Regional Food Hubs and Food Value Chains:
Improving Market Access for Local Producers Through Innovative Distribution

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National Small Farms Conference
September 20, 2012
Regional Food Hubs

- USDA’s “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” (KYF2) Initiative
- Food Hub Definition & Example
- NGFN Food Hub Collaboration
- Summary of Findings to Date
- Deeper Dive into Survey Findings
- Food Value Chains and Case Studies
- Lessons Learned
- Food Systems Resources
Launched September 2009

- Designed to spur a “national conversation” on how to develop viable local and regional food systems and stimulate new economic opportunities

- Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan oversees a “KYF2” task force with representatives from every USDA agency, which meets every 2 weeks. Designed to:
  - Eliminate organizational “silos” between existing USDA programs to support KYF2 mission through enhanced collaboration
  - Align existing Departmental activities/resources and “break down structural barriers” that inhibit local food system development
Regional Food Hub Taskforce

In May 2010, USDA established an interagency taskforce to examine the role and potential of regional food hubs to improve farmer/rancher access to larger volume markets.

Includes representation from the following agencies:
- Agricultural Marketing Service, lead agency
- Rural Development
- Food and Nutrition Service
- National Institute of Food and Agriculture
- Economic Research Service
- Agricultural Research Service
- Food Safety and Inspection Service

Coordinating efforts with other Federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector.
Why Regional Food Hubs?

**Demand**

- Local food sales were estimated to be $4.8 billion in 2008, and are projected to climb to $7 billion in 2011 (USDA-ERS report).

- In 2011 National Grocers Association survey, 83 percent consumers said the presence of local food “very” or “somewhat important” in their choice of food store (up from 79 percent in 2009).

- 89 percent of fine dining restaurants surveyed by the National Restaurant Association in 2008 reported serving locally sourced items.

- Seven of the top 10 food retail chains in US now promote local sourcing (USDA-ERS report).

- The number of farm to school programs totaled more than 2,000 in 2011, a five-fold increase since 2004 (National Farm to School Network estimates).
Why Regional Food Hubs?

**Supply**

- Farmers continue to be challenged by the lack of distribution, processing and marketing infrastructure that would give them wider market access to larger volume customers.

- Particularly acute for operators of mid-sized farms, who are too large to rely on direct marketing channels as their sole market outlet, but too small to compete effectively in traditional wholesale supply chains independently.

USDA believes *regional food hubs can play an important role* in supporting/retaining these “ag-of-the middle” farmers and encouraging smaller farmers to scale up their operations.
Regional Food Hub Definitions

Definitions vary from narrow market efficiency functions to those related to visions of building a more sustainable food system.

Working Definition

A business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.
Regional Food Hubs

- Actively linking producers to markets
- On-farm pick up
- Production and post-harvest handling training
- Business management services and guidance
- Value-added product development
- Food safety and GAP training
- Liability insurance

Operational Services:
- Aggregation
- Distribution
- Brokering
- Branding and market development
- Packaging and repacking
- Light processing (trimming, cutting, freezing)
- Product Storage

Community Services:
- “Buy Local” campaigns
- Distributing to “food deserts”
- Food bank donations
- Health screenings, cooking demonstrations
- SNAP redemptions
- Educational programs
- Youth and community employment opportunities
Regional Food Hub  
- Defining Characteristics -

- Carries out or coordinates the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of primarily locally/regionally produced foods **from multiple producers to multiple markets.**

- **Considers producers as valued business partners** instead of interchangeable suppliers and is committed to buying from small to mid-sized producers whenever possible.

- **Uses product differentiation strategies** (e.g. identity preservation, group branding, sustainable production practices, etc.) to ensure that producers get a good price for their products.

- **Works closely with producers** to ensure they can meet buyer requirements by either providing direct technical assistance or finding partners that can provide this technical assistance.

- **Aims to be financially viable while also having positive economic, social, and/or environmental impacts within their communities.**
Local Food Hub
- Charlottesville, VA -

- **Started in 2009** by two women entrepreneurs, one with a background in retail and distribution and the other in nonprofit work.

- **Mission:** “Local Food Hub is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and secure the future of a healthy regional food supply by providing small farmers with concrete services that support their economic vitality and promote stewardship of the land.”
Local Food Hub
- Charlottesville, VA-

Non-profit food hub model with two major programs:

- Local food distributor
- Educational farm with a variety of outreach programs
Currently works with more than **75 small and mid-sized family farms** (annual sales under $2 million) within 100 miles from Charlottesville

- Produce farms from 1 to 30 acres and orchards from 20 to 500 acres

- Offers fresh produce, meat, eggs, and value-added products to **more than 150 customers**, which includes:
  - Schools
  - Restaurants
  - Grocery stores
  - Senior centers
  - College dining halls
  - Hospital (see video at [http://vimeo.com/14964949](http://vimeo.com/14964949))
  - Several distributors, processors, and caterers
Local Food Hub
- Charlottesville, VA-

- Annual Gross Sales for 2011: $671,505
- Projected Gross Sales for 2012: $871,000
PRODUCER IMPACTS

- Ensures that 80% of the sales price goes back to the producer
- 100% of their producers rated product pricing fair to excellent
- Producers have increased farm sales by an average of 25% since working with the hub
- 60% of their producers plan to increase production
- Provides numerous workshops for their producers in areas such as Integrated Pest Management, season extension, crop rotation, farm business planning, and food safety (GAP/GHP).

“Local Food Hub provided a “good opportunity to open up a market that was not available to us otherwise, and as a result, we have expanded production of our crops considerably and hired more folks due to increased demand.”” – Whitney Critzer of Critzer Family Farm
Local Food Hub IMPACTS
- Charlottesville, VA-

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS**

- Reinvested over $1.3 million in the local farming community
- Created 15 paid jobs at their distribution and farm operations
- Hub services have helped to retain and support over 200 agriculture-related jobs
- The 120 active food hub buyers reported increasing their local food purchases by an average of 30%
- The hub’s educational farm offers apprenticeships and high-school internships to budding farmers
- Donated more than 130,000 pounds of produce to hunger relief organizations, with 25% of the organic produce from their own 6 cultivated acres from educational farm donated to area food bank
NGFN Food Hub Collaboration

Collaboration between USDA, Wallace Center at Winrock International, and the National Good Food Network

Major Accomplishments to Date

- Carried out a national survey of regional food hubs
- National database of operating food hubs
- Published the *Regional Food Hub Resource Guide*
- Convened a national gathering of over 150 food hubs and their supporters to launch a *Food Hub Community of Practice*
Regional Food Hub Survey

- Online survey was sent to 72 food hubs in January 2011.
- Surveys completed by Feb. 7 were included in analysis.
- 45 food hubs completed the survey (63% response rate).
- Follow up phone interviews with 20 food hub operations
Food Hub Survey Key Findings

- **A nascent industry:** 60 percent had been in business for five years or fewer

- Average food hub sales were nearly **$1 million annually**

- **Private entrepreneurs** were largest single segment of food hub organizers at 40 percent of total

- Food hubs employed an average **7 full-time and 5 part-time employees** and relied on **5 regular volunteers on average**

- **Median number of suppliers to a food hub was 40**
Food Hub Survey Key Findings

- Offer a wide range of food products, with fresh produce being its major product category
- Sell through multiple market channels, with restaurants serving as an important entry market
- Socially driven business enterprises with strong emphases on both “good prices” for producers and “good food” for consumers. More than 40 percent operate in "food deserts" to increase access to fresh, local food products in underserved communities
- Offer wide range of services to both producers and consumers
From follow-up phone interviews with 20 regional food hubs on their financial viability:

- 10 Food Hubs identified themselves as financially viable, i.e., presently covering their operating costs (breaking even) or turning a profit

- 7 Food Hubs projected they will break even in the next 1 to 3 years

- All 10 financially viable food hubs have gross annual sales of $1 million or more
Based on a working list of 200 regional food hubs identified by the NGFN Food Hub Collaboration.
## Regional Food Hub Classifications

### Breakdown of Regional Food Hubs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Hub Legal Status</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privately Held</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publicly Held</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
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<td>1%</td>
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<table>
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<th>Intermediated Market Model</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Farm to Consumer (F2C)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm to Business/Institution (F2B)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both F2B and F2C</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27%</td>
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*Based on a working list of 200 food hubs identified by the NGFN Food Hub Collaboration (Aug. 6, 2012)
At least 68 food hubs have started in the past three years (2009-2011), with at least 25 food hubs established in 2011 alone.

*Based on a working list of 200 food hubs identified by the NGFN Food Hub Collaboration (Aug. 6, 2012)*
In most cases, the physical and “virtual” infrastructure is already in place, with an unmet demand for locally and regionally grown products.

It’s not about building new infrastructure, it’s about taking underutilized assets and making them work better.

What is needed?

- **Start-up capital** to renovate existing facilities for aggregation, storage, packing, light processing, and distribution.
- **Working capital** for business management systems to coordinate supply chain logistics (e.g., grower-buyer transactions, aggregation, distribution, and marketing).
- **Enterprise development** training and technical assistance to increase grower capacity to meet buyer requirements (volume, quality, packaging, food safety, etc.)
The Big Picture...
- Regional Food Hubs and the Food System -

Regional food hubs are filling a market function not adequately addressed by the current distribution system: the aggregation and distribution of food products from small to mid-sized producers into local/regional wholesale market channels.

Strong potential partnerships between regional food hubs and other distributors/wholesalers. Regional food hubs can:

- Serve as aggregation points for regional distributors/wholesalers
- Provide a reliable and ready supply of local/regional products
- Offer a broader and more diverse selection of source-identified and branded local products
- Increase supply of local/regional products by providing training/technical assistance to “grow” more producers
Exploration of organizational form and mission statement

Findings of a national survey of regional food hubs

Carolyn Dimitri, New York University & James Barham, USDA-AMS
Small Farm Conference, Memphis TN, Sept 20, 2012
Raising agricultural products
coffee beans, apples, cows
Entities involved: farms around the world

Potential policy targets: Environmental quality; farm worker wages/conditions; farmer income/farm viability/"agriculture of the middle"; animal welfare

Making & marketing food
roasted coffee beans, meat, apples
Packers, shippers, manufacturers, processors, ingredient suppliers, private labelers, wholesalers, brokers, distributors

Potential policy targets: Environmental quality (related to packaging, processing, transporting); healthfulness of food item; food system worker wages/conditions; upstream and downstream market power

Selling Food
Supermarkets & food retailers, restaurants, food service

Potential policy targets: Working conditions/wages paid to workers; prices paid to suppliers (including farmers); prices charged to consumers; types of food sold; product mix sold

Eating Food
People

Potential policy targets: Geographic availability of food; affordability; personal health; public health; labeling products with attributes; culturally appropriate food
Food hubs versus terminal markets

Food distribution

Financial viability

Social contribution: economic, social, and environmental
Mission driven organizations

Organizational form (profit motive?)

Is there an intersection between mission and organizational form, and is it systematic?

Anecdotal evidence: start as nonprofit
Food hub survey: goals

- Function
- Type/number of products handled
- Type/number of suppliers and buyers
- Organizational structure
- Mission
Conducted online in January 2011

Two versions implemented

Snowball methodology

108 firms identified

68 firms responded; 54 found to be food hubs (58% response rate)
Food hub mission statements

- “Building a resilient and socially just food system,“
- “…to connect consumers and farmers,“
- “…. to pay farmers for the food they produce and provide citizens with access to healthy food grown close to home
Classification of mission statements

Goals embedded in mission statements

Recoded into 10 categories:

local food, reshaping food system, support farmers, human health, food access, community development, environment, profits, increase consumer awareness, justice or equity
Assessment of mission statements

The number of goals included in each hub’s statement:

ranges from [1, 10]
mean & median: 3
st deviation of mean: 2

- 74% - target farmers
- 70% - local food

(higher than consumer & environment goals)
N = 47
Organizational form

- Cooperative – 25%
- For profit (LLC or C Corp) – 30%
- Not for profit – 28%
- Public – 17%

Note: N = 54
# Missions and organizational form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Food system</th>
<th>Local Food</th>
<th>Farmers</th>
<th>Food justice</th>
<th>Food access</th>
<th>Community Development</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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Socially responsible businesses?

- Survey supports trends in broader society and the food movement;
- “Beginning farmers” not alone;
- “beginning food businesses”
## Benefits of the for-profit model

### Annual value of products handled by food hubs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average (dollars)</th>
<th>Median (dollars)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Number of firms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>2,937,609</td>
<td>1,680,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>For profit</td>
<td>4,419,923</td>
<td>580,000</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>1,873,083</td>
<td>529,500</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>5,462,500</td>
<td>750,000</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>All food hubs</td>
<td>3,374,329</td>
<td>632,000</td>
<td>38</td>
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Source: Food Hub survey, Wallace Center.
More on non-profit vs profit

- Hire more FT employees (14 vs 5)
- Handle more products (8.1 vs 4.6)
- Have more customers (8.9 vs 5.5)

Potential for impact
Looking ahead

- Tighten analysis
- Test for statistical robustness
- Tie in public markets and cooperatives
Moving Food Along the Value Chain:
Innovations in Regional Food Distribution

James Barham
Marketing Services Division
USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)

National Small Farms Conference
September 20, 2012
Study Objectives

- To find out how different regional food distribution models work and how effective they are in creating new market channels for small and mid-scale producers
Research Methodology

- **Case study approach** - 3 year longitudinal study

- **Conceptually framed around value chains**

  Strategic business alliances formed between producers and their supply chain partners to distribute significant volumes of high-quality, differentiated food products and share the rewards equitably (see [www.agofthemiddle.org](http://www.agofthemiddle.org)).

- **Selection criteria for case studies**
  - Types of organizations
  - Stages of development
  - Geographic location
  - Agricultural products offered for sale

- **Semi-structured interviews with producers, distributors, buyers, and consumers**
Food Value Chain

Shared Mission Values
Examples:
- Farm viability
- Farmland preservation
- Healthy food access
- Sustainable production methods

Shared Operation Values
Include, but are not limited to:
- Accountability
- Long-term commitment
- Open and ongoing communication
- Transparency

Factors Influencing the Food Value Chain:

Finance
- Start-up capital
- Working capital
- Credit terms
- Taxes
- Insurance

Service Providers/Facilitators
- Agricultural extension
- Consultants
- Non-profits
- Government agencies

Policy Environment
- Food safety
- Subsidies
- Conservation programs
- Labor regulation
- Taxation

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service

9/20/2012
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Distribution Model</th>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Start-up/Nascent</th>
<th>Developing/Emerging</th>
<th>Mature/Developed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retail Driven</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>La Montanita, NM</td>
<td>The Wedge/Coop Partners, MN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-profit Driven</td>
<td></td>
<td>MFA/Big River Foods, MN</td>
<td>CAFF/Growers Collaborative, CA</td>
<td>Red Tomato, MA</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appalachian Sustainable Development, VA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producer Driven</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New N. Florida Cooperative, FL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Driven (e.g.,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oklahoma Food Cooperative, OK</td>
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</table>
Crosscutting Themes

1. Infrastructure Investments
2. Product Differentiation
3. Coordination of Producers
4. Organizational Capacity
Infrastructure investment needs to match the organization’s stage of development and marketing capacity – *in other words, only buy wheels and warehouses when you really need them!*
Oklahoma Food Cooperative

- 200 farmers – 3,800 members – over 4,000 items available each month (OK products only)
- $864,000 in sales for 2010, a 23% increase over 2009.
- Low level of initial infrastructural investment by coop, with equipment purchased as needed and as operating revenues permit
Product differentiation, including identity preservation, is essential to establishing marketing claims and improving negotiating position with buyers – *in other words, these businesses don’t sell plain vanilla products!*
Red Tomato

- **Started in 1996** – Serves as broker between grower network and retail stores

- **Scope of Operations**: ~35 farmers; 35 crops, including 22 heirloom apple varieties; Trader Joes and Whole Foods stores throughout Northeast

- **Eco Apple** – apples grown using advanced integrated pest management methods subject to third party verification. All tote bags labeled with individual farms

- **Sales** (2010) $2.8 million – 500% growth since 2003. Eco Apples account for roughly half of their sales
Informal producer networks can be highly adaptable to the constantly shifting demands of diversified food markets – *in other words, we love co-ops but there’s more than one way to work with farmers!*
Appalachian Sustainable Development - Appalachian Harvest -

- Non-profit established in 1995 – works with a network of organic farmers who collectively market and distribute produce under one identifiable, regional brand.

- **Appalachian Harvest** – a network of roughly 60 farmers, selling organic produce and eggs to supermarket chains with more than 600 stores.

- **Preseason planning:** The network meets in off-season to decide what to grow, how much, when and who will grow it.

- Over $1 million in sales (2011)
Building strategic partnerships can offset organizational limitations and strengthen value chain relationships – **in other words, find out what you’re good at, find out what you’re not so good at, and then get the right people to help you!**
CAFF’s Growers Collaborative

- Established by Community Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF) in 2005 to offer aggregation, distribution, market promotion, and education services to a network of more than 70 farmers, selling primarily to institutional markets.

- In 2009 CAFF stopped being a full-service distribution company, transferring distribution and marketing services to independent aggregators and distributors.

- Playing more of a matchmaker role, connecting farmers to distributors institutional food service operators, and focusing its efforts on providing support services through market promotion and education to local supply chain actors.
# Nonprofit Roles in Food Value Chains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matchmaker</td>
<td>Connect key stakeholders through short-term or one-off engagement. As public interest brokers, nonprofits can bring unlikely partners together to create value chain collaborations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Be actively involved in building longer term relationships among food value chain actors by helping to establish effective communication channels, ensuring values are articulated and shared, and fostering a trusting environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-party Certification</td>
<td>Establish a program whereby producers receive independent verification of their adherence to a certain set of standards. Such programs help to differentiate products and build demand in the marketplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>Provide marketing and educational support, such as branding that reinforces the values and “tells the story.” Education can raise consumer awareness and ultimately drive sales for food value chain products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst / Innovator</td>
<td>Test out innovative business models. Through grants and donations, nonprofits can take financial risks that would be more challenging for a for-profit business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Prospector</td>
<td>Identify and pursue resources, such as grants, loans, and service providers, to support value chain collaborators as they develop their enterprise(s).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other Lessons
- Five Keys to Successful Marketing for Food Hubs -

✓ Don’t sell commodities
  ➢ Product differentiation is key (unique product attributes, source identified, production practices, social equity), telling a compelling story, branding, certifications.

✓ Be there all year for your customers
  ➢ Must sustain operations year round to cover costs and keep customer communication constant. Be pragmatic about your approach in terms of sourcing “locally.”

✓ Get buyer commitment
  ➢ Be clear with buyers about volume order expectations and use a combination of specials, incentives, rewards, public recognition for “committed” buyers.

✓ Think farmers first
  ➢ Ensure good prices for producers and find ways to build their capacity to grow and be successful.

✓ Sweat the small stuff
  ➢ To tell an authentic and compelling story, all staff need to know every detail of the production and handling practices of the product sold under the brand (even the truck drivers!).
NGFN Food Hub Collaboration

Study Hubs
- Work closely with ~ 8 hubs
- Provide TA
- Capture and share learning

Community of Practice
- Food hub “professional network”
- National & regional networking opportunities
- Peer to peer learning tools
- Goal: Accelerate innovation and increase commerce

Technical Assistance Network
- Leverage National Good Food Network Research
  - Help to coordinate research across country
  - Annual survey

Outreach & Communications
- Case studies
- Webinars
- Links to financial and knowledge resources
  - www.FoodHub.info
  - www.ams.usda.gov/FoodHubs
USDA Food Hub Resources

USDA’s Food Hub Portal
www.ams.usda.gov/FoodHubs

A catalogue of USDA's findings, resources, and support for food hubs

Regional Food Hub Resource Guide:
Food hub impacts on regional food systems, and the resources available to support their growth and development

A collaboration between USDA and the Wallace Center
USDA Food Systems Resources

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service – Marketing Services Division
http://www.ams.usda.gov/WholesaleFarmersMarkets

Includes National Farmers Market Directory, grant programs, and research/resources to assist producers improve their market opportunities
Start2Farm – For New and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

www.start2farm.gov

Start2Farm serves as a one-stop reference for anyone looking for programs and resources to start farming and to be successful in their first years as a farmer or rancher.
“Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” Compass 2.0

www.usda.gov/kyfcompass

An online multi-media narrative with stories, pictures and video about USDA’s support for local and regional food systems

Includes an interactive map of USDA-supported local and regional food activities in all 50 states

2.0 version displays a great deal of local food infrastructure, including food hubs.

3.0 version coming soon!

USDA’s “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” Initiative

www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer
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