

RAPPAHANNOCK-RAPIDAN FARM & FOOD PLAN

Plan Summary



As part of ongoing efforts to foster sustainable agriculture, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission conducted a comprehensive study of the region's food system, culminating in the development of a Regional Food System Plan. A food system is a collaborative network that includes everyone involved in putting food on our tables, whether that table is located in our homes, a restaurant or our children's cafeteria.

Through a series of Community Conversations, stakeholders developed a vision for the region's food system. This shared vision served to focus discussion and development of priority projects, and will serve as indicators from which to measure success in the future.

Food System Vision Statement

Our region has a thriving and inclusive food system that:

1. Provides affordable and abundant healthy food for our informed families and community
2. Provides a competitive financial return, respect for our farmers, and good jobs for our community
3. Protects and regenerates the health of our farmland and natural resources

PRIORITY PROJECTS

A list of priority projects was also developed by the region's stakeholders to address core obstacles found in the study.

1. Regional Food System Council

As the first step in the implementation effort, a Regional Food Council should be created to act as an advisory body and ensure the continuation of this effort. The council would be tasked with fostering implementation of regional food projects, assessing and providing recommendations on local food policy, and other related duties as needed. Members should be appointed by each county government, and also include local experts and representatives of key stakeholder organizations.

Staff of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission may assist with the council's development and operations at least initially. As duties' grow, a part-time or full-time staff person will likely become necessary, and could serve as a local foods coordinator for the region.

2. Local Food Regional Marketing Plan

As its first task, the Regional Food Council should develop a regional local foods marketing plan in collaboration with key stakeholders such as local tourism and economic development directors, Piedmont Environmental Council's Buy-Fresh-Buy-Local Program Staff, and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents. An assessment of past marketing efforts within the region should be conducted as an initial step in plan development.

The plan would provide on-going, diversified marketing with programs targeting the general public, local schools, restaurants, and other key stakeholder groups. Slogans and delivery must be fresh and attention-grabbing, tailored to each audience. Social media should be utilized where possible. Welcome packets for new residents, population of Market Maker, and check-off for farmers markets participants should be considered for inclusion in the plan. The plan should also incorporate strategies to market the region to farmers seeking to purchase land or relocate.

Creation of a regional brand should be explored as part of this effort to determine whether it would be beneficial compared to utilizing existing labels. Creation of a regional brand would allow for a clearer definition of "local food."

A phased approach to plan implementation should be taken with phase one focusing on raising general awareness of the region's local foods and phase two directed at consumer education and regional farmer/business marketing. Implementation of this marketing plan will lay the groundwork for implementation of the other projects.

3. Community Kitchen and Food Processing Center
The development of a centrally located commercial kitchen/food processing center in the region should be fostered. As one possibility, the Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission is currently conducting a feasibility study for developing such a facility at the Carver-Piedmont Center in Culpeper County in conjunction with Virginia Food Enterprise Centers and the Carver-Piedmont Agricultural Institute. Additional information about this study is available on the Commission's website at www.rrregion.org/carver.html.
4. Food Node/Aggregation Center
Explore the feasibility of developing a food node in the region to act as an aggregation center. This node would be smaller in scope than a food hub, but would connect with existing facilities such as food hubs, value-added processing centers, and institutional markets. Such a facility should include storage and freezer space. Siting the facility in the same location as the community kitchen/processing center would take advantage of shared resources and should be considered.
5. Farmer Mentorship Programs
For beginning farmers to succeed long-term, holistic and ongoing training is needed. Mentorship programs that pair beginning and well-established farmers together should be further developed to establish a source of long-term support with real-world knowledge. To take this concept one step further, several incubator farms should be created around the region that include business planning, mentors, equipment, and beginning farmer training, for a complete holistic program.
6. Farm Labor Internship Programs
An internship program for seasonal farm work should be developed with specific learning experiences provided. The Internship program would include a curriculum with clear goals and objectives, and potentially include sub-sets targeting returning veterans, ex-offender reentry, high-school students, etc. A certification program for mentors and interns should be established to provide proof of job skills and program skill development. In conjunction with this effort, a training class on labor laws for farm employers should be developed to assist employers in wading through the legalities and ensure they are meeting minimum standards.
6. Regional Farm Labor Needs Assessment
Due to the complex nature of the issue, further information is needed to determine how best to address the regional food system's lack of farm labor beyond creation of training programs. Therefore, the Regional Food System Council should collaborate with regional Virginia Employment Commission Farm Placement Specialists, local VEC staff, local economic development directors, and Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents to assess current resources and develop a regional strategy. Creation of a regional job farm labor job bank/directory is one possible outcome.

7. Mobile Slaughter Unit

While there is a great deal of interest in an additional slaughter facility among cattle farmers in the region, there is currently not sufficient evidence to support a large-scale processing facility. As an alternative, the feasibility of mobile meat processing should be explored in the short-term. The USDA's Food Service and Inspection Service defines a Mobile Slaughter Unit as "a self-contained slaughter facility that can travel from site to site." For more information on MSUs, including regulatory compliance information, costs of operation, case studies, and videos of the MSU slaughter process visit the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network, sponsored in part by USDA, at www.nichemeatprocessing.org.

8. Promote Existing Resources

Many great resources for farmers and local food buyers already exist (e.g. Farm Link, Farmer-Chef Express), but are not yet widely known or utilized. Rather than duplicating efforts, all stakeholder groups should promote these tools, and the Food System Council should consider developing a web-based resource guide.

Additional information about this project, including the full plan document, can be found on the Regional Commission's webpage at www.rrregion.org/foodsystem.html.



Funding for this project was made possible by a Planning Grant through the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) Community Development Block Grant Program, and the Local Food Promotion Program managed by the Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).