

NSAC'S BLOG

NEW USDA INITIATIVE AIMS TO BUILD CAPACITY AND STRENGTHEN LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

March 31, 2016



Pallets of fresh produce ready for transport at the Common Market food hub in Philadelphia. Photo credit: USDA.

For local and regional food systems to thrive, farmers and rural producers increasingly need to access customers in urban areas and be able to offer products that meet their unique needs and demands. “Value chains” and “value-adding” have long been solutions to this problem. Value-adding is simply the process by which farmers and producers are able to transform their raw ingredients (e.g. kale, basil, berries) into items that can sell at higher prices, like salad mixes, sauces, and jams. The value chain is the process that makes that transformation possible – the supply networks, equipment, and processing facilities, as well as the people and skills needed to make everything run smoothly.

On Thursday, March 31, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in partnership with the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Delta Regional Authority (DRA), and 15 philanthropic partners, **announced** the creation of the *Leveraging Investment for Network Coordination* (“Food LINC”) initiative, which is designed to grow local and regional food economies through value chain development. The inaugural roll out of Food LINC will target 10 regions across the country, connecting rural producers with urban buyers using a combined public/private investment of nearly \$3 million.

The Surdna Foundation, one of the project's philanthropic partners, will also provide additional support for NSAC member organization, the [Wallace Center at Winrock International](#), to facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges that will help participants share best practices and evaluate the overall success of the initiative.

"USDA, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority recognized that our investments in local food infrastructure have the most success in communities with strong coordination between producers, food purchasers, and access to shared resources. Food LINC aims to replicate that coordination in ten cities to create market opportunities for the areas' producers, meet demand for locally produced food and create or sustain jobs along that local supply chain," said USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack. "More than 160,000 farmers are tapping into demand for local and regional foods, and industry estimates predict more growth in the next several years. With the help from our partners, USDA can 'supercharge' our resources to create lasting impacts for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities as a whole."

NSAC has long championed programs, such as the [Value-Added Producer Grants](#), [Local and Regional Food Enterprise Loan Guarantees](#), [Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program](#), [Farm to School](#), and others, that help producers develop new, higher revenue products and reach larger customer bases. We commend USDA for bringing partners together to launch this new initiative, which will increase coordination between supply chain actors, support community economic development, and help rural producers reach urban markets and expand access to nutritious foods.

Food LINC is being launched as part of USDA's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Initiative (KYF2), an effort spearheaded by the Obama Administration in 2009 to enhance coordination and efficiency among the various USDA agencies and programs that work to build local and regional farm and food systems. As long-time supporters of KYF2, NSAC recognizes the inherent value the addition of an initiative like Food LINC will bring to this effort. With interest in local and regional foods, markets, and programs booming, this program has the potential to make significant impact for rural producers and urban buyers alike.

See below for the list of target regions, host organizations, and funding partners:

- Albuquerque and New Mexico Region: [La Montañita Co-op](#); Thornburg Foundation
- Atlanta, Georgia/South Carolina Region: [Common Market Georgia](#); Schmidt Family Foundation
- Central Appalachia Region: [Appalachian Sustainable Development](#); CoBank, The One Foundation, Appalachian Regional Commission
- Chesapeake Region: [Washington Metro Council of Governments](#); Prince Charitable Trust, Agua Foundation, Town Creek Foundation
- Delaware Valley Region: [Fair Food Philly](#); RSF Social Finance, Surdna Foundation
- Jackson, Mississippi Region: [Soul City Hospitality](#); Delta Regional Authority
- Louisville, Eastern Kentucky Region: [City of Louisville \(Farm to Table\)](#); RSF Social Finance, Kentucky Ag Development Board
- Memphis, Arkansas Region (Including NE Arkansas and NW Mississippi): [Communities Unlimited](#); Delta Regional Authority
- Pueblo/Colorado Springs Region: [Rocky Mountain Farmers Union](#); Gates Family Foundation
- Raleigh/Durham, Coastal Plain Region: [The Conservation Fund](#); Oak Foundation, Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, The Duke Endowment