**South Carolina’s New Covenant with Land and Farmers: The Coastal Conservation League’s Sustainable Agriculture Initiative**

**Background**

South Carolina’s agricultural history is monumental and tragic. Beginning in the seventeenth century, indigo, cotton and rice fueled the state’s economy and created wealth on an unparalleled scale at that time. In the 1770s, the average value of estates in the Charleston District was more than three times as great as the next richest place in the colonies, Anne Arundel County in Maryland. Nine of the ten wealthiest men in British North American were South Carolinians, and all planters. Charleston, described by an 18th century visitor as, “the most beautiful city between Philadelphia and Lima,” was built by agrarian wealth.

One hundred years later on the verge of the Civil War, Governor James H. Hammond declared, “….you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.” Hammond was spectacularly wrong about war, but he was right about cotton. Even after the economic devastation of the war, agricultural production, and cotton particularly, was responsible for the vast majority of the state’s economy.

In direct proportion to its economic magnitude, South Carolina’s agricultural heritage extracted a terrible, devastating toll – environmentally, culturally, morally, and, ultimately, economically – that haunts the state to this day. Human slavery underpinned the immense accumulation of planter wealth in the state. This “peculiar institution” drove the country to the schism and chaos of the Civil War. In South Carolina, one out of every three young white males was killed during the five-year conflagration.

The psychology of South Carolina’s agricultural legacy is complex. Historians have puzzled over the proclivity of South Carolina leaders to embrace extreme and destructive policies and programs. Nullification and secession are among the state’s better-known missteps, but the threads of extremism and immunity run through the 300-year history.

One of the more prescient articles written on South Carolina is “The Problem of South Carolina” by historian James Banner. Banner proposes that the moral indefensibility of slavery, coupled with the desperate need to justify it to the larger world, created a “culture of conformity” in which political dissent was suppressed, producing what is, to this day, a one-party state run by a tightly-controlled political elite.

Amid it all, for more than three centuries, South Carolina unswervingly pursued an agenda of industrial-scale, single-crop, export agriculture, the culture of which is still deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche of the state.

**The Rural Status Quo**

The current industrial model of agriculture has failed to deliver prosperity or even subsistence to the state’s rural areas. Rural areas in SC suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment, health care is underfunded and insufficient, and the school system rates as one of the worst in nation.

For SC’s rural population, current options for employment are inadequate. SC rural unemployment ran at 19.3% in 2008[[1]](#footnote-1), compared to a national average of 5.8% the same year.[[2]](#footnote-2) Additionally, the employed residents in the rural areas earn less than their national counterparts. Rural South Carolina’s average household income is 15.1% less than the national average for rural households, and 18.5% less than the average for all households. A higher percentage of South Carolina rural families fall into poverty than national rural families as a whole by a margin of 12.3% to 8.5%.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, many of SC’s rural residents must travel outside of the rural area to more urban or suburban centers in order to find work. 40% of SC’s residents live in rural areas, but only 20% of the jobs are there. As a result, rural workers spend an average of 41.7 hours longer commuting each year than do their urban counterparts.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In addition to poverty and unemployment, SC’s rural communities face unique healthcare and education challenges. Public health care infrastructure in the rural communities is inadequate, hindering the quality of life of the surrounding communities. Three out of four rural minorities living in SC live with inadequate health care resources available to them.[[5]](#footnote-5) Consequently, SC has the 6th highest obesity rate and the 2nd highest diabetes rate in the country. [[6]](#footnote-6) In both cases, the rate for minorities is significantly worse than the white population. One contributing factor is that low income and racial/ethnic minorities have less access to stores that sell healthy food products, creating “food injustice.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This disparity is more evident in the rural Lowcountry, where large concentrations of minorities live in poverty without access to healthy foods.

Another example of failing infrastructure that ails rural communities is the current status of the public education system. About 3 in 10 public school students in South Carolina attend rural schools. Out of those students, only 52.3% graduate from high school, ranking South Carolina in last place nationally. The Concentrated Poverty Gauge, which was developed by the Rural School and Community Trust, defines the bottom 10% of rural school districts in terms of student poverty. For South Carolina, the Concentrated Poverty consists of 92% minority students, of which 84.1% live below the poverty, and only 38.2% will finish high school (2nd to last for all states).[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, Interstate 95, which travels through parts of the Lowcountry, has been labeled the “Corridor of Shame” because of its failing schools as depicted in a documentary of the same name. President Barack Obama recognized the “Corridor of Shame” in his 2009 State of the Union.

**Sustainable Agriculture: The Key to SC’s Rural Success**

SC’s rural areas are demanding community, economic, and environmental revitalization. Although almost all agree that the revival will involve a shift in our agricultural model, there is little agreement as to how it should occur. Ignoring centuries of failed attempts, the state’s political leaders continue to cling to the old hope of big agriculture, with dreams of landing a national processing company or export operation.

And yet, the winds of change are blowing in South Carolina, just as they are across the country. Consumers, restaurants, grocery stores, farmers’ markets are all demanding local produce, far more than the current system has the capacity to deliver, but not far more than we are capable of producing in our rural areas. According to the USDA, demand for locally produced food has increased sharply in recent years. Consumers are choosing to purchase local foods for a variety of reasons. Some consumers prefer the product quality and freshness of local produce. Other members of the community show support of local farmers or farmer practices and the local economy through purchasing power.[[9]](#footnote-9)While some consumers buy local to save money, others appear to be willing to pay a substantial premium to buy local. Seventy-one percent of Americans are willing to pay more for food that is grown locally.[[10]](#footnote-10) There is a nation-wide demand for local food products, and SC is not an exception.

The prospect of expanding our local food economy through sustainable agriculture is one that not only excites urban residents & institutions, but it is one that has many positive side effects: rural improvement, increased investment in the local economy, environmental conservation and local health benefits.

**The Sustainable Farming and Food Advantage**

South Carolina’s rural agricultural areas are environmentally and economically crucial to the state’s vitality. Forty percent of SC’s population is rural, and farmland represents approximately one quarter of the total land mass. Today these rural lands are in jeopardy, with high rates of land conversion from rural to urban increasing pressure on the agricultural sector. Moreover, resources to support agriculture, like local and regional-scale slaughterhouses, canneries, and dairy-processing plants, are scarce.

A shift to a local food economy has the potential to revitalize our rural economies by providing a connection for our ailing rural communities to our vibrant urban centers. Metropolitan markets of Greenville, Columbia and Charleston, along with smaller areas like Beaufort, Georgetown, Florence and Rock Hill, have the potential to revitalize rural areas, allowing landowners and residents to tap into the powerful heritage of farming in a new constitution that values conservation, community and equity.

Small-scale local farming has the potential to bolster our state’s economy. A study by the University of Minnesota Extension Service revealed that small farms with gross income of $100,000 made almost 95% of total expenditures within their local communities. Large farms with a gross income greater than $900,000 spent less than 20% locally. Since there are many small farms and only a handful of large farms, the cumulative effect is that small farms invest more money overall in local economies. Moreover, large-scale farming provides relatively few rural jobs because public policy and technology have favored the replacement of human labor with chemicals and machinery.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, with more sustainable farming practices, product diversification and opportunities for a guaranteed market, rural residents can begin to profit from their land. With opportunities for local processing and adding value to raw materials, farmers can enjoy higher yields on their products. Business opportunities generated from the local food movement will create jobs, and increased farmer earnings will lead to an increased quality of life in our rural communities.

An added benefit of rural agricultural production to rural residents in South Carolina is increased access to fresh local produce and a healthier lifestyle. According to Professor Darcy Freedman with USC’s College for Social Work, developing a sustainable local food system that leverages production from the rural areas will provide health benefits to the rural underserved, as well as economic opportunities. Local foods generally undergo minimal processing and are fresher than their globally-transported counterparts. For a state that suffers from a high rate of obesity and diabetes, this added health benefit is one more pillar in the structure of our new food economy.

While the economic and health benefits of the local food economy are notable, it is the environmental benefits of community farming systems that help make this model of agricultural production sustainable. Smaller farms generally rely less on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and consequently protect our waterways and marine life from exposure to these chemicals. Sustainably farmed lands, managed with cover cropping and no-till practices, do not suffer from the top soil erosion issue that is devastating to many large-scale agricultural lands. Moreover, small-scale farms are generally less fossil fuel dependent. Less equipment and transport are required than are for their industrial farmed counterparts. Conventional produce, for example, is shipped an average of 1,500 miles before reaching consumers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Small-scale farms tied into local distribution systems that serve regional customers do not need their products to travel these distances. Local food sheds range from 30 miles to 400 miles, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of food distribution. Small-scale sustainable farms are also less dependent on synthetic inputs, such as herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers. These inputs require massive amounts of energy for their fabrication.

The shift to sustainable agricultural production has many benefits, but it is going to take a powerful movement to begin seeing significant changes in SC. In order to progress toward a system of healthy and local food production in this state, there are two basic areas where agricultural reform must occur:

1. Physical infrastructure for product processing, marketing; and

2. State and local policy.

**Product Processing, Marketing and Distribution**

Until 2010, there was only well-developed private and public-sector infrastructure available for large-scale agriculture. Produce distributors, packing sheds, warehouses, etc. served large farmers adequately, particularly in the export arena. As a result, SC consumers were spending at least $7 billion per year on food with less than 10% originating on SC farms (2010).[[13]](#footnote-13) At the same time, our state’s agricultural sector produced almost $3 billion worth of agricultural product.[[14]](#footnote-14) Producers frequently found it more convenient to use the pre-existing infrastructure that carries our local product efficiently and cheaply across state lines. Unfortunately, this trend of exporting most raw produce out of state remains the case today.

Small-scale local operators wishing to sell produce locally are oftentimes limited to roadside stands, undependable pickup trucks, unknown buyers and markets, and unpredictable and uncontrollable prices. Buyers, like restaurants, grocery stores and families, experience a corresponding disconnect. They are unable to purchase local produce in predictable quantity and quality.

The missing links are local food hub centers designed to serve small farmers, located in proximity to metropolitan markets. These centers could not only serve as points of collection and distribution, they could perform clearinghouse functions, matching buyers with sellers, establishing fair prices and providing marketing services. They can also provide space for product processing, allowing producers or others to add value to produce within the community.

Food hubs are a critical piece in a new food economy. While the USDA’s working definition of a food hub is “a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products,” food hubs come in many forms and are a relatively new concept in food distribution.14 Many growers, especially from small and medium sized farms, experience difficulty aggregating, distributing, processing, storing and marketing produce to larger buyers. Food hubs provide the infrastructure vital to addressing the problems associated with the globalization of the food chain.

In recognition of the need for a local food hub, in April of 2010, the Coastal Conservation League (CCL) purchased a warehouse/office building in Charleston with the intention of performing exactly these local food hub functions. Located at 990 Morrison Drive, just up the road from the downtown Charleston restaurants, and a short drive across the Cooper and Ashley rivers from restaurants and grocery stores in Mt. Pleasant, West Ashley and North Charleston; the building has 6,500 square feet of warehouse space and 4,100 square feet of office space that has been renovated to LEED specifications. In June of 2011, CCL hired a general manager to launch the state’s first local food hub, GrowFood Carolina. The local food hub opened for business in October 2011, and has experienced tremendous success.

GrowFood Carolina is a bold, energetic, collaborative partner in creating a truly sustainable food system. By promoting local foods, local farms and rural sustainability, GrowFood helps local consumers better know their food and where it grows. By supporting small farmers, GrowFood Carolina helps to secure the future of a regional food supply, local culture and South Carolina’s agriculture heritage.

**State and Local Policy Reform**

Current agricultural policy favors large-scale producers and systems, and has left a small percentage of very large farmers producing the majority of the food in our country. Government subsidies to large-scale producers have aided in consolidating farm production. Large-scale farming operations benefit few and lead to environmental and economic decline. This system has contributed to the decline in small and mid-sized farms, hurting rural economies and minimizing the availability and diversity of local products available to consumers.

Small-scale farms have not been on the receiving end of government subsidies, but they often require additional capital to operate within strict regulatory confines. Food processing regulations require administrative capacity beyond the means of most modest-sized farmers. Technical assistance is unreliable and frequently geared to the commodity row-croppers. And to compound the problems, small farmers face increased pressure to sell their land as suburban sprawl casts a multitude of unfavorable shadows across the agrarian landscape.

CCL is leading a state-level legislative effort to level the playing field between industrial and community-scale agriculture. Our approach to agricultural policy reform is a three pronged legislative agenda: promoting financial incentives for small farms, supporting increased funding for public agencies that support sustainable agriculture, and reforming policies and regulations that negatively impact small farms.

The vitality of rural economies is dependent upon the success of local agricultural production and consumption. CCL supports a statewide agricultural reform that supports small farms with direct financial incentives. 77% of Americans think that government policies should be oriented towards helping family, owner-operated farms.[[15]](#footnote-15)18 We have joined forces with The Nature Conservancy, SC Wildlife Federation and many other organizations in the forestry, conservation, agriculture, community development and tourism sectors to establish and promote policies that will provide direct grants to local farmers, train existing and new farmers, market local and organic products, provide tax credits for sustainable farmers and provide low interest loans to local farmers.

A large part of our agenda includes working with local and state agencies to provide effective avenues of funding for increased technical assistance and infrastructure to farmers. Through a partnership with the SC Department of Agriculture, SC Department of Commerce, CCL, and Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, we are in the process of outlining an investment strategy in small farms that will lead to millions of dollars of public and private investment in rural South Carolina.

Another important component of our legislative agenda is increasing the availability of local foods in public institutions. We are working with the state Department of Agriculture on their goal of increasing local food production and consumption through their “Fresh on the Campus” bill. Additionally, we are examining policy decisions that affect our land grant universities and how they make investment decisions. State agencies must refocus on supporting the local agricultural sector of our state’s economy.

While working to create a positive legislative agenda for promoting agriculture and restoring our rural economies, we are also closely monitoring legislation that could negatively impact agriculture. Our legislative agenda will include removing burdensome regulatory constraints for local farmers. Policy reform in this arena will enable small produce and livestock producers and processors to easily meet standards, without compromising the quality and safety of the product.

As part of the small farmer protection arm of our agenda, CCL acts a voice in the legislature for small farmers in the state. In this year’s legislative session, that support is helping to introduce and pass enabling legislation for Voluntary Agricultural Districts, a land use program that aims to preserve thousands of acres of family farmland through incentives and public involvement. CCL is also supporting Farm to School legislation and an overhaul of the Department of Health and Environmental Control’s *Retail Food Establishment Regulations* so that they allow for more innovation.

In addition to statewide policy reform, proper land use planning and coding coupled with agricultural renewal are vital to the success of our rural communities. Many rural farmers have resorted to selling their land in order to profit. In 2002-2007, South Carolina lost 64,600 acres of rural agricultural land to development. In roughly the same time period, South Carolina’s agricultural land value increased approximately 84%. Charleston has the highest average per acre value in the state at $6,929, which is a direct result of urban sprawl development.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Charleston has the highest average per acre agricultural land value in the state due to urban sprawl. Farming on land of this value is exceedingly difficult as property taxes and development pressure increases. Concentrating development into urban centers and preventing suburban sprawl is a key component to increasing the viability of the local food economy.

The Conservation League is working on local planning and coordination in the tri-county area to ensure that local planning and policy efforts are adequately protecting and further enabling Lowcountry farmers to continue and expand community-farming practices. As part of the local planning effort, we are refining local comprehensive plans and policies to preserve and enhance local agriculture, working with local planning bodies to establish farmer-based advisory committees, advocating for complete catalogues of agricultural resources, such as maps of farms, farmers markets and distribution centers, and engaging the community in an ongoing discussion on the value of sustainable agriculture.

**Conclusion**

A shift from South Carolina’s historical dependence on large export agriculture to locally-driven farming can revitalize SC’s rural communities and serve as a model for local food economies across the nation, but this change requires new investment and policies that support a local food system. Through the GrowFood Carolina local food hub project and reformed policies that support small-scale farmers, the Conservation League is working to change the way we produce, distribute and consume food in South Carolina.

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2. Bureau of Labor Statistics, http://data.bls.gov/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2009 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2009 Census. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://rhr.sph.sc.edu/report/minoritiesInRuralAmerica.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CDC, BRFSS, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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12. http://www.sustainabletable.org/intro/comparison. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Food and Agricultural policy research institute (FAPRI), USDA, Economic Research Service, USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the 2007 Census of Agriculture. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 2008 USDA Census, http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/SC.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 2007 USDA Agriculture Census [↑](#footnote-ref-16)