



The North Carolina County Agricultural Profiles were designed to serve as a starting point for stakeholder discussions around the development of local food systems.ⁱ

The profiles provide visual representations of the agricultural economy in each of North Carolina's 100 counties and all 16 councils of government regions.ⁱⁱ They are designed to be easy to share, print, and utilize in a number of different settings and for a wide variety of audiences, including elected officials, advisory boards, planners, economic and community developers, small business developers, and others. This discussion guide is one component in a suite of resources developed by the Local Food Economies initiative of NC Growing Together, a project of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS). CEFS is a partnership of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, North Carolina State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services.

Talking Points about the “Nuts and Bolts” of the Food System

The profiles describe the elements or “nuts and bolts” of the food economy in your region. Direct-to-consumer sales, for example, are considered one indicator of a healthy local food system because they indicate that local farmers have the opportunity to sell through this market channel, and that residents have the opportunity to come directly into contact with the farmers who grow. Additionally, recent research from the USDA suggests that those farms with direct-to-consumer sales survive at a higher rate than other farms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Examining change over time in the number of and sales from different types of farms can also yield insights into the local food economy and opportunities to build that economy. Capitalizing on a county or region's increase in animal agriculture, for example, depends on having sufficient processing and storage infrastructure, which presents a new opportunity. Discussions based on data in the profiles can also lead to productive conversations about various issues including environmental sustainability and land use.

Before holding a group meeting or other convening to consider local food system development, generate a set of questions to provide a starting point for discussion. Some useful “starting point” questions might be:

- What data points are particularly striking, and what do the trends in these illustrate about overall change that is occurring in our county or region?
- Do the stakeholders in the room bring on-the-ground knowledge about particular data points? Or do we need others in the room who have more in depth knowledge?
- How can local policies and plans impact a particular data point?
- How can we include agricultural stakeholders in strategic planning that would impact a particular data point?
- Are there opportunities for regional entities to provide institutional support for an initiative that could mitigate loss and/or encourage growth in a particular data point?

NC Growing Together Project: Local Food Economies Initiative

Small agriculture and food entrepreneurship can benefit local economies in a number of ways. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts. NCGT supports that work by providing resources and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers. Each county in North Carolina is home to a North Carolina Cooperative Extension office, which serves as a local resource for more in-depth information about your local food economy. The Local Food Economies website provides additional resources for communities and governments including videos, webinars, case studies, a local government planning and economic development guide, a local food supply chain infrastructure map, and business development resources for farmers and food entrepreneurs. For more information, see www.localfoodeconomies.org.

ⁱ Profiles are work supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number RD309-122/4940246, Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program.

ⁱⁱ Data for the North Carolina Agricultural Profiles was largely drawn from the USDA Census of Agriculture, which is conducted every five years. Keep in mind that if your county has a data point stating “no data was available,” that indicates a lack of response by farmers to the census surveys. Encourage farmers to participate in the 2017 census, and consider conducting your own county- or town-level farmland inventory to better understand where farms are located, what they grow, and their primary market channels. Similarly, you may notice losses shown in the data from 2007-2012. While the profiles cannot provide specific reasons for those losses, it may help to look back over time to see if there are obvious reasons that could contribute to the decline. For example, if a farmers' market has closed or dwindled due to competition, fewer farmers may have an outlet for their products. If a large farm has closed down, been sold into development, or been passed on to younger generations who are no longer farming at full capacity, the overall county numbers may reflect this loss. If policies or programs have impacted farmers (such as a new requirement by buyers for third-party certification or a development plan that incentivizes the sale of farmland), those may be underlying causes of those declines.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://blogs.usda.gov/2016/04/28/farms-that-sell-directly-to-consumers-may-stay-in-business-longer/>

