



Executive Summary, Findings, and Next Steps from the Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference

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Overview

The Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference was September 23-25, 2015 in Marion, Virginia, organized by the Appalachian Foodshed Project, in partnership with the Central Appalachian Network, the Appalachia Funders Network, and the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition.

The conference was a gathering of key practitioners, funders, academics, and policymakers from West Virginia, southwest Virginia, western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, and southern Ohio to connect the work that is happening across our diverse region and guide strategic efforts moving forward. This event was intended to build on on-going regional efforts to build a robust, just, and vibrant food system in Appalachia.

The Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference was made possible by a generous grant from the Virginia Cooperative Extension Community Viability endowment fund.

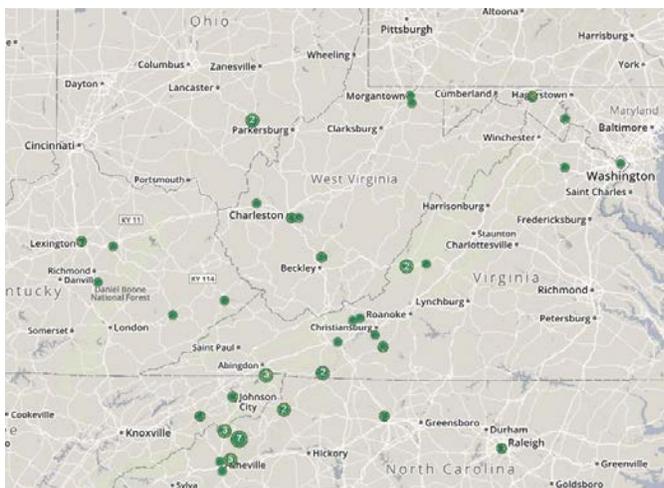


Figure 1: Map of participating organizations, created from LocalWiki.

Summary

The Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference brought together 52 key food system practitioners, funders, academics, and policymakers from North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio. Together, we explored some of the most pressing issues and exciting opportunities facing regional food systems and food security efforts in central Appalachia.

Appalachia has a strong food movement with great work established or emerging in the fields of research, community engagement, food security, and economic development. As this movement grows, new partners beyond local food system actors are recognizing the economic, environmental, health, and cultural importance of strengthening our region's food system. The result is an increasing variety of perspectives, roles, interests, and potential contributions within this broader movement.

Leveraging and interweaving these interests will require an open-minded, collaborative approach that embraces peer exchange and emergent practice. This conference put those principles into action by using an Open Space format. Participants self-organized around the conversations they wanted to have and, without any of the usual “top-down” dynamics, created spaces for deep and honest exchange. They expressed feelings of rejuvenation. The conference sessions produced new connections and relationships, insights into shared challenges, and promising pathways to strengthen this work.



Figure 2: Participants workshoping learning from the Central Appalachian Foodshed Conference

The Conference aimed to create a space for peer-to-peer learning and engagement with the following objectives:

Leadership in large-scale food system change efforts will come together with peers to:

- a. *share what's working, what's being learned, the complexities of the work, and what we are still figuring out;*

- b. *engage in creative dialogue about how to aggregate and synthesize the most promising directions and strategies, with the recognition that the local context drives the work on the ground;*
- c. *explore the potential of an information-sharing platform for on-going regional alignment, collaboration, and movement building across political boundaries.*

Key learning from the Conference included:

- The need to create spaces to **fail fast and frequently**, and the means to reassess, respond, and retool. We experience many of the same issues and challenges across Central Appalachia. As food systems work matures and deepens in our region, we need to be able to take risks, share results and failures openly, and learn together. Funders need to fund experiments, practitioners need safe spaces to innovate, and everyone needs the opportunity to learn from what works and (especially) what doesn't work.
- **Transparency** is vital to support collaborative, innovative efforts to address complexity and create food systems change. This requires a shift in culture and mindset, as well as development of technologies and tools that facilitate effective and transparent communication.
- Food systems work in Central Appalachia is increasingly viewed as a tool for economic development. While this is a positive reflection on the work so far, the reality on the ground is complex and there are no silver bullets for impacting economically distressed and food insecure communities. The economic impacts of local food systems are deeply interconnected with the **other impacts of a localized food system** for the people of Appalachia, including health and wellness, culture, and food access. This will involve bringing in new partners, especially from the health sector.
- We need focus on **democratizing the work**, by identifying barriers to participation and creating cultures of inclusion, especially with low resource communities.

Session Topics

(Links and notes from the sessions can be found on LocalWiki:

https://localwiki.org/centralappalachia/Central_Appalachian_Foodshed_Conference.)

Connecting Food & Place: Community Revitalization Efforts

Forest Farming

Challenging the Profit Paradigm

Food Policy from the Grassroots

Best Practices for Fostering Collaboration and Cooperation

Alternative vs Conventional Supply Chains

Tired of Working in the Supply Side? Can we work with consumers and behavior?

Farm Transition Programs/Growing Tomorrow's Farmers

Asset Mapping

Food Education/Farm-to-School

Regional Network Building

Are You Addressing Issues of Race/Class Around Food Systems in Your Community?
Viability in West Virginia
Supply
Severance & Land Reform
How to Lift Localism as a Regional Policy Incentive
Rules and Regulations
Financial Models

The Role of Multi-State Networks

Food systems work is inherently place-based, but is also embedded in large-scale cultural, economic, social, and biological systems. Food systems do not always fit within political boundaries, and work that is connected across county and state lines benefits from access to innovative strategies, effective tools, and useful resources.

Organizations and networks like the Appalachian Foodshed Project, the Central Appalachian Network, and the Appalachian Funders Network help to make connections across communities, organizations, and regions. They help to identify trends, lift up emergent or best practices, and hold the big picture perspective that includes the organizations that are engaged deeply on the ground. They also provide a venue for exploring larger strategies, for brokering new connections, and for creating opportunities for collaboration and shared work. Multi-state networks help to connect the movement, providing communications spaces and gatherings where ongoing dialogues about vision and values can take place. These networks create important spaces for relationship building, peer learning, and identifying shared priorities. They also are able to leverage resources, including access to research and funding for shared strategies.

LocalWiki: a Platform for Information Sharing

Context is hugely important to food systems work, and approaches across the region are constantly evolving to meet emerging needs and opportunities. We need nimble ways to connect to one another, to aggregate existing information, share tools and resources, and exchange knowledge about what is working, what is not working, who is doing what, and where there are spaces for new action.

In order to efficiently move food systems work in Central Appalachia forward, we need effective tools to archive information and share resources. LocalWiki is an online platform for open, transparent information sharing. It allows us to create a digital commons, where together we are the collective owners, creators, and users of the information that is most relevant to our work. It is a place for local knowledge, but also has the capacity to connect across multiple localities. Information can be easily mapped and categorized using a tagging system. Contributing and editing is simple and easy to navigate, even for people who are only used to writing emails.

LocalWiki allows us to explore the work that is happening in our region—both inside and peripheral to the food system. In the near future, a LocalWiki page for Central Appalachia can

function as a hub for discovering organizations, learning more about specific localities, exploring specific food system topics or issues, and sharing information about resources, events, or opportunities. This tool has the potential to facilitate the free exchange of information, regional connections, and new partnerships necessary for broader impacts and more innovative and emergent work in our region's food system.

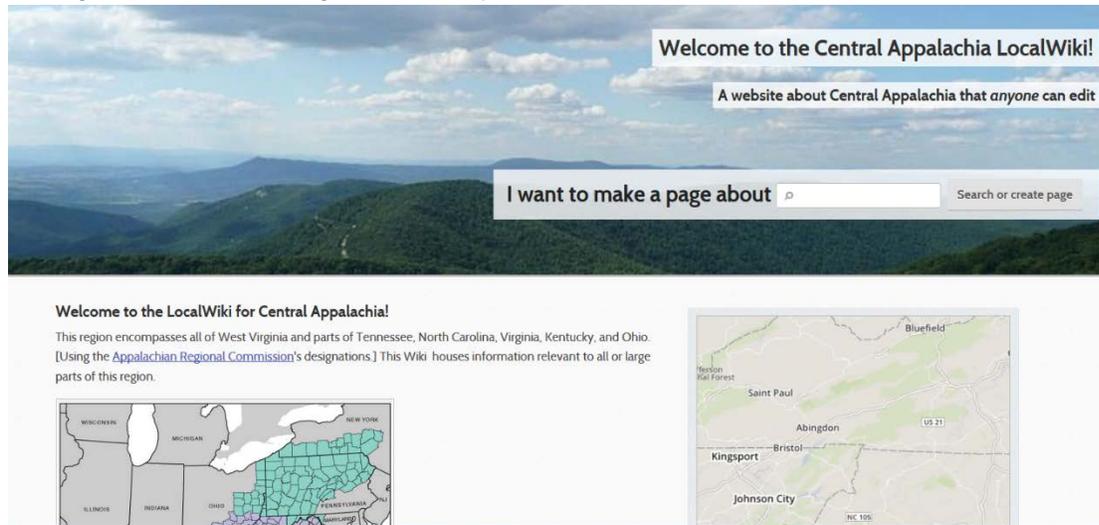


Figure 3: Screenshot from the Central Appalachia LocalWiki page.

The Road Forward

There is a strong desire and need to create more spaces for peer-to-peer engagement for food systems practitioners, funders, academics, and policy makers in Central Appalachia. This can continue to happen through in-person gatherings, as well as through online connections. We need to be strategic about finding the funding, capacity, and structure for facilitating coordinated change in our complex system. For those of us interested in creating real, lasting food systems change, this will require us to invest our energies in developing LocalWiki as an information-sharing tool, and building our knowledge, and the food movement, together.

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