



Moving from Resilient Planning to
Implementation: Minnesota's Region 5
Transforms its Food System

April 2017





GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS

A key goal of the Growing Food Connections (GFC) project is to document ways in which local and regional governments adopt and implement policies and plans that simultaneously alleviate food insecurity and strengthen agricultural viability among small and medium-sized farmers. To that end, beginning in 2012, the GFC team conducted a national scan and identified 299 local governments across the United States that are developing and implementing a range of innovative plans, public programs, regulations, laws, financial investments and other policies to strengthen the food system. GFC defines the food system as the interconnected network of activities, resources, industries, public and private stakeholders, and policies that play a role in the production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food. The GFC team conducted exploratory telephone interviews with stakeholders in 20 of these urban and rural local governments followed by in-depth, in-person interviews with stakeholders in four of these communities.

The GFC Story of Innovation Brief - *Building from the Inside Out in Region 5, Minnesota: A Rural Region's Effort to Build a Resilient Food System* – highlights innovative food systems related plans and policies in Region 5. This case study brief provides a more in-depth exploration of the process taken to develop and implement these plans and policies. GFC project team members conducted five in-person interviews and one telephone interview with key stakeholders in August 2015 to better understand the food systems planning and policy making process in Region 5, and document lessons for local and regional governments interested in using plans and policy to strengthen food systems.

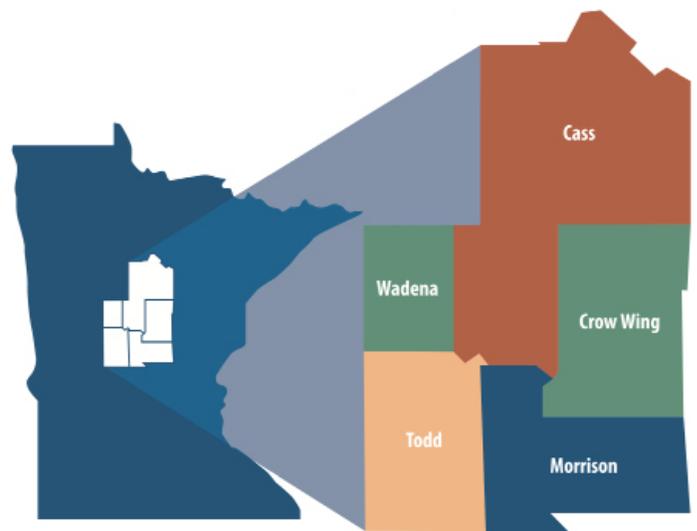
Cover Photo: The Farm on Saint Mathius in Brainerd, MN. Photo by Jennifer Whittaker.



Moving from Resilient Planning to Implementation

Minnesota's Region 5 Transforms its Food System

Driven by a desire to improve the regional community, many governmental and non-governmental groups in Region 5, Minnesota have come together to strengthen food production and food security through lasting food systems change. As early as 2007, this rural region recognized its community food system as one of its strongest community assets and has made concerted efforts toward creating a regional food system that generates local wealth and provides access to healthy, affordable foods. In 2010, the Region 5 Development Commission initiated a planning process that identified the goal to promote and support the local foods sector as a priority. The planning process provided a springboard for action. This case study brief explores the regional food system planning process, as well as the creativity of government, at both the regional and local levels, in implementing various food related projects and programs, specifically a regional food distribution network. Key network components include: direct sales between schools, hospitals and local farmers; micro-financing and business development support for growers and food artisans; and a recently opened food hub facility for processing and distribution. Region 5's experience suggests that factors such as coordination, collaboration, creativity, and resourcefulness are critical in implementing a food system plan.



Region 5, Minnesota includes Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties. Source: <http://regionfive.org/cms/files/BldgResilientRegion.pdf>

region's other cities have fewer than 500 residents. The majority of the region's population and growth is centered in Crow Wing and Cass Counties.³

The majority of the regional population is white, non-Hispanic (about 95%) and of Germanic or Scandinavian descent. Todd County has seen a growing Latino population and 12% of Cass County's population is Native American where the Leech Lake Reservation is located. The oldest Amish community in Minnesota is located in Wadena County; and there are five Amish settlements in Todd County.⁴ Due to the location of a military and civilian training facility in Morrison County, Camp Ripley, a number of former military service people also reside in the region.

According to the Region 5 Development Commission (R5DC), "Region 5 is the only region in the State of Minnesota where all five counties are classified as economically distressed." Todd and Wadena counties are considered to be the two poorest

Background

Region 5 is located in central Minnesota, a state known as the 'Land of 10,000 Lakes' for the abundant natural lakes scattered across its landscape. Region 5 consists of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd and Wadena counties, and is home to approximately 163,000 people. This rural, 5-county region, includes 65 incorporated cities, 155 townships, 24 school districts, one Army Camp, one community college, and part of the Leech Lake Indian reservation - the land base for the The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, one of six federally recognized bands of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. Brainerd, located in Crow Wing County, is the largest city with about 13,425 residents,² and is one of the top 20 fastest growing micropolitan cities in the nation. Most of the



counties in the state of Minnesota.⁵ A number of factors, including failing businesses, population growth and out-migration, disappearance of family farms, pressure on natural resources, and high unemployment all contribute to the economic distress of the region. Nearly 13% of the region's population lives in poverty with Wadena and Cass Counties being the highest at 15.5% and 15.3%, respectively.⁶

Food Systems Planning & Policy

Historically, regional interest in the food system focused on large-scale agricultural operations. Until recently, few farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and other direct market channels selling locally grown products to residents existed. As a result, residents relied on conventional supermarkets and convenience stores for grocery shopping. However, similar to other parts of the country, the region is experiencing a paradigm shift in how the public views its food system. Several dynamics are at play in Region 5: the 2007-2008 US financial crisis severely damaged the region's economy; residents are increasingly interested in learning where their food comes from; and obesity rates are continuing to rise. These factors drew stakeholders' attention to the health and economic benefits of strengthening the region's food system.

AGRICULTURAL STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

Agriculture has been an established industry in the region for decades. Agriculture is the region's primary economic sector and has seen recent growth in sales. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture 2012 data, there were about 5,610 farms in Region 5, encompassing about 1,236,500 acres. The average size of a farm was 227 acres, compared to the Minnesota state

average of 349 acres. The market value of farm products sold in 2012 was approximately \$791 million for the region, about a 56% increase since 2007. The annual average sales of products per farm in the region was \$110,075, compared to the state average of \$285,479.⁷ The region produces primarily poultry and eggs, milk from cows, cattle, turkeys, grains, dry beans and peas and over 70 varieties of vegetables.

Although the average farm in Region 5 is classified by the USDA as a "small family farm" (gross sales less than \$250K),⁸ there is a growing number of very small farms of 40 acres or less in size, with annual farm incomes of less than \$5K in the region. Many of these farms are farmed by Amish, Latino or Native American farmers.^{9,10} This emerging farm community faces a host of challenges. Due to its location in the northern part of the U.S., the region's cold climate severely limits its growing season, requiring season extension, such as through the use of hoophouses (high tunnels), to enable small-scale farmers to stay profitable and earn a living throughout winter months. Additionally, these farmers have poor to limited access to financial capital, infrastructure, and technology.

A 2008 survey conducted as part of the Central Minnesota Food Hub feasibility study of farms with annual farm incomes of less than \$5K found that growers, including existing specialty crop producers, commodity growers, and new farmers, lacked the time to dedicate to farm work because of the need to have an off-farm, paid job. Many of the producers surveyed also expressed the desire to expand sales to individual customers, businesses and institutions, and stated that their biggest challenge was connecting to buyers. While the largest farm-to-school program in the state of Minnesota is located in the region, small farmers find it difficult to provide enough local produce to meet the demand generated by about 12,000 students in six different school districts.



Photo by Jennifer Whittaker



FOOD SECURITY

Food insecurity notably impacts many communities across the region. Wadena and Cass counties have higher food insecurity rates,¹¹ about 13% and 12%, respectively, compared to the state average of 11%. About 18%, 13% and 11% of Todd, Wadena, and Morrison county residents, respectively, face limited access to healthy foods, compared to 2% in Crow Wing County, 7% in Cass and the 6% across the state. Over half of all children in Cass County (52%) and 42% of children in Todd County are eligible for free lunch, compared to the state average of 30%.¹² Until recently low-income residents had few options for acquiring healthy foods, beyond food banks and grocery stores that accept federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Driven by a desire to improve their regional community, government and non-government groups have partnered to support the farm sector and improve food security through lasting planning and policy change. For example, these groups are responsible for integrating food as a key component in regional planning; establishing a variety of financial and educational programs for small growers; developing a regional farm-to-institution program to support growers, while improving food access for vulnerable populations; constructing a food infrastructure to assist in the aggregation, processing and/or distribution of products for local growers; and developing a program that provides a weekly box of local produce to food insecure populations. Critical to moving such efforts forward, has been the work of **R5DC, county public health departments, and local governments.**

Region 5 Development Commission

R5DC serves as the key coordinator for the region’s food systems planning and policy work. Region-wide planning and development coordination for this rural area, which spans nearly four million acres and includes over 200 governing bodies (e.g. cities, school districts, etc.), is provided by R5DC. Similar to commissions in the eight other regions of the state, R5DC was established by the Minnesota Regional Development Act of 1969. R5DC’s governing board includes 22 elected officials from the various townships, cities, counties, school boards and public interest groups in the five-county region. The commission’s purpose is to coordinate state, federal and local comprehensive planning and development programs addressing economic, social and physical issues in the region. R5DC also provides technical assistance to local units of government, such as on comprehensive planning and zoning, and has a lending arm, North Central Economic Development Association that invests in community driven economic development strategies.¹³

R5DC is viewed as “integral to every part of the community food system development that has happened in the region.”¹⁴ This is due in part to R5DC’s multi-year regional strategic planning process, which is detailed in the next section – *The Resilient Region Project: The Importance of Local Food.*

Choose Health

Funded by Hunger-Free Minnesota, Choose Health was designed and implemented by a public-private partnership of Lakewood Health System, Sprout – the regional food hub, Todd County, University of Minnesota Extension, and Prairie Bay restaurant, with R5DC acting as the program administrator. The Choose Health program provides healthy foods, recipes, food demonstrations and education to local families who have been identified as food insecure by physicians from Lakewood Health System. Participants go through an extensive process of pre and post health care screenings, receive nutrition education and recipes from the University of Minnesota Extension, alongside a concentrated community referral process and ongoing support offered by Todd County Public Health. Twice a month, families receive locally grown and raised foods from Sprout, the 5-county regional food hub of more than 70 local low-income growers, as part of a hospital-run community support agriculture (CSA) program. Initial pilot results showed an improvement in the amount of fruits and vegetables participant families are eating and having more access to fruits and vegetables, both indicators of improved health outcomes.¹⁶ Since its inception, Choose Health has been instituted in two additional hospital systems and one private sector nonprofit. The program is impacting approximately 200 food insecure families in the region. At one hospital system, 88% of participants are non-native English speakers, and require translation assistance from University of Minnesota Extension educators.¹⁷

Public Health Departments

County public health departments have been able to play a significant role in food systems planning and policy work due to a stable, dedicated funding source from the state via Minnesota’s Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). Adopted in 2008, SHIP provides grant funding to county public health departments to reduce obesity through policy and environment change. As a result, the five counties have financial resources and staff to conduct community health needs assessments, develop strategic plans, and coordinate on prevention programming related to healthy eating or nutrition. A county health planner pointed to the SHIP funding as a key resource that enabled public health departments to begin focusing on local foods as a means to improve healthy food access.¹⁵ Public health departments provide technical assistance and staffing for efforts such as the **Choose Health** project and other initiatives.

Local Governments

Local units of governments in the region have also shown interest in improving the community food system. The **City of Eagle Bend**, a small, rural municipality of 619 people,¹⁸ is working to construct a community kitchen facility in partnership with Lutheran Community Services and others. Upon facility comple-



Downtown Brainerd, MN. Photo by Jennifer Whittaker.

tion, the city government intends to cover rent and utility costs for the space, which will produce senior meals to be delivered throughout the region. In a larger city, this may not seem exceptional, however the city's dedication of very limited staff time and resources to a food related project is noteworthy.

In response to residents' requests, the **City of Brainerd** (population 13,590)¹⁹ adopted an ordinance to allow for raising chickens in the city, and an ordinance to allow food trucks in designated commercial areas. Despite these successes, a local city council member interviewed shares that the limited local government investment is, in part, due to prevailing perspectives that government does not have a role in food systems work as well as a general resistance to change.²⁰

The Resilient Region Project: The Importance of Local Food

In 2010, R5DC received \$1.8 million (\$800,000 Sustainability Planning federal grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of Transportation (DOT), and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), plus a \$800,000 in-kind local match) to develop a 5-county, regional strategic plan. This planning process, called the *Resilient Region Project*, identified local food as a key regional "economic engine", established lasting relationships among food system stakeholders, and served as an impetus for change in the region's food system. This planning process was responsible for:

- convening and coordinating the food system work of many partners, including farmers, schools, community colleges, hospitals, and emergency food programs
- identifying, prioritizing and aligning efforts of various stakeholders
- identifying and securing state, federal and private foundation funding to implement food systems work
- collecting, assessing and evaluating important food system data, and
- developing and implementing a range of food systems related programs with partners.

The Resilient Region Project was a multi-year, public-private collaborative effort between key governmental and non-governmental groups, including R5DC, Central Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs), Central Minnesota Housing Partnership (CMHP), Envision Minnesota (formerly 1000 Friends of Minnesota), EnSearch, Inc., University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, and the William Mitchell School of Law. Using an inclusive civic engagement model, R5DC actively sought input from over 600 residents across the region in 2011 and early 2012. The Resilient Region Project culminated in the adoption and implementation of *Creating a Resilient Region: The Central Minnesota Sustainable Development Plan*. This plan focused on integrating key sustainability and resiliency topics – housing, transportation, natural environment, and economic development, with crosscutting topics such as food, agriculture, and health. The plan includes several recommendations and action steps to guide the region's food system work.



Economic Engines

Economic Engines Issue II (ECII)

Agriculture CSAs: We must protect our region’s agricultural heritage and support smaller-scale efforts like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We should focus on developing a land use plane that keeps our prime farmlands in production rather than fragmenting and converting them to subdivisions. CSAs and local farmer’s markets are excellent ways to promote local agriculture and affordable local food production.

ECII Recommendation EC2

Local foods: Promote and support the expansion of the local food economic sector.

Action Step EC2A

Incentives for agricultural use: Current tax codes that encourage low-density residential development, taking farm and forest land out of production. Instead, pursue tax changes that incentivize innovative small-scale agricultural use on small tracts of land and leaving forests in production. Focus on natural resources and crop diversification.

Action Step EC2B

Distribution systems: Develop local foods opportunities, including community gardens and local producer and distribution networks. The goal is to make local foods more accessible to residential and commercial consumers, such as schools, hospitals, and local grocery stores. Continue to move forward on local food education, production, processing, distribution, and purchasing at the regional level.

Action Step EC2C

Value added: Explore options, including regulations and incentives, for adding value to locally grown agriculture and setting new, regional regulatory standards that encourage local food production, processing and distribution. These new standards must still meet federal and state regulations that ensure the health, safety and welfare of the purchasing public.

Action Step EC2D

Training and education: Focus on enhancing small farm training and increasing agriculture education in schools, including home processing, food preparation, and seed storage. Increase agricultural awareness through public education, using a “cradle to grave” approach.

Action Step EC2E

Grow the demand: Increase demand from citizens, institutions, and businesses for locally produced goods. Make local foods more accessible by increasing transportation options for seniors and low-income populations. Create a distribution and marketing network which could improve transportation of bulk local food goods to stores.

Action Step EC2F

Packaging: Teach and encourage local producers and distributors to use sustainable practices such as the use of recyclable and reusable containers for packaging.

Figure 1: Creating a Resilient Region: The Central Minnesota Sustainable Development Plan, Economic Engines, Agriculture, page 32. Source: <http://resilientregion.org>



AGRICULTURE: A KEY ECONOMIC ENGINE

The plan explicitly identifies agriculture as a key *economic engine* for the region, and calls out the need to promote the agricultural sector, specifically local foods (see Figure 1).²¹ The plan’s economic development section states that the region “ must protect [its] agricultural heritage and support smaller-scale efforts...[and] focus on developing a land use plan that keeps [its] prime farmlands in production rather than fragmenting and converting them to subdivisions.”²²

Included in this section are six action steps that provide guidance for public and private stakeholders on how to achieve the overarching goal of promoting and supporting the expansion of the local food economic sector. In brief, these action steps aim to:

- encourage local units of government to develop planning and zoning standards and ordinances that support local food and protect existing agricultural land;
- pursue tax changes and regulations that incentivize innovative small-scale agricultural use, adding value to locally grown agriculture;
- set standards that encourage local food production, processing and distribution;
- develop local producer and distribution networks to improve local food access in schools, hospitals and grocery stores;
- increase demand for locally produced goods from citizens, institutions and businesses; and
- improve access to local foods for seniors and low-income populations.

Furthermore, other areas of the plan highlight the connections between local foods and public health, education and workforce development, and energy, specifically the need to support healthy food choices, provide educational opportunities for agriculture careers, and improve energy efficiency in agriculture.

CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING A LOCAL FOODS DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

R5DC and its partners raised over \$43 million for plan implementation, of that \$2.6 million is for local food work. And in 2012, R5DC established and convened a number of advisory committees, including one on food. The food system advisory committee – an inclusive, multi-sector group of key food system leaders – oversees food related implementation efforts. This committee has grown through both formal and informal partnerships, and includes stakeholders such as small growers, health care providers, local governments, school districts, county public health departments, education institutions, and other critical food system stakeholders.

Of the food and agriculture related action areas listed in the plan, R5DC has made significant progress in implementing the creation of a **local foods distribution system** (see Action Step EC2B in Figure 1). Between 2012 and 2016, the committee engaged growers and buyers in an ongoing conversation that led to the:

- Development of a **direct market channel** for institutions such as schools, hospitals, long term care facilities and restaurants;
- Construction of a **food hub facility** for aggregation and processing;
- Creation of ongoing **training and technical assistance** for growers to work with institutional buyers; and
- Development of a **micro-lending program** designed for local growers and food artisans.

Direct Market Channel

Considerable effort has been put towards developing direct market channels for local buyers, such as schools, hospitals and restaurants, to establish farm-to-institution purchasing. R5DC and partners first engaged potential buyers by developing relationships with institutions interested in sourcing locally grown foods. This included convening meetings with hospitals and schools and events for introducing buyers and growers. R5DC co-sponsored an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) position that researched national models of regional distribution networks. This work led to assessing the feasibility of a farm-to-school initiative in the region.²³ Farmers demonstrated an interest in aggregating and distributing their products with other regional growers for local institutional buyers.

Food Hub Facility

A feasibility study was then conducted on the development of a food hub facility in Central Minnesota.²⁴ R5DC served as technical advisor to the study conducted by Happy Dancing Turtle, a consulting firm, along with other partners. Funded by state and regional grant funds, the study showed strong evidence for a facility that would aggregate, process, store, and distribute local grown products for regional buyers. Following the study’s recommendations in fall 2012, The Farm on St. Mathias, an 80-acre farm, developed a business plan that outlined the business concept, management structure, financial plan and capital needs for a food hub facility.²⁵

In 2016, through public and private financing, the Sprout Growers and Makers Marketplace (Sprout), a regional food hub facility, opened its doors. This facility aggregates and distributes fresh products to institutional buyers as well as processes to extend the seasonal market. The facility also includes a demonstration kitchen and indoor farmers market.

Training and Technical Assistance

During Sprout’s capital campaign and facility construction, Sprout and partners worked on building relationships with buyers and providing technical assistance for growers in preparation for the facility’s opening. For example, a partnership with the University of Minnesota provided Good Agricultural Practices and post-harvest training for growers and North Central MN Small Business Development Center provided business planning workshops.



Micro-Lending Program

In addition to providing technical assistance, a micro-lending program was developed in 2012 by North Central Economic Development Association (NCEDA) to provide financial assistance for farmers looking to scale up their operations and food artisans. NCEDA, a 501c3 subsidiary of R5DC, established the program through USDA's Rural Microenterprise America Program (RMAP) award and private foundation funds. Loans from \$1,000 to \$50,000 with a 3-7% interest rate are available for start-up and small businesses in a 10 county region NCEDA serves, including Region 5's counties. R5DC provides technical assistance and requires 25% owner's equity injection and one job created/retained for each \$10,000 lent.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The creation of a local foods distribution network has required little local policy work, yet regional government has played a critical coordination role. R5DC has supported the work through soliciting and managing funding, convening and engaging stakeholders, and measuring and reporting progress.

Soliciting Funds

Through a collaborative effort, public and private partners have successfully solicited public grants and private foundation funding to support various phases of the work (see Sidebar C). R5DC staff provides basic grant management support through identifying potential funding sources, grant writing, and can be a fiscal sponsor to distribute awarded funds. Furthermore, R5DC helps the development of partnered proposals in which multiple partners collaborate and distribute grant funds as appropriate. This includes building and maintaining relationships with funders, as well as coordinating and combining funding from multiple sources.

Convening Partners

R5DC also continues to play a role as a convener of partners. Engagement efforts tend to focus on either bringing specific stakeholder groups (e.g. farmers, hospitals) together or engaging across stakeholder groups to introduce and build new relationships. A variety of engagement methods have been used including community forums, stakeholder interviews, surveys, working groups, workshops, and design charrettes. Working with partners, the engagement activities are often focused on strategies and initiatives that support the broader action step. Over the past several years R5DC and its partners have:²⁶

- convened an advisory committee for the regional plan that oversees the plan's implementation;
- surveyed growers to identify willingness to produce more local food for local buyers;
- interviewed chefs to gauge interest in sourcing more locally grown foods;
- held a speed dating event to introduce growers and schools;

Funding

Private foundations and public agencies have provided grant funds for planning, programming and capital expenses. Below shows the funders supporting the region's distribution systems efforts:

- Agricultural Utilization Research Institute
- ArtPlace America
- Bush Foundation
- Hunger Free Minnesota
- Initiative Foundation
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- Minnesota Department of Health
- National Joint Powers Alliance
- Northwest Area Foundation
- Otto Bremer Foundation
- Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships
- University of Minnesota Central Region Partnership
- USDA Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)
- USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP)
- USDA Rural Microenterprise America Program (RMAP)
- USDA Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG)

- formed a workgroup to develop a business plan for a storage and distribution facility;
- hosted a series of meetings with chefs to exchange buying practices and learn fair market rates for local products;
- held workshops for growers on topics such as Good Agricultural Practices; and,
- hosted a design party to inform the facility design of the Sprout Growers and Makers Marketplace.

Informal processes such one-on-one meetings and phone calls have also been key to coordination. These informal practices provide opportunities to check-in on individual partners' needs and interests, build trust, and ensure ongoing communication of the many activities at play. This type of engagement has also allowed for focused outreach to marginalized populations such as Latino and Amish growers, in which conventional tools, such as surveys, are not always useful.

Measuring Progress

R5DC, along with partners, has spent considerable effort in thinking how to evaluate the food system and measure their progress. Similar to R5DC's other areas of work (e.g. housing) in the regional plan, the WealthWorks model, developed by the Ford Foundation, Aspen Institute and Yellowwood, has been applied to the local food systems work. The WealthWorks



approach focuses on identifying economic opportunities that build a self-reliant region and are rooted in people and place.²⁷ In looking at the food system, for example, an interviewee describes how the approach views food as part of a value chain that can provide “value back to the region.”²⁸ The approach helps identify strategies and partners to engage in the regional effort. The metrics being collected and tracked are not just about quantifying results but are comprehensive in providing more insight to the successes, challenges and progress being made.

While there is little existing data available on local foods (as similar to other regions), effort is being made to collect, track, and report out on conditions of the local food economy and progress of efforts such as the distribution system action item. For example, research and reports such as the Central Minnesota Food Hub Feasibility Study incorporated and appended results of several surveys including R5DC’s Grower Surveys 2008 and 2012 and Buyer Surveys 2009 and 2012.

In addition, R5DC has documented the work achieved each year such as types of events occurred, participants and partners involved and funding received. These reports are publically available, and demonstrate how current work is linked to the broader goals and action steps identified in the regional plan.^{29,30}



SPROUT Herb Bed. Photo by Jennifer Whittaker.

Aligning Actions

Action Step EC2B is one of six actions identified under the plan’s goal to promote and support the region’s local food economic sector. Other action items, such as EC2D, focus on enhancing small farm training and increasing agriculture education in schools. Progress has been made through a partnership between Central Lakes College, National Joint Powers Alliance, and K-12 public schools. These partners have developed curriculum and hired an instructor to provide agriculture-focused training for both high school and post-secondary students. Another example is Action Step EC2E that focuses on creating market demand for local foods from institutions, businesses and consumers. This action step has seen progress through marketing tools developed such as a Local Foods Catalog and the launch of the Choose Health program.

While each action step addresses a specific issue or component of the regional food system, the work does not happen in isolation from the others. The work under each action step is supportive and integral to one another. For example, Action EC2B focuses on establishing market channels and infrastructure to get local foods to buyers while Action EC2E focused on creating market demand for local foods – these two actions complement one another in addressing the supply and demand sides of the equation and will not see successful implementation unless done with coordination.

Discussion

With nearly a decade of a region-wide focused effort on food system work, Region 5 offers insight for others on how a collaborative approach, committed local champions, and a rural context contribute to food system change. This region has recognized their local food system as one of their strongest community assets, which is reflected in the strategies being implemented. Through the asset-based approach, partners have focused on investing in and retaining wealth locally so that local food is for the community itself.

Collaboration is a core value to how the work is accomplished in the region. R5DC’s effort to engage multi-sector stakeholders has led to strong relationships created across and among government and non-government partners. Projects often involve multiple partners, each bringing to the table their resources, connections and expertise. Collaborative work has helped partners overcome capacity issues such as staffing and funding. It also has helped establish a long-term commitment to the work. Each step of the work builds onto the next – this is evident through the distribution system work described earlier.

While the collaborative nature of the work has been critical to Region 5’s success, local **champions** have also played a significant role. Several individuals have invested considerable time and effort that continually push the work forward and ensure partners are continually engaged. For example, as Executive Director of R5DC, Cheryl Hills has the unique position to see and know who is involved and what is happening across the re-



gion. Through her creativity and concerted effort in relationship building, Hills has convened partners that become engaged in initiatives – and then she communicates this network approach and resulting impacts to funders leading to ongoing, leveraged funds for the work. One interviewee describes Cheryal as the “key catalyst...because of her energy, her resilience and [her ability to] command the presence in the room to make it move.”³¹

Local champions also play a critical role in bringing stakeholders to the table who were not participating in the local food system work. For example, Arlene Jones, Executive Director of Sprout and a farmer herself, recognized minority growers such as from the Amish and Latino communities were not participating in conventional engagement activities such as surveys and public meetings. Jones worked to establish relationships with these communities by approaching community leaders, learning about their interests and challenges in the local food sector, and including them in strategy development.

The **rural context** has influenced the region’s approach to this work. Capacity issues such as limited staffing, funding and other resources such as access to technology or educational institutions are, in part, due to being a rural area. Partners have overcome these constraints by pooling resources together. For example, public health departments have shared staff such as their community health planners. Or, R5DC has been a fiscal sponsor for grant awards when partners could not receive them directly. Being a rural community though has eased **making connections** and **building relationships** with stakeholders, including elected officials or high level staff that are typically less accessible in more urban communities.

Despite the focus on region’s resiliency and re-localizing, interviewees expressed **value learning** from other regions across the country. Key stakeholders have engaged with other regions to learn and exchange their work. In looking at tools and best practices, they have learned to identify and adapt tools to meet their community’s food systems goals. This is evident in the use of the WealthWorks evaluation tool, and the design and development of efforts such as the Sprout Growers and Makers Marketplace and the Choose Health program.

Conclusion

Less than ten years ago, Region 5 faced high rates of unemployment, food insecurity, and poor health. With a focused, creative, and collaborative effort, the community has recognized the food system as a local asset to address these health and economic disparities. Using the region’s plan as a guide, the community has made considerable progress in developing market channels and demand between local growers and consumers. Partners have demonstrated a strong commitment to the region’s work and one another. What lies ahead is sustaining the systems and tools they have put in place. If Region 5 continues a collaborative and community asset-based approach, they will likely continue to ensure there are ongoing resources to implement and sustain the regional plan’s vision, and the next decade will see Region 5’s vision for a resilient food system coming closer to fruition.



SPROUT Community Kitchen. Photo by Jennifer Whittaker.



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- ⁹ Interview with Local Government Representative in Region 5, Minnesota (ID 145), August 6, 2015.
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Recommended citation: Martin, Kara, and K. Hodgson. 2017. Moving from Resilient Planning to Implementation: Minnesota's Region 5 Transforms its Food System. In Kimberley Hodgson and Samina Raja (Series Editors), Innovation Deep Dive. Growing Food Connections. 13p. Available online at: growingfoodconnections.org.

Growing Food Connections is supported by Agriculture and Food Research initiative Competitive Grant no. 2012-68004-19894 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

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of Food and
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