

CENTRAL OHIO

LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENT AND PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A strategy for strengthening the economy, ensuring access to healthful food, reducing food-shipping distance, and preserving farmland



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CENTRAL OHIO

LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENT AND PLAN

Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

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Prepared by MORPC's Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group

VISION

Fresh, safe, healthy and affordable local foods are easily and equally accessible to everyone in Central Ohio and distributed through a system that promotes sustainable farming practices and resilience in the region.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This report is created to assess all components of a regional food system in the 12 central Ohio counties, to make policy recommendations to local governments, and to serve as a resource to businesses and organizations on food decisions.



Photo: Ohio Farm Bureau/Jodi Miller



Photo: Brian Williams

INTRODUCTION

The Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group, a multi-county team convened by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), has spent the past year examining the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food throughout central Ohio. Five task forces – Research, Health/Access, Agricultural Business, Land Use and Public Awareness – were established to guide the assessment. The Working Group, the task forces and other experts consulted in the effort comprised about 80 people representing a variety of interests throughout the region’s 12 counties. The resulting local food assessment and plan promotes efforts to:

- Ensure that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels at local markets, grocery stores, restaurants, schools and other institutions.
- Strengthen the region’s economy, create local jobs in the food production, processing and distribution industries and coordinate energy-efficient distribution that provides a secure supply of many foods to people of the region.
- Preserve valuable farmland by making agriculture more profitable, and by showing planners and policymakers that farmland is important to local economies.
- Encourage policies that allow agriculture on vacant and underused land in cities and towns throughout the region, and promote the benefits and availability of local food.

- Coordinate regional local-food efforts with those of the statewide Food Policy Advisory Council that Governor Strickland established in 2007 to promote local foods across Ohio.

The local-food assessment, conducted in the last six months of 2009, is essential to the creation of a regional food plan. It provides a snapshot of existing local-food-system components in central Ohio. There are many producers and marketers of local food; farmers markets; community gardens; businesses that process food; stores, restaurants and institutions that sell and serve local food; and groups that promote local food in central Ohio. By compiling this substantial listing and overview of those efforts, we can now begin to make connections among them and develop a credible plan to increase their size and scope.

This assessment is intended to serve two functions. First, it is a tool that enables the Working Group to: collect and analyze regional agriculture and food data; determine what local-food assets the region has; pinpoint where those assets are; connect those dots; and develop a plan. Second, it will be a resource for public policymakers and business leaders to learn about the value of local food to the regional populace and economy. The assessment has a wide range of other information: identification of underserved rural and urban “food deserts;” analysis of 2007 Census of Agriculture data for the 12-county region; and analysis of data that show the farm-to-market economic potential for local food in the region.



CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENT

What do we mean by “local food?”

Our assessment focuses primarily on food that is grown or raised in MORPC’s 12-county central Ohio region, processed and packaged in the region, distributed within the region, and sold and consumed within those 12 counties. Simply put, this is food that goes from seed to plate entirely within those counties.

Interest in “local food” has grown in recent decades in tandem with the growth of the organic-food industry. Many individuals and organizations promote both “organic” and “local” food, and some may feel the terms are interchangeable. The local-food movement, however, does not focus exclusively on certified-organic production. It includes farms with organic practices but not certification. It also includes a broader group of advocates who focus not only on how food is grown, but on providing healthy food access for all, creating a safer system by knowing the sources of our food, and leaving a smaller carbon footprint by reducing food-distribution distances.

It is important to stress that “local food” goes far beyond the seasonal farmers markets where people can buy food that is clearly local. Those summer markets are a vital, but tiny, part of a 12-county regional food system. The challenge is: Can central Ohioans feed themselves on locally grown food in the middle of winter? Meeting that challenge requires a “local food infrastructure” that goes well beyond the farmers market and includes year-round processing, distributing, freezing, storing and alternative production methods such as indoor fish farms.

A local-food system is a cohesive way of producing food locally and making it readily available to all people in the region. The system includes not only producing food, but also aggregating, processing, storing, distributing, selling and consuming it. A local-food system need not be centrally controlled, but needs to include linkages among its many components. A resilient, sustainable local-food system improves the economy of the region as well as the health of its people. We are all part of the local-food system: We all eat.

◀ Urban community garden in the Linden neighborhood, serving New Harvest Café. The city of Columbus demolished the building at center to allow the garden to expand.

Benefits of local food

The benefits of a local-food system are many, but the central Ohio effort has focused primarily on four: strengthening the local economy; ensuring that fresh, safe, healthful, locally produced food is easily accessible to people of all income levels; reducing the miles needed to distribute and sell food; and preserving farmland by making agriculture more viable to area farmers. But there are plenty of other benefits.

Local food:

- Can include greater varieties of flavorful produce, rather than the few varieties that are bred more for stability for shipping across the country.
- Can save on energy and transportation cost because it is produced, processed and distributed in a given region, rather than shipped across the country.
- Is more comforting to consumers because they know where it comes from, how it is produced and because it offers more connections with others in the community.
- Can be part of a resilient system that provides a reliable supply of food regardless of economic conditions, weather and other disruptions in other parts of the country.

Current situation: Producers

Central Ohio farmers raised \$1.1 billion worth of agricultural products in 2007. Of that, \$703 million was grain, oilseed and dry beans or peas for processing or export, and another \$56 million was nursery, greenhouse, floriculture and sod products. That leaves just \$336 million, about 30 percent of the total, for food – vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry and dairy. This amounts to about \$118 worth of food per person in the region annually – a very small percentage of the food each person consumes.

Central Ohio has at least 80 farms growing fresh produce for local markets in the 12-county region, plus 21 orchards and berry patches growing local fruit, and at least nine farms selling food directly to investors through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs or “subscription farms”). Another 22 farms produce beef, pork, lamb and goat for local markets,

and 15 more specialize in local poultry and eggs. The region has at least 12 farms that produce local honey or maple syrup, and at least two fish farms. It also has over 150 community gardens combined in the region’s 12 counties.

But those 160 or so producers are a tiny fraction – about 1.6 percent – of the 9,928 farms in central Ohio. Those farms range from 1,000-acre grain farms and egg farms with millions of hens to horse farms, hobby farms and market gardens that net less than \$1,000 per year.

Current situation: Processors/distributors

The 12-county central Ohio region has 36 small, locally-oriented poultry- and meat-processing businesses – at least one in each county except Marion. Many of them are slaughtering facilities, while others process and package meat harvested elsewhere. While Ohio has lost many of its small plants over the years, it still has more than most states, and Ohio’s state inspection program is respected across the country. Most of these small plants are inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture, but some are USDA-inspected and can sell their products across state lines.

An oft-cited 2001 study done in Iowa showed that the average distance for food arriving at a Chicago terminal warehouse by truck was 1,518 miles. A 2008 study done by the

▼ Schwartz poultry farm in Knox County.



Photo: Ohio Farm Bureau/Jodi Miller

Michigan Department of Agriculture found that 90 percent of the U.S. food supply is transported by truck, and that truck traffic was expected to double by 2020. Travel distances are increasing — the average distance has increased by about 25 percent since 1980. Our current food system is heavily reliant on petroleum.

It is easy to assume that if food is produced and consumed within a region, its transport will require less energy. But that may not be the case if every farm transports its products separately. For a local-food network to be viable and economical, but also efficient in its use of transportation resources, the region needs an efficient system of aggregating and distributing food.

Current situation: Consumers

Research by the Social Responsibility Initiative at The Ohio State University finds that Ohio consumers consistently support local food and are willing to pay more for it. Its survey found that: 98 percent of Ohioans said it is “very important” (64 percent) or “somewhat important” (34 percent) for state and local governments to develop food systems throughout Ohio; over 75 percent of Ohioans say they bought food directly from a farmer; the median amount spent on such direct sales in 2007 was \$68 per household; and 23 percent of Ohioans reported “frequently” purchasing local food in 2008, and median household spending among this group was \$200.

Blystone Farm

On the outside, the processing plant at Blystone Farm near Canal Winchester looks like a barn addition on a classic Ohio farmstead. Inside, a woman in a burqa stands behind a computer terminal in an eight-by-eight-foot, windowless cinder block room, talking to a tall, gray-bearded cleric in a white robe in a language that is difficult to identify. An assistant helps the cleric in the discussion, and occasionally the three lapse into English, as a default language, to clarify a point. Occasionally, a Somali worker passes through, or a slender woman in a cowgirl hat, bandana around her neck and big rubber boots on her feet, exits the kill floor and passes through the office. Meanwhile, a short, sixtyish white couple, stand quietly to the side, waiting their turn.

The cleric is discussing the fee he will pay for the goat he selected earlier in the barnyard and that soon will be brought to him from the back room, butchered and ready to go. The elderly couple wait to discuss the fee they will be paid for the latest trailer load of sheep they have brought down from their Morrow County farm. The woman in the boots and bandana is Katharine Harrison, the general manager of the processing plant, who makes all these disparate pieces come together.

The Blystone family has been raising sheep near Canal Winchester in southeast Franklin County for over 80 years. While Ohio is still the biggest sheep state east of the Mississippi, it is far behind the western states, and the industry here is a shadow of its former self. But Harrison and her father, Joe Blystone, saw the influx of Somalis and other immigrants in Columbus as a new niche for the family business. In December 2004, Blystone Farms opened a processing facility to provide goat and lamb for the tables of these immigrants.



“It was a traditional farm before that,” she said. Her great-grandparents raised sheep in Wyoming, but returned to their native Ohio in the 1920s. The family farm produced sheep, corn, soybeans and wheat. They took their sheep and goats to a stockyard and accepted whatever price

they could get. As the Columbus metropolitan area grew, they knew change was necessary — and they saw an opportunity.

“Columbus was changing with an influx of immigrants and refugees,” Harrison said. “That gave us a chance to connect to a different market — and add value to the product while gaining more control over pricing.” She said the Somali population is about 25 percent of the market. Another 25 percent is immigrants from Muslim West Africa, 25 percent Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians. The remaining 25 are from the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere.

Initially, Blystone processed only sheep and goats raised on the farm. But demand grew so fast that they soon needed to buy from other producers — which required additional state and federal certification, for the plant, which is inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Business is steady, but margins are tight.

There may be new ventures on the horizon. Blystone Farm is mulling the possibility of expanding into poultry processing. Harrison said there are a lot of questions to be answered first — about equipment needs, additional paperwork, hiring additional workers. But it could fill a huge need in a state that has only one commercial poultry plant for custom processing.

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But research shows that many urban neighborhoods and rural areas are “food deserts” where residents do not have easy access to full-service groceries with any produce, much less fresh and local foods. This, combined with hectic lifestyles and, often, a lack of information about preparing fresh, healthful meals, leads people to subsist largely on packaged, processed convenience foods.

On a local level, in 2008 within the Columbus City School District, nearly one in four preschoolers whose body-mass index was checked were found to be overweight, as defined by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 44 percent of the district’s 4,067 fifth-graders were identified as overweight or obese. The district said the number of students with diabetes has increased from eight in 2000 to nearly 180 students. In addition, admission rates, outpatient and emergency room visits to Columbus’ Children’s Hospital for obesity-related diagnosis codes more than tripled from 2002 through 2007, further emphasizing the troubling problem of pediatric obesity in our community.

Resources

Central Ohio’s most important agricultural resource is in dwindling supply. In the last 10 years for which data are available, the 12-county region lost 230,231 acres of farmland – more than two-thirds of it between 2002 and 2007, before the housing slump hit. At the same time, the region had a net loss of 760 farms. However, the number of the largest farms – those with over \$500,000 in annual sales – more than tripled from 173 to 533. Meanwhile, the smallest farms – those with under \$1,000 in annual sales, often “hobby” farms, horse farms or specialty producers of local food – increased by 436 to a total of 3,090.

The biggest loss in farms in the region is among those small and mid-sized farms that have annual gross revenues between \$1,000 and \$50,000. The number of farms in those categories in the 12 counties declined by 832 between 2002 and 2007. Farms in that range might find a model for success if they turned their focus to food production for local markets.

Capital is an essential resource in building a regional food system. Farmers need financing for land, equipment,



Photo: Ohio Farm Bureau



Photo: Ohio Farm Bureau/Jodi Miller

livestock, seeds and fertilizers. Processors and distributors need financing to build or expand their operations, and to buy equipment. Ohio has the capital for these initiatives from: private lenders; Farm Credit Services of Mid-America, a federally created lender of last-resort for agriculture; USDA loans and programs; state programs (such as Linked Deposit in the Treasurer's Office); and not-for-profit programs, such as Economic and Community Development Institute in central Ohio. But these institutions are not always aware of or focused on local-food initiatives. While an individual small farm might not be a good credit risk, its viability increases if its products can be aggregated with those of other small farms. Small-scale farmers are showing greater interest in formal and informal cooperative arrangements.

Barriers

There are many barriers to establishing a regional food system in central Ohio, but none is insurmountable. We hope that by identifying barriers, and then making recommendations on ways to overcome them, the region can join in a coordinated effort. The Working Group identified 31 barriers under the general categories of Infrastructure, Land, Farms, Markets and Public Awareness. Five task forces have condensed these in 24 recommendations under the heading of five different goals to create the regional food plan summarized below.

Conclusion

A local food system is nothing new in central Ohio. The Columbus area, with about 60 percent of the current metropolitan population, had eight dairies in 1959. It also had 10 meat packers and 25 produce distributors – 16 of them based near the old Central Market. Though a variety of economic and social factors steered us away from the local sourcing that was common in the past, new economic and social forces make this a good time to look anew at local food. More farmers are growing for local markets; local processors are feeling pressure for growth; petroleum-dependent systems are increasingly vulnerable to market disruptions; and public interest clearly is on the rise.

◀ Modern “cowboys” at the Wolfinger family farm in Fairfield County use all-terrain vehicles to check on their beef herd.

There is great potential to build a regional food system that can make farms more viable; keep land in agriculture; create jobs on the farm, in food processing and distribution; reduce transportation costs and petroleum dependency; and keep consumers' food dollars circulating, and recirculating, in the local economy. A regional food system also can lead to greater access to healthful food in central Ohio's urban and rural food deserts; promote healthful eating and living; strengthen rural and urban communities that grow and process food; and create a resilient network of farms and food-related businesses that are not dependent

on and vulnerable to circumstances in other states or countries.

We produced this assessment as the basis for a series of recommendations that will lead to a regional food system. We hope that this plan will encourage local governments to adopt regulatory and procurement policies that promote local food; businesses large and small to buy and sell local food; and central Ohio consumers to learn more about the availability, benefits and preparation of fresh, healthful local foods.



Local Matters

Local Matters offers one-stop shopping for local-food information and planning in the Columbus area. Its three core programs – focusing on children, neighborhoods and markets – were created to support each other and to have a measurable impact on the community.

Local Matters is a not-for-profit organization working to improve the quality of life for children and adults by promoting healthful nutrition, increasing access to fresh, wholesome, local foods and advocating for more-equitable food policies. Its mission is based on the belief that food connects us to some of the most important issues of our times and that food also gives us a common language through which we can discuss these issues. Its unofficial motto: “Everybody eats!”

Local Matters is a leader in helping to create a new paradigm to address pressing issues like obesity, diabetes, climate change, peak oil and the creation of new jobs through the lens of food. Its strategy combines education, strategic community collaborations and innovations within the current food system in a thoughtful and intentional way.

The core programs build a foundation for a comprehensive solution to these issues:

- The **Local Food to School** program includes the “Food is Elementary” curriculum, a 28-week nutrition education project. Focusing on pre-K-2nd grade, the program reaches over 1,000 children, teachers and parents each week. The curriculum teaches vulnerable children in schools and the Child Development Council/Franklin County Head Start programs about where their food comes from; what healthful, wholesome food is; and how to cook it. It also includes a Nutrition Wellness Education Planning Group facilitated by Local Matters staff and made up of teachers, staff and community members which can support a school wellness policy.
- Local Matters’ **Urban Agriculture** program strives to provide better access to local, healthy food in the community. It does this by assisting the community in efforts to grow food closer to where people live; teaching adults how to prepare it; and adapting the “Food is Elementary” curriculum for them. This program complements the Local Food to School program by

helping to ensure that children in the program have access to eat fresh, healthful food at home and at school.

- The **Farm to Fork** program creates market opportunities for local farmers and improves distribution channels for locally grown food, making it available to all communities on an equal basis by working with its partner, The Greener Grocer. The Greener Grocer buys much of its produce from local farmers and is home for three Veggie Vans – mobile farm markets on wheels. The Veggie Van is one example of how Local Matters both supports local farmers and provides healthful food access throughout the community. Each Veggie Van is equipped to accept EBT cards (Food Stamps) via wireless credit card machines and offers cooking demonstrations during its neighborhood stops.



Photo: Brian Williams

Local Matters also publishes an on-line local food guide called Fresh Connect. It lists restaurants that buy from local farmers, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) opportunities, retail outlets selling local food, a map of the over 140 community gardens in Columbus and stories about community members who are passionate about creating a local Foodshed.

For more information about Local Matters and how you can be “Localicious,” visit www.local-matters.org or call 614.263.5662.



CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD PLAN

Recommendations

Central Ohio consumers have a growing awareness of, and interest in, food that is produced locally. The number of farmers markets has increased steadily, and more restaurants and groceries are featuring local products. A growing number of farmers in the 12-county region raise crops and livestock primarily for local consumption, and distributors, large and small, are seeking local foods to satisfy the demands of their customers.

The region seems poised for an explosive growth in the local-food economy. This growth will not be easy, however, because many barriers stand in the way: policy barriers that allow the loss of rural farmland and restrict the use of urban and some exurban land for food production; insufficient capacity in the local-food processing and distribution infrastructure; business barriers that limit access of local products to many stores and restaurants; inconsistent and

inefficient regulation of farmers markets and other food businesses; lack of access to fresh, healthful and local food for people in rural and urban “food deserts;” lack of public awareness about the availability and benefits of local food; and more.

The recommendations in this report show how to overcome the barriers and provide a plan for the 12 central Ohio counties to expand the regional food economy and make local foods readily available to people of all income levels throughout the region.

Goal: Increase the supply of local food

- 1) **Establish agricultural cooperatives for local food.** Cooperative arrangements could be organized around shared distribution, or the need to aggregate larger quantities to meet the needs of large retailers or institutional buyers. They could be organized around

processing, or could apply to farm equipment and even labor. These could be organized with help from the Ohio Cooperative Development Center, which is part of OSU Extension's South Center in Piketon.

- 2) **Adapt to changing food-safety standards and consumer preferences.** Producers must prepare for an emerging need to trace even local food grown on small farms back to its source. This may require improved labeling or bar codes on all boxes packed for distribution, with responsible record-keeping by distributors and producers to enable tracing of food sources in the event of a health problem.
- 3) **Adopt new practices to extend growing seasons.** This can include plastic mulch to produce berries earlier in the season, hoop houses and high tunnels to grow vegetables in the early spring and late fall, and greenhouses for year-round growing. These practices can make Ohio-grown food more mainstream by keeping it available and in the public eye for most of the year.
- 4) **Prepare the next generation of food farmers.** The average age of Ohio farmers continues to rise, which means many farms in the coming years may be changing hands. A growing local-food economy should be an impetus for joint vocational schools in the region to revitalize their agriculture offerings. The school programs should focus not just on agricultural practices and job training, but also on the business aspects of operating a farm.

Goal: Expand the local food infrastructure

- 5) **Increase food-processing capacity.** The region needs an independent poultry processing facility, expanded meat-processing capacity, a flash-freezing facility, and canning, storage and cooling facilities. Immigrants and ethnic and religious groups should be included in efforts to promote halal and kosher processing. There is a need for a larger, regional processing facility that can provide beef, pork, goat and lamb to grocers around the region.

- 6) **Improve aggregation and distribution of local food.** Farmers and distributors could benefit from regional centers where fresh-picked produce can be chilled and packaged for distribution, or stored for winter use. Such centers could be operated as farmer cooperatives, or by non-for-profit organizations or private business.
- 7) **Establish incubators for local-food businesses.** Incubators such as the state's Edison Centers and Tech Columbus focus on technology businesses; a similar effort should be directed at food businesses in central Ohio. A not-for-profit organization or a local government agency could lead the effort. Likewise, there is a need to follow up on business startups – to stabilize businesses and set them up for long-term viability.

Goal: Improve the viability of farm and food businesses

- 8) **Develop a workforce for food production and processing.** State and local governments, and schools, should do more to promote on-farm agriculture jobs. The state should include agriculture and farm workers in the Job Creation Tax Credit and Third Frontier reimbursement for newly created jobs. Rural and urban school districts should promote hands-on vocational work, internships and apprenticeships, including farm work.
- 9) **Promote large-scale institutional purchases of local food.** Central Ohio and the state need a guide for institutions on the logistics of buying local – finding producers, processors and distributors – and a network of institutional chefs and buyers who can be mentors for their counterparts at other institutions. Institutional buying cannot occur on any grand scale until the local-food infrastructure is expanded. That expansion will create new markets, inducing producers to grow food for local consumption.



Photo: Brian Williams

▲ Fresh, local produce is one of the attractions at North Market

- 10) **Ensure that funding for a local food system is accessible.** At the county or regional level, there should be a resource to direct farmers and businesses to appropriate private financing, not-for-profit micro-lending or government financing programs. Existing programs must be better utilized to support distributors, processors, retailers and institutions that are currently participating in some fashion in the local foodshed. Consider some of the same types of abatements and/or credits for investment in improvements or expansion as mentioned below in Recommendation 12.
- 11) **Ensure that resources are available for urban food production.** Strategic marketing of land in land banks and other resources is needed to help both community residents and local producers find available land for community gardens, thereby increasing the amount of local food available in local markets.
- 12) **Help food farmers operate more efficiently.** Look at existing businesses, not just startups, and focus on reducing fixed costs and increasing marginal revenue by increasing yield, adding value, or extending the growing season. Develop efforts for shorter-term financial assistance for farmers, as opposed to long-term or perpetual farmland protection. Property tax abatements or additional credits are potential solutions that could address profitability.

12.1) Help farms and food businesses control the initial costs of expansions into modified or additional production. The partners to implement this recommendation could include OSU Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC); Ohio Department of Agriculture; Columbus State Community College; Farm Service Agency; and local processors.

Goal: Remove policy barriers to a local-food system

- 13) **Ensure government support for local-food efforts.** Local governments should adopt resolutions supporting a local-food system, promote government purchase of local foods, and consider establishing local food policy councils. Successful local-food

efforts around the country have used public-private partnerships that use the energy of not-for-profit advocacy organizations and food policy councils with broad representation.

- 14) **Make sure government regulations and policies are aligned with local-food goals.** The state and region need a city, county and state food-policy audit. The audit should identify state, city and county laws and policies that may inhibit local-food production, processing and marketing. The audit also should identify policies and laws that are helpful to local food systems and use those as models for creating additional opportunities in other cities and communities. Safety should not be compromised, but some regulations are written with one type or size of operation in mind, while also imposing restrictions on smaller operations to which the regulations do not readily apply. State and local health regulations regarding local food should be consistent. Land-use policies should recognize the importance of rural and urban agriculture.
- 15) **Establish “best practices” planning and zoning standards.** These standards should 1) preserve farmland, 2) encourage local food production in urban and suburban areas and 3) fix land-subdivision regulations to preserve farmland and encourage local-food production. As part of a model zoning regulation, local officials need education on best practices for supporting these goals. MORPC should work with the Ohio Department of Agriculture, the Center for Farmland Policy Innovation at OSU, local officials in Central Ohio, farmers, land owners and regulatory experts to identify all farmland-preservation tools and identify land-use best practices.
- 16) **Modernize Ohio land-use statutes.** MORPC and central Ohio counties should examine how existing state law may affect the development of regulations such as cluster lotsplit regulations. They should also explore any other deficiencies that state legislation may have on promoting local food production.
- 17) **Establish better partnerships with state and local governments.** The Ohio Department of Agriculture

and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have many programs aimed at promoting local-food systems and preserving farmland. Central Ohio local-food leaders need to ensure that local governments and state and federal agencies work together to promote local-food systems.

Goal: Increase the understanding of local food and its benefits

- 18) **Establish a regional food policy council.** A central Ohio council should guide the region’s efforts with representatives from each of the 12 counties, plus members representing food producers, processors, and distributors; local governments; schools; university research; non-for-profit organizations involved in local-food advocacy; health professionals; hunger advocates; and other interests.
 - 18.1) The council should develop a list of non-governmental community “best practices” resources and models that can be shared in places in the region that are looking for ways to help underserved populations have access to healthy, fresh and local foods.
 - 18.2) The council should conduct a community-based assessment of different groups working on local food issues and bring the leadership of these groups together in a more cohesive fashion.
 - 18.3) The council should establish a better way to exchange farmland-preservation information among local-food advocates — such as a toolkit that could guide this process and provide methods for conducting the assessment that would help to target various aspects of the food system.
 - 18.4) The council should establish a means of better exchanging farmland-preservation information among local-food advocates.
- 19) **Develop a state-level framework to assess urban food deserts.** Integrate food-desert data on a statewide level and design ways for localities to take this framework and have the same data generated for their communities. The Ohio Food Policy Advisory Council already is moving forward with this effort.

- 20) **Make information and resources easily available.** A multi-layered communication system should be based on information gathered by the regional food council. This information can include a centralized website hub that could direct people to local food resources in their community, public announcements that address the benefits of local foods, and corner-store initiatives with local farmers directly supplying some stores.
- 21) **Establish programs that reach out to consumers about local food.** This two-pronged outreach should a) expand early-childhood local-food education programs that teach children where their food comes from, what healthful, local food is and how to prepare it; and b) create new solutions to address the fact that people lead busy lives and often don't have the time to cook from scratch.
- 22) **Adapt existing programs to meet local-food needs.** Many communities have policies and programs designed for one purpose that also could be used to promote a local-food system. Land in land banks, for example, sometimes is used for community gardens and agriculture – a prospect that could become more common as more communities establish land banks. Another example is to use programs that promote access to healthy food as a way to help residents of neighborhoods start food-related businesses, thus encouraging economic development.
- 23) **Promote sustainability by linking infrastructure improvements with agriculture.** The region should recognize environmental benefits and opportunities for farmland that flow from the development of infrastructure. Roundtable discussion groups looking into such solutions should comprise farmers, developers, and local policymakers.
- 24) **Showcase local food in stores and restaurants.** Persuade retailers and restaurateurs to adjust their business models to ensure shelf space for local produce, meat, poultry and dairy products. The larger retailers, like the smaller, independent retailers, should consider the consumers at individual stores and make room for very-local products.



▲ Amish workers unload a pallet of fresh strawberries at the Owl Creek Produce Auction in Morrow County.



The Making of Luna Burger

Barbie and Megan Luna are herding local vegetable growers, not cattle, to supply their burger business.

Luna Burger LLC started making vegetarian burgers in Columbus in May 2009, and by mid-September had already outgrown its rented kitchen space at Himes Vending. Now the company has its own 2,400 square foot facility on the city's Far East Side, where it takes delivery of kale, carrots, grains, beans, onions, garlic, apples and paprika peppers – mostly from central Ohio farmers – and fashions them into veggie burgers for local stores and restaurants.

“Our initial definition of local was Ohio,” said Barbie Luna. “We try to find ingredients in Columbus, or as near to us as we could. We had to go beyond Franklin and Fairfield counties, but maintain the same values, and the same impact of supporting farmers and growers.”

It took time to find a stable of steady suppliers. Now she's hopeful that the early success of the couple's business will trigger growth in other local-food processing and distribution businesses, which in turn will encourage more farmers to grow for local markets.

“The more small entrepreneurs we talk to about buying local ingredients, the more of a snowball effect it has,” she said.

The Lunas, fans of community-supported agriculture and local farmers markets, started modestly – and used farmers markets as a springboard.

“Food – and access to healthy food – have been important to us,” Barbie said. “We wanted to do wide variety of things, and began with vegan meal delivery, including burgers. People were receptive to our burgers, and we started our line from there.”

To get ingredients, they started with growers they met at farmers markets. After they started production at the Himes facility, they started

selling the burgers at farmers markets. As local restaurants and retailers showed interest, they quickly outgrew that original facility.

Luna Burgers are sold at independent Columbus-area grocers Weiland's, Huffman's and The Hills, and at Clintonville Community Market and Bexley Natural Market. They are served at area restaurants such as Drexel Radio Café, Hal and Al's and Oatganic.

On the supply side, Luna said all the carrots now come from Wayward Seed in Union County. Kale and beets come from Sippel Family Farm in Morrow County. Staples and grains were harder to get, but they found an Amish farmer in Holmes County for oats, and that led to an arrangement with a northeast Ohio distributor for maple syrup and molasses.

Barbie does not have a business background, and so she has learned a lot in a short time. Because there's so much to learn – and because she wants to keep a local orientation – she doesn't want the business to grow too fast. Still the company envisions growth – perhaps keeping central Ohio production, but adding distribution in other parts of the state.

“We'd love to support community gardening more – make contact with smaller and urban growers. As we grow, will have to diversify our supply stream,” she said.



Photo: Brian Williams



Photo: Brian Williams

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Implementation

This Assessment and Plan provides a comprehensive portrait of the local food system in central Ohio as it exists today. It also charts a course, through its 24 recommendations, to numerous improvements that will allow the system to deliver more affordable, healthful local food to more people in central Ohio while creating jobs, preserving farmland and making the system less petroleum-dependent and more resilient.

The next step is implementation. MORPC is committed to promoting implementation through the efforts of its staff and through the numerous volunteers who work through and with its Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group. Implementation efforts are beginning immediately. Achieving full implementation, however, will require participation by more than just MORPC staff and volunteers. We will need the assistance, cooperation and, in many instances, leadership of our state and local government agencies, private businesses, community groups and passionate citizens.

We therefore conclude this Assessment and Plan with an invitation. Please join us in making the vision set forth in this document into a reality! Contact our Center for Energy and Environment at (614) 233-4178 and we will let you know what you can do to help. Together we can ensure that central Ohio has a local food system that ranks among the best in the world.





Photo: Ohio Farm Bureau/Jodi Miller

CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD PLAN

Recommendation Achievement Schedule

The Agriculture and Food Systems Working Group divided its 24 recommendations into groups of short- and long-term projects. Some of the recommendations can be successfully implemented within one to three years, while others are likely to require four or more years to fully manifest. The recommendations are structured in such a way that allows the long-term projects to build on the successful implementation of the short-term projects.

Short-term recommendations

- Adapt to changing food-safety standards and consumer preferences
- Adopt new practices to extend growing seasons
- Establish incubators for local-food businesses
- Ensure that resources are available for urban food production
- Help food farmers operate more efficiently
- Ensure government support for local-food efforts
- Make sure government regulations and policies are aligned with local-food goals
- Establish “best practices” planning and zoning standards
- Establish better partnerships among local, state and federal governments
- Establish a regional food policy council
- Develop a state-level framework to assess urban and rural food deserts
- Make information and resources easily available
- Adapt existing programs to meet local-food needs

Long-term recommendations

- Establish agricultural cooperatives for local food
- Prepare the next generation of food farmers
- Increase food-processing capacity
- Improve aggregation and distribution of local food
- Develop a workforce for food production and processing
- Promote large-scale institutional purchases of local food
- Ensure that funding for a local food system is accessible
- Modernize Ohio’s land-use statutes
- Establish programs that reach out to consumers about local food
- Promote sustainability by linking infrastructure improvements with agriculture
- Showcase local food in stores and restaurants



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