

WNC FOOD SYSTEMS COALITION



COLLABORATIVE AG NETWORK'S
PARTICIPATORY ACTION
RESEARCH REPORT
2022-23



Introduction

The Collaborative Ag Network (CAN) began as one of the six strategic areas of the Food Justice Planning Initiative (FJPI), which is now the WNC Food Systems Coalition. CAN's purpose is to facilitate cohesion and collaboration amongst the farming community of Western North Carolina.

Carrying on from initial interviews that informed the direction of the FJPI, CAN undertook further interviews to hear directly from farmers what was needed in order to experience an agricultural system in WNC that adequately meets farmers' needs, improves quality of life and has equity, access and opportunity at its core. In this research, collaboration was emphasized as the Initiative/Coalition held this as pinnacle to achieving its mission.

METHODOLOGY

Interview Process

In 2022, the WNC Food Systems Coalition's Collaborative Ag Network (CAN) recruited over a dozen farmers in Western North Carolina to help design and prepare an interview process to consult other farmers regarding what a successful food system which is based in collaboration amongst growers would look like.

Over the course of six meetings, farmers were trained in a Participatory Action Research methodology, where peers interview other peers to get insight into the community perspective. Ten questions were included in the interview tool, and included prompts to help guide the interviewer and/or interviewee in reaching clarity and depth in the responses. These were the ten questions:

1. What questions do you have before we get started?
2. What relationships led to this interview? Tell the story of how this connection was made and who the interviewer and interviewee know in common.
3. What is currently out of balance in the regional food and farming system as far as fairness and access?
4. What are the inputs that would be needed to support a fair and equitable food system? What are the barriers to being able to support a fair and equitable food system here?
5. How can farmers collaborate with one another to create an equitable food system in WNC?
6. How are farmers already collaborating successfully and what are the lessons from those collaborations?
7. What would make your farming operation easier (ex. more land, fencing, access to equipment, staff, funding) What would make your personal life easier? (ex. insurance, childcare, a day off, vacation)
8. What resources do you need that you are not able to get from your own community?
9. What other specific ideas do you have for how a collaborative farmer network in the region could make a real impact in the lives and operations of local farmers?
10. Would you like to be actively involved in helping the Collaborative Ag Network happen?

The goal was to conduct 10-12 interviews, however only eight were completed. Interviewees completed a confidentiality agreement that allowed the data to be shared internally and amongst relevant partnerships, but protecting their identities in final reports and media.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were transcribed using AI software (otter.ai) to initially convert the audio files into transcripts. These were then reviewed and edited by a human for accuracy.

The transcripts were then distributed to various staff and community members connected to the Collaborative Ag Network and agricultural industry for analysis. They were compensated \$25 an hour for their time and instructed to look for quotes that summarized examples of what is and isn't working well in the current food system and collaborative efforts amongst farmers. Analysts were asked to draw out themes that summarized these points, such as "land access", "resource-sharing", "marketing", etc.

Their work was then reviewed by a research assistant and themes were collated into overarching categories, summarizing the priorities that interviewees were naming. Fifteen priorities were identified (page 4-5) that indicated their importance to an equitable system for the farmers, regardless of how well each priority is or is not currently functioning. But overall each of these priorities needs attention and improvement.

Limitations and Future Research

- ✦ Though these interviews were thorough they were limited in number, with only 8 being completed. Interviewees were prompted to reflect on their own, as well as others farmers experiences, as best as they were able.
- ✦ The nature of the results - a list of priorities - lends itself to future research in order to investigate the best ways to address them. Given that the results are not weighted, additional research to identify which are the most important to address in the short, medium and long term, is also recommended.
- ✦ Future reports will detail what work is happening in the region by the WNC Food Systems Coalition, grassroots organizations, farmers and other non-profits within these priorities, as well as recommendations for how to address gaps.
- ✦ This additional research will inform a strategic plan for the Collaborative Ag Network, as well as the WNC FS Coalition. It will include how to address these priorities through funding, advocacy or programming. Results will include recommendations and wording that could support the ag community in grant-writing, resource-access and service-awareness.

RESULTS

The following list of priorities are not weighted or in any particular order of importance. Due to the small sample size interviewed, this list serves as a starting point for building a picture of the components of WNC's food system from the perspective of its agricultural community.

The 15 Priorities

Product Aggregation & Distribution

Having adequate options for growers' produce and products to be distributed. Increased local aggregation could benefit the region.

Access to Funding for Farmers

The grant and loan processes that many farmers navigate can be not only prohibitive but time consuming, stressful and demeaning. Better ways to navigate and access the funds are needed.

Land Access

Land is becoming prohibitively expensive and challenging to access. Exploring innovative ways to keep land affordable and accessible to young, first generation and BIPOC farmers is needed.

Policy & Advocacy Issues Related to the WNC Food System

Examining where local or federal policy change may be necessary for a more equitable and collaborative growing community.

Navigating Legal Regulations and "Loopholes"

"Demystifying" what rules are in place that farmers need to navigate regarding land use, certifications, processing, sales, etc., as well as creative ways to navigate them, such as cooperatives.

Quality of Life Assistance for Farmers & Their Families

How could better access to resources like vacation time, retirement funds, insurance, etc., increase quality of life and are there collective ways to access these?

Labor

Overcoming the many barriers in accessing and retaining skilled labor, including housing for staff, temporary and long-term support, being able to pay a living wage, etc.

Sharing of Resources

Creating systems for sharing resources within the farming community of WNC, including equipment and other physical infrastructure like cold storage, land management with livestock, etc.

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Sales, Marketing and Consumer Education

Consumer awareness of quality and pricing realities is crucial for small farmers' products to be respected and purchased. Collective tactics for consumer education and assistance with marketing and sales are essential.

Communication and Information Sharing

Overcoming the barriers to effective information sharing in the ag community, including equitable and adequate access to analogue and digital communications.

Improving Farmer Network Relations

Increased opportunity to meet and collaborate with other farmers and fostering the natural collaboration this can produce.

Innovative and "Novel" Food System Solutions

In order to build more solidarity and robust food culture and business, exploring new solution such as "food churches", "local food certifications", and new growing technologies could help our region's growers.

Farmer Education

Ensuring our growers have access to exceptional learning opportunities from each other, such as intergenerational/peer mentorships, conferences, workshops, etc.

Increasing Regenerative Practices and/or Self-Sustainability

Helping to protect our global and local climates and ecosystems and long-term sustainability through regenerative ag practices, perhaps through incentives, education or policy work.

Equity within Farming

Closing the gaps in access, financial sustainability and success caused by racial, gender, LGBTQ+ and socioeconomic inequities.

Conclusion

The Collaborative Ag Network, as part of the WNC Food Systems Coalition which is partnered with community members and other nonprofits, is well positioned to address gaps as identified by the farmers in order to support a robust collaborative agricultural community.

Through additional research to identify the top priorities within these 15, creating short/medium/long-term strategic plans and continuing to build a network of engaged farmers, CAN will seek to fulfil its mission using these priorities as a jumping off point.

Further reports and plans with detailed calls to action and recommendations for the region will be published in 2024.