



**CENTER FOR FOOD SYSTEMS AND
COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION**
VIRGINIA TECH.

2023 Annual Report
December 20, 2023



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Executive Statement

The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation is an Extension/Outreach center housed in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs). We work at the nexus of food, agriculture, and society through a values-based and systems-approach to explore and catalyze the conditions for a more just, sustainable food system so that all may thrive. Our Extension and Outreach aims include:

- Address food system complexities with emphasis on social equity and community sustainability through programs, outreach, and partnerships.
- Conduct community-based food systems research on historical and emerging food system issues.
- Enhance existing and create new curriculum related to food systems and community-university learning goals.

Our Center currently supports six signature Extension-based programs aimed at strengthening and transforming the ecological sustainability of our food system; the quality of life of food and farm system workers; food access, health and wellbeing; and the emancipatory potential for socially just food systems in advancing the human condition in Virginia and beyond. Additionally, the Center is actively leading and/or partnering on 11 research-outreach projects that support food systems and community transformation focusing on such key issues as: regional food systems, new farmer sustainability, agroecology and climate resiliency policy, regenerative soil health-building practices and agroforestry systems, urban agriculture, food justice, and farm worker health equity and social vulnerability.

Through our programs, projects, and events locally and nationally, we meaningfully engaged with more than 3,330 people in 2023. Our outreach engagement included over 635 people who attended our 16 Center events and with another 475 people who attended 10 events we co-hosted and promoted with our partners. We have 45 Center Fellows who actively participate in Center related programs, projects, and related scholarship. Additionally, our Center hosted four new resourcing initiatives; presented seven invited presentations; published six scholarly works; published 15 stories of community food work profiles as creative works; and created and distributed 26 episodes of the 4 The Soil: A Conversation podcast. We have also mentored a successful team of graduate students and created an undergraduate internship program to be expanded in 2024.

During 2023, the Center had five current grant projects totaling \$282,334. An additional 13 proposals were submitted and funded in 2023 reaching a total of \$3,318,311. Together, the Center generated \$3,600,645 across 18 competitive grants and contracts. Two additional proposals are currently under review and another prepared for submission.

Our team is growing, which reflects a growth in our need for space. In 2023, we acquired office and conference space on the Virginia Tech campus to serve as our physical home in Litton-Reaves Hall, which includes two rooms, 1820 and 1830. The Center's off-campus footprint was expanded to the Northwest District Extension office. We have also expanded this year to include two new positions while refilling another position. We look forward to illustrating our ongoing commitment to Virginia Cooperative Extension, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and our community partners in 2024 and years to come.

Core Team

Our core team comprises individuals who work together to achieve Center objectives:

Kim Niewolny, Center Director and Professor, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Eric Bendfeldt, Center Associate Director, Senior Extension Specialist, Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems Community Viability Program, Virginia Cooperative Extension

Katie Trozzo, Center Associate, Food Systems Network and Outreach Specialist, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Lia Kelinsky-Jones, Center Postdoctoral Fellow, USDA NIFA Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Justice Madden, Center Graduate Fellow for Outreach, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

David Smilnak, Center Graduate Research Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Stephanie Zhu, Center Graduate Research Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Served part of 2023: **Garland Mason**, Center Associate, AgrAbility Virginia Program Coordinator; **Kasey Owen**, Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education; **Nicole Nunoo**, Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education.

Advisory Group

We are advised by a group of leaders from across the state. We communicate frequently and meet once annually. Our advisory group includes:

Jeanette Abi-Nader, Co-Executive Director, Cultivate Charlottesville; Founding Member, Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative

William Crutchfield, Director, Small Farm Outreach Program, Virginia State University

Daniel Goerlich, Associate Director for Economy, Community, and Food, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia Tech

Ellington Graves, Associate Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Virginia Tech

Kathy Hosig, Associate Professor, Department of Population Health Sciences; Director for the Center for Public Health Practice and Research, Virginia Tech

Janine Parker Woods, Associate Administrator, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia State University

Nicole Shuman, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, Goochland County Virginia Cooperative Extension

Max Stephenson, Professor and Director of the Institute for Policy and Governance, School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech

Signature Programs

Our Center is home to six state and/or regional “signature” programs supporting food systems-based community development at the nexus of food, agriculture, and society. These Extension-based programs cover the following issues and are briefly described below:

- New farmer sustainability
- Health, wellness, and accessibility
- Connecting food, farm, and health
- Equitable value chain work
- Sustainable food systems

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition

The Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition (VBFRC) is a state-wide coalition of agricultural organizations working together toward the goal of improving opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers so they can establish and sustain viable agricultural operations and communities in Virginia. Funding has consistently been sponsored by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and new funding has been awarded as of Fall 2023.

Activities: The Center supports the Coalition through backbone support for online and in-person programming, communications and outreach, evaluation, and resource development. We build capacity through convening advisory group meetings and annual statewide coalition gatherings.

Impacts and Outputs: As funding for this project wrapped up in 2023, we created three installments of our Taste of Farming videos, hosted one special topic webinar, held a statewide Coalition gathering, tabled at statewide conferences, awarded four mini-grant projects, sent out a monthly news blast, and maintained our listserv (1,019 farmers and 238 partners) and social media communications. Dr. Trozzo provided evaluation support for VSU’s Small Farm Outreach Program, collecting data for all the events they and the Fauquier Education Farm offered throughout the project term 2020-2023 (349 programs), analyzing the data, and writing a cumulative report. Throughout 2023, over 75 signature programs were offered serving more than 1,020 participants. Notably, we collaborated with VSU to submit a new Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant and were awarded to help expand the footprint of the VBFRC and continue to support beginning farmers in underserved communities.

AgrAbility Virginia

AgrAbility Virginia holds a strong record in addressing the safety, health, and wellness of Virginia farmers and their families through educational programs, rehabilitative and assistive technology services, culturally relevant outreach, and collaborative networking. Anchored through the Center, AgrAbility Virginia is a statewide program led by Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Easterseals UCP of Virginia and North Carolina. Largely funded by the USDA NIFA AgrAbility Program, 2023-02387, with additional funding from complimentary state and Virginia competitive grants.

Activities: As a successful collaboration spanning 20 years, AgrAbility Virginia continues to offer

comprehensive and community-based programming, outreach, and direct services to address farm safety, mental health, wellness, and accessibility education and assistance for farmers and farm families in Virginia. Our targeted aims for 2023-2027 include: 1) Enhancing direct services with historically underserved farmers with disability in Virginia through 1862-1890 Land Grant University partnership with focus on urban agriculture and outreach to Latinx/Hispanic farmworker communities; 2) Increasing education through the Virginia Agriculture Mobile Education Unit; 3) Advancing programming and outreach related to farm safety and farm-related stress as critical mental and behavioral health issues impacting farmers; and 4) Enhancing education on human-centered design of affordable assistive technologies.

Anticipated Impacts and Outputs: In addition to servicing over 20 farmer clients with direct services, we 1) created three new Extension publications and updated and republished two others to address farm stress and safety, 2) presented and provided outreach at over 20 conferences; 3) reached over 8,000 individuals through the VSU Mobile Unit; 4) partnered on Virginia Tech Integrated Competitive grant titled, “Community-based Health Equity Research to Practice Initiative to Increase Farm Worker and Agricultural Laborer (FW&AL) Health, Safety, and Wellness in Virginia,” and 4) organized and implemented five Farm Dinner Theaters on Farm Stress and Wellness with funding provided by Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Virginia Farm-to-Table: Connecting Food, Farms, and Health

The Virginia Farm-to-Table is a state-wide food and farm system initiative, which Virginia Cooperative Extension initiated in collaboration with Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, in partnership with the Virginia Food System Council, the University of Virginia, and other state agencies and organizations in 2010. The 2023 Virginia Farm to Table Conference was held for the first time since 2019. The theme for the conference was “Nourishing and (Re)Imagining Collaboration, Conservation, and Community.” The two-day conference was attended by more than 200 people and provided continuing education credits for nutrient management planners and certified conservation planners. An inspiration to action activity was facilitated on Day 1 of the conference around the themes: food security, quality, and justice; equitable access to land, capital, and equipment; improving soil and water health by reducing erosion, drought, and flooding; and new solutions for regional food systems and stacked enterprises.

Virginia Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)

Virginia is part of USDA’s Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) region. The Virginia SARE program supports farmers and ranchers through sustainable agriculture research and education strategies and educational programming that encourages ecological management, promotes natural resource conservation, regenerates landscapes, strengthens financial viability, develops regional food systems, builds community, and fortifies the state’s overall resilience. Virginia SARE provides ongoing professional development opportunities for agricultural professionals and mentor farmer-leaders to enhance their knowledge and expertise in sustainable agricultural principles and practices, emerging research, and innovations.

Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Program Team of Virginia Cooperative Extension

Virginia's 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 critical health issues. The concept of community, local, and regional food systems (CLRFS) broadly define a complex and interconnected set of systems and pathways that comprise sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management to bring about social, economic, and ecological change that benefits all residents. The VCE CLRFS program team addresses these issues and is supported through programming and outreach through the Center and Center team members.

Equitable Food Value Chain Coordination in Virginia

This ongoing programming initiative seeks to catalyze equitable food value chain coordination and food system development across Virginia to increase local and regional market access of small and mid-sized farms and food businesses, such as produce auctions, food hubs, food and farm cooperatives, farm stands/markets, aggregators, and distributors.

Projects

As a Center, we are involved in 11 projects that support food systems and community transformation on the ground including those that develop regional food systems, share farmer agroecological knowledge, support regenerative soil practices and agroforestry systems, create climate resiliency policy, develop recommendations for support of urban farmers, and explore farm worker health, safety, and wellness. Each of these grant funded projects are described below:

Roanoke Foodshed Network

This partnership project in support of the Roanoke Foodshed Network (RFN) aims to explore and build capacity for a regional food system in the Roanoke Region of Southwest Virginia. The project's goals are to collectively learn about and address the needs of sustainable farm development; local food distribution; equitable food access; and develop a comprehensive approach to create a more resilient, socially just, economically viable food system in this underserved region. The project is funded 2021-2023 by USDA-AMS Regional Food System Partnership grant and led by Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP), a Roanoke-based 501 (c)3 non-profit organization.

Activities: The Center supports the project by 1) facilitating community storytelling about food farming, and community in the region, 2) organizing virtual learning exchanges with partners inside and outside the region, and 3) supporting the network development and function.

Impacts and Outputs: Over the course of the year, Center team members have served as co-leads in RFN working groups and participated as part of the leadership team that meets monthly. They have taken leadership on the following items with events reaching 753 participants:

- A narrative project collecting 15 narratives from RFN stakeholders that are posted on the RFN Mighty Network page and ready to be launched in January 2024.

- Six farm tours (183 attendees) and five farming and food production working group meetings (62 attendees).
- One virtual learning exchange (69 participants) that was the final installment in a Fall series for 2022 featuring regional food systems stakeholders and their work.
- An awarded Arts and Culture Grant that is fostering arts-based approaches to food systems transformation and that supported OkraFest and a CommUnity ArtsReach Performance on September 10, 2023 (220 participants)
- A Farm Dinner Theater Program offered on August 28, 2023 in partnership with AgrAbility, led by a local theater director to support farmers in exploring health, safety, and wellness (36 participants)

Soil for Water

This Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education systems grant project led by National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) aims to identify and promote practical ways of using regenerative grazing practices to improve soil health and catch and hold more rainwater in soil. Project partners include NCAT, Southern SARE, and the Virginia Association for Biological Farming. The project term is 2021-2024.

To date, seven Virginia farmers and ranchers have been interviewed about their regenerative grazing and soil health-building systems including Glade Road Growing, Ellett Valley Beef, Holsinger Homeplace Farm, Bean Hollow Grassfed Farm, Heaven's Hollow Farm, Cattle Run Farm, and Shamoka Run Farm.

Anticipated Outcomes and Impact: Video case studies will be developed from these interviews and two community storytelling events will be planned to support a community dialogue across public and private entities. In sharing the experiences and perspectives of farmers and ranchers through video case studies, the intended impact is to increase and improve on soil health, livestock health, wildlife and pollinator habitat, carbon sequestration, climatic resilience, and drought resistance, while also encourage a broader community of regenerative grazing practitioners across Virginia and the Southern region.

4 The Soil Awareness Initiative

Virginia Tech and the School for Plant and Environmental Sciences (SPES) received a three-year \$1 million National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant in 2020 to build soil health across Virginia. The Center is working with SPES colleagues and the Virginia Soil Health Coalition and its partners to raise awareness about soil as a critical resource and encourage farmers and landowners to follow the four soil health principles through the 4 The Soil educational campaign.

The *4 The Soil: A Conversation* podcast premiered in October 2021 as a digital scholarship initiative with 9,104 organizational downloads (~375 per month). To date, 61 episodes have been published as a collaboration with Eric Bendfeldt, Mary Sketch Bryant of the Virginia Soil Health Coalition, and Jeff Ishee of On the Farm Radio. Most recent guests include Dr. Stuart Grandy of the University of New Hampshire, Nelson Muiro of Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO), and Dr. Mike Goatley of Virginia Tech's School of Plant and Environmental Sciences. To access the podcasts, [visit the Center's website](#) or <https://www.4thesoil.org/podcast>. Additional outputs

include a 4 The Soil Ambassador Toolkit and 4 The Soil coloring book that emphasizes soil health's importance to the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay and local waterways.

Anticipated Outcomes and Impact: A short-term outcome is the adoption and implementation of best management practices like no-tillage, cover cropping, and planting of more diverse crop rotations in support of core soil health-building principles. The long-term impact would be to change behavior and community sentiment for better more durable care of land, soil, and water resources.

Expanding the Agroforestry Regional Knowledge (ARK) Exchange Network in Virginia

This USDA Southern Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education (SARE) Professional Development Program grant funded project aims to expand the Agroforestry Regional Knowledge (ARK) Exchange Network in Virginia using a collective impact approach to strengthen, solidify, and anchor this informal network of farmers, nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, governmental agency, and non-governmental partners across the state through enhanced train the trainer programming and coordination of on-farm agroforestry demonstrations. This project represents a collaboration between the Center, Virginia State University (VSU), Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), the Virginia Association for Biological Farming (VABF), and farmers. The project term is from July 2023 to June 2025.

Activities: Dr. Trozzo serves as principal investigator on the project, supporting partners toward project goals. The project will include in-person and online agroforestry programming for natural resource professionals and farmer leaders as well as on-farm demonstrations.

Impacts and Outputs: We have initiated the project with subawards granted and the first all partner meeting held. An advisory group has been created of farmers with experience in agroforestry to help guide the project. The Virginia Association for Biological Farming and Small Farm Outreach Program has created an agroforestry track with 12 speakers for their summit to be held in January 2024. Planning is underway for spring demonstration plantings and in-person training in the fall of 2024.

Agroforestry Trainings for Natural Resource Professionals

Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), in partnership with Virginia Tech, Interlace Commons, Savanna Institute, and Cornell University, was awarded funding from the Edwards Mother Earth Foundation (EMEF) to improve agroforestry technical assistance for forest farming, alley cropping, and Silvopasture to meet the growing support needs of farmers.

Activities: The Center supported by coordinating and facilitating three one-day Agroforestry Trainings for Natural Resource Professionals in collaboration with ASD and partnership with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), VCE, Dept of Forestry, and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition. We also provide evaluation support for the programs. Our Center will be providing additional programming support in 2024 and 2025.

Impacts and Outputs: Over 125 natural resource professionals attended the three trainings. The events were tied into the NRCS Joint Employee Development (JED) training schedule and 51% of

attendees were NRCS staff. The remaining were from extension, NGOs, private businesses and Dept of Forestry. As a result of the program, ASD and NRCS were able to collaborate to get the NRCS practice standard turned on for forest farming and a second round of funding was awarded from Edwards Mother Earth Foundation.

Point of Harvest Trainings for Wild Harvesters

The Point of Harvest (PoH) Trainings for Wild Harvesters, led by the Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition and Appalachian Sustainable Development, offers free training to wild harvesters and buyers of woodland roots, barks, and more. The program is designed to help participants access premium priced markets and includes training in plant identification, propagation and stewardship, sustainable harvest, post-harvest handling, and storage and processing.

Activities: Our Center provides organizational support for hosting PoH trainings offered in 2023 and 2024.

Impacts and Outputs: Two PoH training events were held in Southwest Virginia for 54 attendees.

Accelerating Forest Farming in Central Appalachia

“Accelerating Forest Farming in Central Appalachia” is a multifaceted Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) Planning Project funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission and designed to prepare and submit an ARISE Implementation Project proposal that will transform a globally-significant agricultural cluster of Appalachian forest farmers, primary buyers of forest farmed materials, woodland species nurseries, and local communities who benefit from regional forest farming cultivation. The planning project is led by Dr. John Munsell and leverages an existing collaboration between 11 partners who are involved in improving forest farming marketing and technological innovations, seed-to-sales sector capacity and efficiency, enterprise-based community development, and profit-generating cultural initiatives, as well as local-to-international industry investments and consumer demand.

Activities: Our Center, under Dr. Trozzo’s leadership, is providing facilitation support for the planning project, including the kick-off and summative retreats.

Impacts and Outputs: Dr. Trozzo facilitated the 1.5-day kick off retreat for 20 project partners across 11 organizations, including arts-based facilitation approaches. Partners indicated the event was successful in helping them connect and organize. “That was the best organized/most productive/most enjoyable work retreat I’ve ever been to!”

Developing Climate-Adaptive Policies and Capacities through an Agroecological Lens

With support from USDA NIFA Postdoctoral Fellowship Program (\$250,000) this project aims to strengthen climate resilience within the regional food systems of four Central Appalachian states (Southwest Virginia, Southeast Ohio, Western North Carolina, and West Virginia). The project focuses on the possibilities of policy to effect change, and includes both research and extension activities. The work is guided by a participatory policy approach called Joint Fact Finding (JFF). A participatory committee of food system leaders will jointly guide the research and identification of

policy levers alongside the project's institutional lead. The extension efforts focus on capacity building on using JFF as an extension tool to support policy lever identification within food systems and communities.

National Urban Agriculture Initiative

This national project is funded through a cooperative agreement with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) and led by Virginia State University in partnership with our Center and Cornell Cooperative Extension. The National Urban Agriculture Initiative (NUAg) aims to increase the number of urban farmers who will learn about and utilize a variety of resources for finance, education, research and outreach to benefit their farm operations. Connecting farmers to the programs and services that are offered nationwide through USDA's Farm Service Agency is a primary goal of this initiative. The project term runs from July 2023 to June 2027.

Activities: Over the course of the project, our Center will support the project by providing evaluation support for the project and facilitating learning exchanges for 17 regional organizations that received cooperative agreements from FSA.

Impacts and Outputs: Since the project initiated, our team has participated in planning meetings with VSU and Cornell, provided evaluation support for the NUAg Kickoff Event, created an evaluation plan, and began outlining a plan for learning exchanges in 2024.

Advancing Urban Agriculture and Sustainable Food Systems in Virginia

In partnership with Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program and the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), our Center is leading "Advancing Urban Agriculture and Sustainable Food Systems in Virginia" as a national call from the USDA FSA to support urban growers through culturally appropriate education, technical assistance, and outreach programming. This project has five objectives: 1) Build Organizational, Farmer, and Agency Capacity to Assist VA Urban Farmers, 2) Increase Understanding of Urban Agriculture in Virginia, 3) Increase Knowledge, Awareness, and Participation in FSA and USDA Programs and Services Associated with Growing Food in an Urban Area, 4) Assist Farmers with Expanding Farming Operations, Accessing Land, and Implementing Climate-friendly Practices in Urban Areas, and 5) Increase Access and Participation of Underserved Farmers in FSA Programs and Services in Urban Areas. The project term runs May 2023 to May 2026.

Activities: Over the course of the project activities include co-designing and implementing Urban Agriculture Enhancement Project mini grants; conducting a Virginia Urban Agriculture Landscape Assessment; hosting six regional urban agriculture convenings; creating an online resource center with urban agricultural content; launching a Richmond area urban agriculture tool lending library; and leading FSA's Train the Trainer program "Urban Food Systems and Farming."

Impacts and Outputs: Since the project term began in May 2023, we have created an advisory group of members representing different areas of the Commonwealth, have begun the landscape assessment of urban agriculture in Virginia, attended the NUAg Kickoff Event, and presented on the project at Virginia Farm-to-Table.

Community-based Health Equity Research to Practice Initiative to Increase Farm Worker and Agricultural Laborer (FW&AL) Health, Safety, and Wellness in Virginia

Funding through Virginia Tech CALS Strategic Plan Advancement / Integrated Internal Competitive Seed Grants Program in 2023 (\$75,000), this community-based research and Extension/outreach project is supported by a novel collaboration that brings together expertise and experience in *food systems* (VT Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation); *public health* (VT Center for Public Health Practice and Research); *farm safety, health, and wellness* (AgrAbility Virginia Program and VT Environmental Health and Safety FAST Program); *economic development* (VT Center for Economic and Community Engagement); *historically underserved farmer outreach and extension education* (Virginia State University Small Farm Outreach Program); and *farm worker and agricultural laborer outreach and education* (county-based Virginia Cooperative Extension offices), and *legal* expertise (Legal Aid Justice Center). This collaboration is the first of its kind at Virginia Tech to address concerns related to agricultural labor needs, food supply chain resiliency, the health of vulnerable populations, and the importance of farm safety and wellness for farm workers and agricultural laborers through enhanced understanding of the social and environmental vulnerabilities they face in Virginia in order to provide culturally-appropriate and community-based solutions with data-driven recommendations.

Center Programming

We offer a variety of targeted programming as core offerings related to advancing the work of the Center, Center Fellows, and partners. These include Learning Circles, Fellow Speaker Series, and resource dissemination to address a diversity of stakeholder needs and interests. Over 635 participants attended 16 core program events offered by and represented of university faculty and students, Extension field faculty, and community leaders local and nationally.

Center Fellows and the Fellows Speaker Series

We currently host 45 [Center fellows](#) who comprise a mix of Virginia Tech faculty, graduate students, Virginia Cooperative Extension agents, and community leaders. A fellow is an outstanding individual who is part of a university, organization, or community that uplifts the aims of the Center and is a leader and resource to stakeholders in their area of expertise.

In 2023, we hosted eight fellow talks where Center Fellows shared their community-engaged scholarship through virtual presentations. We had over 526 attendees participate in the series. The Fellow Speaker series is a monthly talk designed for peer-to-peer learning around pressing issues related to the Center's core mission. With Fellows leading, these talks engage university faculty and students, Extension professionals, and community leaders, and practitioners working in the field from a local to global perspective. The Center's core team organizes and facilitates with the aim of encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration.

- Mary Sketch Bryant, *The Power of Network Weaving: Catalyzing Impact from the Soil Up* (75 participants)
- Dr. Maria Elisa Christie, *Kitchenspace: Participatory Approaches to Food and Gendered*

Spaces of Everyday Life in Mexico, Uganda, and Ethiopia (77 participants)

- Dr. Ralph Hall & Dr. Jessica Agnew, *Addressing Food, Housing, and Well-being at Virginia Tech: Results from the 2021 Survey* (48 participants)
- Tanya Denckla Cobb, Michael Carter Jr., Tom McDougall, Stasia Greenewalt, & Caroline Baloga, *A Unique UVA-Africulture-Amarak-4P-Local Food Hub Collaboration: Growing an Equitable Regional Food System with Institutional Purchasing Power to Support BIPOC farmers* (67 participants)
- Kasey Owen, Carol Davis, & Dr. Lia Kelinsky-Jones, *Municipal Level Food Systems Planning for Impacts of Climate Change* (82 participants)
- Dr. Nicole Nunoo, Michael Carter Jr., & Thelonius Cook, *Rooted in Collectivity: Lessons from Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia* (80 participants)
- Dr. Katie Trozzo & Stesha Warren, *Advancing Agroforestry in Virginia* (61 participants)
- Dr. Eric Bendfeldt & Dr. Austin Council, *Exploring Tanzania and Kenya Through the Lens of Education and Sustainability* (36 participants)

Graduate Student Learning Circles (GSLC)

The Graduate Student Learning Circle continues to be an affinity space where graduate students from across fields of study and disciplines gather to learn and develop professional skills centered around food systems. These monthly opportunities also serve as an opportunity for advancing graduate student research. Throughout 2023, eight monthly installments were hosted. A notable highlight featured renowned food journalist and author, Nina Mukerjee Furstenau in April 2023. The learning circles had 66 attendees total and were facilitated by Center Graduate Fellows: David Smilnak, Stephanie Zhu, Justice Madden, Kasey Owen (graduated in Spring 2023), Nicole Nunoo (graduated in Summer 2023).

- Welcome & GSLC Planning Meeting (7 participants) (1/24/2023)
- *Town of Blacksburg Municipal Level Food Systems Planning for the Impacts of Climate Change* with Kasey Owen (7 participants) (2/23/2023)
- Alumni Presentation with Dr. William Singer (6 participants) (3/30/2023)
- Discussion featuring author Nina Mukerjee Furstenau (20 participants) (4/12/2023)
- Resource Sharing and Visioning with David Smilnak (6 participants) (9/27/2023)
- *Seedkeeping and Black Radical Tradition* with Justice Madden (7 participants) (10/25/2023)
- *Yésq:sahi Language and Lifeways Project* with Desiree Shelley (5 participants) (11/29/2023)
- Reading Day Group Reflection (8 participants) (10/7/2023)

Five Pieces Worth Reading

We have shared a weekly digest of five annotated articles with bibliographies to our listserv (now with over 1,100 members) since spring of 2020. Our weekly readings feature a diverse set of themes related to food systems and community transformation scholarship sent every Friday. We send recent and current articles from science- and community-based sources and highlight relevant journal articles and feature pieces that include Center Fellows as co-authors. The articles shared weekly are archived by theme and cataloged by year in the [news archive on our webpage](#).

Bi-Monthly Update

Center Graduate students take leadership to compile and send out Center updates every other week. We feature upcoming Center Fellow talks, 4 the Soil podcasts and blogs, events and publications of our Fellows, partners and friends, and conferences and research opportunities. Fellows frequently contribute events and announcements for sharing in the update.

Special Events and Partnerships

Over the course of the year, we offered special events in partnership with Center Fellows and community partnerships. Specifically, we partner with organizations providing backbone support and hosting for collaborative programs as needed. In doing so, the Center has fostered partnerships with organizations on and off campus to achieve mutually supportive outcomes. Examples include the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance, Virginia Tech Center for Public Health Practice and Research, Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement, Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program, The Racial Equity and Agriculture (R.E.A.L.) Lab, Virginia Food Systems Council, the Virginia Soil Health Coalition, Appalachian Sustainable Development, and the Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer Coalition. In 2023, we supported ten featured events with 475 participants, including:

Center Open House. On April 4, 2023, the Center team celebrated the opening of their new office and conference space by inviting the Center community to an Open House. This 1.5-hour event provided space for 60 Center community members to convene for a catered lunch, networking, and celebration.

- **Nina Mukerjee Furstenau.** The Center co-hosted culinary author and journalist, Nina Mukerjee Furstenau, as part of the Women and Gender in International Development (WGD) Program and Discussion Series at Virginia Tech. Led by Center Fellow, Maria Elisa Christie, Director of WGD, the culminating event, titled "*Food, Gender, and Identity in a Global Context,*" which took place at the Newman Library as a hybrid event. Over 60 people attended the event.
- **Rhythms of the Land.** On September 13, 2023, the Center hosted an exclusive screening of *Rhythms of the Land*, a multimedia documentary directed by Dr. Gail Myers, in partnership with the Roanoke Foodshed Network, Farms to Grow Inc., and St. Paul United Methodist Church. This 1.5-hour event included a discussion led by community elder Ms. Amazetta Anderson as well as snacks and refreshments including a watermelon grown in the Carver Community Garden two blocks away from the venue. Over 40 people attended the event.
- **The Indigenous Friendship Garden.** The Center supports the Indigenous Friendship Garden through creating promotional materials, managing registration, and sending outreach communications. In 2023, we partnered on seven programs with the Indigenous Friendship Garden, serving 315 participants. See full list below:
 - *Pandapas Pond Walk.* (20 participants) (2/3/2023)
 - *Winter Celebration for Virginia Tech Humanities Week.* Featured Mohawk Chef Dave Smoke-McCluskey and Mae Hey. (60 participants) (2/24/2023)

- *Indigenous Friendship Garden Spring Celebration*. Featured Guests: Victoria Ferguson, Justice Madden and Mae Hey. (65 participants) (4/23/2023)
- *Foods From Indigenous Garden Celebrating LatinX & Native Heritage*. Featured Guests: Chef Fabiola Rodriguez. (40 participants) (9/22/2023)
- *Indigenous People's Day Cooking Demo and Celebration*. Featured Guest: Mae Hey (77 participants) (10/10/2023)
- *Celebration of Fall Foods*. Featured Guest: Mae Hey. (36 participants) (10/27/2023)
- *Monacan Indian Nation Annual Holiday Gifting and Lunch*. Featured Guests: Em Shawish and Mae Hey. (17 participants) (12/2/2023)

Academic Programming and Student Engagement

In 2023, the Center participated in several academic programming opportunities with or in support of undergraduate students at Virginia Tech:

Civic Agriculture and Food Systems Minor

The Center has served as a seedbed for students to complete core requirements for the Pathways Civic Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS) Minor through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In 2023, this included a Center Podcast series developed by students as a final course project for ALS 4204, *Concept in Community Food Systems*, and the completion of one Capstone project as a culminating submission for the Minor. Additionally, a CAFS student invited the Center to collaborate on a student-led Virginia Tech Dining Services publication focusing on regional food systems and food security.

Undergraduate Internships

During the Fall 2023 semester, the Center developed an Internship with CALS undergraduate student, Phoebe Pyles. The Internship project focused on core responsibilities related to archiving and data entry for the maintenance of the Center's online library.

Food Justice Challenge

For Fall 2023, Dr. Niewolny participated as an "expert" collaborator and instructor in the USDA Higher Education Challenge Grant titled "Food Justice Challenge," which is co-led by Virginia Tech. This effort included lecturing on food justice and featuring the Center with a national student audience reaching over 10 institutions and 100 plus students and faculty.

Food, Agriculture, and Society Pathways Minor Collaboration

The Center has provided support in creating a new, university-wide food-related Pathways Minor that is based on a partnership between the current Civic Agriculture and Food Systems Pathways minor in the CALS with the Food Studies program in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. This support comprised serving on a committee of faculty to design and submit an administrative revision to the Civic Agriculture and Food Systems Pathways minor to be reflective of this new interdisciplinary program titled, "Food, Agriculture, and Society, for a 2024 launch.

Website and Social Media Outreach Analytics

Over the last four years, we have developed and maintained a resource-driven website that houses our projects, programs, and publications. People also engage frequently with the content on our website with over 9,400 pageviews from January 1 to December 19, 2023. The website includes a number of specific resource web pages that are the result of scholarship and archival research:

- [Virginia Tech Food Systems Curriculum Compendium](#)
- [The Food System and COVID-19 Resource Page](#)
- [Racial Equity in the Food System Resource Page](#)

We also engage our community through our listserv and social media accounts. Our general listserv consists of 1,111 members, which is an increase of 55 from last year. We also manage a separate listserv for Fellows and advisory group members. Our social media audience includes 409 who follow our [Center twitter handle](#) and 200 who follow our [Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation Facebook](#), both of these numbers are up more than 50 from last year. We created a LinkedIn page this year that now has 29 followers. The Center also manages the [Virginia Farm-to-Table Facebook page](#) with 4,700 followers, which is up 300 from last year.

Invited Presentations, Press, and Recognition

The following are invited seminars, conference presentations, course lectures, and news articles focused on the work of the Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation:

Presentations

- Niewolny, K., Foster, R., Zhu, S. (2023, December). *Advancing Urban Agriculture and Food systems in Virginia*. Presentation at the Virginia Farm to Table Conference. Weyers Cave, VA.
- Niewolny, K. (2023, November). *Why Regional Food Systems?* University of Vermont's Food Systems Summit. Burlington, VT.
- Niewolny, K. (2023, October). *Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation*. Presentation for the VT Leadership and Social Change Residential College.
- Niewolny, K. (2023, September). *Community-university food justice: Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation (CFST)*. Presentation for the Food Justice Challenge (virtual).
- Nunoo, N., & Niewolny, K. (2023, September). *Collective agency and food sovereignty movement making with Black farmers in Virginia*. Presentation for the Food Justice Challenge (virtual).
- Niewolny, K., Madden, J., McGonagle, M., Bendfeldt, E., Trozzo, K., Mason, G., Owen K. (2023, July). The Praxis of "Story Work" from Seed to Plate: Rhizomatic Considerations for Regional Food Systems. Presentation at the *XX ISA World Congress of Sociology*. Melbourne, Australia.
- Niewolny, K. (2023, March). *Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation*. Presentation for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Alumni Association Event. Blacksburg, VA.
- Trozzo, K. (2023, September). *Riparian Buffer Design and Establishment*. Virginia Tech

Agroforestry Undergraduate Class. Blacksburg, VA.

Trozzo, K., (moderator), Meter, K., Best, M., McGonagle, M., & Edwards, M. (2023, December). *Regional Food Systems Development Panel*. Virginia Farm to Table Conference. Weyers Cave, VA.

Press and Recognition

Robertson, J. (2023, June). *Virginia Tech's sustainability efforts earn global recognition*.

Retrieved from: [Virginia Tech's sustainability efforts earn global recognition | Virginia Tech News | Virginia Tech \(vt.edu\)](#)

“The Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings are the only global performance tables that assess universities against the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). THE rankings use calibrated indicators to compare universities across four areas: research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. Virginia Tech received an overall score of 89 and an impact ranking of No. 92 out of nearly 1,600 universities.... Of the United Nation’s 17 SDGs, Virginia Tech participated in 11 of those and registered top-100 marks globally in six. The university’s top mark came in the SDG of Zero Hunger, a category that considers a university’s research on hunger, its teaching of food sustainability, a commitment to tackling food waste, and a commitment to addressing hunger on campus and locally. The university finished 17th globally out of 647 institutions ranked in this category. **The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation** played an important role in Virginia Tech’s success in this category. As an Extension and Outreach Center in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the center leads multi-institutional and community-based grant-funded projects focused on ecological, cultural, and societal elements of regenerative agriculture, local foodways, and regional food systems.”

Publications

In 2023, Center Team members published several scholarly works, including: two dissertations, one master’s thesis, and two peer-reviewed journal articles. Also, members submitted one peer-reviewed journal article under review, led the publication and distribution of the *4 The Soil: A Conversation* podcast series, and contributed to the Editorship of *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, special issue, “Critical Praxis and the Social Imaginary for Sustainable Food Systems.”

Journal Articles, Dissertations, and Master’s Theses

Bendfeldt, E.S. (2023). *The ecotonal nature of community food work: A case study of trauma-informed care and agential change space*. Dissertation, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.

Retrieved from: [The Ecotonal Nature of Community Food Work: A Case Study of Trauma-Informed Care and Agential Change Space \(vt.edu\)](#)

Dickson, O., Niewolny, K., Archibald, T., Schenk, T., Nunoo, N. (2023). Transformative learning to promote transformative evaluation of food system praxis. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 6:1068356. Doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2022.1068356.

Kelinsky-Jones LR, Niewolny, K., & Stephenson M. (2023) Building agroecological traction: Engaging discourse, the imaginary, and critical praxis for food system transformation. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 7:1128430. Doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2023.1128430.

Kraak, V., & Niewolny, K. (under review). A scoping review to develop a food systems governance typology to drive social and political change for sustainable diets, regenerative food systems and planetary health. In *Sustainability*. (Submitted 10.25.23).

Nunoo, N., (2023). *The collective agency of Black farmer organizers in Virginia advocating for racial justice in the food system*. Dissertation, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA. Retrieved from: [The Collective Agency of Black Farmer Organizers in Virginia Advocating for Racial Justice in the Food System \(vt.edu\)](#)

Owen K.M. (2023). *Municipal Level Food Systems Planning for the Impacts of Climate Change*. Master Thesis, Virginia Tech. Blacksburg VA. Retrieved from: [Municipal Level Food Systems Planning for the Impacts of Climate Change \(vt.edu\)](#)

Stephenson, M., Niewolny, K., Erwin, A., Zanotti, L. (Editors) (2022-2023). Critical praxis and the social imaginary for sustainable food systems. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*.

Podcast

4 The Soil: A Conversation podcast is a collaboration of Virginia Cooperative Extension, On the Farm Radio, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Virginia Soil Health Coalition with funding from the Agua Fund, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Virginia Tech's Department of Agriculture, Leadership, and Community Education's Community Viability grant program. The podcast is available through Apple iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and Spreaker, the Virginia Soil Health Coalition, [4thesoil.org/podcast](https://thesoil.org/podcast), and the Center's project page at <https://foodsystems.centers.vt.edu/projects1/4TheSoil.html>

Proposals and Funding

During 2023, the Center had five current grant projects totaling \$282,334. An additional 13 proposals were submitted and funded in 2023 reaching a total \$3,318,311. Together, the Center generated \$3,600,645 across 18 competitive grant and contracts. Two additional proposals are currently under review and another prepared for submission.

Funded

1. **Bendfeldt, E.S., & Sketch Bryant, M. (2023 - 2024). Evaluation and Expansion of the Adaptive Capacity of the Virginia Soil Health Coalition Network to Address Service Gaps and Increase Inclusivity. Chesapeake Bay Trust (\$25,000).**

To build the reach and capacity of the Coalition network, if we receive this capacity building grant, we plan to investigate and evaluate the landscape of stakeholders working in this space as well as begin outreach to and engagement of identified new partners to better reach and educate the commonwealth on the importance of soil health and water quality for all of Virginia. This deliberate focus on network analysis and partner outreach will allow us to conduct our efforts with a broader, more inclusive perspective.

2. **Bendfeldt, E.S. (3/1/2023 - 2/28/2024). National SARE Fellows Tour. University of Maryland flow through USDA-SARE. (\$12,980).**

To understand the diversity of agriculture in Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic region and understand the opportunities and challenges for Extension programming in the Virginia

landscape of small, diversified, family farms, and regional food systems; and build and strengthen networks among the participants, including SARE Fellows, SARE staff, and other agricultural professionals.

- 3. Bendfeldt, E.S., & Sketch Bryant, M. (2023 - 2024). *4 The Soil for the Chesapeake Bay: Promoting Health and Water Quality from the Soil Up*. Commonwealth of Virginia (\$10,000)**

The proposed project will develop and disseminate outreach materials to raise awareness of the connection between soil health and the health of the Chesapeake Bay (“4 The Soil, 4 The Bay”). Outreach materials will include animated videos featuring a 4 The Soil, 4 The Bay mascot and related graphics. Materials will be shared through the 4 The Soil social media channels as well as through the networks of Virginia Soil Health Coalition partners.

- 4. Bendfeldt, E. S., & Sketch Bryant, M. (9/30/2023 - 9/29/2025) *Enhancing Food System Health and Resilience in Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic Region from the Soil Up*. The Agua Fund, Inc. (\$60,000).**

The overall aim is to increase demand for local and regional foods, while increasing the diversity of producers’ participating in state and federal conservation programs that have historic levels of funding through a robust communications, outreach, and training campaign.

- 5. Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., & Trozzo, K. (4/1/2021- 3/31/2024). *Soil for Water: Regenerative Grazing and Soil Health Systems*. Southern SARE Systems Research. (VT Subcontract \$97,527).**

This Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) systems grant project led by National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) aims to identify and promote practical ways of using regenerative grazing practices to improve soil health and catch and hold more rainwater in soil. Project partners include NCAT, Southern SARE, and the Virginia Association for Biological Farming. The project term is 2021-2024.

- 6. Bendfeldt, E.S., Sketch, M. Niewolny, K., Crutchfield, W., Parrish, M., & Trozzo, K. (9/1/2021 - 8/31/2023). *4 The Soil Awareness Initiative: Building Community and Health from the Soil Up*. Virginia Tech Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education Community Viability Grant Program. (\$50,000).**

The 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative is a two-phase educational plan and campaign to raise broader awareness of soil as an agricultural and natural resource critical to current and future social, economic, and environmental health.

- 7. Bendfeldt, E.S., Sketch, M. Niewolny, K., Crutchfield, W., & Trozzo, K. (9/1/2021 - 8/31/2023). *4 The Soil Awareness Initiative: Building Health from the Soil Up*. The Agua Fund. (\$60,000).**

The 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative’s aim is to leverage market opportunities and encourage greater adoption and implementation of soil health-building practices through a two-phase campaign strategy plan to raise broader awareness of soil as an agricultural and natural resource critical to social, economic, and environmental health, while amplifying the four core soil health principles promoted by federal and state partners and the Virginia Soil Health Coalition. The 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative serves as a communication bridge to forge common ground and common good among farmers, ranchers, soil managers, market gardeners, landscapers, landowners, consumers, planners, developers, and local government since we all can be 4 The Soil.

8. **Niewolny, K., Weslyne, A. (9/30/23 - 3/31/25). *Increasing Access to Wholesale Markets: Meeting Technical Assistance Needs of Black, Hispanic, and Tribal Producers.* USDA AMS Cooperative Agreement. \$247,879. *Invited cooperative agreement.***

This project will employ a mixed methods study to understand the distinct needs of Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers around access and entry into wholesale markets. The project will also assess the core competencies of technical assistance and preferred modes of delivery to meet these distinct needs. The project plans to deliver resources and its results to regional technical assistance (TA) providers, including the Regional Food Business Centers (RFBCs), that will support Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers.

9. **Niewolny, K., & Trozzo, K. (9/15/2023- 9/14/2026). *Creating Opportunities for Sustainability for Small, Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers in Virginia, Maryland Eastern Shore, and North Carolina.* USDA NIFA BFRDP. (VT Subaward \$179,209).**

The goal of this project is to equip socially disadvantaged, and veteran beginning farmers and ranchers (SDVBFR) in Virginia, 4 Counties in Maryland's Eastern Shore and North Carolina, with the tools and skills needed for them to make informed decisions in entering and operating successful farm businesses, thereby enhancing economic opportunities and quality of life for them, their families and communities. Led by VSU, the project will be conducted in a holistic manner through outreach, training, technical assistance, and implementation of a beginning farmer certification program.

10. **Niewolny, K., Hosig, K., Travis, E., Mason, G., Bendfeldt, E., Crutchfield, W., Sastre, W., Daubert, J., Camargo Palomino, A.M., Yarashes, J. (4/1/23-7/3/24). *Community-based Health Equity Research to Practice Initiative to Increase Farm Worker and Agricultural Laborer (FW&AL) Health, Safety, and Wellness in Virginia.* Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CAL S) Strategic Plan Advancement - Integrated Internal Competitive Seed Grants Program. (\$75,000).**

This community-based and interdisciplinary research project is the first of its kind in Virginia to address concerns related to agricultural labor needs, food supply chain resiliency, the health of vulnerable populations, and the importance of farm safety and wellness for farm workers and agricultural laborers through enhanced understanding of the social and environmental vulnerabilities they face in Virginia in order to provide culturally-appropriate and community-based solutions with data-driven recommendations.

11. **Niewolny, K., Crutchfield, W., Robertson, T., Mason, G., Leonessa, A., Posadas, B. (9/1/2023 -8/31/2027). *AgrAbility Virginia.* USDA NIFA AgrAbility Program. (\$732,347).**

AgrAbility Virginia will continue to address the safety, health, and wellness of Virginia farmers through educational programs; rehabilitative and assistive technology services; culturally relevant outreach; and networking with agricultural, healthcare, and disability service organizations and agencies. AgVa will accomplish this aim with increased program effectiveness and by expanding our scope to address programming in urban agriculture and outreach to Latinx/Hispanic farmworker communities, increase education and rehabilitation assistance in hard-to-reach settings through the Virginia Agriculture Mobile Education Unit, advance programming and outreach related to farm safety and farm-related stress as critical mental and behavioral health issues impacting farmers, and enhance education and outreach on human-centered design of affordable assistive technologies.

12. Niewolny, K., Bendfeldt, E.S., & Trozzo, K. (7/1/2023-6/30/2027). **USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Urban and Innovative Agriculture Community-Based Organization Fund – National. Total Subaward request: \$3,249,978.00. (Virginia Tech subaward \$161,184). *This is an invited cooperative agreement.***

The Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program, Cornell University, and Virginia Tech are collaborating on this project, now titled "NuAg." The goal of this project is to develop a national program for FSA to assist the needs of Urban Farmers with the tools and skills needed for them to successfully access and utilize FSA and other USDA programs and services. The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation is leading evaluation, capacity building, and learning exchange aims.

13. Niewolny, K., Crutchfield, W., Bendfeldt, E.S., Brown, H., Githinji, L., Jackson, N. & Trozzo, K. (5/25/2023-5/31/26). **USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Urban and Innovative Agriculture Community-Based Organization Fund – State. (\$1,499,754). *This is an invited cooperative agreement.***

The purpose of this project with VSU SFOP and the VT CFSCT is to equip new and established urban farmers in Virginia with the tools, capacity, and skills needed to successfully access and utilize USDA (e.g., FSA and NRCS) programs and services from an equitable food systems perspective. The training and equipping of urban farmers, along with FSA personnel, will serve as a cornerstone for creating more resilient, vibrant, and equitable urban food systems and economies needed to increase supply chain resiliency, improve sustainability, and long-term viability of urban farming operations and food systems. This work aligns with FSA goals to increase equity in urban food systems by expanding FSA's outreach efforts to urban producers through technical assistance, outreach, education, and research.

14. Niewolny, K. & Bendfeldt, E., Trozzo, K. (9/30/20-9/29/23). ***Strong Farm & Food Future: Planning for a Collaborative Regional Economy in the Roanoke Valley.* USDA-AMS Regional Food Systems Partnership Project (VT Subcontract \$58,896).**

The purpose of this USDA-AMS Regional Food Systems Partnership planning project led by Local Environmental Agricultural Project (LEAP) is to explore and build the partnership capacity of a regional food system across the Roanoke Valley as a comprehensive approach for a more resilient, socially just, and economically viable system in this underserved region.

15. Niewolny, K. Nunoo, N. (9/1/2022- 8/31/2024). ***The Role of Black Farmer Organizers in Promoting Healthy and Sustainable Local Community Food Access.* Southern SARE. (\$15,911).**

This project is a community-based case study with Black farmer organizers in the Commonwealth of Virginia, who are actively farming and providing local leadership to address the core goals of sustainable food system development (i.e., soil health, food access, social justice, and economic wealth) in their communities. The study aims to identify recommendations for sustainable community development through agriculture led by Black farmers as illustrations of self-determination and community resiliency. Although the study is specific to Virginia, the research may have broader implications for similar geographical regions.

16. Trozzo, K., Niewolny, K., Bendfeldt, E., Taylor, A., Brown, H., Munsell, J., Commander, K., Warren, S., Wills, B., Beegle, D., Downing, A., & Fike, J. (7/1/2023- 6/30/2025) ***Expanding the Agroforestry Regional Knowledge (ARK) Exchange Network in Virginia.***

USDA-Southern SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) Professional Development Grant Project. (\$79,958).

The purpose of the project proposed in the SARE-PDP proposal is to expand Virginia's Agroforestry Regional Knowledge (ARK) Exchange Network, enhance Train the Trainer programming, and amplify awareness and coordination of existing and emerging on-farm research and demonstrations using a collective impact approach to grow agroforestry systems and a coordinated educational technical assistance network in Virginia.

17. McGonagle, M. & Trozzo, K. (7/1/2023-6/2/2024) A Seat at the Table: An Arts and Culture-based Approach to Growing and Strengthening the Roanoke Foodshed Network. Roanoke Arts Commission. (\$10,000).

The purpose of this project is to bring together members of the Roanoke Foodshed Network (RFN) and the Roanoke arts community to host a series of free or low-cost community-based arts and cultural events that provide opportunities for residents to share their stories and shape the narrative surrounding food and farming in Roanoke.

18. Kelinsky-Jones, L., & Niewolny, K. (6/25/2023-6/24/2025). *Developing Climate-Adaptive Policies and Capacities through an Agroecological Lens* (Postdoctoral Fellowship). USDA NIFA Postdoctoral Fellowship. (\$225,000).

The purpose of this project is to identify policy levers in four states of Central Appalachia that support climate resilience and agroecology using a participatory policy identification methodology.

Submitted and Under Review

1. Bendfeldt, E.S., Hammett, A.L., Mekanji, D.L., Abaye, O., Archibald, T.G., Council, A.D., Downing, A., Mumukha, C., Namasaka, F., Ogejo, J.A., Otieno, D., Thompson, J.D., and M. M. Lipford Zahed. (2023). *Educational Equity for Youth and Communities in the Arid and Semiarid Lands (ASALs) of Kenya: An Interdisciplinary Research Initiative to Inform and Transform Teaching and Learning*. The Spencer Foundation Vision research planning grant 2024 - 2025. \$75,000. Submitted and under review.
2. Ogejo, J.A., Bendfeldt, E.S., Drape, T.A., and H. Huang. (2023). *Using black soldier fly larvae to advance animal feed and other value-added products from organic wastes in agricultural and food systems*. USDA, National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) 2024 - 2027. \$299,999. Pending.

2023 VT Expenditures

The following expenditures are associated with Virginia Tech funds (state, college, and/or university) beyond those acquired through externally awarded grants and contracts:

- 2023 Center Open House (\$1000)
- Outreach materials and supplies (\$2,500)
- Center Spaces in Litton Reaves (1820 and 1830) upgrades (\$6,000)
- Indigenous Friendship Garden events through in-kind support (\$1,000)

Plans for 2024

Our goals for 2024 include continuing to advance our three objectives through our core programs and grant-funded projects. We aim to continue our center programming events and communications, such as: Monthly Fellow Speaker Series, Graduate Student Learning Circles, Bi-monthly 5 Weekly Readings, and the 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative with Podcast. We have also identified areas and opportunities for growth that are underway for 2024:

New position: Research Assistant Professor

In summer 2023, we hired a new Research Assistant Professor Faculty position as part of our Center Team. As a member of the Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation core team, the Research Assistant Professor contributes to leading the Center's community-based research program by conducting interdisciplinary and community-engaged scholarship focused on food systems change and community transformation relevant to Virginia, Central Appalachia, and the Mid-Atlantic region. The position also includes responsibilities to advance core Center programs and teamwork while participating as a faculty in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education.

New position: Postdoctoral Research Associate

In fall 2023, we completed a search for a new postdoctoral research position to serve as research lead for the new project, *“Increasing Access to Wholesale Markets: Meeting Technical Assistance Needs of Black, Hispanic, and Tribal Producers,”* which is funded by USDA AMS. The Postdoctoral Researcher will take leadership to organize and conduct research to address the project's aim in partnership with USDA-AMS and the Food Systems Action Lab at Illinois Tech: employ a mixed methods study to understand the distinct needs of Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers around access and entry into wholesale markets. The project plans to deliver resources and its results to regional technical assistance (TA) providers, including the Regional Food Business Centers (RFBCs), that will support Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers. The new hire will begin early 2024. The position also includes responsibilities to advance core Center programs and teamwork while participating as a faculty in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education.

New Hire: AgrAbility Virginia Program Coordinator

In fall 2023, we hired a new Coordinator for the AgrAbility Virginia Program. Housed in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, the AgrAbility Virginia Program Coordinator has primary responsibility of assisting the Program Director and AgrAbility Partnership in all educational, outreach, communication, managerial, and program evaluation responsibilities related to this statewide Virginia Cooperative Extension program. As a Center Associate, the position also includes expectations to participate in related programming with Center.

Undergraduate Internship Program

In fall 2023, the Center launched a pilot program with application for undergraduate student internships. The internship program is being designed to increase undergraduate student participation in research, community engagement, outreach, and policy related opportunities tied to current projects and signature programs. The application process will be fully launched in spring 2024 to accept students for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Resource Needs and Acknowledgements

In 2023, the Center acquired office and conference space on the Virginia Tech campus to serve as our physical home in Litton-Reaves Hall, which includes two rooms, 1820 and 1830. The Center's off-campus footprint was expanded to the Northwest District Extension office where Dr. Eric Bendfeldt is located. With financial support of the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education and the Associate Dean's Office of Academic Programs in CALS, the functionality of Litton Reaves space was renovated with additional aesthetic and technology improvements. To improve upon our current success and scope, we are developing a funding request to 1) support operating costs that are not covered by grants and contracts, and 2) seek support for the Center Associate's professional advancement in alignment with Center goals. We look forward to illustrating our ongoing commitment to Virginia Cooperative Extension and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech in 2024 and beyond.