



# Crossroads Resource Center

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*Tools for Community Self-determination*

## Next Steps for Supporting Emerging Farmers in Illinois

For  
The Land Connection

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## Executive Summary

The Land Connection (TLC) is asking how Illinois can better support its core of dedicated, emerging farmers. Interviews with 25 farmers from 16 farms in diverse regions of the state, as well as leaders of 3 nonprofits that serve them, provide initial answers to this question.

Each of the key elements of success identified by the farmers is complex. They are:

- **Access to Land & Capital**
- **Direct Connection to Household Customers**
- **Determination**
- **Supportive Infrastructure & Services**

After summarizing these themes, this report cites direct comments from the farmers interviewed. Much detail is lost by simply considering the categories above.

Each issue is complex. To simplify action, TLC and its partners may wish to identify system “levers” that can incite broader change across multiple issues and dimensions.

The current context is shaped by both the COVID-19 pandemic and by the assumptions made by those who invest in community food systems. Three of the most common assumptions are (1) that regenerative agriculture can be pursued as a narrow goal at only the farm level; (2) that projects must be “scalable” to have significant impact; and (3) that progress requires new technology. Each of these falls short of understanding the realities that farmers face.

Our findings suggest that TLC and its partners should focus on five priority areas:

1. Work with partners and other stakeholders to define a vision of forming **Regenerative Communities**, rather than simply focusing on farm operations.
2. Perform **consistent outreach to rural community members** who are not in “the choir” grounded on meals serving food from local farms and carefully curated conversations that elicit more inclusive visions for the state’s regional food systems, and build more committed consumer demand.
3. Raise funds to re-grant **small grants** of up to \$10,000 available to emerging farmers with a simple application process and rapid decisions.
4. **Expand farm incubator programs** to foster collaborations, cooperation, and community building as well as technical assistance to prospective farmers.
5. Raise patient funds to hire regional **Community Food-Web Weavers** who will develop collaborative leadership networks.

With these elements in place, TLC and its partners will be better able to identify additional key system levers that will inspire broader change, and select infrastructure and service priorities based upon this analysis of leverage.

## Purpose

The Land Connection (TLC) is asking how Illinois can better support its core of dedicated, emerging farmers. TLC asked Crossroads Resource Center to perform interviews with a select group of farmers who raise food for Illinois consumers. Farmers were selected as a starting point for this inquiry because, as primary producers, farmers interact with all other stakeholders in the food system. This summary of those interviews is viewed as the first step in what hopefully will be an ongoing process of reflection and strategic implementation.

## Methodology

Farms to be interviewed were selected by The Land Connection staff, in collaboration with more than two dozen partners across the state, who were asked to define topics for the interview questions and to identify potential interviewees. Farms were selected to represent diverse production approaches, selling to diverse consumer markets, located in three major regions of the state. Through this process, a list of about 50 farms was generated. Some farms that have ceased operations were also interviewed to help identify gaps in farmers' support networks. The 16 farms that emerged from this process are shown below, organized alphabetically by community.

Practical considerations also played a role in the final selection: for example, which farms would be available for interviews in a specific period (February 14-21, 2024) that was acceptable to most of the farmers. Winter weather allowed farmers more time to participate in interviews, and no farm or food conferences were convened that week. The itinerary was also selected to make travel between sites as efficient as possible. Each farm was offered a stipend of \$150 to participate in the interview. Several farms declined this payment.

### **Northern Illinois (5 farms)**

- Cliff McConville, All Grass Farms — Dundee, Illinois
- Marc Bernard, Rustic Road Farm — Elburn, Illinois
- Tim Brown, Broadview Farm & Gardens — Marengo, Illinois
- Marty Thomas & MariKate Thomas, Kakadoodle Farm — Matteson, Illinois
- Jason Sonnefeldt, Banford Road Farm — Woodstock, Illinois

### **Central Illinois (6 farms)**

- Mikyung ("Miky") Eum, Humbleweed Farm — Champaign, Illinois
- Ben Oberg & Molly Oberg with Jeff Meyer, Ben and Molly's Farm (formerly Meyer Produce) — East Camargo, Illinois
- Kyle Reed & Katherine Reed, Fox Path Farm — Mount Pulaski, Illinois

- Stan Schutte & Ryan Schutte, Triple S Farms — Stewardson, Illinois
- Traci Barkley & John Williams, Sola Gratia Farm — Urbana, Illinois
- Ted Maddox, Maddox Sweet Corn — Warrensburg, Illinois

### **Southern Illinois (5 farms)**

- Joshua Buchheit, Lick Creek Pork and Beef — Buncombe, Illinois
- Ralph Voss & Karen Voss, Voss Pecans — Carlyle, Illinois
- Jill Rendleman, All Seasons Farm — Cobden, Illinois
- Brian Elias & Kyle McAdams, Pink Tiger Farm — Goreville, Illinois
- Jennifer Duensing and Jason Duensing, Illinois Country Harvest — Prairie Du Rocher, Illinois

All told, 25 principals were interviewed from these 16 farms. While this certainly is not a representative sample of emerging farms in Illinois, our selection has the advantage of being informed by the insights of nonprofits who work closely with a variety of farmers and grasp the issues they face. The farmers interviewed are primarily White. Only one farmer is BIPOC. Yet several farmers we interviewed have felt excluded due to other issues of identity.

Crossroads Resource Center principal Ken Meter conducted all of the interviews. For several interviews, he was assisted by the following TLC staff: Nathan Aaberg, Jacquelyn Evers, Jeanne Janson, and Noah Scalero. Meter also interviewed the executive directors of three nonprofit organizations that work closely with farmers to gain their perspectives on the same issues. This included Jennifer Paulson (Food Works; in Carbondale); Jackie de Batista (Farmers Rising; in Caledonia); and Jacquelyn Evers (The Land Connection; in Champaign).

## **Results**

The 16 farms listed above grow a wide variety of products, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, chickens, eggs, beef, pork, and duck. Several create value-added food items. They are located in different microclimates with diverse soils and diverse access to markets in both rural and metropolitan communities. They range from start-ups to mature farms that seek a successor. Thus, it is difficult to generalize about them.

The one thing that most clearly stands out is that each farm has sold directly to household consumers. For all but one of the farms, this includes online ordering. Several farmers said they would not be operating today without purchasing, or writing for themselves, effective online platforms. Thus, computer technology is shaping the future of local foods in an important manner.

There is considerable variety in the direct market channels these farms utilize. Twelve of these farms sell through farmers' markets. Eight have launched Community Supported Agriculture

(CSA) or similar membership plans. Seven operate a farm stand on the farm. Three offer home delivery, and consider this the optimal strategy for future growth.

Nine of these farms sell to aggregators such as Little Egypt Alliance of Farmers (LEAF), Irv and Shelly's Fresh Picks, Down at the Farms LLC, or food banks. Nine of the farms we interviewed sell direct to independently owned grocers based in Illinois. Eight sell value-added products; nine sell meat or eggs. None makes any concerted effort to sell to broadline wholesalers or supermarket chains. Four sell occasionally to restaurants, but not in large quantities.

Three of the farms interviewed rely upon conventional commodity production as part of their income stream; in some cases, this commodity production has helped cover the costs of a transition to specialty crops or selling to local consumers.

The farms we interviewed hold a strong interest in collaboration. Three-fourths (12) of these farms seek to collaborate more with other farmers. Several hope to learn more about cooperative ownership models. Informal collaboration is already underway: Four of these farms sell products raised by other farmers alongside their own produce.

## **Key Elements of Success**

We asked the farmers to summarize what they felt were the key elements of success for their operations. We received diverse responses, but several stand out. They are not separate, but interrelated. Each is in itself complex:

- **Access to Land & Capital**
- **Direct Sales to Household Customers**
- **Determination**
- **Supportive Infrastructure & Services**

**Access to Land & Capital** is obviously critical for any farm. Land access has become extremely problematic because of rising land prices, especially in areas where metropolitan development is taking farmland out of production. There is an inherent tension here because the growth of suburbs housing consumers having spending power, so essential for farmers to access, also takes farmland out of production and raises land costs.

Several farms also pointed out that the location of the farm can be a determining factor of its success: whether the soil is healthy and fertile or fertility can be built; the prevailing costs of purchase or lease; having the correct farm size for running a specific business; its proximity or distance from consumers; access to supportive infrastructure; support from neighbors; access to transportation; and more.

Two of the farmers we interviewed praised the efforts of The Conservation Fund (based in Atlanta, Georgia) to assist their farm purchases. The Conservation Fund is able to purchase properties at their development value, and then place a conservation easement on the property. This reduces the value of the land by taking it out of development. After a waiting period in which the farm establishes its farm operation, the farm holds the option of purchasing the land from The Conservation Fund at this reduced price. Several farms, however, pointed out that even these reduced land prices are often not affordable for a beginning farmer.

Other strategies employed by the farms we interviewed:

- **Prior farm ownership.** Some farms grew away from commodity farming models even as they maintained cash crop production. These farms enjoyed lower land costs, because they took over a farm operation that was passed down through their family. Others collaborated with people outside of their families who were willing to pass along ownership of their farm to a new generation that is not connected through blood relations.
- **Prior wealth.** Several farmers worked for many years in professional occupations to build up enough capital that purchasing land for a farm was a realistic option.
- **Combine farming with off-farm work.** This has been a critical strategy for ensuring that the farm operator is able to have both health benefits and co-workers, as well as an opportunity to interact with a broader social context. Several of the farms we interviewed combine part- or full-time work at a nonprofit organization that is supportive of their farming business. This may offer flexible scheduling and an appreciation of the farming expertise each farmer brings to the staff. Another approach is quite distinct: One farm is considering purchasing a related business in order to help diversify their income streams.
- **Investments or loans from consumers.** Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farming is typically an essential strategy for enabling someone to launch a farm. Under this model, consumers share some of the risks of farming with the farm by investing up front in the year's crop, and receiving a share of the harvest when it comes in. However, CSA farming can also lead to burnout because the time demands are intense. We were also told that younger consumers are less interested (or simply unable) to put money up front to purchase a CSA share. Larger investments also play an important role by enabling some farms to expand. Several farms invited friendly investors to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in their farm operation, enabling them to launch a larger farm than they could otherwise carry.
- **Building one's own infrastructure.** Those with the mechanical skills and time to construct their own farm equipment, buildings, or software, etc., can reduce operating costs substantially.

- **Living simply.** It is a time-honored tradition for emerging farmers to cut their living costs to the bone in order to relieve pressure off of their farming. This, however, is unlikely to be a resilient strategy over the long haul.
- **Private, federal, state, and local grants.** Amidst a farm and food system that has systematically extracted wealth from rural America, grants are an essential support for emerging farmers and their business partners. Several farms we interviewed reluctantly accepted grants, yet found that these made the farm far more productive. Several also complained the application process for small grants is burdensome, and should be simplified. Typically, the larger grants are not given directly to farms to build infrastructure for a single operator, but rather facilities that serve several farmers at once, or brings clear benefits to consumers as well, This grows out of a recognition that public money should not be dictating which individual farms thrive. However, newer federal programs (such as the new Regional Food Business Centers) do allow the federal government to make relatively small donations directly to emerging farm businesses. This is long overdue.

**Direct Sales to Household Customers.** As noted above, each of the farms we visited sells food directly to household consumers. Several also have found rewarding commercial or wholesale accounts, often diversifying income streams by cultivating several market channels at once.

There are interesting nuances to this common thread, of course. One of the foremost reasons to sell direct to household customers is that farmers can set their own prices at levels that cover their costs of production, something that is not always possible in wholesale markets. Several of the farms even chose to locate their farms in close proximity to prosperous communities where nearby residents have considerable disposable income. This makes direct delivery easier. This delivery has increasingly been fueled by the emergence of innovative software platforms. Unless delivery includes a concerted effort to build closer connections with consumers, however, it risks creating a sense of separation.

For farms launched without considerable capital backing, some form of CSA arrangement has been essential, so that customers share some of the financial risks taken by farmers by providing capital at the start of the season. Over time, several of the farms have scaled back CSA operations because they consider the work too frenetic, or because consumers (especially younger ones) are becoming less interested in putting up money at the front of the season.

Some of the more experienced farmers have shifted their attention to wholesale market channels. At the same time, some farms that have established lucrative commercial markets now find themselves drawn back to selling direct to their immediate neighbors, who they view as more consistent customers that demand less uniformity of product and are able to pay higher prices. Other farmers simply want to build stronger personal connections with their immediate neighbors.

As will be examined later, however, several farm operators and one nonprofit leader pointed out that household consumer demand is somewhat softer than would be ideal. Some of the most

coveted items are not financially rewarding to grow. Consumer demand is somewhat fickle, especially as work demands make it difficult for consumers set aside time to prepare their own meals. Wholesale markets are also deeply variable. Ironically, some of the most difficult consumers to engage are those who live close to farms in rural Illinois.

**Determination.** Several farms noted that managing any farm requires exceptional determination. This is especially true of farm owners who hold a strong commercial bent, rather than those who view themselves as embedded in a community. Given its intense dependence on unpredictable natural forces, fickle markets, and physical risks, farming is inherently (and uniquely) difficult. Several mentioned the severe intellectual, marketing, and emotional focus required of farmers. Several farmers mentioned that there were times they were tempted to give up. One lamented that “farming is not conducive to family life.”

**Supportive Infrastructure and Services.** Those farms that built successful businesses relied heavily upon supportive infrastructure and services. Many argue that the most critical need is to provide technical assistance in business management to farmers. Indeed, experienced farmers noted that they wished they had enjoyed access to business advisers far earlier in their farm careers. Yet it can also be difficult to find service providers who hold expertise in farming or who understand the needs of creative farm business ventures. Some try to confine farmers to conventional business approaches that are primarily attuned to the extractive economy. Many emerging farms work to build a future food system in which very different styles of farms would thrive, through connections to different infrastructure and services than currently are available, but are pressured to conform to more traditional business models.

Among the infrastructure and services that farmers mentioned include:

- **Financial and legal experts** including those who understand:
  - Software that facilitates purchasing and delivery logistics
  - Tax policies
  - Business planning and farm accounting
  - Investment policies
  - Lenders (and knowing when to avoid debt)
  - Real estate agents and legal advisers
  - Land trust and conservation trust experts
  - Marketing including product segmentation
  - Regulatory procedures
  - Cooperative business ownership
  - Labor law
  - Farm business mentors
  
- **Aggregation firms, food hubs, and food banks**
  - Wholesale buyers who are responsive to farmer needs and trustworthy
  - Mentors in staging foods for sale
  - Distributors and drivers



- **Food processing** including
  - Value-added processing on the farm (dehydrating, parboiling and cooking, sterilization, packaging, sealing, bottling, labeling, etc.)
  - Commercial food processors and co-packers
  - Meat processors who are both skilled and responsive to farmers
  - Skilled labor
  
- **Committed consumers with income and loyalty to local farms**
  - Consumers who are choosing quality foods for health reasons
  - Suburban households with mobility to travel to farms
  - Prosperous households with ability to make larger purchases
  - CSA members who will invest up front
  - Farmers' market patrons
  - Consumers who seek a personal connection to farmers, an on-farm experience, recreational opportunities on farms, etc.
  
- **Research, educational, advocacy, and policy partners**
  - Regenerative farming practices such as cover cropping and rotation
  - Farm business training and templates
  - Farm mentors and internships
  - Direct sales advisors
  - Conferences and other gatherings
  - Supportive regulations and health officials
  - Illinois Farmers Market Association
  - Illinois Stewardship Alliance
  - Farmers Rising (formerly Angelic Organics)
  - Food Works
  - The Land Connection
  - The Conservation Fund
  - Food Finance Institute
  - Researchers and Extension agents
  
- **Healthy soil and clean air & water**
  - Protection from pollutants
  - Composting to build fertility
  - Former forests, lakebeds, swamps, etc., that created (or currently add) fertility
  - Cover crop seeds and rotational expertise
  - Markets for cover crops
  - Researchers and Extension agents
  
- **Succession planning and future farmers**
  - Legal expertise
  - People willing to shoulder the tasks of running a farm operation
  - People with sufficient capital and business expertise to take over a farm

- Policies that support farming over the long haul
- Dedicated consumers

Few farmers mentioned the need for supportive public policy, in part because there are so few examples of public policies that support emerging farmers in a sustained manner. On the other hand, farmers did mention that there is considerable public money available for the first time in their experience. This does not yet translate into effective policy that consistently supports growth of resilient food systems over time. Moreover, some farmers are simply skeptical that any public investment can be valuable, and pay little attention to public opportunities.

### **In the Words of Farmers Themselves**

The summary above is only one way to look at the results of the interviews. So it is worth considering the words of the farmers themselves. Note that individual farmers draw diverse conclusions that are inconsistent with each other. The quotations excerpted below offer very visceral insights that farmers bring to this discussion. These suggest key strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for what farmers believe is needed in the future. Some have been edited lightly so they read more smoothly or to protect confidentiality.

#### **Access to land and capital:**

“My father managed to buy out several properties as people left or retired from farming.”

“The only reason I am farming here at all is that we had the money saved.”

“The only reason we could construct this building that we had a death in the family and this meant we had \$40,000 to spend.”

“The problem is that there is never really enough money. We rely on grants and volunteer energy.”

“More grant money is needed with a simpler application process.”

“We need grant writers.”

“We need ongoing education, more state support.”

“There is no safety net, not enough insurance. Having a nonprofit is a form of safety net.”

“Interns should be paid for their time.”

“Some nonprofits have helped a great deal. Their staff are heavily invested. But other nonprofits seem to take up a lot of resources and just keep on getting grant funds [without accomplishing much].”

“There are all of these nonprofits who have money....” [but bring little benefit to farmers].

“Farm to school is getting big. Illinois has all of this money. You would think they would call farmers first to see how to spend it.”

“Farmers don’t have much time for attending meetings/sessions.” [Several nonprofits now compensate farmers for the time they invest in food system visioning and planning].

**Farming as a business:**

“The system is broken. The barriers to entry are real high. You are set up for failure.”

“There is no set system. You have to find what works for you. You have to stay in your lane.”

“This mostly depends on how serious you are. People who don’t take it seriously do not stay in business.”

“Through farmers’ networks and videos I was introduced to farmers who can sell more than \$300,000 on a farm of a few acres. When I discovered this, I felt certain that I could make farming work for myself.”

“We all just sell widgets, and you have to make money on each widget. You’ve got to know the numbers. At the same time, we are also selling a sense of connection, experience, responsiveness, and recreational experiences.”

“This business is all about building relationships.”

“Several people have found a niche, but others are barely hanging on.”

“Three vegetable farms in our region have closed.”

“Our business is based upon trust. We sell mostly through word of mouth. When we quote a price it is good for only 1-2 days, because the market is always changing.”

“[One specific product] is what keeps customers coming in. We never really made money by selling it. But it is the draw that brings people in.” [This was stated by two farms].

“The biggest factor for success is advertising.”

“SNAP benefits are important for our success.”

“For our first two years, we just replicated what [the previous owner] did.”

“You have to have a superior product and sell it efficiently.”

“You have to give customers what they want. You can’t grow what you think they should eat.”

“One big problem is getting labor, whether labor will stay.”

“If we reduced our offerings, we could farm organically, but we would also need more labor.”

“There are good reasons why conventional farmers don’t want to do this. It is labor intensive, high risk, and it’s a marketing nightmare.”

**Business strategies:**

“The key to our success is taking small steps forward one by one.”

“We have learned to tolerate a certain level of failure.”

“Now we are taking baby steps.”

“Our long-term goal is to get everything we need right here on our land without having to go to a store.”

“We hire local youth, and avoid hiring foreign laborers.”

“John Hendrickson at the University of Wisconsin was helpful with equipment and labor. He has a structure of what you need at different levels: for a 1-acre farm, 5 acres, or 10-20 acres. Each level requires different equipment.”

**The importance of direct sales to some farms:**

“I *had* to sell direct in my first year. I started at the farmers’ market. It has been a good starting point for us. Luckily the relationships we formed there have lasted.”

“One day we sold more produce out of our farm stand than we sold through 34 grocery stores in our area.”

“For a while we needed the CSA to get customers to buy.” Now, however, the CSA helps drive farmstand sales.

“We have offered a CSA for 9 years. One reason was that we got tired of the wholesale buyers telling us that our products were ‘too fat’ or ‘too big.’ They wanted everything to be the same size.”

“We started out with 27 CSA members, then we went to more than 50, then 100, then 200, then 250. We peaked at 400 and now are back to 250 shares.”

**The importance of value-added to some farms:**

“We don’t like to raise commodity products to sell.”

“You have to be selling value-added products.”

“If you farm and haven’t figured out how to add value-added products you are making a mistake.”

**Relationships with policies and service providers:**

“By far the most effective ‘training’ we get is talking about our collaboration with other people.”

“The key is knowing what are the real needs of particular farmers.”

“After money, the next need is to have a roving consultant, someone who meets with every farm every couple of years, to see how they are doing, and help connect them with resources.”

“My biggest wish would be to have another person to talk to – someone to talk things through with.”

“The nonprofits can foster communication. Farms have to stay flexible.”

“The various programs are not well connected.”

“We need people resources with time to do deeper thinking.”

“Health insurance is an important need for farmers.”

“There is a need for technical training on cooperative models.”

“There was a disconnect with our accountant.”

**Long-term support required:**

“Farming needs more institutionalized financial support. It needs to be subsidized as well as conventional row cropping.”

“We need a system of emotional support.”

“Financial stability is important, especially since markets are still being sorted out.”

“New farmers really need a year’s pay up front so they can learn their business.”

“There is a lot of pressure on land prices” [because of urban development].

**Meat processing is lacking:**

“Meat processing is a big need.”

“[One meat processor] would not cut the meats the way I asked.”

**Revised regulations:**

“The biggest challenge is regulatory hurdles.” [These were not specified].

**Farming as a way of life:**

“People are always romanticizing farming, especially influencer farmers. It belies the reality.”

“Farming is not conducive to family life.”

**Transferring ownership:**

“I don’t know how to transfer this business to someone else.”

“I’m not going to be able to sell my farm for the \$2 to \$5 million it is worth.”

“We had to deal with the previous owners for 6 months” [who had not kept up the property].

**Potential collaboration:**

“There is more possibility of community use of a wash and pack facility.”

“I am just now at the place [in establishing my business] where I can begin to talk about collaborative efforts.”

“There is a new cohort of farmers now, who are more open to collaboration than some of the older farmers.”

“One competitor did not like that we were advertising our product as chemical free, so he challenged our label. We were forced to change it. Now I tell our customers, Come see how we do it.”

**Educating consumers:**

“The way we eat is so screwed up.”

“Food is like [the] Civil Rights [issue]. It’s never just one problem.”

“I view my duty as a farmer to educate my neighbors to eat healthier.”

“In our area we are so far from markets, we have to go so far to get to them.”

**The ironies of consumer preferences:**

*Consumers say they want to buy food from local farms, however...*

“Our consumer base wouldn’t buy local food if we didn’t deliver. They won’t go out of their way.”

“People don’t want to cook any more.”

“The primary reason people buy from us is that our food is grown in dirt.”

**Connecting directly with rural neighbors:**

“One purpose of our farm is to educate the consumer.”

“Farming at its core should be about trust and generosity.”

“We are now starting a food community. We are going to work with our neighbors and make sure we can survive.”

**Coping with sudden change:**

“The pandemic was crazy. Almost too crazy.”

“Our goal is to maintain what we have, but be ready to shift as needed.”

## **The Complexities of Consumer Demand**

These comments by farmers highlight the complexity of consumer demand. One farmer who is deeply dependent upon direct marketing lamented that their customers want to buy food raised on farms near them, but their commitment is rather soft. “Our consumer base wouldn’t buy local food if we didn’t deliver. They won’t go out of their way.”

In the next sentence, this farmer added a further caution that is even more problematic: “People don’t want to cook any more.” This has led some farms to emphasize delivery of meal kits and other value-added products. This represents a commercial opportunity, but also suggests that consumers have limited commitment to supporting farms over the long haul. Nor does it suggest that many consumers are actively engaged in taking full charge of their food options, nor in preparing healthy meals for themselves. This certainly limits the potential for community food networks to flourish over time.

On the other hand, other farms report that their neighbors willingly drive to their farms on a regular basis to pick up farm-fresh foods. This may be due to demographic differences; more prosperous consumers are likely to have more time and resources to take a more proactive role. Even here, however, some consumers need to be enticed to visit the farm by offering products that do not reward the farmer financially, but create reasons to visit.

Ironically, consumer loyalty is most difficult to build among rural consumers — those who live closest to farms and do not have good access to fresh foods at their local supermarkets. As one nonprofit leader lamented, “grocery chains do not prioritize shipping fresh produce to our communities.” Most of these communities also lack spending power. Some consumers are unfamiliar with fresh produce.

This softness of demand suggests that TLC and its partners may wish to focus considerable effort on engaging consumers more actively. The softness of demand suggests that TLC and its partners may wish to focus considerable effort on engaging consumers more actively. Examples of ways to engage consumers would be to bring locally produced foods directly to community gatherings where people who are not in “the choir” already gather or to host a community meal featuring locally raised foods catered by local chefs. Another example includes trying to establish connections between rural producers and artists with tourism initiatives.



## Overall Context

The current context is deeply shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which sparked immense shifts in US food systems. While outbreaks of the disease continue, seemingly the worst impacts of the pandemic are, at least temporarily, behind us. This caused a sudden spike of interest in Community Supported Agriculture and direct purchasing from Illinois farms, but that interest has now peaked.

Unfortunately, one of the key insights gained from the pandemic was that all of us will be coping with considerable uncertainty for decades to come, and that we must plan for uncertain times. Yet the rush to respond to the pandemic has also led many Illinoisans to fall back upon older patterns that promised comfort. One such pattern is the rush to deliver healthier food to those who need relief, but without using those initiatives as ways of constructing more resilient food systems.

Our interviews highlight that there are at least two edges to the new federal and state investment in local and regional foods initiatives. Certainly, these funds are critically needed after decades of disinvestment from rural communities. Moreover, terms of funding are getting more favorable, so public funds are more suited to the needs of community foods initiatives than ever before. However, there is also a shadow side to this largesse. Both farmers and nonprofits may become caught up in pleasing the dictates of public grant programs, rather than using these funds to build strong communities with resilient food systems on their own terms. While Illinois nonprofits have successfully encouraged their partners to use these funds to build community food systems, beyond counting the pounds of food that may be delivered, they themselves report having difficulty stepping back to take the long view because of the rush of new programs.

Already, for many of the people we interviewed, conversations about future visions were at times limited by shaping their attention to the pools of money that are available, and couching their planning in terms of specific programs, rather than implementing more comprehensive local visions. Further, there are also indications that key funders focus primarily upon funding well organized and highly visible nonprofit organizations over supporting community initiatives. Several farmers, indeed, noted that some of the most visible nonprofits seem to have considerable resources, but little conviction to advance community interests.

At the same time, Illinois nonprofits also play an unrecognized informal role in supporting emerging farmers. About half of the staff of both The Land Connection and Food Works are working farmers — who are able, through these jobs, to enjoy health benefits that would be difficult to afford as a beginning farmer, and are able to work with supportive fellow staff. This further allows these farmer/staff to gain a richer understanding of food system dynamics and may gain flexibility in scheduling so they can better tackle farm chores, or to respond to unpredictable developments such as weather changes. Community-minded nonprofits are thus central to constructing the infrastructure that emerging farmers require.

Compounding the rush to fulfill public deadlines, well intentioned efforts by a number of philanthropists and investors who have risen to the challenge of planning and constructing more resilient food systems are often hampered by assumptions that may not be warranted given current dynamics in the farm and food sector.

Some of the main prevailing assumptions are:

1. Regenerative agriculture can be pursued as a narrow goal on farms.
2. The only projects that are worth investing in are those that are “scalable.”
3. Progress requires new technology.

Each of these will be addressed briefly below.

**Regenerative agriculture:** The concept of “regenerative agriculture” was put forward by organics pioneer Robert Rodale more than 50 years ago, as a refinement of organic agriculture. This certainly refers to farming practices, but also to an entire food system that supports regenerative food production. However, it is often considered primarily as a potential set of farming practices, or merely a marketing label, today.

Rodale considered regenerative agriculture important because farmers could build soil health and grow nutritionally dense foods using resources that were readily available on their farms. This allows farms to regenerate their production practices over multiple generations, with limited reliance upon outside inputs. It described a self-organizing system that could be resilient to changing circumstances.

At the time Rodale expressed this vision, three examples of regenerative agriculture were visible. Traditional indigenous agricultural practices certainly were regenerative. Amish and other “plain folk” communities, by holding to a simple lifestyle and limiting their use of technology, could (and still do) build entire communities from scratch. Even farming communities formed by immigrant settlers at times pursued regenerative practices such as cover cropping, or at least held clear memories of farming before chemical inputs and harvest machinery became dominant following World War II.

In each case, communities practiced agriculture in ways that could be sensitive to environmental conditions and resilient as conditions changed. Entire communities ensured that the skills of farming, cooking, and eating, as well as lending, innovating, educating, and the like, were re-created in new generations.

Yet rural communities have been decimated by extractive economic structures and have lost their capacity to regenerate themselves.

Simply put, regenerative farms will not survive over the long haul unless they are embedded in regenerative communities. Our current challenge is to construct regenerative food systems — not simply to persuade consumers to look for a “regenerative” label at the grocery store.

This must occur even as our models of family farming have shifted over the past 50 years. Now families are more egalitarian and more fluid. Climate is less stable. Market channels are subject to greater competition internationally and demand is changing rapidly. As farms strive to sell to nearby consumers with the purpose of building community in an uncertain world, all parties, including farmers, consumers, nonprofits, service providers, researchers and others, need to be contributing, and learning from each other continuously. Markets are inefficient in delivering these coordinating conversations, so this will continue to require a nonprofit presence.

**Scalability:** One major priority expressed by many potential investors, including both commercial and philanthropic entities, is to seek solutions that are “scalable.” This analysis responds to a very reasonable frustration with the inherent slowness of community foods work, based as it is upon personal relationships of trust, and the limited impacts that can be attributed to specific allocations of funding. It expresses the urgency of changing food systems rapidly in a manner that addresses racial injustice, economic dislocation, degraded water supplies, climate change, the decline of soil fertility, and a host of complex issues, all at once.

However, the farmers we interviewed offered different insights. Two farmers noted that key to their success was taking small steps one step at a time. Several farmers feel encumbered by a lack of infrastructure that supports their farm operations at the scale they currently operate, not by an absence of scale. Each farm is changing its operation continually, scaling up and scaling down, based on personal or family needs, changing weather patterns, fickle markets, varying consumer tastes, the knowledge and technology available to them, and the unique needs of the specific lands and ecosystems in which they farm. As one farm put it, “I have learned to shift as needed.” Resilient farms must be able to make robust choices under changing conditions over time — and then to pass their operation on to a new generation. Smaller farms are often the most flexible. All of this suggests that a priority is to construct farms that are nimble, not necessarily scalable.

Certainly, no template that is “scalable” would apply equally well to the rolling hills of Southern Illinois and the flat prairie landscapes of the North. The construction of any template risks creating a locus of control that is external to the farm itself or its community. It also risks creating inflexible standards. It risks imposing top-down templates that are not responsive to unique local conditions.

Our interviews bore this out. Each of the farms we interviewed took lessons from farmers that preceded them, adopting (and adapting) methods that had worked on other farms, as a way to get started. This included following the examples: Joel Salatin, Eliot Coleman, a farm tool manufacturer, the University of Wisconsin, the previous farm owner, a family member, or

others. As each farmer became more proficient, they refined these models to suit their own priorities and local contexts. Some have scaled up only to scale back down.

The work ahead of us is to build resilient and regenerative food systems that allow farmers to scale up and down as conditions require based on changing conditions, treating “scaling up” as a potential *strategy*, not as a *purpose*.

Given the complexity and rapidly changing nature of food systems, a better alternative to defining “scalable” solutions outside of each unique community context is to identify systems “levers” that will prompt broader impacts.

**Technology:** Related to “scalability” is the widespread assumption that true progress can only be attained by adopting new technology. Once again, this assertion holds a grain of truth. Those farms that thrive by selling direct to household consumers today are those that adopted a suitable online ordering technology, most notably in response to the pandemic. Technological advances have created tremendous new efficiencies. Efficient hoop houses have done wonders to extend the growing season across Illinois, and may offer a richer palette of options as climate changes.

Still, to state that only technological progress can advance the future of farming is for society to abandon our responsibilities to create new efficiencies, and more elegant solutions, by collaborating. Technology also runs the risk of acting in a top-down manner. The purpose of food systems is not simply to increase productivity or reduce costs. Food systems should build health, wealth, connection, and capacity within urban and rural communities.

The processes that generated the tremendous wealth that has been created in technological sectors (and that often allows foundations or investors to have capital today) cannot simply be transposed onto the farm and food sector. Live foods grow slowly, and farmers confront inherent risks from climate, markets, and economic structures that technological firms will never face. Farming and food systems must adapt to each place and be resilient over time. Technology may help achieve these ends, but cannot do so by itself.

As one example, rather than asking farmers to invest in reducing costs to match the cost structures of firms that have adopted larger-scale technology, it would be more fruitful to develop pricing systems (as Fifth Season Cooperative in Wisconsin has done) in coordination with buyers that pay small farmers prices that cover their costs.

## Moving Toward Regenerative Communities

Rather than searching for “scalable” templates that would narrow the choices that farmers and communities have to devise their own solutions, it would be better for investors and nonprofit activity to support the self-organization of regional food systems across Illinois that are unique

to each place. Each region of the state has a unique heritage, technical and social capacities, soil characteristics, climate, resources for building fertility, access to markets, nonprofit capacity, and public policy. No “scalable” template can be responsive to such diversity, nor should it overlook the strengths that this diversity represents.

Rather than focusing solely upon new technologies that would dictate the options that farmers and consumers can pursue, this quest should be integrated into processes that weave a fabric of community. Building interpersonal trust and forging strong personal relationships allows people to make informed and strategic choices over time as conditions change — including having the freedom and power to say no to specific technologies that do not serve local interests.

The regenerative food systems of the future will draw upon insights cultivated by generations of family farmers in the past, as well as others who were excluded from farm ownership in the past, but who nourished community nonetheless.

A regenerative farm and food system will include a complex array of openings for farmers of diverse approaches and needs. It will recognize that farmers of diverse sizes are all important, so that there are adequate entry-level slots, strategies and places for running a farm business while expanding (for those who wish to expand), and large-scale, efficient operations that contribute to community life rather than focusing solely on the bottom line. Such a system will recognize that each farm experiences its own life cycles, and shifts its attention to markets, from direct sales to wholesale and perhaps back to direct, over time as conditions change. A regenerative food system will further create pathways for farms to transition from one generation of ownership to the next.

Following are some potential action arenas based upon the themes identified in the interviews.

**Access to Land & Capital.** Several national land funds and lenders already operate in Illinois. Our interviewees mentioned the following specifically:

- Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT (Real Estate Investment Trust), founded in Illinois in 2007.
- The Conservation Fund (Atlanta, Georgia)
- Farmers Land Trust (New Hampshire & Tennessee)
- Agrarian Trust (Portland, Oregon)
- American Farmland Trust (Washington, DC)
- COMPEER (Midwestern branch of the national Farm Credit System) with 17 offices in Illinois

Small or mid-sized Illinois nonprofits can play only a limited role in addressing land and capital requirements because this work requires access to larger amounts of money. Still, the state’s nonprofits can remain in active contact with these initiatives, communicating local visions to national actors, and assisting farmers to interface with each one on rewarding terms.

Farm incubators such as the one currently operated by Farmers Rising (focused on livestock farming for marginalized groups), and one being developed by Sola Gratia farm in Urbana (still being planned), should also be supported. Incubator farms may wish to add a focus on fostering farmer collaborations so alumni can continue to work together after graduation, rather than simply sending emerging farmers out to face fickle markets by themselves. Indeed, they could play a solid role in creating community collaborations and local food trade in their own regions.

Yet even an individually focused incubator project holds significant impacts. As merely two examples, both Farmers Rising (formerly Angelic Organics) in Caledonia, Illinois, and PrariErth Farms in Atlanta, Illinois, have each fostered the professional development of dozens of farmer trainees who now operate farms as well as work for nonprofits that advance the quest for resilient and regenerative food systems.

**Consumer Loyalty.** Perform outreach to rural, urban, and peri-urban consumers through community meals. Detailed suggestions are spelled out in the final section below.

**Determination.** There is little that the Illinois nonprofit sector can do directly to build greater determination among emerging farmers, since this is largely an individual attribute, and one that may wax and wane over time. Still, something can be done to build the capacity for community self-determination. Building relationships of trust, honest and fruitful collaborations, and cooperative ownership can all play a role. The more that a local food system is based in community, and self-organized by the members of that community, the more likely it is to induce solid local impacts.

**Supportive Infrastructure and Services.** Farm neighbors have historically helped each other through difficult times quite reliably. However, now that farms are scattered widely, often isolated from each other or connected more closely to suburban consumers than to nearby farmers, new issues arise.

- **Infrastructure.** Farmers emphasized the need for better infrastructure that would allow them to reach broader markets. One nonprofit leader noted the need for more farm-level infrastructure to keep crops cold and safe before they are shipped, as well as aggregation points that help supply larger markets. Critically, local and regional logistics firms and food delivery systems for smaller shipments are lacking in several parts of the state. This is complicated by the fact that different types of foods require different handling for safe treatment.
- **Farming support industries.** Now removed from farm neighborhoods, many emerging farms lack access to a variety of essential services:
  - **Input dealers** for seeds, seedlings, organic amendments, small-scale equipment, etc.
  - **Skilled mechanics** for equipment repair
  - **Meat processing:** One glaring need that is difficult to address is adding responsive meat processing, when so few laborers or even owners are committed to performing the daily tasks of slaughter and butchering.
  - **Business and marketing advisers**

- **Data providers** that can help ground community foods work and make a more informed and precise case for their food initiatives.
- **Accountants** that understand farm law and taxation
- **Veterinary** or insemination services
- **Insurance** is lacking for specialty or livestock producers and weather disasters
- **Ongoing mentoring.** Several farms gained essential skills from the Farm Beginnings course run by FoodWorks, but wish they had access to ongoing mentoring or coaching: someone who could be called when a confusion or crisis pops up. Several farmers would especially enjoy having access to professionals who could write grant applications for them, or at least having vastly simplified application processes. As one nonprofit leader put it, “Farmers are tired of having to wear too many hats at once.”
- **Labor.** Finding reliable help that is skilled and committed to the farm operation is proving difficult for many farmers.
- **Neighborly assistance.** Several farmers expressed a wish that they had more neighbors to call upon for tasks as simple as volunteer labor when a piece of equipment needs to be moved.

## Weaving Community Food Webs

One nonprofit leader noted that emerging farmers in Illinois have been quite successful at growing high-quality foods and delivering them to consumers who have taken extra steps to purchase them. The social and commercial networks that have been formed represent a beacon of hope in a politically polarized era, and often are indeed one of the few connections that cut across worldviews held by diverse groups of rural residents, in particular.

Each region of Illinois — North, Central, and South — has effectively responded to the unique geographic and climate opportunities available. Yet there is also a tendency for Chicago investors to favor urban agriculture, assuming that rural areas will magically supply metropolitan consumers, rather than place a priority on feeding themselves.

Nonprofit leaders also bemoaned the social isolation that affects farmers, nonprofit staff, and consumers — each for diverse reasons. Community foods efforts all are devoted to breaking down this isolation, yet technology, habit, and economic pressures push solidly in the direction of isolation. One leader mentioned that field days can help break down isolation by bringing people together, but often do not result in more coordinated action. Moreover, funders often limit their interest to providing funds for specific technical assistance but not for ongoing social connection. Language, cultural and racial barriers can create deeper isolation.

Unless consumers become dedicated to purchasing food from local farms, and see themselves as people who engage in creating new food systems, rather than simply as consumers looking

for the best deals, it is unlikely that decades of committed work toward constructing community food systems will come to full fruition. Therefore, more concerted attention toward building more comprehensive and inclusive community networks (community food webs) will be essential.

In the short term, nonprofits in Illinois seem likely to prioritize relationship-building and responsive technical assistance, and to work with diverse partners to identify the most fruitful leverage points to address.

While there is already considerable statewide cooperation among nonprofit organizations, with several engaged in regular monthly meetings to compare notes on current developments, not all of their farmer partners are aware of this. Suggestions from this investigation include the following key steps:

1. Better coordinate nonprofit service providers and make existing collaboration more visible:
  - a. Build stronger relationships of trust among staff and board members.
  - b. Ensure that clear boundaries in service provision and geographies are defined to minimize competition and promote collaboration across organizations.
  - c. Hold regular coordination meetings that will evaluate Illinois' progress toward building regenerative food systems and monitor changing conditions. These should include farmers, food buyers, policy specialists, and other stakeholders. All should be paid for their time.
  - d. Each nonprofit may be able to specialize in a few areas, rather than competing with each other to offer similar services. As one example, The Land Connection has developed considerable expertise in grain farming, while Farmers Rising is specializing in training emerging farmers in small livestock production. The Illinois Stewardship Alliance focuses on statewide policy.
2. Perform more regular informal check-ins with farmers and food businesses to ascertain key needs that each farm has, offer supportive technical assistance, and connect each farm with grants and other opportunities.
3. Establish more grant programs that offer grants of up to \$10,000 for individual emerging farmers (or collaborations) to help them build their farm businesses, whether to purchase inputs, tools, equipment, or other essentials. Application forms should be very simple, ideally one page. Funds should be released in a short time frame. Grantors should visit each farm as stated in #2 above. As one nonprofit leader pointed out, farmers must also invest something tangible in the process, so they have some "skin in the game" as commitment to broader outcomes than farm profitability.
4. Wherever possible, establish pricing systems that reward farmers for the raw foods they produce, rather than relying upon value-added production as the sole method of raising returns. This, in turn, requires collaboration among farmers, buyers, and end users, to make sure prices are fair to all involved.
5. Hire regional Community Food-Web Weavers charged with:



- a. Fostering local visions for community foods that are unique to place in each region of Illinois and identifying systems levers that will help spark broader change.
- b. Building new connections among community foods initiatives and across regions.
- c. Working with incubator farms and other local foods initiatives to foster more conscious and sustained collaboration.
- d. Ensuring that resilient networks are built over time.
- e. Identify and implement economic efficiencies that can help local food trade be more competitive.
- f. Perform outreach to rural, urban, and peri-urban consumers through community meals.
  - i. Identify a small number of community meals that already take place in each region and build trust with each one.
  - ii. Select one or more of these events as partners for a trial run.
  - iii. Raise funds to subsidize the cost of adding food raised by local farmers to each meal, as appropriate to the traditions of each gathering. (For example, add locally raised eggs and locally milled grain to a pancake breakfast).
  - iv. Keep meals at low cost to participants.
  - v. Deliver these specialty food items to each site as requested.
  - vi. Invite the farmers who raised each food item to attend the meal and introduce their farm to those who attend.
  - vii. Perform outreach to local media, social media, churches, and other networks to ensure that each event is visible to a broader population.
  - viii. Raise additional funds to expand to new constituencies.
  - ix. Add new partners and new meals as resources allow.

Ultimately, the social and infrastructure shifts required to create effective networks of support that embrace the vision of success for emerging farmers will create new landscapes in scattered locales across Illinois. This will create the possibility of constructing an economy that builds health, wealth, connection, and capacity in rural areas as a counterpoint to extractive economic structures that have depopulated the countryside and siphoned wealth to metro areas. The more successful this transition becomes, the more successful emerging farmers can be.

Ironically in a nation that says it “feeds the world,” one of the most difficult places to find locally raised foods is in farm country. This means that immigrant groups who know how to farm often draw upon indigenous wisdom and simpler technologies to raise food for themselves.

As just one example of the potential for this transition: The Somali Bantu Community Association in Maine has engaged a 99-year lease for farmland through the Agrarian Trust. On their initial plot of 32 acres, more than 200 Somali Bantu people raise food for themselves, with another 15 farmers launching commercial farming operations. Their vision for their land is markedly different from the prevailing land use. Given some of the racial barriers that plague the communities where they live, the Somali Bantu farmers did not want to be isolated into

single-family homes that are miles from each other. Moreover, they aspire to live in settlements that resemble the villages they left behind. The long-term vision SBCA has set for itself is to build a cluster of houses located close to each other, surrounded by farm fields that are tended collaboratively. Attaining this vision will require imagination, persistent political work, and supportive investors. Illinois will have much to learn from visions such as these raised by immigrant groups who are repopulating the countryside.