

Food System Opportunities in Rural Louisiana

Introduction

A food secure Louisiana requires stable rural communities with strong food production sectors including profitable production, processing, aggregation, storage, distribution, and consumer access points. Rural communities, contrary to popular belief, lack sufficient farm and ranch-based businesses that raise diverse specialty crops (fruits and vegetables) and healthy grass-based livestock. Existing supply chains do not have the capacity to connect rural specialty crop production to local, regional, and statewide distribution to wholesale and consumer markets.

Abundant agriculture exists across the state of Louisiana, yet it is primarily for national and international markets in the commodity program and principally inedible by humans without significant processing. The development of community-based food systems - which is one of many factors needed for rural places to thrive - does not require the alteration or disruption of the existing commodity agriculture in the state. Rather, efforts must focus on increasing farmers, ranchers, and food production.

Community-based food systems are one of many factors needed for rural places to thrive. The linchpin in this is of course enough capable farmers and ranchers within the state.

Key Concepts

Local: Louisiana grown/harvested/raised/processed produce (fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, herbs, etc.) and grass-based animal proteins. Meant for minimal processing and for use as ingredients in value-added products.

Food security: a multi-faceted term that includes resiliency through a disruption (e.g. hurricane, flood, pandemic, trade issues), as well as equitable access local crops and animal proteins for all residents regardless of zip codes, household earned incomes, and transportation, with significant ease to meet daily caloric requirements.

Direct to Consumer (D2C): very small farms and ranches, not typically business (profit) driven models. More aligned with lifestyle choices. Operations of less than 3 acres (often much less). Non scalable. Invaluable to the sustainability of rural farmers markets and place building community food systems.

Agriculture of the Middle (AOM): In the “middle”, between direct to consumer and commodity operations, AOM operations are profit driven, scaled up businesses of 10 – 1,000 acres. These farms and ranches create source-identified products that are distinguished in the marketplace based on consumer values such as regenerative practices, exceptionally high quality, and fair-trade principles. AOM creates strategic alliances among farmers/ranchers, processors, distributors, and retailers to reach end users who are demanding more locally sourced ethical and sustainable options in the food system.

Intermediated Markets: wholesale food distribution networks that link source identified farm/ranch products with institutions such as schools, restaurants, grocery stores, and other consumer access points. Suitable for AOM businesses.

Background

- Climate, Land & Water
 - Rural Louisiana is especially well poised to capture nationwide AOM industry expansion due to the affordability/availability of land and water as well as the subtropical climate that has vastly more growing days than most states currently leading the produce industry (CA, FL, WA, ND, MI).
- Average age of Louisiana farmers is 58 years old. (*USDA 2017 Ag Census*)
- Roughly 1.5% of the state (8 million acres) is in agricultural production, of this, less than 2% of that is used for specialty crop production. (*USDA, NASS, 2019 State Ag Overview*)
- A survey of nine central Louisiana parishes shows that consumers purchase roughly \$837 million dollars' worth of food annually, roughly \$800 million of which is sourced from outside the region & state.
 - If each resident in this region purchased \$5 worth of specialty crops directly from local farms each week, farms would earn \$96 million of new revenue. (*K. Meter, Crossroads Resource Center, Assessment of Central LA Food System Economic Impact*)

- Current production cannot meet this demand.

Two main food systems exist in the United States (and Louisiana): the well-established, primarily functional industrial food system (IFS), and the less functional but equally established community-based food system (CFS).

- The IFS is supported by the USDA and corporate global supply chains that link massive mono-crop production systems with extremely concentrated aggregation, distribution, and consumer access points. These production systems are less profitable and create less wealth than CFS (*USDA, AMS, Local Food Demand and Economic Impact, Views from the National Landscape, 2017. Attached as link*).
- The CFS consists of thousands and thousands of disorganized but mildly effective local and regional supply networks that link production (farmers and ranchers) with primarily non-aggregated markets for direct to consumer access with little intermediation. The CFS operates almost entirely without private investment or publicly funded supports.

Organizations across Louisiana have worked for several years to implement successful programs in support of CFS. These organizations have built strong statewide and national coalitions that collaborate in support of shared goals that revolve around rural revitalization through entrepreneurial ecosystems that include food systems development. Including:

- Food Policy Councils (New Orleans, Alexandria, and others under development)
- Louisiana Food Fellows (more than 50 graduates statewide trained in CFS & community leadership)
- Beginning Farmer/Rancher Training Programs (Alexandria, New Orleans, Lafayette)
- Rural Farmers Market Development (dozens of rural parishes statewide)
- Farmers Market nutrition incentive programs and matching programs (multiple statewide)

Recommended Action Items in Support of Rural Louisiana

More Farmers and Ranchers

- Recruit AOM industry to rural parishes to grow jobs and food security

| CFS-RELATED INDUSTRY CODES for RURAL INDUSTRY RECRUITMENT | | | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Agriculture | Manufacturing | Wholesale Trade | Transportation and Warehousing | Livestock Processing |
| 111/1112/1113/1114/111998 112, 115 | 311, 312 | 4244, 4245, 4248, 42491, 42493 | 49312, 49313 | 311611, 311615 311613, 311612 |

Source: North American Industry Classification System

- Support robust research into specialty crop production within multi-crop farms (diverse, non-mono crop style farms of 10 – 1,000 acres) as well as grass-based livestock production with regenerative practices that are specific to our subtropical climate.
 - Ideally this research would be conducted collaboratively among Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.
 - Research topics should focus on regenerative production systems for subtropical climate and year-round production to support scaled up production.

Food Access

- Support the Louisiana Departments of Agriculture & Forestry and Children & Family Services in developing a robust Food Access & Nutrition Benefits Program with qualified staff to:
 - Facilitate coordination among, and advocate for the advancement of, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), and other nutrition benefits programs
 - Assist farm-direct operations in becoming authorized SNAP retailers
 - Support the expansion of match programs to augment food access and nutrition benefits programs for the advantage of both consumers and producers by incentivizing the purchase of fresh, healthy food, prioritizing local produce and proteins when available.

Rural Entrepreneurship

- Increase sales limits within the Louisiana Cottage Food Act (Act 542 & HB 1270) from \$20,000 to \$35,000.
- Encourage rural broadband infrastructure to provide seamless, high speed internet access to every household and business.
- Develop mobile and fixed livestock slaughter and processing facilities in rural parishes for niche meat/poultry processing

Food Policy Councils (FPC)

- Support work being done statewide by non-profit organizations and community-based institutions to train and equip local communities to empower local leaders in forming FPC's
- Encourage state agency participation in FPC work

Conclusion

Recent research on rural development and the role of food systems in rural revitalization has provided a more complete understanding of the investments needed to synthesize positive outcomes that link healthy economies, healthy people, and vibrant communities. The Louisiana climate is prime for year-round production of high-demand/high-value specialty crops and grass-based livestock to meet national needs in addition to statewide and regional demand. Rural Louisiana is especially well suited to achieve strong economic, public health, community-building, rural revitalization opportunities from increased specialty crop and grass-based livestock production.

Additional Resources

- [Sustainable Local Food Policy Council Report: Recommendations for a Sustainable Local Food Economy](#)
- [Extension Resources on Local Food Economics](#)
- [Federal Reserve Board of St. Louis - Harvesting Opportunity: The Power of Regional Food System Investments to Transform Communities](#)
- [USDA/AMS & Niche Meat Processor Association Network – Lessons Learned from Public Investment in Local and Regional Meat and Poultry Processing Activities](#)
- [Guidelines for Promoting Local Food in the Workplace](#)
- [Louisiana Well-Ahead Healthy Meeting Policy checklist for Employers](#)
- [Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development: Economics of Local Food Systems](#)
- [Jonesville, LA Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance](#)
- [Local Food Demand and Economic Impact, USDA AMS](#)
- <http://www.crcworks.org/>