Supporting Regional Farmers as a Rural Economic Development Strategy

New Partners for Smart Growth
Charlotte, NC
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Presentation Outline

• Overview of Food Systems Issues and Role of Regional Organizations

• Tom Elmore, Planning Consultant/Farmer
  Land-of-Sky Regional Council and Thatchmore Farm/Thatchmore Consulting (NC)

• Cheryal Lee Hills, Executive Director
  Region Five Development Commission (MN)
About NADO

- National association for 520 regional development organizations (such as Councils of Governments, Regional Planning Commissions, Economic Development Districts)

- Promote public policies that strengthen local governments, communities and economies through regional solutions

- Develop training and research resources related to:
  - Rural/small metro transportation planning
  - Regional development, environmental stewardship, and brownfields redevelopment
  - Small business finance
  - Economic development planning
  - Post-disaster economic recovery
Regional Food Systems

- Public Health
- Equity
- Transportation
- Energy
- Workforce Development
- Food Safety
- Land Use
- Economic Development
- Locally grown

- Image of a variety of vegetables
- Image of a truck
- Image of a field with a barn
- Image of cucumbers in a market with a sign reading "locally grown"

- Image of a sign indicating a price of $1.99
Role of Regional Organizations

- Facilitate partnerships
- Corral resources
- Collect and analyze data
- Provide technical assistance
- Promote rural-urban connections

www.NADO.org
www.RuralTransportation.org
Audience Survey

- Planners
- Economic development practitioners
- Elected officials
- Federal agency staff
- Agricultural advisors
- Farmers
- Transportation professionals
- Others
Regional Economic Development for Agriculture

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www.landofsky.org
thatchmorefarm.wordpress.com
Agricultural Economic Development

- Introductions
- The setting for agriculture in Region B
- A systems approach to ED
- Regional economic development organization role
- LOSRC activity supporting agriculture
- Activities by other organizations
- Future opportunities
Thatchmore Farm

- Ten acres in Leicester NC
- Karen, Liz and Tom
- Certified organic vegetables, fruit, and ornamentals
- About half family labor and half farm crew
- About 2/3 of our time produces about 1/3 of our income from the farm
- Outside work as teacher, student, and natural resources consultant
Land-of-Sky Regional Council

- Four counties in Western NC
- Predominantly rural but several cities
- Significant public land, mostly USFS
- 45 person staff
- Aging, volunteer, local government services, waste reduction and administration sections
The Land-of-Sky Region

- Four counties in Western North Carolina
- Asheville is the largest city at 80,000
- Tourism, retirism, health care, manufacturing, construction, agriculture…
- Great Smokies Park, Blue Ridge Parkway
- Development boom in early 1900s
- High ratio of nonprofits to population
Vanderbilt Estate

- Completed in 1895
- Grounds by Olmstead
- Hobby farm on a grand scale
- First US school of forestry
- Biltmore Dairy
- Skilled workers stayed
Architecture in Asheville

Grove Arcade

Asheville City Hall
Subsistence Farming Tradition

- Scotch Irish Settlers
- Traditional distrust of government
- Poor transportation for cash crops
- Limited flat land
- Led to first value added crop
Moonshine and Stock Cars

Source: A Guide to Moonshine

Source: Dan Pierce
WNC Ag Economy

• 12,212 farms averaging 85 acres.
• $543 million of farm commodities sold
• Potatoes, hay, poultry, corn, cattle, milk, apples
• 101 organic farms - $425,000 (0.1%) 
• 0.6% of food sold direct in WNC
• About 5% of food sales are local

Source: Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center for ASAP (2002)
Regional Economic System

Food and fiber imports
(and energy)

Dollars escaping

Solar energy and rain

Land Resource
Labor

Local food consumers

Dollar Recycling Opportunities

Dollars entering

Food and fiber exports
Agricultural Needs

- Land
- Entrepreneurial management
- Trained workforce
- Infrastructure
- Capital
- Customers
- Similar to other businesses?
Agricultural Problems

- Intergenerational transition (land at risk)
- Public policy to keep food prices low
- Difficult to enter at a small scale
- Overlooked by some economic developers
- Agricultural support organizations are cash strapped and sometimes lack an integrated approach
- Food safety hurdles for value added products
Solving Entry Problems: Blue Ridge Food Ventures

Photo: Asheville Citizen Times
Regional Council Assets

• Strengths
  – Access to policy makers
  – Planners and communicators
  – Problem solvers
  – Fewer turf issues
  – Long term perspective
  – Economic development experience

• Weaknesses
  – Production and technical knowledge
  – Familiarity with markets
  – Communication with producers
  – No ongoing budget for agricultural work
Regional Councils as Catalysts

- Convener role
- Facilitator skills
- Grant seeking and management
- Translate agricultural issues for a broader audience
- Demonstrate emerging concepts, institutionalize, and move on
LOSRC Working Lands Program

- Henderson County Plan Ag. Chapter
- Survey of economic development approaches for agriculture (>200 +)
- Facilitation for agricultural groups
- Herbs for Commerce dryer funding
- Farm Prosperity Project
- WNC Livestock Market support
- WNC Forest Products Co-op Marketing
Herbs for Commerce Project

Farm Prosperity Project

William Hamilton
Farmland Protection Specialist

Source: Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy
WNC Livestock Market
Forest Products Cooperative Marketing Project

Furniture Specialties
Skilled Craftsmen

Introducing our green line of custom furniture
Other Local Food Efforts

• Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (asapconnections.org)
• Blue Ridge Food Ventures shared use kitchen
• Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center
• Asheville Foodtopia Campaign
Local Food Education

- Warren Wilson College Sustainable Ag Program
- UNC-Asheville Food Cluster
- UNCA Farmland Values Project
- NC Cooperative Extension Vegetable School, Apple School and field days
- Mountain Biz Works business training
- CFSA Sustainable Agriculture Conference
- Organic Growers School CRAFT
Local Food Businesses

- Mountain Food Products
- Leading Green Distributing
- Carolina Organic Growers Marketing Coop
- WNC Farmers Market (NC Dept of Agriculture)
- Many buyers through ASAP Local Food Guide
Many Tailgate Markets
ASAP at asapconnections.org

- Regional branding
- Local food guide
- Bumper stickers
- Farm to School
- Growing Minds Prog.
- Mixing Bowl guide
- Business consulting
- Marketing Grants
Regional Opportunities

- Woody biomass – sustainable fuels
- Political middle ground in uncertain times
- Local food sales support
  - CSA promotion example – ASAP
  - Foothills Connect example
  - Foothills Family Farms example
- Nutrition/Obesity Initiatives
- Microlending/revolving fund (kiva.org)
Final Suggestions

• Start with the big picture (what’s needed?)
• Get farmer opinions
• Consult agricultural advisors
• Recognize resource strain in ag agencies
• Bring funding to the conversation
• ID problem, solve it, and move on
• Enjoy the fruits of your work first hand
Thanks for your time

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RDC’s & Local Foods
Minnesota Regional Development Commissions

162,000 population
5 Counties, all considered economically distressed
65 Cities, mostly all under 500 people
155 Townships
2 Tribes
9,000 miles of road
1 Local airport, 2 Community Colleges
2 hr. drive to Minneapolis.

Largest city Baxter: one of top 20 fastest growing Micropolitan’s in the nation
Transportation
- Safe Routes for Schools planning
- Deliverance of transportation bill funding
- Transit, trail, rail studies with MnDOT.
- Functional Classification

Economic Development
- Lending: Revolving Loan Fund, septic systems and well water loans (microlending, PACE in development)
- Workforce development initiatives
- Internship programs
- Eco. Dev. Planning – CEDS
- JobZ administrator

Community Development
- Active Living & recreation planning
- History, Arts and Education coordination
- Hazard Mitigation Planning
- Micropolitan & Land use initiatives
- Broadband initiatives

Energy
- County energy assessments
- Neighborhood Energy Workshops
- GreenSteps Cities
- Project development

HUD – R5DC Sustainable Communities Regional Planning

And, Local Foods……..
Local Food efforts

Catalog
• Database of over 150 growers
• 5,000 copies

Farm-to-School
• 3 new school districts engaged in Farm-to-school sourcing.

Farm-to-institution
• 2 Local hospitals
• Several resorts and restaurants
Local Foods and Public Health (SHIP)
• Statewide Heath Improvement Program – focus on obesity and tobacco use. Over $1.5 million distributed in our region, much to support local food initiatives.

Studies
• Completion of Farm-to-School financial feasibility study
• Engaged in 5-year health and behavior study

Community Gardens
• Education Mini-grants
• Convening garden managers and planning garden focus
R5DC Local Food partners

- Farmers Union
- AmeriCorps VISTA – Initiative Foundation
How & Why??

How:
- Assessed the need, Engaged Communities
- Rallied partners
- Utilized AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteer program to build capacity

Why:
- Local foods aligns well with other R5DC initiatives
- Supports regions agricultural cluster

What hasn’t worked well yet:
web based purchasing
What’s next?

- Engage grocery stores and at least one higher Ed. Institution. Expand partnerships!

- Study and select a model distribution and controlled storage system. Ascertain funding to execute selected model.

- Coordinate a regional local foods Garden Gourmet Expo.

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