



# SEA ISLANDS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM

December 2011

## Introduction to Need

Although agriculture is central to the history of our country and certainly that of the Sea Islands region, it is striking to note both how complacent we have become to the vitality of our farms and farmers, and how disassociated we have become from the sources of the food that we eat.

As a nation, Americans consume more processed food than any other country in the world, and rough averages put the distance our food travels at 5000 miles from harvest to plate, approximately the distance from Miami, FL to Anchorage, AK. National headlines describe the frequency of systemic failure of the industrial-scale farming our system relies upon, as quality control breakdowns happen on a massive scale and widespread outbreaks of illness result. Rising gas prices threaten the system as a whole, placing enormous burden on the consumer to subsidize the grossly inefficient transportation required to move food the thousands of miles that it travels. And perhaps most perplexingly, this massive system continues to fail to provide for large groups of citizens, leading to food deserts in impoverished areas and the toxic combination of widespread food insecurity matching a widespread obesity epidemic within our already-disadvantaged communities.

Yet there is a rising demand for alternatives to our current system. Recent history has seen the rapid growth of the organic food market, from a 1 billion to a 26.7 billion dollar industry in two decades.<sup>1</sup> Grocers of all scales, from mom-and-pop shops to mega-Walmarts, are stocking organic options of both fresh and shelf-stable products. Large-scale standard food production companies are now purchasing smaller organic groups, aware of the market demand and seeking to recapture the economic base that has turned from their conventional products in favor of organic options. At the same time, a grass-roots movement is underway bringing agriculture to recently unheard-of locales: urban areas and individual yards. While small-scale urban agriculture and individual growing was prevalent for many generations, the initial growth of the industrialized food system made it the rare exception for at least a generation. But that trend is reversing, with studies showing that today, roughly 15% of the world's food is produced on urban farms,<sup>2</sup> growing in community gardens and abandoned lots and even on balconies and rooftops. Most impressive is the massive return of farmers markets across the country, with the USDA reporting a 17% increase in the number of markets in just the past year alone and a 200% increase over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> Citizens are turning to their own local farmers for healthier, local food purchasing where the current industrial-based food system is otherwise failing them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ota.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/farms-and-community/urban-agriculture>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ams.usda.gov/>

Considering that the national percentage of income spent on food is approximately 10%, the state of the food system is not just a personal sustenance problem, it is an economic development problem as well. Looking at the Sea Islands region, the 2010 Census gives the following statistics:

Population in Beaufort County	162,233	Median household income	\$55,286
Population in Jasper County	24,777	Median household income	\$37,393
Population in Hampton County	21,090	Median household income	\$34,846
Population in Colleton County	38,892	Median household income	\$33,263
Total Population	246,992 <sup>4</sup>		

Using the USDA statistics for a “Moderate Cost for Food Spent Per Month” averaged over the demographic spectrum, the average food costs per person totals \$226 per month, or \$2,712 annually, an increase of 60% since 1994. With a total population of 246,922, we can estimate that the four county Sea Islands region spends approximately \$672,806,208 annually on food costs. Replacing the community’s dependence on inter/nationally-sourced foods, an increase in locally-grown food sales by a mere 5% per year would add roughly \$33,640,310 annually to our local economy and in support of our local farmers. This capture of capital would be an enormous boost for the community’s economic growth.

A Sea Islands Sustainable Food System has the potential to impact not only the sustainability of the agriculture and mariculture industries of the region, but also have a positive effect on many secondary areas of impact. Civic participation and neighborhood investment are known to increase, through venues such as farmers markets and community gardens and community-supported agriculture programs, when communities are able to know the individuals responsible for their food’s production. Natural resources are better maintained and the natural environment can be healthier as a result, when embracing a smaller-scale, localized agricultural model that reflects a land use serving the immediate community. Finally, a strong agricultural region can provide significantly to local business development and economic expansion, with models such as Napa/Sonoma, Hudson, and Missoula Valleys as examples of sustainable food-based economic regions.

## Goals and Objectives

Sea Islands 2050 sees the development of a localized sustainable food system as an opportunity to radically improve the overall sustainability of the region through direct economic, environmental, and social measures. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition defines the basic goals of sustainable agriculture as, “...environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity...”<sup>5</sup> Using this definition in considering how to successfully achieve food system sustainability, the goal of the Sea Islands Sustainable Food System initiative is to create a local food system that provides regional food source resilience, facilitating systemic shifts in (food) security, (food) distribution, and (food) supply.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://sustainableagriculture.net/about-us/what-is-sustainable-ag/>

A systemic shift in food security is necessary to guarantee reliable and consistent locally-produced food to all members of our community. Economic success factors include insuring a sustainable supply/demand curve for local products and ensuring an increasing percentage of local food expenditure goes directly to locally-owned and operated farms and businesses. Environmental success factors include protecting and providing an adequate supply of diversified land types for food production, including preservation of land for future demand through co-op farming. Supply equity success factors include protection against price fluctuations at an inter/national level through a growing percentage of food produced from and by local sources.

A systemic shift in food distribution is necessary to guarantee the delivery of locally-produced food through an efficient and competitive system. Improvements to the current local model include adding additional venues for local food distribution, such as 1. more farmers markets/farmstands, 2. direct sale/distribution (the SILO model, see: <http://www.silo-beaufort.com/>), and/or 3. infiltration of regional/national-scale retail. Additionally, guaranteed adequate local supply must develop based on demand and responding to hurdles involved in transport and delivery of product. Increased food distribution capability must include development and expansion of local processing facilities, including those for 1. small animal, 2. produce, 3. seafood, and 4. specialty products.

A systemic shift in food supply is necessary to guarantee the stream of locally produced food to be adequate, consistent, and diverse. Improving sustainability of the local food system will require reducing food imports by 20% over the next 10 years, supplementing the difference entirely with locally sourced food. Additionally, developing niche/specialized food products through the mariculture and agriculture industries of the area will contribute to securing ongoing supply to our immediate market. Increasing the efficiency and economy of the local food supply, and increasing the convenience of and access to the local food supply, will contribute toward ongoing reliability of the market for consumers and therefore the market demand of the consumers.

Summarizing that background, the general goals of the initiative include:

- Economic impact - providing for a new growth industry in the region, and capturing a significantly larger percentage of local food purchase dollars as a result
- Environmental impact - providing for an expansion of small farms in the region, ensuring the proliferation of healthy land and the valued rural character of the Sea Islands
- Social impact - providing support for the long-standing land based culture and community identity of the region, while responding to the frequency of food insecurity in the community

Focusing on the potential outcomes, specific objectives for the initiative include:

- Increase in the percentage of food sold by local farmers to local consumers by 5% over the next 10 years
- Increase in venues for local food distribution, expanding local production over time in response to a grown local demand with the ultimate goal of 100% local resilience capability
- Foster the local production and adequately diversified supply of food through public-private partnerships, utilizing tools such as property tax credit and farmland leases

## **Target Population**

Multiple groups will be impacted by this project. In general, implementation of a Sustainable Food System will reach all of the greater Sea Islands community as it provides consumers with a secure and sustainable food system well into the future.

More specifically, the initiative will serve the local agriculture/mariculture and food industries, which would benefit from the support and investment in their products and services as a result of the improved system, with those economic benefits spreading to secondary and tertiary industries as well. Additionally, local and state institutions will be targeted through this project, as partners in research and expertise as well as platforms for outreach for sustainability in local food systems. Furthermore, local groups and institutions, particularly large-scale purchasers of food products, would benefit significantly from a localized system that shortens food travel cycle and improves efficiency of delivery.

## **Project Strategies**

The Sustainable Food System project will develop in three phases, summarized as: Evaluation, Research, and Implementation.

During the Evaluation phase, the Project Team will seek participants and host a public Forum on our region's food system. The Forum will provide opportunity to identify the food needs of the community as well as quantify the resources currently available. Experts in both sustainable food systems and the existing local system will be called upon to provide data on relevant issues, present precedent programs and systems that might serve as models, and deliberate the relevance and effectiveness of those models for the Sea Islands region. As part of preparation for the Forum, Sea Islands 2050 will partner with higher education institution(s) to prepare a Food Shed Analysis of the region.

During the Research phase, the Project Team will partner with vested organizations and institutions to conduct studies, the research from which might serve to improve upon the current regional food system. Research areas will be those identified as gaps of information by the previous forum, and the results of these studies should contribute to the provision of defined strategies for improvement of the current system, as well as documented goals for these strategies. Areas of study may include: agriculture/mariculture, economics, public policy, sociology, environmental sciences, and ecology/water sciences.

During the Implementation phase, the Project Team will work to implement a single and/or series of stand-alone organized system-building efforts within the Sea Islands community. These efforts may include, but are not limited to: a farmers market/farmstand organizational system for the region, a network of community gardens developed in conjunction with municipal facilities and the local public parks systems, a replicable local food distribution model, a local food processing resource system and outlets, systematized coordination between local food producers and local food banks, and a public outreach and participation campaign targeting area retailers, schools and institutions, health services and healthcare, governmental and military entities, and the hospitality industry, as well as the public at large

## **Chief Participants**

The Sea Islands 2050 Fellows chairing the Local Food System project are:

- Garrett Budds, Conservation Director, Beaufort County Open Land Trust
- Bob Turner, Developer of Habersham
- Chief Olofundeyi Olaitan, Director of Outreach Development at African Theological Archministry

Sea Islands 2050 will partner with the Beaufort County Open Land Trust to execute this project, leveraging the Trust's access to land well-served for small-scale agricultural use and contributing to a both economically- and environmentally-conscious approach to the rural and critical lands of our region. Sea Islands 2050 will also seek academic partners to execute this project, utilizing the academic approach in response to the current problems within our local food system and providing a base for study to the participating institution(s).

Additionally, participation by Sea Islands 2050 staff will be necessary for coordination of some project activities, and expert consultants will be sought, in collaboration with local institutions, to implement project activities at the academic level. Sea Islands 2050 will also collaborate with parallel initiatives throughout the country, seeking to contribute to best practices toward the cause of sustainable agriculture and food security.

## **Measurement of Results**

The results of the Sustainable Food System project will be measured by the systematic implementation of the following:

- Establishment of an economic and agricultural baseline for the Sea Islands region
- Establishment of key destinations, outlets, and audiences for outreach and value-building of sustainable agriculture practices and food system development throughout the community
- Establishment of a system of integrated farmland protection and farmer access
- Provision of training and development for farmers at all levels of institutional education, as well as the development of a new-farmer mentoring program within the local farming community
- Demonstrable increase in the acreage of farms, number of farms, number of farming jobs, and dollars from local farming kept within the Sea Islands region
- Demonstrable increase in the diversity of the produced agriculture within the Sea Islands region