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The Local Foods Resource Mapping Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this USDA/AMS-funded project is to develop web-enabled, comprehensive state food system directories in six pilot states; to provide a more complete representation of the local food system instead of merely connecting buyers and sellers; and to identify and potentially create business opportunities for entrepreneurs by identifying gaps in local food systems.

Gaps exist in the understanding of the overall picture of statewide local food systems. Further, barriers to entry may prevent the deepening and growth of local food systems in rural and urban communities. Much remains unknown about how local food moves from farms to consumers, and consumer demand varies across states and remains relatively poorly understood.

At focus group events for the Local Foods Resource Mapping project, diverse groups of invited participants were presented with a series of state-level maps showing basic production, distribution, and consumption data as well as questions designed to guide discussion and provide actionable insights. Following the focus groups, participants were invited to respond to a more detailed online survey about the local food system.

An early conclusion is that a web-based mapping service that serves two distinctly different needs may be required. There is a recognized need for and value in providing food systems analytics in the form of maps showing where different supply chain firms are located and benchmarks such as location quotients that may point to opportunities for new businesses to emerge or improve the functioning of the supply chain. There are also opportunities to enhance the usefulness of MarketMaker and to expand its adoption for more immediate transactions between buyers, sellers, and market intermediaries.

Sustainability over time is a key issue, as secondary data rapidly become obsolete; however, this could represent a potential entrepreneurial opportunity. In general, participants see value in mapping where the production of different crops occurs in each state and where processors, distributors, and different markets are located. In addition, there is perceived value in combining and overlaying maps from public data sources to identify potential patterns and relationships.

Keywords: business development, food system maps, linking producers and consumers, MarketMaker

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