



Photo: Farmers Market (Elvert Barnes/Flickr)

REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS PROGRAM

The Regional Food Systems Program has been made possible through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's, pilot Food LINC program and philanthropic partners.

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' (COG) Regional Food Systems Value Chain Coordinator provides COG members and other stakeholders with technical assistance on a range of food policy issues—from food security, to market development and distribution, and food waste.

Program Priorities

COG's 2012 *What Our Region Grows* report found that although metropolitan Washington produces a wide variety of food and fiber, there are very few food products for which local farmers could meet the region's demand. Agricultural production tends to be more concentrated on indirect agricultural products, like corn and soy, rather than direct-to-consumer products.

There are challenges to maintaining a strong agricultural industry in the region and opportunities to meet the growing demand for local food. Demonstrated market opportunities to farmers willing and able to produce more, and a wider diversity of crops produced at greater volume, will be necessary to achieve a greater level of regional food security.

The Value Chain Coordinator (VCC) works with a range of stakeholders—from businesses to non-profits to local, state, and federal government to identify opportunities for leveraging COG's unique expertise and competencies in ways that can grow the region's food economy to the benefit of producers, consumers, and COG members. In addition to advancing the priorities below, VCC contributes expertise to help partners plan key events, identifies resources for interested producers, and connects producer organizations with prospective partners and buyers.

FOSTER LOCAL FOOD BUSINESS CONNECTIONS

Producers and those working alongside them have noted that operating in metropolitan Washington means added costs for travel time, labor, fuel, and more. Lack of access to scale appropriate infrastructure for small and medium-sized producers to aggregate, process, and distribute product is another challenge cited. In response, COG has formed a Regional Food Distribution Working Group to serve as a "Local Food Chamber of Commerce."

GOALS

-  Grow market connections and profitability for regional farmers committed to sustainable practices.
-  Increase consumer access to healthy, local food.
-  Develop and sustain the program beyond the two-year pilot.

The group serves as a forum to learn from local and national experts on key issues related to growing the local food economy, and to facilitate market connections and partnerships between producer organizations, distributors, and mission driven businesses and nonprofits. In the future, the group will identify underleveraged, existing infrastructure for improved farm to market connections, as well as other barriers to increasing the flow of farm food to our region's buyers and consumers. COG is engaging planners, locally-owned and operated food hubs, distributors; major food banks and other nonprofits working to increase food security; COG's Regional Agricultural Work Group; and more. This working group could also elevate policy challenges and potential solutions to the COG membership.

SUPPORT FOOD AND AGRICULTURE POLICY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Since 2006, COG has hosted a Regional Agricultural Work Group comprised of local agricultural, economic development and soil conservation district staff, and several nonprofits. Recently, the Regional Food Systems Program has expanded this effort, hosting annual meetings of regional food policy councils, local government staff, and others, to expand best practices for food policy and programs. In January, the programs hosted farmers market organizations from Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia for peer exchange and networking. COG will continue to convene groups such as these, develop timely learning opportunities, and update *What Our Region Grows*, to promote the on-going learning and collaboration that will be required to develop a more sustainable, equitable, and profitable regionalized food system.

EXPANDING MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

The region must maintain strong retail and high value markets where small producers can continue to command higher-than-wholesale prices. COG and partners are designing strategic linkages on high visibility, high value markets to grow consumer awareness and market opportunities. COG has designed an employee benefit program to support healthy eating and local farm purchases. Inspired by lessons from programs in the City of Baltimore and Madison, WI, COG is working to implement a successful pilot program that could be replicated elsewhere in region to encourage continued support and use of Community Supported Agriculture programs.

INCREASE ACCESS TO LOCAL FOOD

COG has had an active Cooperative Purchasing Program in place for over four decades, and is assessing if there is an opportunity for a regional food procurement contract on select local food items. The hope is that this could support government, school, institutional and other purchasing and additional markets for local food.

MORE INFORMATION

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ABOUT COG

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is an independent, nonprofit association that brings area leaders together to address major regional issues in the District of Columbia, suburban Maryland, and Northern Virginia. COG's membership is comprised of 300 elected officials from 24 local governments, the Maryland and Virginia state legislatures, and U.S. Congress. www.mwkog.org