

SMALL FARMER COOPERATIVE GENERATES BIG IMPACTS FOR REGIONAL AGRICULTURE ECONOMY

SANDHILLS' FARMER SUCCESS LEADS TO FOOD HUB, OTHER NEW AG DEVELOPMENT

Thursdays are pickup days at Pinehurst Elementary School in Moore County, North Carolina. The Sandhills Farm to Table Cooperative (SF2T) fills and delivers between eight and nine hundred boxes of produce to various community sites, including the elementary school, each week, through their CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program.

Each CSA box is filled with produce from dozens of local farmers, with produce that changes each week and is often accompanied by recipes and cooking tips. The stop at Pinehurst Elementary is just one of more than 45 "Gathering Sites" in the Sandhills region, which includes Lee, Moore, Cumberland, Hoke, and Richmond counties.

The goal? Provide fresh, local, healthy produce in places where families and residents already congregate.



These Thursday afternoons and other days at Gathering Sites are the culmination of years of work by SF2T founders Fenton Wilkinson and Jan Leitschuh, who worked with Moore County Cooperative Extension Agent Taylor Williams and Richmond County Cooperative Extension Agent Paige Burns to launch the CSA. SF2T is the cooperative providing the produce in these boxes. The cooperative's founding in 2010 catalyzed the farm-to-table

movement in the region, creating notable impacts on the regional agricultural economy, and driving new regional food projects in these rural counties.

BUILDING A UNIQUE MODEL FOR A RURAL ECONOMY

SF2T is the only food organization of its kind in North Carolina: it is a legally registered North Carolina Cooperative Corporation with membership comprised of farmers, consumers, and staff, who equally manage and govern the organization. Many years of planning and research supported the cooperative's formation. Williams and Burns worked closely with local Master Gardeners, who wanted to see more local food in the region, and with farmers, who were seeking new markets for their products, to help the cooperative's founders create a model that worked in their rural region. Wilkinson had previous experience with food co-ops, and was surprised to learn in a New York Times article that although Moore County was the 18th wealthiest in North Carolina, it also had the 5th highest year-over year increase in poverty in the nation. Wilkinson believed that the wealthier tourist and retirement communities in the region would support local farms, which could benefit farmers and provide more jobs in those counties.¹

Wilkinson approached the Moore County Community Development Director, Tim Emmert, about the possibility of



Volunteers are a large part of the SF2T success, this crew is packing boxes for delivery. Photo courtesy of Sandhills Farm to Table Cooperative.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/22/us/measuring-the-toll-of-the-recession> (2011).

creating a cooperative that could supply larger markets with produce aggregated from multiple small farms. With Emmert's help, a proposal was developed for and approved by the Moore County Board of Commissioners. The Board sponsored SF2T's initial grant application to Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA), for \$30,000 to fund the development of the cooperative.² Master Gardener and Sf2T Founder Jan Leitschuh also raised an initial \$10,000 from local supporters, enabling the launch in 2010.

From inception and through its development the Cooperative has also received funding support from the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program, USDA office of Rural Cooperatives, and local donors. Additional funding support was realized through a Lee County Cooperative Extension grant from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, an Extension Community and Resource Development grant, and a feasibility study funded by North Carolina State University's Plants for Human Health Initiative. Moore County Government provided additional funding for a feasibility study on possible business links between SF2T and area restaurants.

TRANSITIONING RURAL FARMERS FROM TOBACCO TO NEW MODELS

Historically, agriculture in the Sandhills region of North Carolina focused mainly on tobacco and peaches. While the peach industry in the region is still vibrant and is seeing a resurgence with a new generation of farmers, tobacco has been on the decline since the Master Settlement Agreement in 1998 (an agreement between the federal government and most large tobacco companies). This agreement began the phasing out of tobacco farming as a primary industry.³ To assist farmers in making that transition, Moore County hired Williams, who stepped in to help farmers identify alternative crops and business structures.

Williams' team tried many models and products, and found success with the cooperative multi-farm CSA model introduced by Wilkinson. To build the successful cooperative model at SF2T, the team undertook a year-long educational campaign: tabling at Farmers Markets, talking to chefs, and soliciting co-op members to make an up-front financial commitment.

The campaign featured a showing of the film [Food Inc.](#) in Southern Pines. Jan Leitschuh coordinated the event featuring local foods prepared by local chefs and a speaker's panel. This event launched the campaign to form the cooperative, resulting in the commitment of 300 initial supporters.

Williams and Burns recruited key farmers from the area to participate to make sure supply would be reliable. "It was a crazy idea to some old timers, with some committing only one new row of vegetables to the cooperative," said Williams. Now, though, SF2T is nearly forty farmers strong.

In 2016, Co-op members & subscribers put close to \$265,000 in the pockets of Sandhills farmers & food artisans, and the number of restaurants using local produce went from two to 12 in Moore County.

² <https://www.moorecountync.gov/planning-and-transportation/community-development>.

³ <http://tobaccotrustfund.org/about-the-ttfc/>.

DEMONSTRATING RURAL SUCCESS WITH COOPERATIVE SUBSCRIPTION MODELS

According to SF2T's founders, CSAs were once thought to be an "urban foodie" choice - but they believe their organization has shown that rural communities can support a thriving local food subscription service. In 2016, Co-op members & subscribers put close to \$265,000 in the pockets of Sandhills farmers & food artisans, and that number has remained consistent since 2012. The number of restaurants using local produce went from two to 12 in Moore County.

The USDA Agriculture Census shows that Moore County has had a 240% increase in direct-to-consumer sales between 2007 and 2012.⁴ Direct-to-consumer sales are considered one indicator of a healthy local food system because they indicate that local farmers can sell through this market channel, and that residents can come directly into contact with the farmers who grow their food. Additionally, recent research from the USDA suggests that those farms with direct-to-consumer sales survive at a higher rate than other farms.⁵

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

While the cooperative increases local farmer income and consumer access to fresh and local food, the broader community also receives a share of the bounty. SF2T inspired residents to donate an estimated 3,000 volunteer hours; over three tons of produce has been donated to local food banks annually; and each drop-off "Gathering Site" is allocated a percentage of sales for that site to support causes of their choice. **Through this allocation, more than \$35,000 was contributed directly to community schools, churches, and organizations in 2016.**

Drop-off days often also include health and wellness outreach from area non-profits and other educators and resource providers. A dozen or so businesses offer workplace wellness benefits, including First Health of the Carolinas, which offers the CSA as part of their employee health and wellness program. First Health and a number of SF2T's other wellness partners sponsor their employees' SF2T membership fees and/or a portion of their employees' subscription costs. Sandhills Pediatrics views SF2T produce boxes as an integral part of their employees' health and wellness and pays for employees' full subscriptions. Other workplace partners include Pinehurst Surgical, Situs, St Joseph of the Pines, Sandhills Community College, Scotia and Unilever.

MOVING FORWARD

A vision for increased access to healthy, local produce and the hard work of many people over the past decade brought success to SF2T – but it hasn't stopped there. Food and farm projects continue to arise and evolve in the Sandhills Region:

- SF2T's success spurred Richmond County Commissioners' to contribute \$150,000 for the creation of the Sandhills AgInnovation Center. That support helped Richmond County Cooperative Extension earn a \$475,000 grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation to support the creation of the Center. (This food hub project is featured in another NCGT case study.)

⁴ <https://cefs.ncsu.edu/resources/moore-county/>.

⁵ <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/local-food-systems-clarifying-current-research>

LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

Building Resilient Communities



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- Wilkinson is now working with the North Carolina Rural Center's Local Food Business Assistance Program, a two-year USDA grant-funded initiative in three regions across the state to help food businesses expand and succeed. The program is exploring several opportunities to increase local farm profitability in the region, such as adding humanely raised, local chicken to the sustainable food supply chain at a price that many consumers can afford.

SF2T proved to me that synergy is real. SF2T was designed to address the needs of many stakeholders (farmers, health advocates, the hungry, local governments, consumers, and workers) and being a 'we're all in this together' process, resulted in enthusiastic participation by many stakeholders.

The positive impacts in the community far outweighed the effort to make it happen.

- Fenton Wilkinson, Founder, Sandhills Farm to Table

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sandhills Farm to Table | <http://sandhills.deliverybizpro.com/home.php>

RAFI-USA's Agriculture Reinvestment Fund | <http://rafiusa.org/grants/>

USDA Rural Development | <http://www.rd.usda.gov/nc>

USDA Cooperative Programs | <http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/cooperative-programs>

USDA Farmers Market Promotion | <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/fmpp>

NC Rural Center | <http://www.ncruralcenter.org/>

Golden Leaf Foundation | <http://www.goldenleaf.org/>

NCSU Plants for Human Health Initiative | <https://plantsforhumanhealth.ncsu.edu/>

the North Carolina Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
<http://www.ncadfp.org/>

NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: RESILIENT LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

An effective way to revitalize the economy in local communities is through support for smaller-scale agricultural enterprises and food entrepreneurship. 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, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at [Emily Edmonds@ncsu.edu](mailto:Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu), or Laura Lauffer, Local Food and Farms Coordinator, at ldlauffe@ncat.edu, or visit these websites, www.ncgrowingtogether.org and www.localfoodeconomies.org.

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