in farming and food processing sectors;
- Direct job creation - in these production and processing sectors;

- Indirect effects - purchases of supplies and materials by farmers and food processors to produce goods being purchased by schools (e.g., farm or processing equipment);
- Indirect job creation - in these indirectly related sectors;
- Induced effects - household spending resulting from income earned by business owners and employees in the directly and indirectly affected businesses (e.g., food or medical services);
- Induced job creation - in sectors benefiting from this increased household spending.[36]

The study yielded the following findings:

- Schools leveraged an initial investment of $160,750 during the 2008-2009 school year to purchase $461,992 in local foods they had been buying outside the state;
- The investment created an estimated 17 jobs (7 direct, 6 indirect, and 4 induced);
- A relatively small investment of $.07 per lunch served inspired trade substitutions that resulted in more money staying in the local economy;
- Each dollar spent locally on school food encouraged an additional $.86 of spending amongst suppliers and households.[37]

Overall, the study concluded that:

> "local school food purchases not only support local jobs and have the potential to increase output in food producing and processing sectors, but may also create jobs in other sectors and increase output in the broader state economy through the economic multiplier effect. Moreover, the business relationships built between school districts and local farms through the purchase of local foods are likely to persist and may strengthen. Relationships between school districts and local farms support the production of healthier, tastier, and more nutritious food for schoolchildren as well as provide long-term revenue streams for local farmers (for whom a little more production may be enough to take their farms from being unprofitable to profitable)."[38]

8.0 Value Chain Facilitation

The feasibility study for the Hoosier Harvest Market prioritized hiring a market coordinator to work directly with growers and buyers, performing two primary roles:

- Identifying and tracking the demand for products that specialty crop producers with established capacity and adaptability could fill; and
- Providing resources and technical assistance to existing farmers and also to educate new farmers entering the marketplace.[39]

The “Economics of Local Food Systems” toolkit points to other communities that have followed similar strategies of investing in staff dedicated to value-chain facilitation. Rather than sinking large amounts of capital into building new food hubs, it suggests building relationships between farmers, processors, distributors, and markets. By first mapping local assets and convening strategic conversations, staff and leadership can encourage “related local businesses to build new linkages with each other, forming business clusters that lend permanence to (their) work and increase local economic multipliers.”[40]

9.0 Conclusions

A key takeaway for this FarmLab study should be that while economic analyses can yield useful insights to guide strategic planning, these “should be complemented by practical, boots on the ground action research.” The Economics of Local Food Systems toolkit notes that

> “The evolution of food system practices in recent years towards a more decentralized system has created many new opportunities, both economic and non-economic, but thus far, most local food initiatives are in the early stages of development and are not yet fully realized. Accordingly, any discussion of the potential for food system innovations must be realistic about using anecdotal evidence to support projects or programs that are significantly larger in scope than what has already been “piloted” in their region or similar areas.[41] (Meter)

Thus, the FarmLab would be an appropriate name for an organization with the capacity not just to manage new pilot initiatives, but also to convene stakeholders, lead action research, and co-create prototypes that can generate useful feedback and scale up if successful. As a “lab,” it could fill a strategic role in facilitating exploratory processes that contribute to a shared understanding and awareness of value-chain needs and opportunities, while aiding the formation of local food networks with the connections and capacity to collaborate.

Focusing on value chain facilitation staff initially rather than infrastructure could enable small but effective steps forward in the face of many unknowns associated with the unique attributes of our local food system, such as:

- The large distribution and diversity of non-commercial and small-acreage farms;
- The current food production capacity and interest of large Amish and Mennonite farm populations;
- Existing and potential connections between agriculture and a strong manufacturing base; and
- A highly socioeconomically diverse consumer base with changing demands.

Considering the sheer volume of small noncommercial and small-acreage farms, and the large percentage of operators working off the farm, there would seem to be significant underutilized potential for adopting innovations that have been successfully tested and piloted locally. To the extent that these attributes can be tied to a large Amish population finding prosperity in both the agricultural and manufacturing sectors (as evidenced in Appendix B), Elkhart County should explore their potential contributions to food localization for increased community food security, quality of place, and economic development. Again, the FarmLab could play a critical role in exploring this potential and facilitating further development.

As a non-profit, the FarmLab could potentially tap funding sources that are increasingly available to support food localization projects, especially those contributing to community and economic development. Aubrey provides a thorough survey of potential grant opportunities, including the following sources:

- USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
- USDA Integrated Research, Education, and Extension Competitive Grants Program - National Integrated Food Safety Initiative
- USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP)
- USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant (REDLG)
- USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Grant
- USDA Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program
- USDA Value Added Producer Program (VAPG) Program
- HUD Community Development Block Grant Program – CDBG
- Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) Community Focus Funds
- ISDA Specialty Crop Block Grant
- North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (NCR-SARE)[42]

Non-profit status would also position the FarmLab to facilitate studies and experiments that engage the broader community in participatory processes to insure that projects and programs remain in sync with community interests and values. This role would be critical in maintaining healthy connections with ag educators, charitable food networks, and other food system partners. Perhaps most importantly, the FarmLab could help improve public perceptions of agriculture by supporting ag literacy and promoting food localization as a complement rather than competitor to the mainstream food system.

Based on the various economic development opportunities and considerations presented in this section, a key strategic focus for the FarmLab would be to work with local producers and school food service directors to identify and develop farm to cafeteria procurement programs and processes. A group of schools focusing on specific products (ie: sweet potatoes) may provide a large enough market to justify education and aggregation support from FarmLab staff for decentralized production among enough growers to meet the demand. The FarmLab could facilitate these farm to cafeteria initiatives on a small scale and guide possible expansion to larger volumes and additional varieties based on initial results.

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