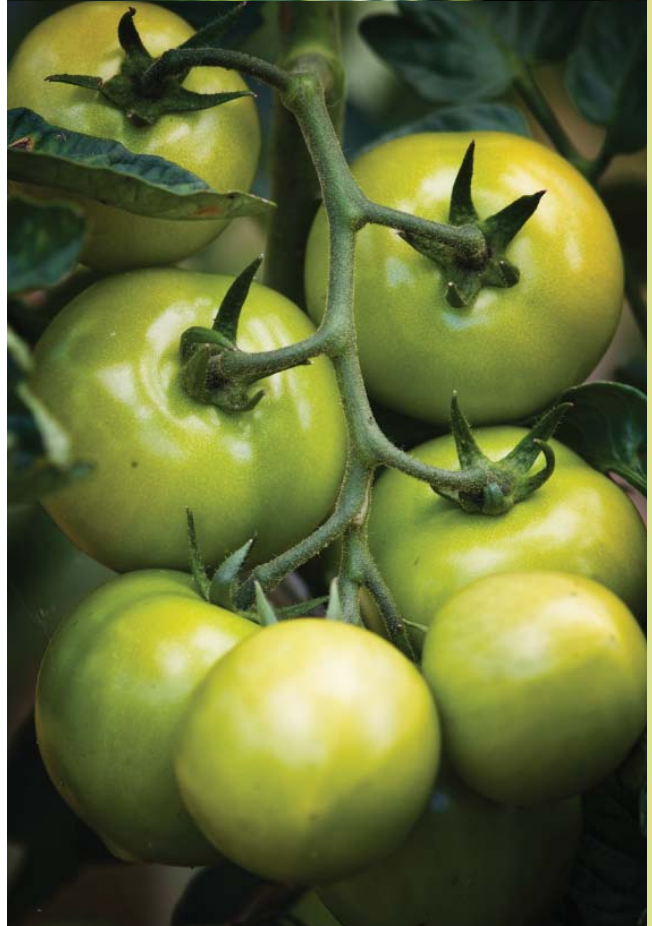


**Enhancing  
Local and  
Regional Food  
Systems:  
Exploring the  
Research, What  
Works, and  
What We Need  
to Learn**

**Conference  
Proceedings**

**Hudson Valley Resort,  
Kerhonkson, NY  
May 19-20, 2009**





## ***Enhancing Local and Regional Food Systems: Exploring the Research, What Works, and What We Need to Learn***

### **Workshop Goals**

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Provide an extensive opportunity for shared learning and exploration related to the scientific research base on a wide range of local and regional food system development strategies and activities – what works, what does not, and what more we need to know.

Provide networking opportunities for researchers, Extension professionals, and others working to enhance local and regional food systems.

Identify emerging research, information, program, and research priorities and develop a set of options for addressing these issues across the region.

### **The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development**

*Enhancing the capacity of Land Grant Universities to foster rural development and regional prosperity*

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## **Conference Summary**

### **Bringing Together Research, Extension and Practice**

#### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, and most dramatically in the last five years, the concept of “local foods” has become a focus of growing interest and attention. Consumers are now much more likely than in the recent past to recognize that what they eat has social, economic, environmental, political and individual health consequences. Researchers and others have devoted considerable effort in books, publications, media reports and research articles to the concerns and opportunities surrounding this evolving issue. Most importantly, consumers, agricultural producers, processors, businesses, government agencies and non-profit groups have become increasingly engaged in a wide array of local agricultural and food system development activities.

Despite this growing interest and activity, however, much remains to be understood about what makes local and regional food systems thrive and what the empirical evidence suggests regarding the relative merits and impacts of local food system development. Researchers, Extension professionals and others across the Northeast are increasingly being called upon to provide this type of analysis and assistance to help the individuals, families, communities, states and regions they serve make the most of these emerging opportunities.

Recognizing this, the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development convened a conference to explore these issues and lay the foundation for responding to them across the Northeast. Over one-hundred stakeholders gathered on May 19-20, 2009 in Kerhonkson, New York to focus on “*Enhancing Local and Regional Food Systems: Exploring the Research, What Works, and What We Need to Learn.*” The event was designed to provide participants with an in-depth overview of the current research as well as interactive workshops to engage participants in developing strategies to advance the science, education and practice of local

and regional foods. To our knowledge, this was the first-ever major conference organized around the topic in the US. Eleven northeastern and numerous other states from around the country were represented.

The following pages provide an overview of the presentations and discussions that resulted from this effort. Additional details, presentation videos and resources are available on our website at <http://nercrd.psu.edu/LocalFoods/Conference.html>

## Conference Presentations

**Dr. Kate Clancy** Food Systems Consultant and Senior Fellow, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, University of Minnesota addressed **“What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Local and Regional Food Systems?”** She stressed that a review of these issues was urgently needed after nearly four decades of interest in local foods and rapidly growing bodies of research and commentary. Dr. Clancy went on to discuss the multiple meanings of food systems, confusion of global with US situations, important differences between regional and local, conflation of local foods with direct marketing and sustainability and the need for systems research.

**Dr. Clare Hinrichs**, Associate Professor of Rural Sociology, Penn State University, discussed **“What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know about the Community Impacts of Local and Regional Foods?”** She began by defining “community impacts” in the context of local food initiatives and suggested that they can be categorized in one of three ascending levels of engagement and behavioral change. She then presented several findings from CSA and Farmers’ Market studies, the foci of most of the community impacts research. She summarized the research as being: largely exploratory; focused on individual initiatives; and prone to using single research methods and different indicators within in each study, making the knowledge base non-cumulative. Dr. Hinrichs posed several areas for future research, emphasizing the need to further probe community impacts.

**Dr. Dawn Thilmany**, Professor of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, focused on **“Consumers of Local Foods: Civic Minded or Seeking Assurances?”** She began by stating that *all* of the myriad reasons given for significant growth in “locavores” (e.g.: reconnecting with the food system, produce quality, and support for the local economy), likely matter for *some* consumer segments. Next, she explored evidence that local and direct markets are market-based assurances for consumers that their purchases have substantive impacts on issues that matter to them.

## Panel Discussion

### Highlights

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**Duncan Hilchey**, Principal, **New Leaf Associates, Inc., Ithaca, NY**, discussed a wide range of applied research needs, opportunities, and tools, including Food Systems Mapper, and a Progressive Agriculture Index. He also provided an overview of regional food campaigns, a Farm Friendly Communities Certification program, and a proposed agriculture and food system development journal.

**Kathy Ruhf**, Coordinator, **Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG)** underscored the importance of being clear with definitions, terminology, and typologies and avoiding the conflation of terms (e.g. local and direct; fresh and sustainable). She called on the audience to explore the characteristics of regional food systems, in contrast to local food systems, more fully, including the foods, farms, farmers, and consumers that are included or excluded in both. She also talked about the need to think about how we frame food systems issues, the importance of multi-disciplinary approaches to this research and the links between research and policy.

**Jennifer Wilkins**, Food System Educator, **Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University**, stressed the need for practitioners and activists to be at the table with researchers. She observed that local and regional food systems data and research aren’t as advanced as the development activities but are critical to tracking and assessing their progress. She also asked “how can we focus on the rest of the food system in a way that enhances the work we are trying to do?” She spoke to the challenges associated with “ultra processed” foods and their prominent role in contemporary diets and the need to explore ways to re-engage those disenfranchised from participating in local and regional food systems, starting with federal policy programs and education.

## Research Roundtables

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Agri-leisure: Exploring Recreation and Leisure Linkages in How Producers and Consumers Interact with Farms, Farmer's Markets, CSAs and Other Local Food Venues. *B. Amsden, Plymouth State University*

MarketMaker Electronic Infrastructure for Enhancing Local and Regional Food Systems. *Dr. Khin Mar Cho, Cornell Univ. Extension – NYC*

The Growth of Local Food Market and Preliminary Findings from the ERS Local Food System Study. *Michelle DaPra, USDA-ERS/AMS*

Strategies to Meet the Training and Technical Assistance Needs of Beginning Farmers. *J. Hashley New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Boston MA*

An Evaluation of Distribution Channels for New York Perishable Product Producers. *B. Henehan, Cornell University*

Broadening the Horizons of Practitioners in the Emerging Field of Food System Planning and Ag. Development: A New Journal. *D. Hilchey, New Leaf Associates, Ithaca NY*

A Transdisciplinary Approach: The Food Systems Research Collaborative. *J. Hyman, University of Vermont*

An Evaluation Framework for the National Market Maker Program. *D. Lamie, Clemson University*

The Relative Costs and Benefits of Marketing Channels Used by Typical Small-Scale Diversified Vegetable Crop Producers. *M. LeRoux, Cornell Cooperative Extension*

Understanding consumer interests is important for helping farmers to tailor their marketing messages and for understanding the types of things consumers, as citizens, may be willing to have policymakers support with tax dollars. Dr. Thilmany pointed out that as we move from local to regional food systems, it will be important to consider ways to continue to provide consumers with the assurances they seem to get through local purchases.

**Dr. Mike Hamm**, C.S. Mott Professor of Sustainable Agriculture, Michigan State University discussed **“Growing Kids, Growing Food – Farm to School: Opportunities and Realities.”** Dr. Hamm started with the assertion that sustainable food systems are not only critical at this time for meeting dietary requirements but also present an important opportunity to achieve several sustainable development goals. Despite multiple challenges, locally integrated food systems can serve as a link between the interrelated goals of economic development, public health, land preservation and sustainable agriculture. Dr. Hamm then focused on research exploring ways farm to school initiatives are helping to achieve these goals and the structural constraints which must be addressed for them to do so.

**Richard Pirog**, Associate Director of the Leopold Center at Iowa State University shared: **“Building Networks That Work: Iowa’s Network for Food and Agriculture Working Groups.”** He began with the claim that all too often organizations that work to support businesses and communities in sustainable food systems collaborate only at superficial levels that do not synergize the expertise and social and financial capital available to make true systems change. Mr. Pirog then described his work with Value Chain Partnerships (VCP), an Iowa based network of food and agriculture working groups that uses a highly collaborative, decentralized approach in managing knowledge for food systems change. Evidence suggests the partnerships are achieving desired outcomes, including county-level investments in local foods systems.

## Approaches, Research, and Information Recommendations

There were a wide range of topics, suggestions, research and program needs identified during the workshop. Highlighted below are a few of those mentioned most frequently.

### *Approaches*

- There is a compelling need for clarification and consensus defining “local” and “regional” recognizing the consequences of each
- We need to be cautious about an urban bias when we talk about foodsheds
- We need to better engage and interact with related organizations, educational entities, practitioners, food policy groups, state policy makers and advocacy groups if we are to take full advantage of regional strengths and capacity
- We need to be aware of policy issues and work effectively to engage the policy development process
- We need to develop effective communications and networks
- We need to pay attention to labor issues and their implications in all our discussions related to food system development

### *Research and Education Recommendations*

- A working paper threading together, and providing the rationale for why this type of work should be expanded and funded is greatly needed
- Economic impact data and research
- Scaling up and distribution systems research
- Trans-disciplinary research is necessary to truly move to a more efficient understanding of local and regional foods systems
- Effective and consistent food system indicators and benchmarks. How do we know, and how can we communicate, where we are or what we’re trying to achieve in ways that are consistent across studies?
- Public understanding and information regarding strategies interrelationships, and roles in food system development

## Research Roundtables

*(cont’d)*

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How Could Northeast Food Systems Research, Implementation and Evaluation Apply Systemic Approaches? *K. Meter, Crossroads Resource Center, Minn., MN*

Eastern Seaboard Food Security: Systems that Link Local Production Capacity with Regional Consumer Demand. *J. Steiner, USDA - ARS*

The Kentucky Food Consumers Panel: An Assessment of our Attitudes and Behaviors. *S. Williamson Univ. of Kentucky*

## Evaluation Highlights

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22% of participants indicated they planned to follow up with one or more participants regarding future research initiatives

50% of participants indicated they planned to follow up with one or more participants regarding future Extension initiatives

58% of participants indicated they planned to follow up with one or more participants regarding future practice initiatives

52% reported they planned to revise or expand current research or Extension program

73% reported they plan to seek additional information regarding one or more of the topics discussed at the conference

52% reported they plan to seek additional funding opportunities related to regional and local foods

## Participant Comments

*"I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the Local Foods conference. It was one of the most useful gatherings that I have attended in a long time. It was a pleasure and I thank you for making it possible for me to participate. I hope that this will be the first in a series of conferences on the topic of local food system research."* **Dr. Jennifer Wilkins, Senior Ext. Assoc., Director of the Cornell Farm to School Research and Education Program**

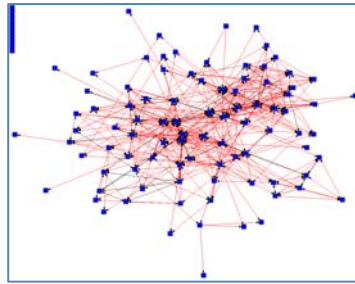
*"The conference especially served those of us who work across various topics of research, by providing a sort of 'one stop shopping' for connecting to people and learning about specific research topics within food systems work; and was especially helpful to my work by giving me ideas and connections for making the case for what we do, to diverse audiences."* **Michelle Frain Muldoon, Program Officer, Wallace Center Winrock International**

*Developed by:*

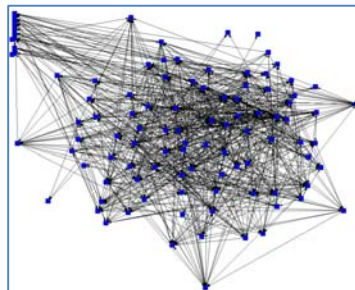
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Pre-conference Networks



Post-conference Networks



## Network Analysis

Our network analysis documents the growth in relationships among participants at the conference, growth that has potential to lead to enhanced collaborations among researchers, educators, and those working to create local and regional food systems. It also identifies potential subgroups that can work on specific projects, as well as those individuals that cross over subgroups and provide crucial connections to other groups.

## Conclusions

While there remains substantial need to enhance the research, information, and education capacities across the region and nation, considerable progress has already been made in our understanding of the many facets of local and regional food system development. Importantly, as this conference has highlighted, considerable movement has been made toward identifying many of the most critical questions that remain to be answered as well as the partnerships and networks that will ultimately be required for communities and regions to best take advantage of these growing opportunities.

The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development is prepared to assist these efforts. We encourage you to contact us to share ideas and information, explore partnerships and opportunities, or develop programs to meet the needs of your community, state or region.