



# INSIGHTS ON FRESH-PRODUCE DISTRIBUTION IN D.C.'S WARDS 7 AND 8

## Part 3 in a Series: Challenges and Opportunities in Food Procurement

*In 2018, the Foundation's Food Security Initiative team surveyed and convened organizations that distributed fresh, whole, take-home produce in Wards 7 and 8 through nongrocery sources<sup>1</sup> in 2017 (e.g., farmers markets, food banks, corner stores). Parts 1 and 2 of the series covered the District's gaps in data and food access/availability as well as our survey approach and an overview of the findings. Part 3 will discuss challenges and opportunities in produce sourcing, with a focus on the regional food system.*

### Introduction

In this part of the series, we will focus on the supply chain upstream of distribution (see Figure 1 below) and the challenges and opportunities that participating organizations face for procurement – defined here as the process of purchasing or obtaining fresh produce from suppliers or producers.<sup>2</sup> Guest contributor [Lindsay Smith](#), the Regional Food Systems Value Chain Coordinator at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG), will focus on how well the region is positioned to deliver on supply needs using

findings from COG's recent [What Our Region Grows](#) report. Throughout this part, we will weave survey and convening data together with COG's regional production assessments to distill insights on the interplay between our regional supply chain and produce distribution in Wards 7 and 8.

**INSIGHT #1: Mirroring national trends of a growing local/regional food movement,<sup>3</sup> many participating organizations prioritize regional sourcing, but this movement does not yet reflect the diversity of our region.**

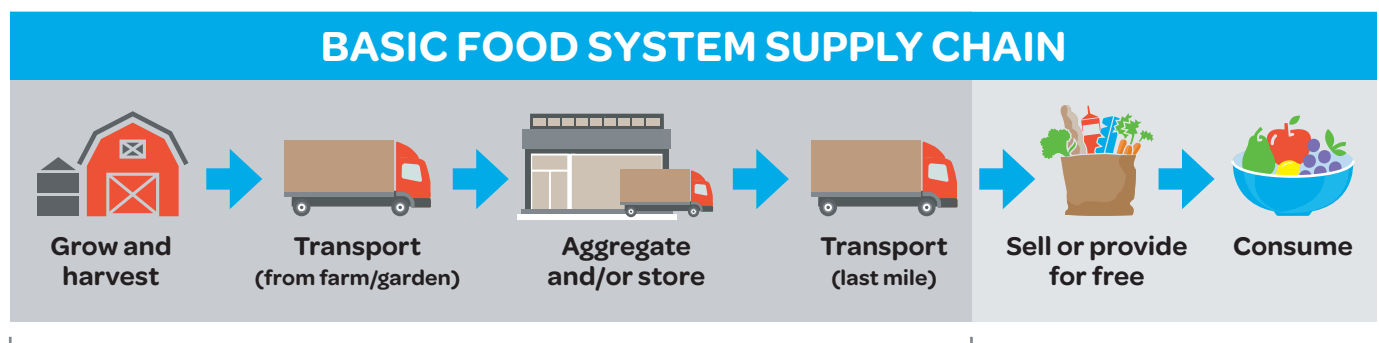


FIGURE 1

FOCUS OF PART 3



## Survey/Convening

**Local/regional sourcing is important for many participants, but there is a need to address inequities in the local food movement.**

- **Sixty-nine percent** of surveyed organizations cited local or regional<sup>4</sup> farm sourcing as a priority, the most commonly cited procurement priority.<sup>5</sup> Some participants stated that local/regional farm support was not only an organizational priority, but one embedded in their mission statements, often related to supporting local farmers and/or supporting quality food-sector jobs in marginalized communities.
- **Forty-six percent** prioritized supporting producers who use sustainable production techniques.<sup>6</sup> Cost may be a factor in this being a relatively lower priority, but it also may relate to participants' observation/experience that many customers may perceive "sustainable," "organic" or even "healthy" items as expensive or exclusive. Instead, attributes such as "fresh" were perceived to be more universally valued by customers.
- Several participants emphasized the need and opportunity to actively address inequity in the local/regional food movement in procurement. One method of doing so is by supporting/prioritizing procurement from farmers and food producers of color historically marginalized from land ownership and access to capital. Some participating organizations focus on sourcing relationships predominantly/exclusively with food producers of color.

## Regional Food System Findings

**Lindsay Smith: Investment in the next generation of farmers is critical to improving the diversity of producers in the agriculture sector as well as to the security of the regional food supply.**

"There needs to be greater awareness of the benefits of regional food system development, enhanced collaboration, investment needs and a shared understanding of the range of inequities that persist within the food system. We're a very racially, ethnically and socio-economically diverse region, but this diversity isn't reflected

## CUSTOMER DEMAND

Some participants described experiencing a tension between their mission and customer preferences or perceptions. While some customers prefer local/regional food, it is not a priority for all. Participants with a regional sourcing focus stated that sometimes customers are frustrated or disappointed when popular items aren't available because they can't be grown regionally (e.g., oranges, bananas), or when other desired items are only available seasonally.

in farmer demographics from the U.S. Census of Agriculture. ***We should invest in the next generation of farmers by improving access to land, markets, infrastructure and appropriate technology. Farmers and food entrepreneurs of color especially need to be supported with the resources required to launch and sustain businesses*** to improve representation and opportunity in our region's food system."

## Implications and Opportunities

Procurement is one opportunity for nonprofit organizations, private-sector entities and public institutions (i.e., schools, government) to use their purchasing powers to invest in the people, systems and infrastructure that can strengthen the regional food system. There are numerous benefits to sourcing from local and regional producers, starting with taste and quality — a reduction in travel time from farm to table and reduced time in storage can result in better-tasting produce with higher nutrient content. Second, supporting regional farmers and producers contributes to job creation in our area and helps preserve open/green spaces in our rapidly developing region. Finally, local farmers using sustainable farming practices can benefit soil, water and air quality; add nutritional density;<sup>7</sup> and support the health and vitality of farmland and ecological systems in the region.<sup>8,9</sup>

Yet, there are big challenges facing the long-term security of regional production, not limited to an unpredictable and changing climate, an aging workforce, and the tenuous economic viability of owning and operating small and medium-sized



farms. While these challenges are not unique to our region, they are pressing issues in our regional food system. In the Washington Agricultural Region,<sup>10</sup> as of 2012, 48% of farmers were over the age of 60. An aging agricultural workforce is compounded by a severe shortage of younger farmers to replace those entering retirement and a lack of programs connecting new farmers with established farmers and/or landowners. Government and private donor investments in “land link” and other programs (e.g., the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation’s [Next Generation Farmland Acquisition Program](#)) could provide the opportunity for farmers and producers newer to the profession to engage with established landowners to facilitate farm transitions – through technical assistance, land leasing and/or lease-to-own land opportunities.

Regional producers also do not reflect the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the metro region – the majority of farm owners and operators identify as white males, with a very small margin of black/ African American, Asian, American Indian and Latinx operators, reflecting a long history of systemic marginalization of agricultural workers of color, from dispossession of land and slavery to discriminatory

### CHALLENGES IN REGIONAL FOOD SUPPLY

In their report “What Our Region Grows,” the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments also found that “agricultural production in the region does not fulfill food demand from the region’s residents. The degree of the region’s self-reliance on its own production to meet estimated consumption continues to decline due to increasing population and decreasing farm production.”

and exploitative federal farm programs.<sup>11</sup> Across the supply chain, further work is needed to ensure that historically marginalized producers and consumers have equitable opportunities and resources/supports to develop enterprises that improve physical health and wellness to build community wealth. A greater diversity of successful farmers and food producers isn’t just important for generating personal income and advancing equity in our food economy – diversity brings new ideas and buyers to the marketplace. Investing in viable business pathways for underserved players in the food system can bring economic, social and environmental health benefits to the region.

### THE ROLE OF URBAN AGRICULTURE

While the basic supply chain diagram in **Figure 1** in some ways suggests that farms are necessarily distant from urban centers, we want to note that urban agriculture is an important and growing part of the regional supply chain. It is often on the frontlines of farmer training and food sector entrepreneurship programs for participants from diverse, low-income and/or marginalized communities. For example, THEARC farm is one of seven farms comprising Building Bridges Across the River Farms – a family of farms and gardens that expand healthy produce access and educational and workforce development opportunities to residents of Southeast D.C. In addition to farm education programs, THEARC farm and Dreaming Out Loud (both of which participated in the survey and/or convening) co-manage the Community Raised Inspired and Sourced Produce (CRISP) CSA, a weekly produce program that sources

directly from Kelly Miller Farm, a two-acre farm and food hub managed by Dreaming Out Loud.

Additionally, the District’s Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) has formed the new Office of Urban Agriculture, with the intent to build off the priorities set by the DC Food Policy Council’s Urban Agriculture subcommittee. While the immediate priorities and long-term goals of the new office have not been finalized, it has the potential to provide support for key facets of urban agriculture, including land access, community education, community garden training and support. Although the availability of arable land in the District restricts production capacity, a range of training opportunities for new farmers, coupled with targeted land and capital access and business development support, could increase diversity in regional food production.



## DISCRIMINATORY AGRICULTURE PRACTICES

For more than a century, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), banks and real estate developers have discriminated against farmers of color through lengthy loan approval and disbursement timelines and denial of farm loans, leading farmers to face foreclosure and bankruptcy. The 1997 case **Pigford vs. Glickman** alleged racial discrimination by the USDA, resulting in more than 15,000 claimants receiving compensation, with thousands of additional black farmers receiving settlements in 2010. Discriminatory practices (which still exist today) have reduced African-American-owned land by 90% since the early 1900s.

**INSIGHT #2: Insufficient infrastructure creates constraints for both producers and distribution organizations in strengthening the regional food supply chain.**

### Survey/Convening Findings

**It's hard for participants to overcome infrastructure barriers to build consistent sourcing relationships with regional producers and suppliers.**

- While many participating organizations have control over some or all of their procurement (49% of all produce is purchased vs. 47% donated) and have a stated priority of regional farm-sourcing, they face a number of infrastructure gaps along the supply chain in doing so.
- **Fifty-five percent** of organizations cited transportation from farms as a challenge to sourcing directly from regional producers, while limited, irregular and/or small-scale purchase orders were a barrier for many to using mainstream distributors as a supply of regional food. Last-mile transportation<sup>12</sup> is also an organizational issue for both procurement and produce distribution, with vehicle wear and tear, traffic, city regulations (e.g., parking zones) and staff capacity all cited as challenges.

- **Seventy-three percent** cited aggregation or storage facilities as a bottleneck to volume/throughput, especially cold storage. Many participants commented on the lack of such facilities in the District, especially available for their use in Wards 7 and 8.

### Regional Food System Findings

**Lindsay Smith: It's often hard for farmers to connect with regional markets.**

"Farming is a business. A lack of reliable, strong markets that prioritize regional food, [a scarcity of] appropriately scaled infrastructure, farm transition challenges, and the high cost of living and farming in the region are a few of the factors behind the overall declines we're seeing in fruit and vegetable production numbers from the Census of Agriculture. ***If the production of healthy food close to home is a priority for the region, we need to make it one.*** The public sector can lead the way by updating procurement policies to consistently incentivize our region's farmers to sell into schools, hospitals and colleges. Other values besides the lowest price point will be important to consider.

"Our region counts on some great public, nonprofit and private technical assistance to farmers, and the emphasis is on helping farmers to develop or maintain viable businesses. These may not be fruit or vegetable production. The good news is we have farmers who want to produce more. ***Current production is not a reflection of total capacity despite shrinking farm acreage; however, there has to be a market for what farmers are producing.***<sup>13"</sup>

### Implications and Opportunities

While there are many potential benefits of sourcing regionally, creating direct linkages between farms and organizations looking to sell regional items or distribute them for free is difficult. As Lindsay mentioned, the public sector can be a force of change by shaping procurement policies that prioritize regional/local sources. But smaller distribution organizations — like many of the participating organizations in our survey and convening — often don't have the staff capacity to build farmer relationships and/or troubleshoot solutions to source regionally.





## LEGISLATION IN ACTION

The **2010 D.C. Healthy Schools Act** incentivizes schools to serve regionally grown, unprocessed foods in school meals whenever possible, providing a five-cent cost incentive per meal served. The Act also lifted a ban on using recreation centers for farmers markets and farm stands, enabling urban and regional farms/ gardens to use these community-centered facilities to increase access to healthy food.

Participating organizations had great ideas about how to address structural barriers to this priority. To address transportation challenges from farms, they discussed potentially combining orders with other programs to meet order minimums of distributors, piloting sourcing programs from urban farms, and/or partnering with another organization with a regional sourcing core competency. Within the city (last-mile distribution), participants suggested the use of contract drivers using personal vehicles to avoid building a transportation fleet, or collaborating with other organizations (operating on similar routes) to fill space on their trucks. Ideas to overcome storage bottlenecks included using just-in-time aggregation/distribution to avoid the need for storage and exploring underutilized assets in the community (e.g., school kitchens). While these small opportunities require further exploration and may not work for all organizations, they could be a bridge over some of the more systemic infrastructure challenges experienced by participants.

## Conclusion

While some organizations prioritize or experiment with regional sourcing, they are often limited in their ability to deliver the full benefits of regional sourcing: from improved taste and nutrition attributes, to extended product life, to support for equitable economic development in their community. Surveyed distribution organizations are constrained by limited purchasing power and scale, staff time to manage procurement functions, and the gap between consumer demand and seasonally available produce varieties. Producers in our region face highly variable weather and climactic conditions, a high cost of living and of production, and labor challenges. The resulting mix of production and procurement practices may have far-reaching implications for the customer, the organization, the community, the regional economy and the environment.

As noted by Lindsay and by many of our survey/ convening participants, a strong, inclusive and representational regional food system will require increased and equitable investments in production, broader and more reliable market connections, and improved infrastructure (transportation, storage, staff). Funders, grant-makers and investors can use these challenges as an opportunity to invest in regional food solutions that would benefit consumers, distribution organizations and producers/workers throughout the food system. Stakeholders in the regional food system can also direct investments and enact solutions to strengthen consumer-focused policies that provide increased purchasing power at farmers markets (e.g., [Produce Plus](#) and the [Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#)).

## NAVIGATING DATA CHALLENGES

As discussed in Parts 1 and 2 of this Insights Series, multiple data challenges create a barrier to understanding the impact and scale of food availability in Wards 7 and 8. But these data challenges are also pervasive on a larger scale, persisting along the supply chain. There is a lack of adequate resources invested in data systems, collection and analysis on production trends and capacity – mirrored on the procurement side, where participating organizations noted multiple capacity barriers to detailed and consistent sourcing data. Challenges are further compounded by a lack of a standard metric used (e.g., quarts, bunches, bags, unit items, pounds) for production and distribution.



In the next part of this series, we will shift from the upstream part of the supply chain to customer-facing distribution models. We will spotlight organizations participating in different produce distribution models represented among the

survey/convening participants and explore how organizations use different models to procure and distribute produce in underserved neighborhoods across the District.



### **LINDSAY SMITH**

**Regional Food Systems Value Chain Coordinator  
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments**

Lindsay Smith is consulting with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) to develop a Regional Food Systems Program. She's also worked as an urban planner, consulted on land conservation, served as a food council coordinator, and consulted with philanthropy on strengthening regional food systems and improving food access in Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Lindsay holds master's degrees in urban planning and environmental policy from the University of Michigan. She is a member of several local agriculture organizations and graduated in July 2018 from the VALOR, an agricultural leadership development program in the Commonwealth of Virginia.



## Endnotes

- 1 All surveyed organizations distribute food via non-grocery distribution methods. One organization that participated only in the convening distributes food through its grocery store in Ward 5 and has a store opening soon in Ward 8.
- 2 While participating organizations procure from local, regional, national and global sources, this part in the series will primarily focus on **local and regional sourcing**, a stated procurement priority for a majority of participating organizations that aligns with both the mission of the Food Security Initiative as well as the District's Sustainability Goals.
- 3 Since 2006, the number of farmers markets in the United States has increased 180%, and the number of regional food hubs has increased nearly 300%. [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51174\\_ap068\\_report-summary.pdf?v=0](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51174_ap068_report-summary.pdf?v=0)
- 4 For the purposes of the survey/convening, we defined local as food grown within a 100-mile radius of Washington, D.C., and regional as food grown within a 400-mile radius of Washington, D.C.
- 5 For the Distribution Survey, we asked respondents to list their top criteria for choosing suppliers from the following list: local/regional small farm support, quality produce, low-cost, sustainable agriculture support, varieties needed, predictable volumes, year-round produce, convenient delivery schedules, convenient ordering, nonprofit discounts, customer service, not sure and other. Respondents were encouraged to choose all applicable criteria.
- 6 For the purposes of the survey/convening, we defined sustainable/organic as “food grown without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or genetically modified organisms (GMOs); food produce that has a minimal impact on the environment and seeks to protect wildlife diversity, avoid damage to natural resources and provide social benefits.” <http://www.fruitandvegetable.ucdavis.edu/files/217097.pdf>
- 8 [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51173\\_ap068.pdf](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51173_ap068.pdf)
- 9 In this Insights Series, we defined “last-mile transportation” as the flow of food from suppliers (wholesale, food hubs/aggregation centers, farms/gardens) to a point of sale or distribution centers where customers purchase or receive goods.
- 10 The approximately 8,600-square-mile area in and around the District of Columbia, comprising the following counties and jurisdictions – Maryland: Anne Arundel, Calvert, Carroll, Charles, Frederick, Howard, Montgomery, Prince George’s, St. Mary’s and Washington; Virginia: Arlington, Clarke, Culpeper, Fairfax, Fauquier, King George, Loudoun, Prince William, Rappahannock and Stafford; West Virginia: Jefferson; District of Columbia.
- 11 [http://www.ncfh.org/uploads/3/8/6/8/38685499/fs\\_demographics\\_2018.pdf](http://www.ncfh.org/uploads/3/8/6/8/38685499/fs_demographics_2018.pdf).
- 12 In this Insight Series, we defined “last-mile transportation” as the flow of food from suppliers (wholesale, food hubs/aggregation centers, farms/gardens) to point of sale or distribution centers where customers purchase or receive goods.
- 13 As discussed in earlier parts, there is both a desire for some distribution organizations to procure more regional foods as well as outlets. As depicted throughout this series, there are complex factors (e.g., cost and infrastructure, staff capacity, data gaps) that complicate direct links between producers and distributors/consumers.

### Citation for “Challenges in Regional Food Supply and Demand” on page 3

- <https://www.mwcog.org/documents/2019/01/18/what-our-region-grows-farmers-market-farming-urban-agriculture/>

### Citations for “Discriminatory Agriculture Practices” on page 4

- <https://civileats.com/2013/05/07/the-new-york-times-ignores-usda-discrimination/>
- <http://nationalaglawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/crs/RS20430.pdf>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/sugar-slave-trade-slavery.html>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/30/america-black-farmers-louisiana-sugarcane>
- <http://nationalaglawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/crs/RS20430.pdf>

### Citation for “Legislation in Action” on page 6

- <http://dchealthyschools.org/whats-in-the-act>