

# Virginia Farm to Table

## Healthy Farms and Healthy Food for the Common Wealth and Common Good

A Strategic Plan for  
Strengthening  
Virginia's Food System  
and  
Economic Future

 **Virginia Cooperative Extension**  
Virginia Tech • Virginia State University





# Virginia Farm to Table

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## Virginia Cooperative Extension

Virginia Tech • Virginia State University



### VirginiaTech

College of Agriculture  
and Life Sciences



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Find this report on the web at: [www.virginiafarmtotable.org](http://www.virginiafarmtotable.org)

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## A Call to Action: Implementing the Recommendations of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan

The Virginia Farm to Table Plan is an initiative that builds on the rich agricultural history and entrepreneurship of Virginia. Virginia's overall food system directly impacts the survival and viability of farms and farmland; the economic development of rural and urban communities; the care, restoration and resilience of ecological resources such as local waterways and the Chesapeake Bay; and critical health issues. Therefore, the promotion of healthy farms and healthy food from farm to consumer table can have a positive impact on the common wealth and common good of Virginia.

Virginia's agricultural industry is very diverse with different levels of local, regional, national and international trade of Virginia commodities and food products. The Virginia Farm to Table Plan is focused on Virginia's emerging local and regional food commerce and the enhancement of the health and resilience of communities and localities across the Commonwealth.

The unprecedented demand for local and regionally identified foods continues to grow in Virginia and across the United States. For purpose of this report and Plan, local is defined as grown and produced in Virginia. The demand for locally-grown food has also created a myriad of economic and social opportunities for agricultural producers, entrepreneurs and communities. Because the food system is so fundamental and closely interconnected, its significance for economic vitality and community viability of a particular place cannot be overstated.

Families and households in Virginia spend over \$19 billion annually on food purchases. The purchasing power these food dollars represent can be a powerful economic driver within Virginia's local farm and food economy. Encouraging the continued development of Virginia's food and farm economy can also impact individual and community health outcomes and improve Virginians access to fresh, whole nutritious foods.

Virginia was recently recognized as an emerging leader in the Nation's local food movement. The development of Virginia's local food movement has experienced growth through many different initiatives and businesses. Farmers markets are the most visible component of the local food movement, and Virginia has experienced significant growth in farmers markets over the past ten years. At the same time, new business enterprises and community initiatives have been incubated and expanded across the Commonwealth. These businesses and initiatives include food hubs, cooperatives, produce auctions, online farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), urban and community gardens, food policy councils and working groups, Buy Fresh Buy Local chapters, crop mobs

and gleaning clubs, farm-to-school, university, hospital and institutional procurement programs.

However, challenges remain and a more concerted statewide effort is needed to develop supply, markets, infrastructure, programs and policies to optimize the economic framework and access of this movement.

The overall objective of the Plan is to educate and communicate to the public, the food system stakeholders, and to key decision-makers a sustainable food system's impact on economic development, health, natural resources and social well-being; and how Virginia's food system can be strengthened to address key issues facing farmers, food entrepreneurs, and communities.

In collaborating to implement this Plan, we will grow jobs and new entrepreneurs, encourage durable economic development around farming and food, maintain farmland and working landscapes, improve public health, increase food security, and strengthen community viability for a stronger local food system and brighter economic future.

*Eric Bendfeldt and Crystal Tyler-Mackey*

*Virginia Farm to Table Team and the Virginia Food System Council*



*Encouraging greater access to fresh fruits and vegetables.*

## Executive Summary

The Virginia Farm to Table Plan is an initiative that builds on the rich agricultural history and entrepreneurship of Virginia. As long ago as The 1607 Jamestown Settlement, agriculture and innovative farming played a critical role in the establishment and survival of communities. The early settlers of Jamestown learned much from Native Americans about innovative food production and survival in their new environment; crop rotations, planting in rows, fertilizing and composting that allowed the settlers to survive the harsh winters of their new surroundings.

This entrepreneurial and innovative spirit continued and was strengthened by the work of prominent Virginians like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Edmund Ruffin, Cyrus McCormick and others throughout Virginia history. The same entrepreneurial spirit is evident today with Virginia emerging as one of the nation's leaders in the local food movement (Denckla Cobb, 2011).

The Virginia Farm to Table Plan builds on this tradition and strengthens the state's food system and economic future from the farm to the table. A food system is defined as the production, processing, distribution, sales, purchasing, preparation, consumption, and waste disposal pathways of food. Within each of these sectors and pathways, there are opportunities for job creation, business incubation and expansion, health promotion, improved access to healthy, nutritious food, enhanced environmental stewardship and economic success.

A key tenet for the Virginia Farm to Table Plan is that quality food should be affordable and accessible to everyone in Virginia regardless

of economic means. However, the social, environmental and economic importance of farming and food is often overlooked and under-appreciated by individuals and communities. Agriculture plays a critical role in maintaining a healthy environment especially water resources locally and in the Chesapeake Bay. The social, economic, and environmental impact of Virginia's food system is profound; therefore, ongoing education is needed to educate individuals, communities, and decision makers about these impacts. Strong healthy communities and local economies will ensure a strong healthy state economy.

Because the food system is so fundamental and closely interconnected, its significance for economic vitality and community viability of a particular place cannot be overstated. Virginia's overall food system directly impacts the survival and viability of farms and farmland, the economic development of rural and urban communities, the resilience of ecological resources, and critical health issues. Thus, healthy farms and healthy food from farm to consumer table can positively impact the common wealth and common good of Virginia.

*Participants at the Shenandoah Valley Farm-to-Table Summit providing key input to the Plan.*



**“I know of no pursuit in which more real and important services can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture.”**

*George Washington, First President of the United States*

Virginia's agricultural industry is very diverse with different levels of local, regional, national and international trade. Diversity in the agricultural and food system in the form of farmer background and experience, ownership structure, scale, product, production method, and market strategy is one indicator and measure of sustainability of food supply.

The economic impact of Virginia agriculture is reported to be \$55 billion annually, with the industry providing more than 357,000 jobs across the state. For every job within the agricultural and forestry sector, another 1.5 jobs is supported as an indirect economic benefit and impact. The annual economic impact results from \$2.9 billion in direct agricultural output; \$26 billion in value-added industrial output; and an additional \$26 billion generated from other agriculture-related business output. Even with this economic output, there are still more growing and emerging

## Virginia Farm to Table Plan of Action

The Virginia Farm to Table Plan's objective is to identify issues facing farmers, innovators in the food system, and communities across the state, and to suggest how those can be addressed to strengthen Virginia's overall food system. The Virginia Farm to Table Plan Team drew on the expertise and experience of more than 1,920 individuals across the Commonwealth who work in agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, education, finance, philanthropy, nutrition, community planning and economic development, land and natural resources conservation, public policy, local and state government, academics, and youth development. The 38 farm to table recommendations were developed and distilled from research and information gathered from farm-to-table summits, forums, listening sessions, an online survey, and focus group meetings conducted over a 15-month period by the Virginia Farm to Table Team and the Virginia Food System Council.

Facilitated discussions were held at the 2nd Virginia Food Security Summit to review the Plan's top eight recommendations for immediate action and implementation. Based on discussions and results of a written survey at the Summit, the following recommendations for immediate implementation and action were further vetted to develop actionable steps (University of Virginia, 2012).

Criteria for selecting the top three action steps for each recommendation

- .. How powerful is the action likely to be to implementing this strategic priority?
- .. Is the action practical?
- .. Is the action doable in a timeframe of 1- 2 years?
- .. If the action affordable (people, effort, and money)?
- .. Is the action politically feasible?

### **1. The Virginia Food System Council with its participating organizations will shepherd and support the implementation of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan by working closely with universities, agencies, organizations, funders and the private sector. The Council will develop and report on within 9 months:**

- a. A structural framework that is transparent, inclusive, and clear, and that draws connections across sectors.
- b. A marketing plan that distinguishes between different constituencies and among different purposes: education, policy, and alliances.

- c. A business plan that includes a budget, identifies the variety of funders, and targets specific actions to specific funders.

### **2. Work with the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition, coordinated by Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, to recruit, train, and establish the next generation of farmers and farm workers to provide quality food through ecologically sound and profitable production systems.**

- a. Expand farming education in order to re-energize the idea of farming and to address the changing nature of farms.
- b. Focus efforts on working and teaching farms that provide training, apprenticeships, and labor opportunities.
- c. Expand the marketing in order to help the coalition grow.

### **3. Establish a Virginia food system report card to facilitate assessment and collection of baseline data for monitoring hunger, health, environmental performance, and advancements of Virginia's food system.**

- a. Conduct an assessment and analysis of local foodsheds in order to build baseline data for the report card.
- b. Delineate benchmarks and be sure to address desired outcomes based on a community agreement.
- c. Create a working group that is regional and consists of a broad base of stakeholders.

### **4. Work with the Virginia Food System Council to remove barriers that impede the development and expansion of the production, processing, distribution, and marketing capacity of locally-grown Virginia foods.**

- a. Facilitate the development of standards for direct sales to consumers to provide transparency and access to reliable, factual information.
- b. Ensure proper scales for establishing processing regulations, infrastructure, and resource assistance for farmers that need help overcoming hurdles.
- c. Make farmland more accessible for young farmers (including financially).

### **5. Work with state and federal agencies and institutions to increase their support for locally-grown Virginia food and farm products.**

- a. Overcome bureaucratic regulation barriers for implementing the use of local food in all state and county level institutions.

- b. Help producers in overcoming bureaucratic and regulation barriers.
- c. Develop education for all people, from pre-Kindergarten to higher education to consumer and producer awareness.

**6. Set measurable goals and track procurement purchases and costs of locally-grown Virginia food and farm products for all state agencies, schools, universities, and other institutions.**

- a. Streamline and standardize guidelines for purchasers, farmers, and distributors.
- b. Educate both purchasers and farmers about all the opportunities that are available to them as well as institutional needs.
- c. We need a statewide umbrella system to track progress that works for everyone.

**7. Establish a comprehensive informational website and networking resource for all Virginia local food system resources and ecologically sound farming practices.**

- a. Identify the user base and the site owner.
- b. Spell out how this site would function, what services it would offer, and how it would look.

**8. Establish a marketing campaign to challenge Virginia households and businesses to buy \$10 per week of locally-grown Virginia food and farm products year round.**

- a. Include messages that explain the accessibility and importance of local food.
- b. The marketing campaign should take on a variety of forms.
- c. The marketing campaign needs to be extensive and intensive to infiltrate and be visible in a wide variety of communities, places, and venues to affect all participants in Virginia's food system.

Participants of the 2nd Virginia Food Security Summit also emphasized that ongoing education and institutional support should be overarching strategies for advancing the Plan and its implementation. Additionally, summit participants emphasized that the Plan should be undergirded by **values of community, compassion, justice, fairness, balanced leadership, equitable participation, resilience, self-reliance, independence, year round availability and accessibility, and a strong viable future** for all Virginia farmers and farmland.

economic opportunities for Virginia farmers and food entrepreneurs (VDACS, 2011).

The Virginia Farm to Table Plan is focused on emerging local and regional food commerce, and building a strong, demographically diverse, profitable and sustainable food and farm sector across Virginia that provides differentiated place-based products for local and regional markets. Within this context, the Plan aims to help Virginia farmers gain a competitive advantage for increased leverage and position in local and regional markets, while being conscious that many rural and urban communities struggle to afford and access quality healthful foods.

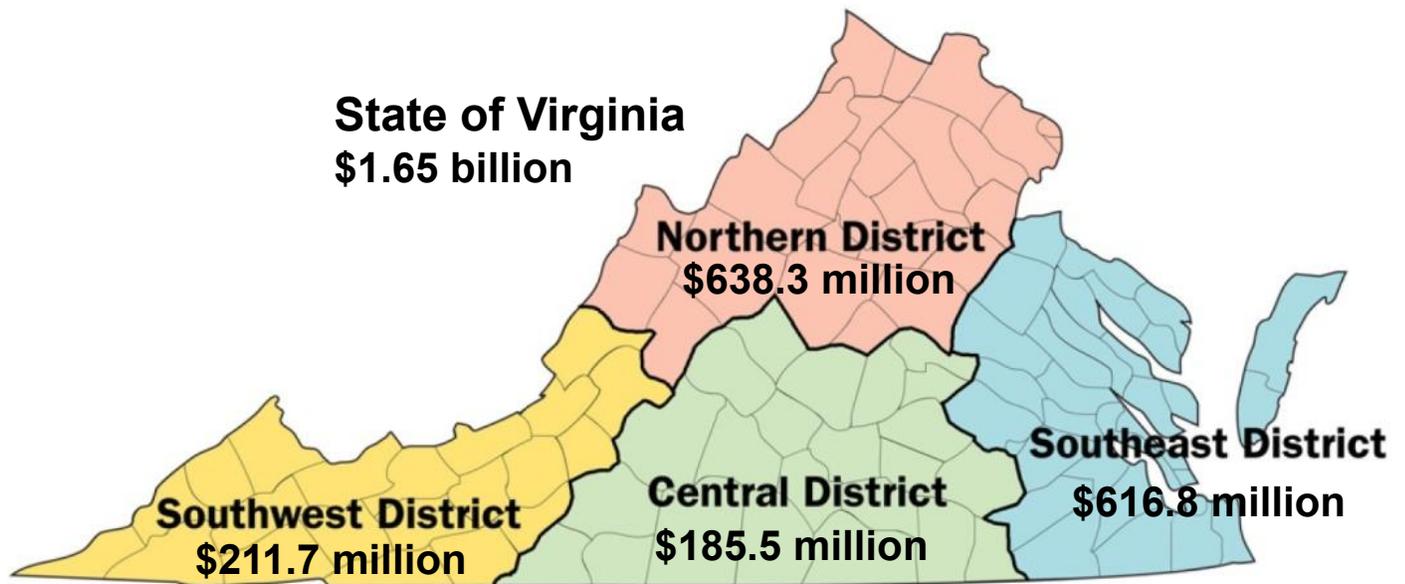
The unprecedented demand for local and regionally identified foods continues to grow in Virginia and across the United States. Low and Vogel (2011) recently reported local food sales, through direct farmer-to-consumer and wholesale market channels, in the U.S. to be \$4.8 billion in 2008. The demand has also created a myriad of economic and social opportunities for agricultural producers, entrepreneurs and communities.

From 2002 to 2007, Virginia experienced a 13% increase in the number of farms selling direct to consumers. The value of these direct-to-consumer sales increased 72% over the same time period, from \$16.8 million to 28.9 million. Today, Virginia has over 200 farmers markets and 135 Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) operations, and the number continues to grow (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service 2009a).

Virginia families and households spend over \$19 billion annually on food purchases (Meter, 2011). These food dollars can be a powerful economic driver for Virginia's farm and food economy. Virginia Cooperative Extension estimates that if each household in Virginia spent \$10 per week of their food budget on locally-grown Virginia food; \$1.65 billion would be generated annually in direct economic impact (Benson and Bendfeldt, 2007).

In 2008, Virginians spent \$11 billion on food eaten at home. Foods eaten at home included \$2.6 billion worth of meat, poultry, fish and eggs; \$1.8 billion of fruits and vegetables; \$1.5 billion of cereals and bakery products; \$1.2 billion of dairy products; and \$3.8 billion of sweets, fats, and oils (Meter, 2011). Therefore, every Virginia community would benefit from more farmers producing products for in-state purchase and consumption.

New business enterprises and community initiatives have been incubated and expanded across the Commonwealth over the past five years. These businesses and initiatives include food hubs, cooperatives, produce auctions, online farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), urban and community gardens, food policy councils and working groups, Buy Fresh Buy Local chapters, crop mobs



*Direct economic impact generated annually for Virginia and four Cooperative Extension Districts if each household in Virginia spent \$10 per week of their total food budget on locally-grown Virginia food and farm products (Benson and Bendfeldt, 2007).*

and gleaning clubs, farm-to-school, university, hospital and institutional procurement programs. However, challenges remain and a more concerted multi-sector statewide food system effort is needed to seize the economic opportunity.

Virginia also has the opportunity to enhance local and regional food systems to improve health outcomes, reduce healthcare costs, and address potential economic leakage in communities due to lost productivity. Economic leakage simply means total sales and economic output within an area are not as much as they could be based on the area's population, income, capacity and existing resources.

In the past ten years, the prevalence of obesity in Virginia increased from 19.3 to 25.5% of the population. Even though this obesity rate is lower than many other states, the rapid growth and prevalence of chronic diet-related illnesses is costing us lives, quality of life and economic prosperity. In 2006, the total cost of diabetes for people in Virginia was estimated at \$4.4 billion.

This estimate includes medical costs in excess of \$2.8 billion attributed to diabetes, and lost productivity valued at \$1.6 billion (American Diabetes Association, 2008; 2011). Since these expenses are due to preventable diet-related illnesses, increasing access and consumption of fresh, healthy whole foods can help address the prevalence of these diseases and health

### Two key tenets of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan are:

1. everyone should be educated about the social, economic and environmental importance of Virginia's food system, and
2. quality food should be affordable and accessible to everyone in Virginia regardless of their economic means.

care expenses. The state would also benefit from lower treatment costs and higher economic activity through time as individuals experience better health.

Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Virginia State University, Virginia Cooperative Extension, The University of Virginia, and the Virginia Food System Council with all its participating organizations initiated the Virginia Farm to Table initiative in September 2010. The goal of the initiative was to strengthen Virginia's food system and economic future through the development of a comprehensive Virginia Farm to Table Plan that informs and integrates assessment, education, development of programs and infrastructure,

policy and funding recommendations to address key issues facing farmers, food entrepreneurs, and communities. A logic model was developed to guide the Virginia Farm to Table Plan development process.

Underlying assumptions and key tenets for the development of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan were that ongoing education of the social, environmental, and economic importance of Virginia's food system would be critical and that quality food should be affordable and accessible to everyone in Virginia regardless of their economic means. The Plan would directly address 1) local regional farm and food markets 2) agricultural economic

# A Logic Model for the Virginia Farm to Table Plan

## Goal of the Virginia Farm-to-Table Plan\*

To strengthen Virginia's local food system and economic future through development of a comprehensive Virginia Farm-to-Table Plan that informs and integrates assessment, education, development of programs and infrastructure, policy and funding recommendations. The Plan directly addresses 1) local regional farm and food markets 2) agricultural economic development, 2) community viability, and 3) food access, nutrition and health.

### Why develop a farm to table plan?

- Job loss and dwindling revenues
- Loss of farmland and working landscapes
- Increased suburban and urban growth and development
- Increased obesity and chronic diet-related diseases rates
- Rising costs of energy
- Increased natural resource degradation
- Loss and consolidation of small mid-sized farms

### Virginia assets

- Strong historic and diverse agriculture
- Increased consumer demand
- Funding opportunities
- Mid-Atlantic geography and climate
- Community engagement (people, institutions, organizations)
- Proximity to urban and metropolitan centers

### Inputs (What?)

- Structured planning
- Strategic coordination and pilot projects
- Examine of policy and regulatory change
- Research, education, and non-formal training programs
- Capital investment for local and regional food and farm infrastructure
- Consumer education and marketing

### Strategies (How?)

- Engage and coordinate agencies, stakeholders and marketing programs at state and local levels
- Grow beginning and transitioning farmers and help secure prime farmland
- Provide education, information, training, and technical support to help farmers adopt ecologically-sound farming methods
- Expand producers' access to larger-scale local and institutional markets
- Support food systems infrastructure, business development, and community food enterprises
- Improve access to healthy, local food and grow electronic benefit transfer (EBT) farmers market programs
- Cultivate urban, school, and community food gardens
- Strengthen farm-to-school program and institutional market opportunities

### Outputs (Short-term results)

- More farmers seeking to sell local and within state markets
- Local farm and food working groups and advisory councils
- Coordinated local food system policies and regulations
- Viable business models and public / private partnerships
- Statewide networks that expand reach and effectiveness of community-based initiatives
- Food system training programs that support teachers, extension agents, farmers and food entrepreneurs

### Outcomes: (Short-term impacts)

- More fresh, healthy, local food widely sold to institutional, retail and food service markets
- More infrastructure and new businesses partnerships established
- A more supportive legislative and regulatory environment
- More demand for sustainable produced foods
- Better coordination of agency and educational institution local food efforts
- Supply and demand of sustainably produced food increasing in parallel

### Outcomes: (Long-term impacts)

- Increased jobs within Virginia's farm and food economy
- Healthier Virginians with reduced healthcare expenditures
- Increased food dollars spent locally supporting Virginia's rural communities
- Improved local waterways and environmental impacts
- Increased food dollars spent on locally grown and processed foods
- Farming widely respected as a skilled, satisfying and economically viable profession in Virginia

\*Logic model adapted from North Carolina's From Farm to Fork Guide and Iowa's Local Food and Farm Plan.

## Current Issues of Virginia's Food System

- “ There is unprecedented demand for locally identified Virginia foods. **Virginians spend \$19 billion annually on food purchases.**
- “ If each household in Virginia spent \$10 per week of their food budget on locally-grown food; \$1.65 billion would be generated annually in direct economic impact.
- “ Healthy soils, air, and water are essential to Virginia's food system.
- “ Of Virginia's 47,383 farmers, approximately 10,883 farms or roughly 25% of the farms have implemented some conservation measure on their farm.
- “ Virginia lost over 649,000 farm acres to development from 1997 to 2007.
- “ From 1997 to 2007, Virginia experienced a significant decline in the number of farms having between \$50,000 and less than \$499,999 of gross annual agricultural receipts.
- “ In 2011, U.S. farmers received only 12 cents of consumers' food dollar.
- “ Liquid fuels and fertilizer costs increased 81% and 65% in Virginia from 2002 to 2007.
- “ In 2007, the average value of products sold per farm in Virginia was \$61,334.
- “ In 2009, Virginia had an adult obesity rate of 25.5%.
- “ In 2006, the total cost of diabetes for people in Virginia was estimated at \$4.4 billion.
- “ In Virginia, 912,790 individuals are considered food insecure. Food insecurity among seniors and children is increasing.
- “ Child food insecurity in Virginia is 17.6%.
- “ Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) monthly participation was projected to be 364,825 Virginia households in 2010.



*Discussing market development at the Forum in Blacksburg.*

development, 3) community viability and environmental stewardship, and 4) food access, nutrition and health.

At each stage of the development of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan, input was sought from a variety of stakeholders and the general public. To develop the recommendations, the Virginia Farm to Table Plan Team drew on the expertise and experience of more than 1,920 individuals across the Commonwealth who work in agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, education, finance, philanthropy, nutrition, community planning and economic development, land and natural resources conservation, public policy, local and state government, academics, and youth development.

Major areas and themes identified as challenges at the summits, listening sessions, and through secondary data research of Virginia's food system include:

- “ **Increasing education and direct outreach to consumers, farmers, underserved populations and public officials.** Because everyone needs to eat each day to thrive, the food system affects and touches everyone on a daily basis. Therefore, ongoing education and more direct engagement of consumers, farmers, underserved populations and policy makers about Virginia's food system will be important for market and policy decisions for long-term community economic development, environmental performance and improved health outcomes and social well-being.

Additionally, education about Virginia's food system should be for all people, from pre-Kindergarten to higher education to consumer and producer awareness.

- “ **Cultivating beginning farmers and farm workers for long-term agricultural economic vitality and stability.** Virginia, like many other states, is facing an aging farm population and a declining farm work force. The typical Virginia farmer is 58 years old, and faces a plethora of risks and challenges such as volatile markets, high feed and fuel prices, farm transition planning and new environmental requirements (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2009a.). Even

for established farmers, off-farm income and employment that offers healthcare benefits is needed to support the farming operation. For beginning farmers, access to land, experience, and capital are all challenges to address and overcome if farming is to be a full-time profession and career.

- “ **Conserving and protecting prime agricultural soils and arable farmland.** Urban and suburban development continues to threaten prime agricultural soils and arable farmland in Virginia. From 1982 to 2007, about 7,500 acres of Virginia’s prime agricultural land was developed annually. More recently, from 1997 to 2007, Virginia lost over 649,000 farm acres (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2009b) . This change and loss is an indicator of development pressure as well as long-term agricultural economic vitality. Once these agricultural soils and lands are developed or paved over, agricultural production opportunities cease and there is no turning back.
- “ **Encouraging food system planning in counties’ and cities’ economic development and comprehensive plans.** The concept of planning our farming and food system has been under-appreciated and at times overlooked in community planning. Planning must consider soils, water, and natural resources needed for farming and a robust food system, but also needs to consider clustering and networking of essential services and resources for a healthy and resilient food system. Once, communities realize that prime agriculture soils and land have been developed, it is certainly too late in the planning process.
- “ **Encouraging ecologically sound farming systems through greater participation and implementation of agricultural best management practices (BMPs), whole farm planning by farmers for comprehensive conservation and profitable management.** Healthy communities and a healthy environment are critical components for economic success and prosperity. Farmers value their soil and water resources; therefore, environmental stewardship of their land and Virginia’s working landscapes is critical to long-term profitability and sustainability.

Agriculture and the Chesapeake Bay are two incredible assets for Virginia’s economy, so balancing profitable land management and conservation practices is an ongoing need. Of Virginia’s 47,400 farmers, approximately 10,883 farms or

roughly 25% of the farms have implemented some conservation measure on their farm. An additional 11,618 farms practice some form of rotational or management intensive grazing. Virginia farmers have made significant progress in protecting and conserving Virginia’s natural resources, but broader participation is still needed moving forward to support agriculture and protect water quality (Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, 2009).

- “ **Addressing community food security, hunger, justice and public health issues.** Food is a basic necessity for life, but also for economic productivity and prosperity. And yet, many Virginians struggle to have access to an adequate supply of healthy food to lead an active productive life. Because of economic constraints, many Virginia households must choose between buying foods or paying for other basic household needs and bills like rent, electricity or medical. Virginia’s food insecurity rate at 11.8% is below the national average, but 912,790 individuals are still considered food insecure (Feeding America, 2011).

Additionally, five counties and 5 cities have food insecurity rates of between 19 and 28%, which means 1 in 4 people in those communities does not know where the next meal may come from. For children, food insecurity is even more pronounced across the state with an overall child food insecurity rate of 17.6%. In a few Virginia counties, the childhood food insecurity rate approaches or exceeds 30% (Feeding America, 2011).

Food insecurity among seniors and vulnerable communities is a growing and urgent concern. According to Feeding America,

7.9 percent of households with seniors (2.3 million households) that they feed were food insecure. In 2010, 8.9 percent or 3.4 million older Americans were living below the poverty line. In addition, food insecure seniors were 2.33 times more likely to report fair to poor health status and had higher nutritional risk. Thirty percent of households with seniors that Feeding America serves indicated that they have had to choose between food and medical care and 35 percent had to choose between food and paying for heat or utilities.

As Virginia addresses these food and health concerns, it is important to realize the demographics of food insecurity among the elderly. Food insecurity among seniors is more likely if seniors live in a southern state; are younger; live with a grandchild; are African American; and are Hispanic.

*Students enjoying a local harvest meal at Eastern Mennonite University.*



**Economic leakage simply means total sales and economic output within an area are not as much as they could be based on the area’s population, income, capacity and existing resources.**



be encouraged to participate in shaping the food system to better address local needs and optimize community resources. Therefore, more support and acknowledgement of past, current and future efforts at the local and regional level as well as the state will be needed. Additionally, the private sector (for profit and not-for profit) will continue to be a key partner and advocate for local food system activities and advancements.

To increase participation in the development of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan, an online survey instrument was designed and developed to further examine the assessment, education, development and policy needs across the state. Approximately 1,134 people, from 418 distinct zip codes, were surveyed about the needs for the development and advancement of Virginia's food system (Hightower and Benson, 2011). Through the survey instrument, an additional 34 distinct items were identified as challenges and priorities for advancing Virginia's farm to table efforts.

The Plan is the product of an inclusive and in-depth process of information gathering and research into issues facing farmers, food entrepreneurs, and communities, and engaging agencies, organizations and institutions. The initial draft recommendations were shared and vetted with representatives from 24 participating organizations and agencies on the Virginia Food System Council, along with participants in the summits, forums, and listening sessions.

The 38 recommendations focus on assessment, education, development, and policy related to four topic areas and overall implementation: 1) Business and Production Management, 2) Market Development, 3) Food System Planning, Management and Policy, 4) Food Security, Food Safety, Diet and Health, and 5) Implementing the Virginia Farm to Table Plan.

The assessment will set baseline data to develop an ongoing report card on Virginia's local food system. Educational efforts will build the awareness and knowledge of government officials, farmers, food entrepreneurs, consumers, and communities about the food system. Development will build capacity, programs and needed food system infrastructure. Policy will address obstacles and encourage local food system innovation and expansion.

During these tough financial times, on-going and concerted effort to address these farm-to-table recommendations will generate additional revenue, strengthen the state's economic future, and help the Commonwealth achieve the following goals, objectives, and outcomes:

- .. Encourage business development and expansion
- .. Create and maintain new jobs
- .. Incubate small and mid-sized processing and manufacturing enterprises
- .. Expand in-state and regional markets for locally-grown Virginia farm and food products
- .. Provide incentives for new and established farmers to invest in their farm and food production enterprises
- .. Enhance Virginians access to local food and farm markets regardless of economic means
- .. Improve food security in all Virginia households and communities
- .. Develop the programs and infrastructure needed to deliver more food from Virginia farms to market
- .. Address any policy or regulatory barriers that hinder local farm and food production
- .. Improve access to Virginia farm and food data for producers, consumers and agencies
- .. Encourage new farm start-ups, beginning farmers, and food entrepreneurship
- .. Improve health for Virginians and reduced diet-related health care costs for the state
- .. Promote a sound sustainable environment for long-term economic vitality and community viability
- .. Educate Virginians about the benefits of buying locally-grown Virginia farm and food products.

The Plan also highlights different local and regional farm-to-table initiatives that can serve as models, tools, communities of practices and/or case studies for further developing and expanding of Virginia's food system. In collaborating and coordinating to implement this Plan, we will grow jobs and new entrepreneurs, encourage durable local and regional economic development around farming and food, maintain farmland and working landscapes, improve public health, increase food security, eliminate rural and urban food deserts, strengthen community viability for a stronger food system and brighter economic future.

**“Liquid fuels and fertilizer costs increased 81% and 65%, respectively, in Virginia from 2002 to 2007. And this increase was prior to the major increase in the price of fuel in 2008.”**

*~ USDA, Agricultural Census 2007.a*

## Virginia Farm to Table Recommendations at a Glance

In looking at the breadth and scope of Virginia’s food system, the Virginia Farm to Table Team identified four key topic areas as foundational components for strengthening Virginia’s agriculture and food system, advancing public and community health, conserving critical natural resources, enhancing local and state economies, and encouraging community viability and quality of life. The recommendations are based on discussions and input gathered and synthesized from summits, forums, listening sessions, focus group meetings and an online survey around these four topic areas in the chart below. The recommendations below are not listed in order of priority or hierarchical rank, but are recommendations to strengthen Virginia’s food system more comprehensively and systematically through more concerted assessment, education, development, and policies.

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)
<b>1. Business and Production Management</b>  <b>Objective:</b> To cultivate viable production and profit to assist the Commonwealth in meeting the needs of individual’s efforts at establishing and maintaining responsible businesses along the farm to fork value chain.	1.1 Develop a business planning educational program for farmers and food entrepreneurs to include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>strategic business planning and long-term goal setting;</li> <li>tactical business planning keyed to developing, evaluating, and selecting alternatives that support the businesses’ long-term goals;</li> <li>developing an information system to measure, monitor, and provide feedback</li> <li>understanding the role of credit and financing in new ventures for farmers, entrepreneurs and processors</li> <li>provide on-going education, training, and technical assistance with special attention given to holistic business planning; whole farm planning; ecologically-sound farming systems; best management practices (BMPs); permaculture; and farm resource management planning for effective conservation of soil, water and other natural resources.</li> </ol>		E	D	
	1.2 Assess and identify gaps in current incentives and technical assistance programs supporting Virginia farmers in establishing and implementing whole-farm resource management and comprehensive conservation plans for improved water quality and natural resources conservation.	A	E	D	P
	1.3 Work with and expand the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition, coordinated by Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, to recruit, train, and establish the next generation of farmers and farm workers to provide quality food through ecologically sound and profitable production systems.		E	D	P

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)	
<b>1. Business and Production Management (cont.)</b>  <b>Objective:</b> To cultivate viable production and profit to assist the Commonwealth in meeting the needs of individual's efforts at establishing and maintaining responsible businesses along the farm to fork value chain.	1.4	Establish a shared database to coordinate and support expansion of farm start-up education, beginning farmer training, mentorships, internship opportunities in the public and private sector from middle school and on up.		E	D	
	1.5	Provide and support farm transition and farmland protection educational programs and consultation services for all parties with a vested interest in the farm (e.g., family, first or second generation farmers, non-family land transfers, Purchase of Development Rights, and Land Conservation Fund ).		E	D	
	1.6	Assess the need for teaching farms to provide hands-on training in basic farming techniques and ecologically-based farming systems; acquisition, use, and maintenance of land, equipment, and machinery; and day-to-day business management.	A	E	D	
	1.7	Survey and ascertain basic infrastructure needs throughout Virginia (i.e. slaughter facilities, cooling and packing operations, community kitchens, canneries, mills and market point distribution systems)	A		D	P
	1.8	Provide technical assistance and business incentives to assist with the development of regional aggregation and distribution sites throughout Virginia.			D	
	1.9	Gather and disseminate ways to improve access to affordable healthcare insurance for farmers and farm workers.	A		D	P
<b>2. Market Development</b>  <b>Objective:</b> To expand the local, regional, and institutional market for Virginia produced agriculture and food products through creating new value added and differentiated place-based products.	2.1	Develop a comprehensive market development educational program at the state and local level to include: 1) strategic market development and long-term goal setting; and 2) tactical market planning for farmers, entrepreneurs and processors.			D	
	2.2	Survey the capacity of Virginia-based meat and other food processing facilities for storage, processing and increased sales and implement these food processing resources where there is an obvious need.	A		D	P
	2.3	Assess the supply and demand for value-added food processing (i.e., canning, milling, freezing, on-farm milk processing) in Virginia and identify the hindrances and opportunities for operating value-added food processing facilities in the state.	A		D	

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)	
<b>2. Market Development (cont.)</b>  <b>Objective:</b> To expand the local, regional, and institutional market for Virginia produced agriculture and food products through creating new value added and differentiated place-based products.	2.4	Assess and establish financial incentives for small and mid-sized value-added food processors in Virginia (i.e., fruits, vegetables, meats and grains).	A		D	
	2.5	Offer recurring Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), as well as Good Aquacultural Practices, educational workshops and training for organic, extending the season, scaling up, opening new market opportunities, and encouraging overall environmental stewardship and food safety.		E		
	2.6	Assess the capacity for establishing other food hubs throughout the state to meet institutional demand.	A			
	2.7	Establish a comprehensive informational website and networking resource for all Virginia local food and food system resources— with information for producers as well as consumers (e.g., Community Food System Explorer).			D	
	2.8	Examine the potential for a Chesapeake Bay brand for Virginia seafood, aquaculture, and food products that recognizes and incentivizes sound environmental practices and the health of the Bay as a key criterion.	A		D	
	2.9	Institute a local ingredient label/sticker on value-added products to incentivize food processors that use Virginia Grown products in their ingredients.			D	
<b>3. Food System Planning, Management and Policy</b>  <b>Objective:</b> To design and plan healthy, sustainable local and regional food systems to support and enhance the overall public, social, ecological, and economic health of communities.	3.1	Work with the Virginia Food System Council to remove regulations that impede the development and expansion of the production, processing, distribution, and marketing capacity of locally-grown Virginia foods.			D	P
	3.2	Evaluate how state and federal agencies and institutions support locally-grown Virginia food and farm products.	A		D	P
	3.3	Set measurable goals and track procurement purchases and costs of Virginia Grown products for all state agencies, schools, universities and institutions.			D	P
	3.4	Assess the economic and environmental impacts of local and regional food systems on localities.	A			P
	3.5	Provide education, resource, and policy support for the Virginia Farm-to-School program to increase the amount of local food procured in Virginia's public schools.		E		P

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)	
<p><b>3. Food System Planning, Management and Policy (cont.)</b></p> <p><b>Objective:</b> To design and plan healthy, sustainable local and regional food systems to support and enhance the overall public, social, ecological, and economic health of communities.</p>	3.6	Gather and suggest adjustments for purchasing policies of local and state government entities to encourage or incentivize local food procurement.	A			P
	3.7	Assess the current capacity and participation of localities and permitted waste management facilities in food waste diversion and composting programs.	A		D	
	3.8	Assess, develop and adopt incentives and technical assistance for Third Party Verification programs, including but not limited to USDA Certified Organic, to add further value to Virginia foods based on land management and natural resource conservation.	A		D	
	3.9	Establish a marketing campaign to challenge Virginia households and businesses to buy \$10 per week of locally-grown food for one year.	A		D	P
<p><b>4. Food Security, Food Safety, Diet and Health</b></p> <p><b>Objective:</b> To identify ways to improve the integrity of the Virginia’s food system to ensure adequate access and amounts of fresh, nutritious, safe food to all individuals and households in the Commonwealth.</p>	4.1	Identify programs/curricula in Virginia (or elsewhere) that focus on healthy eating and cooking with local and regional foods, focusing first on hands-on, experiential school programs to empower K-12 youth and then to a broader community with topics including: a. Food choices/origins b. Safe food preparation and preservation c. Home and community gardening d. Food waste awareness e. Composting and alternative reuse options.	A	E		
	4.2	Gather and disseminate school, organizational, community and media outlets (e.g., TV and radio) interest in offering educational programs or strategies to their audiences	A	E		
	4.3	Gather and disseminate baseline data on local/community diet and health, food deserts, access and availability (i.e., proximity, transportation, financial/economic, other) to local, regional food systems	A		D	
	4.4	Conduct ongoing assessments of diet and health, food deserts, access and availability (i.e., proximity, transportation, financial/economic, other) to local, regional food systems	A			

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)
<p><b>4. Food Security, Food Safety, Diet and Health (cont.)</b></p> <p><b>Objective:</b> To identify ways to improve the integrity of the Virginia’s food system to ensure adequate access and amounts of fresh, nutritious, safe food to all individuals and households in the Commonwealth.</p>	<p>4.5 Conduct a cost and ecological analysis comparing local/regional foods to foods purchased and transported from other states, regions, and countries</p> <p>a. Consider economic costs, direct, indirect and induced effects, and ecological footprints,</p> <p>b. Create educational materials and/or a social marketing campaign to share findings from the analysis and embed materials within educational programs/curricula identified under 4.1.</p>	A	E		
	<p>4.6 Expand the following programs statewide to improve food security, prevent land-filling of recoverable food and encourage reuse:</p> <p>a. Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) at farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) operations,</p> <p>b. community gardening,</p> <p>c. urban agriculture,</p> <p>d. food gleaning network,</p> <p>e. hunters and anglers for hunger, and</p> <p>f. food diversion and composting.</p>		E	D	
	<p>4.7 Establish a community food system recognition program and a central information hub for hospitals, restaurants, schools, universities and other institutions to award and voluntarily list commitments to procurement of locally-grown Virginia foods.</p>		E	D	
	<p>4.8 Establish Virginia as host site for the Food Corps program, similar to Virginia Tech’s Sustainable Food Corps, to give young adults work and skill training, while addressing food access and security issues.</p>		E	D	
	<p>4.9 Provide education, training and technical assistance to help disadvantaged individuals and communities in rural or urban food deserts establish home and community gardens to grow healthful food for themselves, their families, and neighborhoods.</p>		E	D	

Topic and Objective	Recommendation	Assessment (A)	Education (E)	Development (D)	Policy (P)
<b>5. Implementing the Virginia Farm to Table Plan</b>	5.0 The Virginia Food System Council with its participating organizations will shepherd and support the implementation of the Virginia Farm to Table Plan by working closely with agencies, organizations, and the private sector. The Council will develop and report on within 9 months a) a structural framework that is transparent, inclusive, and clear, and that draws connections across sectors; b) a marketing plan that distinguishes between different constituencies and among different purposes: education, policy, and alliances; and c) a business plan that includes a budget, identifies the variety of funders, and targets specific actions to specific funders. The Council will draw on the expertise of Virginia Departments of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Conservation and Recreation, Environmental Quality, Commerce, Education, Health, Mines, Minerals, and Energy, Social Services, Transportation, Virginia Tourism, academic institutions, private industry, and nonprofit partners.	A	E	D	P
	5.1 Establish a Virginia food system report card to facilitate assessment and collection of baseline data for monitoring hunger, health, environmental performance, and advancements of Virginia’s food system.	A	E	D	P



Exploring value-added enterprises like on-farm milk processing.

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