



Local Food in Rural Western North Carolina

Opportunities and Challenges

Charlie Jackson
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This document summarizes a presentation given by ASAP's Executive Director Charlie Jackson on November 1, 2013 at the "Local Food in Rural WNC Forum." The forum was held at the North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness located in UNC Asheville's Sherrill Center. This forum was part of ASAP's Farm to School to Community Project, sponsored by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation. ASAP would like to thank Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation and the N.C. Center for Health and Wellness for their support and for helping to make the forum possible.

ASAP has been a national leader in the local food movement for more than a decade. ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. The organization's work includes a broad array of planning, communication, grassroots organizing, research, and advocacy in order to generate awareness of local farms and increase consumer demand for local food, develop the regional capacity to support local farms, expand the availability of locally grown food, and foster systemic change in agriculture and the food system.

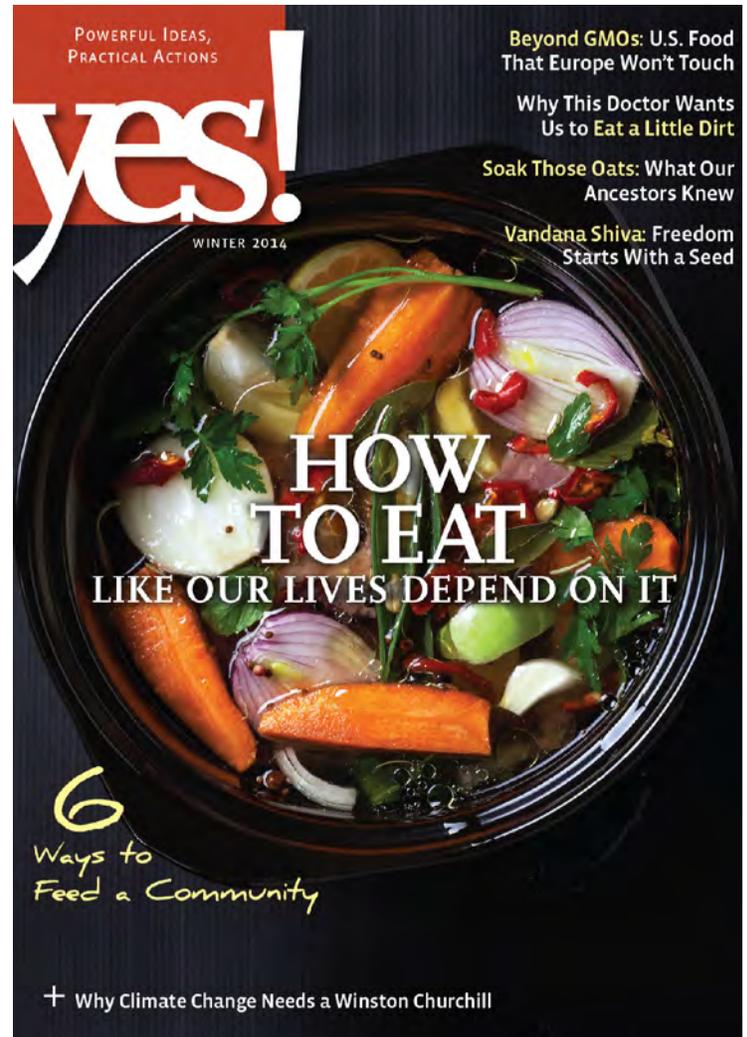
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HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS

Americans are in the midst of a health crisis with chronic diet-related illnesses like diabetes and obesity plaguing the nation. The 2012 study "Prevalence of obesity among adults from rural and urban areas of the United States" in the *Journal of Rural Health* documents the divide between urban and rural communities, noting that the prevalence of obesity is markedly higher among rural populations. Though rural communities sometimes lack access to the resources urban communities utilize to address the issue, rural communities do have access to unique opportunities to promote community health and reduce community members' rates of chronic disease.

Local food grown on local farms provides communities with a diet of diverse fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean protein, the staples of a healthy diet. By tapping into a natural extension of rural communities--their farms--building local food systems opportunities in rural communities is a sustainable and effective method for building community health in rural areas.





Public interest in local food is at an all time high. According to the USDA, local food sales have increased from \$1 billion in 2005, to \$4.8 billion in 2007, and reached \$7 billion in 2012. As a result, local food systems development has been propelled to the forefront of community development strategies. Rural communities in North Carolina are particularly well positioned to take advantage of increasing consumer interest in local food from local farms. For example, in 2012 Western North Carolina consumers purchased over \$120 million of local farm products.

Rural communities face unique barriers and opportunities. The lessons learned from ASAP's research and presented in this report can inform food system work at the local, regional, state and national level.

WHY LOCAL?

There are many reasons to develop local food systems beyond economic impacts:

- Protect farmland
- Support local farms
- Improve quality of life
- Improve community health
- Increase food security
- Preserve open space

For some, reasons other than immediate economic returns might be more important and more feasible than economic impacts.

There are opportunities in every community to build local food systems and positively impact residents. They will not be the same in every community and they will not happen at the same pace, but we are in the process of transforming our food system, and that process will impact all of us.



CHALLENGES

Over the last half century, concentration in the ownership, management and the industrialization of food production and marketing has dramatically restructured the agricultural and food industries in the U.S. and globally. Increasing farm and food industry consolidation has resulted in significant losses in farms and infrastructure.

Agriculture in Western North Carolina is in transition. Two decades ago, and for most of the last century, tobacco was king in much of the region. But as prices for tobacco began to fall and the government continued to cut quotas and look for ways to end the programs that supported tobacco production, the region's farm landscape saw a dramatic change. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, nearly 4,000 farms stopped growing tobacco between 1992 and 2007, a 94 percent decline. Overall we have seen an 80 percent decline in the number of farmers in our region in the last 40 years.

As Henderson County farmer Danny McConnell notes, "Twenty years ago our farm grew one product and had one customer."

In many places and for many farms this continues to be the reality of farming. Certainly this was the case with tobacco. But times have changed from 20 years ago when Danny only had one buyer.



DEMAND FOR LOCAL

In 2007 a Time magazine cover story marked the arrival of local food as an important and emerging food trend. The movement has only grown since then, in fact growing at an astounding pace. Even during a time of economic downturn demand for local has seen steady growth.



- "Local foods sales are booming, having doubled to \$11 billion in the past ten years." -CNBC
- The National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot in 2014" names locally sourced meats and seafood, and locally grown produce the top two trends
- "The cultural appetite for all things local continues unabated." -The Hartman Group
- USA Today says healthy and local food trends will top the charts in 2014

National



source: AT Kearney

Western North Carolina



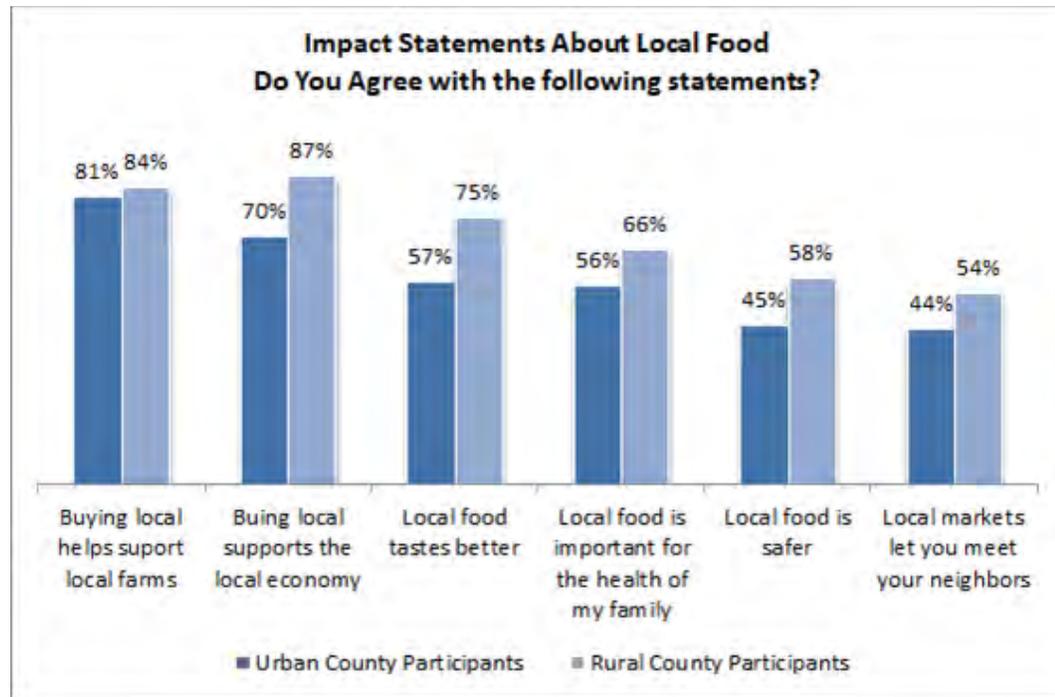
source: ASAP

A recent study by the consumer research firm Mintel found that more than half the respondents they surveyed (52 percent) said it's more important to them to buy local produce than organic options. Mintel concluded that "[c]onsumers' interest in where food comes from and a desire for fresh, unprocessed food will lead more [restaurant] operators to focus on American regionalism."

In 2013 marketing firm AT Kearney confirmed that their research shows almost 30 percent of grocery shoppers say they would consider purchasing food elsewhere if their preferred store does not carry local foods. ASAP's research with Western North Carolina residents has found that over three-quarters (77 percent) deem local food somewhat or very important to them when choosing a grocery store.

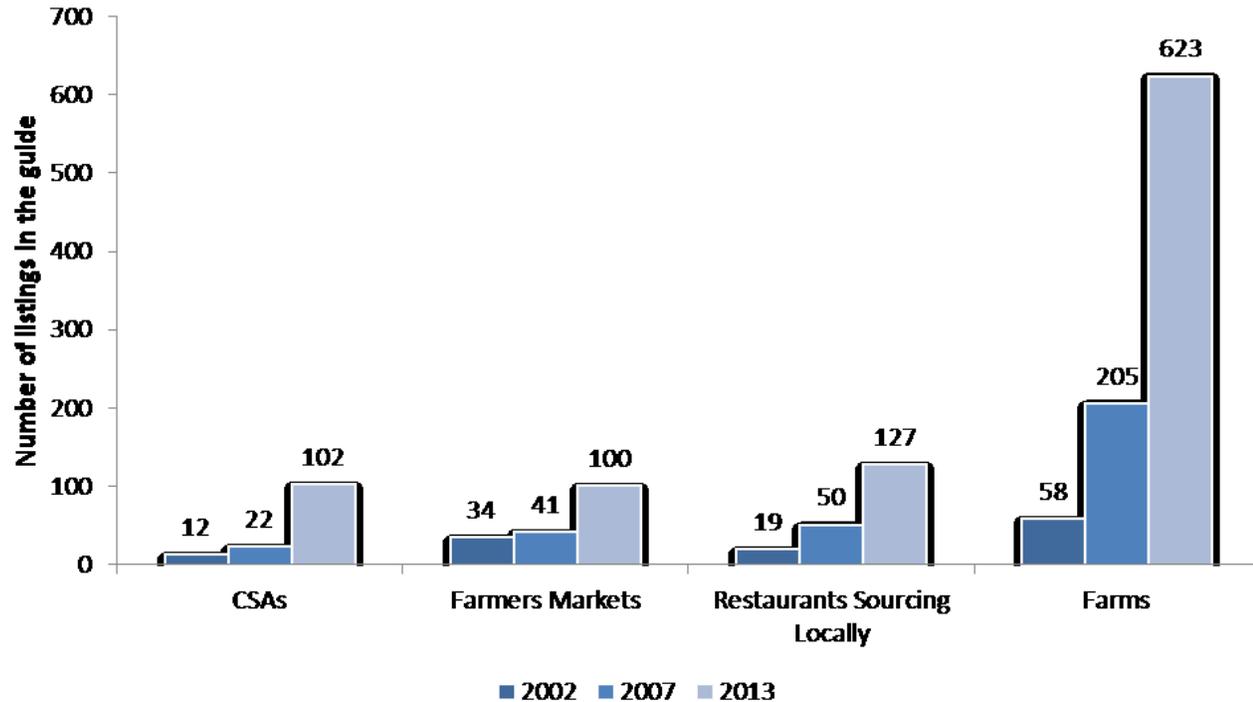
This same ASAP study found that all residents reported interest in local food, and current local food purchasing. Those surveyed in WNC's most rural counties (Cherokee, Graham, Jackson, Macon, Swain) showed interesting differences in their local food preferences and purchasing habits than their urban county counterparts (Asheville MSA of Buncombe, Madison, Henderson):

- Residents of rural counties grow more of their own food (65 percent compared to 52 percent)
- A greater percentage of rural county residents believe locally produced foods are fresher (82 percent compared to 76 percent)
- A greater proportion of rural county residents believe that when locally produced foods cost a little more they are worth the extra cost (50 percent compared to 39 percent)
- A greater proportion of rural county residents believe that local foods are safer (58 percent compared to 45 percent)



These results show that it is no longer a question of *if* we want local food. The local food movement has become mainstream and it is our task to make sure we maintain the value of local to support our communities and our farms. We need to make sure we direct this demand to our communities and our farms. From trendy to a trend, we are part of the local food movement.

Growth of Listings in ASAP's Local Food Guide



Over the last 10 years we have seen growth in every category in ASAP's Local Food Guide. There has been a 200 percent increase in the number of farmers markets; a 740 percent increase in CSAs (from a few hundred shares to over 5,000); growth in processed foods, meats, cheeses, farm tourism, restaurants, grocers, and distributors.

Farmer Danny McConnell now operates his farm business in a new reality, one that provides him with multiple market outlets, eager customers, help and assistance when he needs it, and visibility.

“Last year, more than 3,000 people bought our farm products,” says Danny “we sold to multiple wholesale buyers, we grew more than 25 produce items, and we made some of our produce into jam and ice cream. These days, farms that don’t adapt, don’t survive.”

How do we help farmers like Danny adapt and not only survive but prosper? How do we build a local food economy in rural settings?



We **build on our assets**

We have creative and adventurous businesses and farmers in our communities that want to develop new enterprises or grow their businesses. What they need is an environment that gives them room to take risks, that provides them with assistance and resources, that does not place barriers in their paths, and one that rewards success but allows for failure.

The Local food trend exists.

We need to create a **supportive environment** so that farmers, businesses, and communities can innovate, invest, and make permanent change.



We are already seeing this happen across Appalachia and across the country. It is happening in different ways and at different speeds depending on the local conditions, but it is growing or beginning everywhere.

Many farms are adapting and surviving and prospering. Consumers are responding to innovations, supporting with their food dollars. Farmers are increasingly becoming visible.

At its core, this movement is about visibility, transparency, and informed citizens making choices that support the local economy and quality of life they want.

Wendell Berry noted that eating is an agricultural act. In a healthy local food system eating is also a political act as consumers vote with their food dollars to support farms and businesses and to support changes in policy to create a supportive environment.

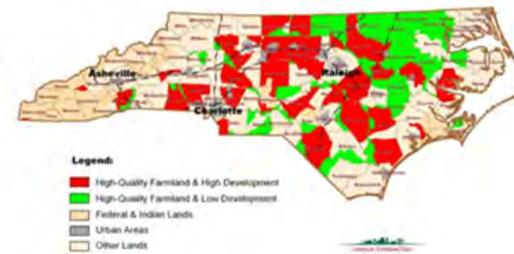
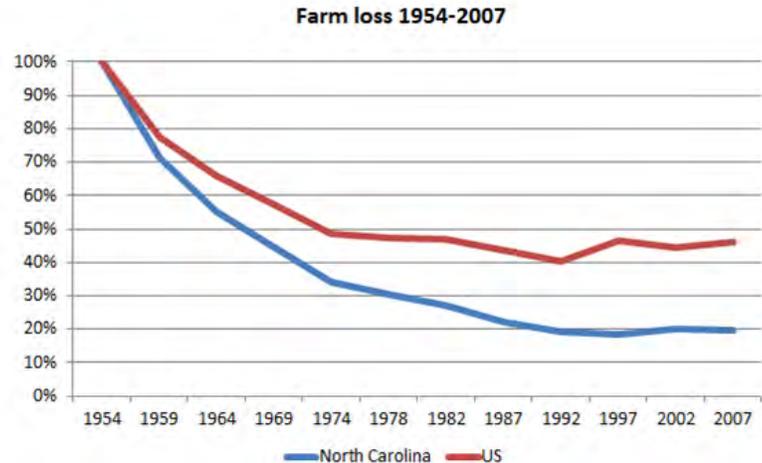
The steps to achieving this supportive environment?

- Assess
- Direct demand
- Build capacity
- Make connections

ASSESS

Assessments should:

- Provide accurate information which will result in good decision making.
- Provide a solid framework for groups to fit together, work together, and accomplish goals.
- Provide recommendations on ways to achieve specific goals.
- Provide information on what has already been done and identify areas of opportunity.
- Provide information on the ways communities can draw on their own resources and capacity to accomplish goals.



DIRECT DEMAND

Defining local is essential for directing the demand that already exists and for ensuring that the value of local stays with the farm and local businesses. The days of urging people to just "buy local" are gone. When left undefined, local can mean anything, much like the term "natural."

Consumers are confused and need a trusted identifier for what they want - local. Marketers recognize the value of local and are using it to their own ends; we need to own and define for ourselves the meaning of local to build loyalty around authenticity.

We also need to get local product to where people already buy or eat food. Farmers markets are important outlets and need to be encouraged and developed, but local must also be convenient and accessible. By getting local into places where people shop, go to school, into local hospitals, etc., local food becomes more widely available and accessible to nutrition support programs like EBT and WIC.

Direct demand through branding and certification and through guides. Making the case for local is not hard. We see that consumers want local. They just need to know where to find it.



BUILD CAPACITY

Farms and local food businesses need assistance. Many chefs don't know what is in season or how to work directly with a farmer, and schools need to know how to cook fresh foods (so do parents and kids).

- Promote and support direct-to-consumer outlets as sources of fresh, affordable, healthy foods.
- Build relationships across community sectors and potential collaborations.
- Conduct research to find out what resources your community already has, what it is missing, and what can be done.



- Assist farmers in accessing the resources, training, and technical assistance they need.
- Encourage initiatives that support healthy food options.
- Raise community awareness of local farms and local food, and provide the public with opportunities for direct experiences with farmers, farmland, and locally grown food in multiple venues.
- Advocate for policies that support farmers and farming.

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Making connections is a critical piece of local food system work, whether you're making connections between farmers and buyers, a child with vegetables growing in a school garden, consumer with a farmer at the farmers market, or connections families can make with their community on a farm tour. The beauty of local food is that these connections are possible; you can visit a local farm, you can learn where your food comes from, you can get to know the person who grows your food.

A critical factor that will predicate success in your community's local food system development strategy is the ability of various community members representing the different food sectors—farming, private food businesses, distribution, etc.—to do research and planning and then collaborate in addressing the specific needs of their communities. This will involve on-the-ground work that brings together stakeholders from the different food sectors to identify what types of training and technical assistance are needed, and what types of projects are suitable and feasible based on available community resources. By working together and building these connections, rural counties can establish the critical mass of knowledge, skills, and resources it will take to build a sustainable local food system.



WORKING IN YOUR COMMUNITY: AGRICULTURE

Local Food System Challenges

- Food system safety and packaging requirements
- Distribution challenges
- Lack of access to capital
- Lack of access to markets
- Land access
- Rules and regulations
- Farm profitability

Local Food System Opportunities

- Group purchasing and marketing
- Training and technical assistance in food safety, business planning, market planning, etc.
- More accessible credit and financial opportunities
- Connections to food buyers (restaurants, grocers, schools, offices)
- Connect farmers to land



WORKING IN YOUR COMMUNITY: HEALTH

Local Food System Challenges

- Diet-related illness
- Food access
- Low income families
- Loss of cooking skills
- Lack of information

Local Food System Opportunities

- Direct-to-consumer outlets as sources of fresh, affordable, healthy foods
- EBT and other programs at farmers markets and local food outlets
- Develop cooking skills
- Local food experiences (e.g., farm to school, festivals, farm field trips, CSA opportunities)



WORKING IN YOUR COMMUNITY: DECISION MAKERS, POLICY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Local Food System Challenges

- Rules and regulations
- Infrastructure challenges
- Food access disparities
- Funding
- Loss of working farmland

Local Food System Opportunities

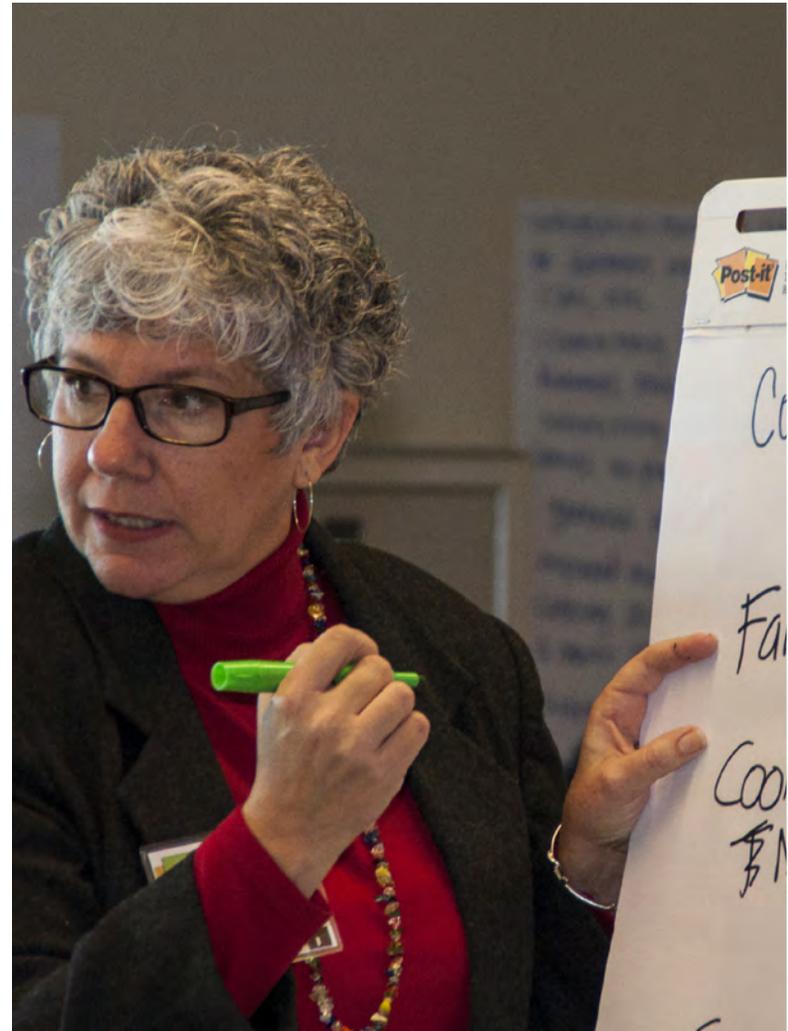
- Policies that support farmers and farming (PUV, VADS, ETJ, PACE)
- Research on infrastructure development (What is missing? Would a building project be cost effective?)
- Food business entrepreneurship
- Initiatives that support healthy food options
- Investigate methods for making farmland more attainable
- Farm to Table destinations



As was stated before, one thing that is certain is that successful localization is based on collaboration. Localizing the food system is, at an essential level, addressing our fundamental disconnect from our food system.

There are many groups with which partnerships are critical for advancing the local food agenda, including farm worker support agencies, organizations concerned with hunger, health, and food security, financial and capital management entities, and governmental organizations that can facilitate policy changes influencing the ability of local farm products to reach local markets.

- Build relationships across community sectors and potential future collaborations. For example, host collaborative conferences inviting all sectors (agriculture, health, policy, decision makers, economic developers, etc.).
- Engage diverse food systems stakeholders in an asset mapping and community visioning process.
- Build community ties centered on local farms and local food, and provide the public with direct experiences with farmers, farmland, and locally grown food.



A BRIGHT FUTURE

Many opportunities exist for both farmers and entrepreneurs, and often times the most entrepreneurial are the farmers themselves. Given options and assistance they blaze new trails in developing our new local food reality.

Skipper Russell, like Danny McConnell grew only one or two crops for most of his farming career. Historically he sold his vegetable products to the local packing house in Haywood County, but he began to recognize the financial benefits of having diverse market outlets as he saw the interest in local food growing in WNC.

Skipper began experimenting with alternative crops like Romaine lettuce and basil. He got listed in the Local Food Guide and became Appalachian Grown™ certified. At a grower-buyer meeting, he met a buyer from Ingles Grocery, and started selling to their stores. He also started selling to Mountain Food Products, a local distributor.

As his business grew, with the help of a local grant program, he invested in a new refrigerated truck to get his tender crops to several outlets that provided him with a better price on his goods. To expand his market outlets, he got his farm GAP certified. After attending a farm to school workshop, and with the required GAP certification, Skipper set out, successfully, to sell his products to the county schools. With the market demand, support and his own willingness to try new things Skipper now has 20+ acres in production growing tomatoes, bell peppers, beans, romaine lettuce, basil, broccoli, potatoes, cucumbers, and sweet corn.

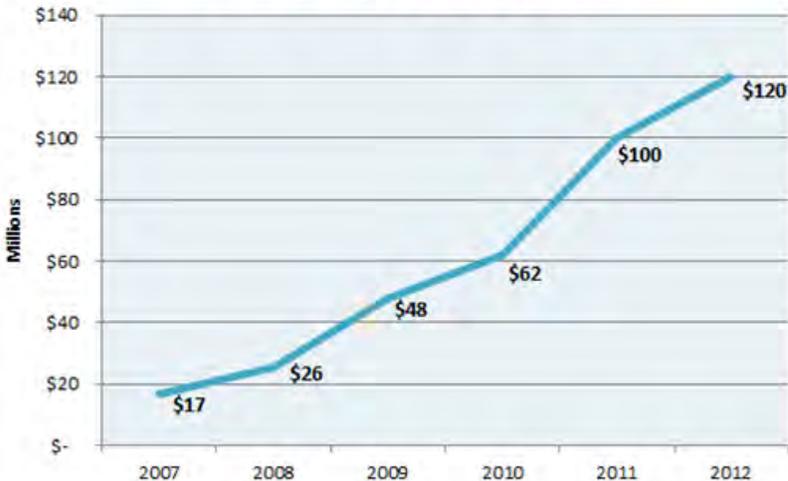
With consumer support, access to training and assistance, and help in making market connections Skipper has transformed his farm and farm business.



Skipper is no longer an invisible part of our food system. Instead, he is a visible part of his community. Not only visible but respected. Skipper recounts how proud he was when a child, in Ingles Supermarket, saw his profile hanging above the produce department pointed and said, "Mama, that's the man in the picture!"

Skipper's success is echoed by the successes of other farmers in the region; ASAP has tracked more than a sevenfold increase in local food sales in Western North Carolina since 2007.

Local Food Sales in WNC



Who Grows Your Food?
Skipper Russell
Seasonal Produce Farm
Haywood County, NC
Ingles supplier since 2010

APALACHIAN GROWN
LOCAL FOOD
fresher!

ingles

Skipper Russell grows mixed produce at his family farm in Bethel, the scenic, historic farming community in Haywood County. He also operates a corn maze from September through October. Look for Skipper's cucumbers, lettuce, peppers, and more.

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We had a head start here in WNC, starting our local food campaign over a decade ago. Over the last 10 years we have seen increases across the board - from increased numbers of farmers markets, CSA shares being offered, farm tourism, restaurants buying from local farms, schools serving local food - everything.



There is a bright future for local food. The nature and pace of change will be different in every community. There are many ideas out there; you need to determine what makes sense for you. You need to test ideas against your reality.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing your local food economy. To get there we need to assess and then be smart, develop our assets, make the right choices for our community, be proactive but be patient. We need to reward success but don't be afraid of failure.

Appalachia has the potential to be the leading region of the country in developing an integrated and sustainable local food system. As local leaders building our local food economies we first and foremost need to unleash the entrepreneurial capacity of farms and businesses by building and directing market demand, developing our regional capacity, and by helping make the vital connections.

I thank you for your leadership in making this happen.

Charles Jackson



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Strong Farms
Healthy Communities**

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