



Roadmap to Regional Connectivity

Southwest Colorado Local Food Hub-to-Node Connectivity Project

Introduction:

Between fall of 2020 and spring of 2022, a network of six local food organizations in Southwest Colorado collaboratively conducted a needs assessment of the regional food system. The goal of the Southwest Colorado Local Food Hub-to-Node Connectivity Project was to identify key strengths and challenges of the regional food system, and to discover opportunities to strengthen and connect local food economies for the social, economic, health, and environmental benefit of the larger system. The project partners hosted a series of stakeholder roundtable conversations, administered region-wide surveys, and conducted a pilot program in a portion of the region to field-test select identified strategies. Approximately 300 local food stakeholders including agricultural producers, wholesale buyers, and individual consumers participated in the needs assessment, contributing critical information and insight to the project. The result of that collective insight is this: eight critical factors for future work that make up the Roadmap to Regional Connectivity for the Southwest Colorado food system.

The Current Network - Organizations Leading the Charge:



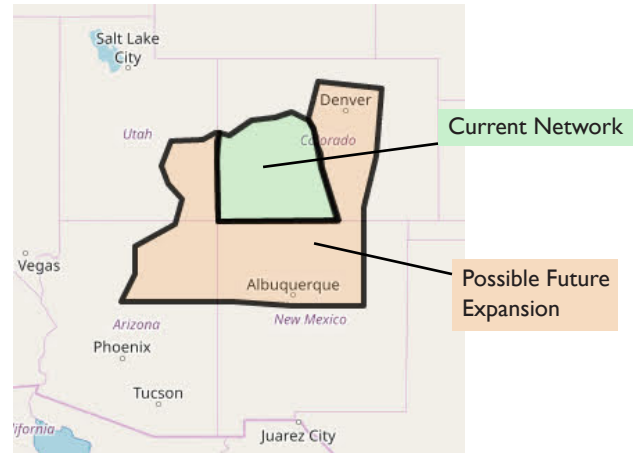
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Our Current (& Growing) Focus Region:

The project needs assessment reached stakeholders in the local networks of the six Southwest Colorado based organizations. The general areas included Gunnison County (Mountain Roots), the San Luis Valley (San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition), Delta County (Farm Runners), the Four Corners Area (The Good Food Collective and Southwest Farm Fresh), and Chaffee County (Guidestone Colorado).

Stakeholders representing Northern New Mexico additionally were engaged through the Four Corners network roundtables indicating strong future partnerships in that area. As Southwest Colorado links closely to additional microclimatic growing spaces across state lines, our hope is that future work will continue connectivity efforts with New Mexico and establish new connectivity with Utah and Arizona.



Project Values:

Relationship Building - across all localities and stakeholder groups

Fair Wages for Producers & Good Working Conditions for Laborers

Value-Based Supply Chain - increase equity and opportunity for growers

Local First – leverage regional and further specialty fair trade foods to fill gaps

Sustainability – healthy treatment of land, animals, and people; regenerative practices are best

Diversity - in crops, access points, revenue streams, and people serving and being served

Equity - rewards and responsibilities are distributed equitably across the supply chain

Authenticity - products are differentiated by values, local branding, and the story of the people producing them

Future Geographical Outreach - New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona stakeholders may be key allies as our work continues

The Roadmap for Regional Connectivity ~ Eight Critical Factors for Success:

1. Relationship Building Within and Across Localities Is the First Step for Connectivity in Our Regional Food System.
2. Food Hubs or Nodes Are Needed in Each Locality.
3. Local Food Retail Outlets Aligned to Consumer Convenience Are Needed in Each Locality.
4. Commercial Kitchens, Processing, and Value-Added Production Are Needed in Each Locality.
5. Improved Logistics in Transportation and Inventory Management Are Needed Throughout the Region.
6. Product Availability, Accessibility, Expansion, and Diversity Are Key Factors for Success.
7. Marketing for Local Food Has Room for Growth, Regional Standardization, and Cohesion.
8. Consumer Education Around Local Food Must Expand.





1. Relationship Building Is the First Step for Connectivity in Our Regional Food System.

Southwest Colorado Producers, Food Hubs, Buyers, and Individual Consumers all expressed a desire to build new, and strengthen existing, relationships within their local and regional food system. While these entities have varying levels of successful relationships within their respective localities, overall, inconsistent business relationships and low connectivity predominate in and between each area in our region. Through this work, we hope to grow:

Producer-to-Producer Peer Networking & Collaboration



Smaller-sized producers especially are interested in learning from their larger counterparts, and in aggregating produce to meet larger consumer demand and the ordering needs of wholesale buyers.

Producer-to-Food Hub Relationship Building



Of producers surveyed, those selling goods through food hubs as one of their markets generally reported higher sales than producers not selling through a hub.

Food Hub-to-Buyer Relationship Building



Wholesale buyers surveyed reported they would increase regional food purchases if they had access to greater product volumes and variety available through one-stop-shop online ordering and delivery systems.

Locality-to-Locality Network Building



Visits to each other's areas, farms, ranches, hubs, and food businesses, and increasing storytelling, marketing, and education, can facilitate relationship building through learning and sharing our unique stories.

2. Food Hubs or Nodes are Needed in Each Locality.

An *infrastructure gap* exists in some parts of the region which prevents local farmers and food businesses from exporting products to neighboring foodsheds. This lack of expanded market access in turn prevents these businesses from increasing production.

Existing food hubs provide significant value to producers and buyers in their areas and the region as a whole. They are good models for other communities to follow. Of producers surveyed, those selling goods through food hubs as one of their market channels generally reported higher sales than producers not selling through a hub.

Approximately 87% of wholesale buyers surveyed reported they prefer (or would prefer) purchasing from food hubs with one-stop-shop online ordering on one invoice over purchasing directly from multiple producers. Additionally, 81% of wholesale buyers believe their retail sales could increase if they offer customers more local food.

All food hubs should accept SNAP/EBT as payment. Around 55% of SNAP consumers surveyed want to support local producers but feel they can't afford to due to limited outlets accepting SNAP. Most producers surveyed do not offer SNAP sales individually, indicating an opportunity for producers to increase sales by either becoming SNAP Retailers or by working with a food hub that is one.

Where We Are:

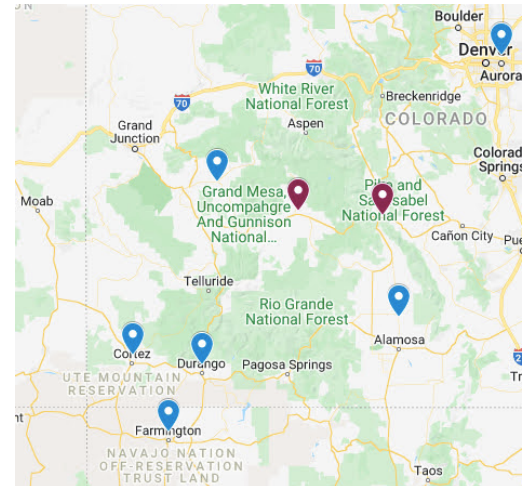
At present, the following areas have a successful food hub (in blue on map):

- North Fork Valley (Farm Runners)
- San Luis Valley (Valley Roots Food Hub)
- Four Corners Area (Southwest Farm Fresh & Good Food Collective)
- Farmington, NM (Harvest Food Hub - *in possible future expansion network*)
- Denver (East Denver Food Hub – *in possible future expansion network*)

Where We Need to Go:

These areas are lacking a food hub or node and would benefit from one (in red on map):

- Gunnison Valley
- Chaffee County (Salida area)



Map of current food hubs (blue markers) and areas that could use and support one in the future (red markers).

3. Local Food Retail Outlets Aligned to Consumer Convenience Are Needed in Each Locality.

Consumers want local food shops that:

- are open 7 days a week including evening hours.
- are close to their homes and/or work.
- are easily accessible regarding parking, public transportation, and bike-friendliness.
- carry a wide variety of products that support one-stop grocery shopping.
- provide educational resources such as recipes and cooking classes.
- accept SNAP.

Mobile retail is a viable option for serving communities where a brick-and-mortar outlet is not yet viable.

Where We Are:

At present, the following areas have established outlets with local food retail:

- Hotchkiss, North Fork Valley (The Station at Farm Runners)
- Del Norte, San Luis Valley (Simple Foods Market)
- Durango, Four Corners Area (Durango Natural Foods and Nature's Oasis)
- Mancos, Four Corners Area (Zuma Natural Foods)
- Dolores, Four Corners Area (Dolores Food Market)
- Gunnison County (Wilders Organic Market and Gunnison Vitamin & Health)
- Buena Vista, Chaffee County (The Lettucehead Food Company)
- San Luis Valley additionally has the MOKI (mobile kitchen) in operation.

Where We Need to Go:

These key areas are lacking a local food retail outlet and would benefit from one's establishment:

- Alamosa, San Luis Valley
- Salida, Chaffee County

All future and existing local food retailers should accept SNAP/EBT as payment.



The Station at Farm Runners (Hotchkiss, CO).



The MOKI, San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition.

4. Commercial Kitchens, Processing, and Value-Added Production Are Needed in Each Locality.

Certified commercial kitchens, temperature-controlled food storage, and B-grade markets are desirable for producers, food hubs, and customers.

- Most producers lack certifications, time, and labor to process their own goods.
- Institutional buyers want more chopped and prepared goods on the market.
- Seasonality and sales can increase through greater inventory of storage crops and shelf-stable goods.
- Rental kitchen spaces can provide opportunities for more value-added producers to enter the market and increase supply.
- Price-sensitive buyers are happy to make goods such as soups and salsas using lower cost B-grade products.

Meat processing facilities, particularly for poultry, should be expanded.

- Many meat producers travel great distances to have their animals processed and are normally subjected to long wait times due to bottlenecks.
- Most chicken producers do not sell to wholesale markets due to their inability to access USDA certified processing facilities.
- Buyers expressed poultry was a top product they would like to buy locally and would pay a premium for.

Where We Are:

At present, the following areas have established or forthcoming commercial kitchens:

- Valley Roots Food Hub has a certified kitchen operating at a limited capacity.
- The Station at Farm Runners has a certified kitchen operating at a limited capacity.
- The Good Food Collective has access to a certified kitchen used for their Fruit for Good production.
- The Chaffee County Fairgrounds and Salida Community Center have certified kitchens operating at limited capacity and underutilized.
- Montezuma County has two existing certified kitchens, and Cortez's Sharehouse is developing a new community-friendly certified kitchen.

At present, the following areas have established or forthcoming meat processing facilities:

- Montrose (Montrose County)
- Cedaredge and Delta (Delta County)
- San Luis Valley (Alamosa and Conejos Counties)
- Salida (Chaffee County)
- Durango (La Plata County)
- Cortez (Montezuma County) – *recently approved for construction*

Where We Need to Go:

- Gunnison Valley is the area most notably lacking both a commercial community kitchen and a USDA inspected meat processing facility.
- Poultry: While a small number of state certified poultry processors exist in the region, no area has a USDA inspected poultry processing facility that can be utilized by more than one single producer.



Commercial kitchen in Durango, and dried apples processed there for The Good Food Collective's Fruit for Good program.

5. Improved Logistics in Transportation and Inventory Management Are Needed Throughout the Region.

Where We Are:

Current Transportation Network:

- Farm Runners transports products to the Roaring Fork Valley, Grand Valley, Gunnison Valley, North Fork Valley and Delta County, Uncompahgre Valley and Telluride, and to the San Luis Valley to exchange products with the Valley Roots Food Hub.
- The Valley Roots Food Hub transports products to the San Luis Valley, Chaffee County (Buena Vista and Salida), Durango, Pagosa Springs, and the Front Range (Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo).
- Southwest Farm Fresh transports products to Telluride and the Four Corners area (Durango, Cortez, Dolores, Mancos, Bayfield).
- Backhauling and cross-docking relationships are being utilized by the above businesses, though these strategies are not operating efficiently or consistently at this time.

Current Online Ordering & Inventory Management Utilization:

- Farm Runners utilizes Local Food Marketplace online ordering software.
- Mountain Roots utilizes Local Food Marketplace online ordering software.
- Southwest Farm Fresh utilizes Local Food Marketplace online ordering software.
- Harvest Food Hub (NM) utilizes Local Food Marketplace online ordering software.
- Valley Roots Food Hub utilizes and owns Local Orbit online ordering software.



Truck fleet (and team) at Valley Roots Food Hub, San Luis Valley.

Where We Need to Go:

Transportation:

- Logistics experts are needed to develop a regional transportation strategy and to support coordination between different transportation entities. Such efforts are expected to improve efficiencies, establish wider product circulation, and reduce the inefficiencies of empty trucks on the road.

Online Ordering & Inventory:

- Logistics and technology experts are needed to develop a regional inventory and communication strategy so that connecting food hubs can efficiently sell products between their service areas.

Facilities:

- Shared and expanded cold and dry storage is required in all areas to provide needed infrastructure to support future improved transportation and increased product exchange.

Business Model Support:

- Assistance developing business models for cross-hub sales, shared transportation and shared inventory management will be a necessary accompaniment to ensure sustainable operations that will support future connectivity logistics.

6. Product Availability, Accessibility, Expansion, and Diversity Are Key Factors for Success.

The limitations of the Colorado growing season create a snowball effect of disengaged buyers (who seek consistent and diverse year-round product availability, quality, and quantity), and struggling local producers unable to meet these high and sometimes unrealistic demands.

Where We Are:

Current conundrums:

- Buyers of all types reported a desire for greater local product variety and expanded seasonal availability, despite seasonal limitations.
- Many local producers are competing unnecessarily as they harvest all the same crops at the same time yet sell independently.
- Certifications such as Organic and GAP are inaccessible to many producers due to cost and time barriers, yet these certifications are required by certain buyers and may influence the decision of others not to purchase local products.
- Producers range greatly in terms of farm size, tenure, revenue, and experience. Networking, collaboration, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and information sharing have room to expand.

Where We Need to Go:

Several distinct strategies for breaking down individual food system barriers came to light through the needs assessment:

- Forward contracting relationships between institutional buyers and hubs or larger producers should be expanded. This could guarantee markets for producers and ensure availability for entities requiring large product quantities.
- Collaborative crop planning could reduce seasonal redundancies in direct-to-consumer markets and increase opportunities for aggregated wholesale market sales.
- Standardization of packaging and product guidelines would create greater consistency for wholesale buyers. Group orders of standardized packaging coordinated by one entity would save producers money on per-box and shipping costs.
- Group GAP certifications OR relaxed certification requirements from buyers would break down market barriers to local producers.
- Expanded shoulder season growing space and capacity, as in greenhouses, vertical farms, or container farms, would significantly increase local food supply and purchasing.
- SNAP accessibility must be prioritized in all retail food outlets in order to grow the market for producers and provide increased accessibility to healthy local food for consumers.
- Peer-to-peer farmer learning opportunities such as workshops, support networks, and collaborations should be expanded. Topics of farmer education could include business and financial management, marketing strategies, technical support, on-farm practices and techniques, food safety and handling, storage and packing, and others as identified by farmers in search of professional development. Such support networks could benefit existing producers, and break down barriers for new, young producers to enter, and succeed in, farming businesses.

7. Marketing for Local Food Has Room for Growth, Regional Standardization, and Cohesion.

Many producers reported they would prefer to outsource marketing work such as photography, blogs, outreach, recipe creation, and other tasks.

Wholesale buyers wish to receive marketing collateral highlighting local farms to share with their customers.

Individual consumers want to know more about their local producers and where to find their products.

All stakeholder groups are enthusiastic about local and regional agritourism events such as farm tours and farm-to-table dinners that create meaningful connections between producers and buyers. These events could be tailored to a general consumer audience, specifically to a chef audience, or both.

Where We Are:

Several local food networks have successful marketing campaigns and initiatives. Some highlights are the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition's "Why Local, How Local?" campaign and the hub-based marketing of network farms undertaken by Farm Runners, Valley Roots Food Hub, and others.

Where We Need to Go:

- Annual, regional agritourism events such as Farm Tours, Farm-to-Table Dinners, and other "Know Your Farmer" initiatives coordinated in each locality and advertised regionally or even statewide.
- Standardized regional branding and marketing materials for use in promoting Southwest Colorado regional products and farms and to educate consumers about our foodshed.
- Creation of marketing staff positions to increase capacity to accomplish the above objectives and support local entities in tailoring region-level marketing efforts.



Visit to the Old Fort Farm, Durango, CO.



Marketing and packing of local food.



Visitors at the 2021 Gunnison Valley Farm Tour.



Sign outside of Farm Runners.

8. Consumer Education Around Local Food Must Expand.

Producers wish more customers were aware of:

- seasonality: what products are ready to harvest when.
- how to cook and use products that grow in the region.
- the true costs of food.
- the low wages earned by farmers, often at or below the poverty level.
- how certifications are restrictive, and that many producers grow food that is organic, sustainable, or regenerative despite lack of certifications.
- which restaurants and grocers are truly supplying local food on a regular basis. They want transparency from restaurants - no greenwashing.

Individual consumers wish to:

- receive recipes and tips for cooking and preserving local foods.
- feel a closer connection to their farmers.
- understand the best purchasing choices regarding sustainability and health.

Wholesale buyers wish to:

- better understand what products farmers have seasonally.

Where We Need to Go:

- Standardized and shareable educational materials and outreach efforts for increased consumer education regarding all above-mentioned topics.
- Expanded and collaborative outreach efforts to communicate to a wider audience and bring all regional food stakeholders together.



Cooking classes.



Volunteer opportunities.



Farmer education events.



Farm tours (Calder Farm, Gunnison, 2021).



Fermentation Fest (Gunnison).

Expected Outcomes of Roadmap Implementation:

Through implementation of the Roadmap, the Southwest region of Colorado will become a more vibrant, collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic, and social health of the region. Specific supporting outcomes of the Roadmap activities include, but are not limited to:

1. Increased Supply

The region will see growing income, investment, viability, and opportunities for producers and food businesses, leading to an increase in production and available local food resources.

- Coordinated efforts will align production to market needs and expand access points in rural areas.
- Increased storage and season extension efforts will reduce the off-season income gap.
- Small family farms will retain a higher portion of the food dollar and jobs will be created for new farmers as well as food hub, retail outlet, and marketing staff.
- Community kitchens will encourage the development of value-added agricultural products and increase food business entrepreneurial opportunities.



2. Greater Access, Greater Demand

The region will see expanded market channels (including food hubs and retail outlets) that will reach a larger customer base and streamline purchasing for wholesale buyers, leading to an overall increase in sales and consumption of local foods.

- Through education, consumers receive information about the social, environmental, and community values incorporated into the production of a product or the farm producing it.
- Values shifts and increased food literacy will be complimented by increased market and access channels such as new, convenient retail outlets and SNAP redemption opportunities.
- These efforts, in turn, will increase access for marginalized groups and increase the diversity of the local food customer base.





3. Enhanced Connectivity

The region will see strengthened capacity of the food system through producer development, community collaboration, public education, and infrastructure expansion of mid-tier value chains.

- Relationships will be established and cultivated across the region and between stakeholder groups.
- Transportation and distribution logistics will be reimagined and improved upon to create more efficient and effective regional connections.
- Local food retail locations will increase access in rural areas and for marginalized communities.

4. Improved Equity, Greater Food Security & Justice

The region will see an increase in equitable access to local food and enhanced food literacy in rural consumers, as well as increased equity and opportunity for growers.

- Historically underrepresented groups will be involved, and hold leadership roles, in the redistribution of power within the new values-based food system.
- Growers are treated as strategic partners instead of input suppliers. Their products are differentiated by values, local branding or the identity and story of the people producing them.
- Rewards and responsibilities are distributed equitably across the supply chain.



5. Ecosystem Benefits

The land of the region will see improved soil health and carbon sequestration on well-stewarded farmlands. Our food system will enjoy reduced reliance on fossil fuels and industrial agriculture through increased efficiency in transportation logistics and increased consumerism of regional products.



WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

We are actively seeking public and private partners who are interested in activating the Roadmap strategies on a local or regional scale over the next few years. To join us, or for more information, contact:

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