

LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS:

BUILDING HEALTH & WEALTH IN THE DELTA



Invest in Healthy, Vibrant Communities

The key to economic recovery in the Mississippi Delta will be to bring the economy back home. Delta residents hold little power over their own lives as long as most of the food we eat is imported from other places.

Cultivating strong networks of local farm and food businesses is one critical step to take. The second is to foster healthy lifestyles based on fresh local foods and adequate exercise. These two actions alone would create thousands of new jobs and reduce health care costs in the Mississippi Delta.

The Delta Faces a Double Crisis: Food & Health

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that 68% of Mississippi residents are overweight or obese. The state is also a national leader in diabetes, with 12% of the population reporting they have been diagnosed by a doctor. Mortality from diabetes, another condition related to diet, increased 97% from 1990 to 2004. The medical costs for treating obesity and diabetes among Delta residents totaled \$323 million in 2009, and for the state of Mississippi as a whole these costs were a staggering \$1.7 billion.

Delta Fresh Foods commissioned the MS Delta Food Economy study from national expert Ken Meter of Crossroads Resource Center





Also troubling for the Delta's long-term future, researchers predict that children will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. These trends are a reflection of the instability of our current food system.

Half of Delta Residents Face Food & Health Deficits

Over 250,000 residents—nearly half of all Delta residents—earn so little that they cannot eat nutritious and safe food year-round. Yet low-income residents make up a substantial market. These low-income residents spend \$511 million buying food in Delta grocery stores each year, including \$127 million from food stamps (now called SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and even more in Women, Infants and Children (WIC) vouchers.

These consumers are rarely considered in food systems planning.

Moving to Healthier Farming & Eating

Only 17% of Mississippi Delta residents eat the recommended five servings of fruit and vegetables each day.

Few of the foods eaten in the Delta are produced by Delta farms for Delta consumers, even though this is a strong agricultural region. Delta farms produce \$350 million of corn, \$350 million of soybeans, and \$300 million of cotton, but most of these are commodities that are raised for industrial processing or export—not to feed local folks.

The Delta holds 17% of Mississippi's farms, but these 7,036 farms sell only \$524,000 of foods directly to consumers. That is only 0.03% of the Delta's farm sales, and 0.04% of consumer demand.

The Delta imports most of its food from distant sources, and sends billions of dollars away from the region.

Delta Food Markets Are Robust, But Billions Flow Out

Mississippi Delta residents buy nearly \$1.3 billion of food each year yet experts estimate that well over 90% of the food eaten in the Delta is raised outside the region. A staggering \$1.2 billion flows out of the region each year for food. The current food system literally creates poverty.

“If each Delta resident spent \$6.71 per week buying locally grown food they would generate \$117 million of new farm income for the Delta.”



If residents spent their food money to buy from local farms, it would build considerable wealth in the Delta. By purchasing 15% of their food for home use directly from Delta farmers, they would generate \$117 million of new farm income for the Delta. This would only require each resident to spend \$6.71 per week buying food directly from a local farmer.

Farm to School sales represent an emerging market for Delta growers. The US Dept. of Education reports that Mississippi spent \$241 million for school food services (including kitchen operations, staff) in 2009. In other states, the amount actually spent for food averages 42 percent of the overall costs making the estimated budget for all public schools in the state of Mississippi \$101 million in FY 2009.



Community-Based Foods Bring Many Benefits

Bringing the food supply back home brings great results. Many Southern communities have taken strong steps toward building local foods networks.

The Jubilee Project in Knoxville opened a shared-use community kitchen for use by residents and food entrepreneurs. The Food Bank of North Alabama has tackled many food initiatives. Atlanta's Emory University has committed itself to buying its food from Georgia farmers and fishermen. Virginia has built a sophisticated local foods effort.

Community development officers of the Nashville branch of the Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank found that many communities, particularly small rural, communities, are taking on "economic gardening," an approach designed to "grow your own" jobs through entrepreneurial activity within the community. The "growing body of research suggests small and local businesses are important drivers of economic growth in communities."

Local food production can be a primary economic driver while decreasing poverty and building vibrant Delta communities. In addition, eating fresh, healthy food grown by folks we trust will improve our health, reduce health care costs and make our food supply more secure.

Effective Local Actions

The Mississippi Delta can create a model food system that builds health, wealth, connection and capacity in our communities.

"Delta farms produce only 0.04% of the regions' demand for food."



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING LOCAL FOODS AS ECONOMIC, HEALTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES:

HELP BUILD A MOVEMENT

Foster a "Community of Practice" by engaging residents (including youth), businesses, public and private agencies and health professionals in building a local foods economy.

Network with other organizations, institutions and individuals in the region to best represent your community's goals and gain momentum for a healthy future.

EDUCATE AND ADVOCATE

Mobilize and provide resources to promote healthy cooking, eating and active living.

Facilitate open dialogue about the intersection of good food, good health and the economic potential of growing, buying and eating our food locally.

EFFECTIVE LOCAL ACTIONS

IMPROVE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL RESIDENTS

Ensure that SNAP and WIC benefits can be used to purchase locally grown food.

Build school, church and community gardens to engage youth and re-engage adults in growing food.

Promote healthy cooking and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet.

SUPPORT LOCAL FOOD PRODUCERS

Support businesses that keep healthy food and food dollars in the local economy—including buying from your local farmer directly and shopping at the farmers market.

Learn about the food system in your community and the capacity to produce and distribute food for local residents.

Help raise support for public and private infrastructure that creates efficiencies for the local food trade such as direct sales between local farmers and local institutions including schools and hospitals.

PROTECT THE FUTURE

Protect farmland and agricultural water rights permanently with a priority on food production.

Grow new farmers through training, financial assistance (including access to credit), and fostering a support network among producers.



DELTA FRESH FOODS

Building a network of comprehensive, sustainable community-driven food systems that strengthen the local economy and promote healthy lifestyles in the Mississippi Delta