

Local Food Resource Mapping Project Update

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Project Overview

This is an update on a USDA-funded, multi-state research project that began in 2015 and is led by the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development at Penn State University. Partners include other Regional Rural Development Centers, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, and Land Grant Extension personnel in Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and North Carolina. The aims of this project include assessing web-enabled state food system directories in pilot states, identifying and understanding the diverse set of stakeholders and their needs in local food systems, and facilitating the growth of business opportunities in the states by identifying information gaps in the local food system.

Preliminary Findings

Between July 2016 and June 2017, 27 focus groups (1–12 per state) were conducted in all 6 states and surveys were conducted in 4 states (Table 1). Both surveys and focus groups engaged a variety of stakeholders, including producers, farmers' market managers, restaurant and food service buyers, grocers, distributors, extension, agricultural support agencies, non-profits, college and university educators, and home consumers. The project identified several themes unique to specific states, including challenges to production, marketing, distribution, and purchasing of food. One example of variation across states is the perception of farmers' markets in terms of market opportunities for producers, which ranged from minimal to significant. While farmers'

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markets may be the only viable market for many small farmers in certain states, in other states, participants noted downward trends in attendance and sales over the past several years. Particularly noteworthy were several common themes identified across states, including challenges for farmers in accessing capital and training, access to wholesale markets, and food safety regulations as a barrier to entry in wholesale markets. Themes for buyer challenges across project states included lack of diversity of products available, cost, lack of consistency of product, and unawareness of how to find producers.

Table 1. Focus Groups and Surveys by State

State	Focus Groups	Focus Group Participants			Survey Respondents
		Total	% Min.	% Fem.	
Alaska	2	9	83	83	-- ^a
Arizona	1	15	25	20	60
Arkansas	5	206	7	58	120
Kentucky	2	29	6	45	-- ^b
Mississippi	12	134	34	49	81
North Carolina	5	60	2	43	154

Notes: ^aNot administered due to lack of broadband.

^bNot administered due to respondent fatigue; covered in FG instead.

This project has several applied aims for the research output. At the state level, land grant partners are using survey and focus group data to reassess and develop programming to fill education and training gaps and better promote existing programs. At the federal level, the project is working with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service to inform online curriculum and technical assistance resources, which may be used by producers, food systems practitioners, and future federal grant applicants and awardees.

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