

REQUEST FOR NEW SOUTHERN EXTENSION AND RESEARCH ACTIVITY

June 7, 2016

I. Title: Strengthening the Southern Region Extension and Research System to Support Local & Regional Foods Needs and Priorities

Requested Duration: October 01, 2016 to September 30, 2021

Administrative Advisor(s): [Ed Jones](#) (VA) – Extension and [Eric Young](#) (SAAESD) – Research

II. Statement of Issue(s) and Justification: Significant interest in local and regional food system strategies has risen over the past decade, in response to efforts to grow and/or stabilize local economies, address gaps in food access, enhance farm sustainability, and increase viability in rural and urban communities. For many, these efforts constitute new, innovative, and interdisciplinary approaches and collaborations to create more resilient, vibrant, and just food systems and economies. Yet, as these rapidly developing interests emerge, strategic efforts to address food system concerns, issues, and opportunities across the Southern Region are fragmented. While some intra-disciplinary work has begun and some efforts to coordinate within state lines exist, a robust effort to link these existing efforts is needed. The current fragmentation leads to duplication of work, gaps in efforts, and missed opportunities to jointly build capacity to respond to the South's local and regional foods needs.

Simply put, working across political and disciplinary boundaries, as well as research, Extension, and teaching domains is challenging. Varying communications systems, plans of work, and professional organizations tend to generate work silos, displacing opportunities for synergistic and long-lasting outcomes. As noted through the Southern Risk Management (SRMEC) convening, one of the recommendations for addressing the complex issues around foods systems is to think and work in a holistic manner nationally (Lamie, et al.). At the same time, unique challenges in the South call for concentrated efforts in that region. Persistent poverty, high unemployment, lack of access to adequate nutritious food, and high dependence on public assistance, indicate that many Southerners face significant hunger and nutrition challenges. On the other side of the continuum, the number of small and mid-sized farmers in the South participating in LFS is steadily increasing (Reynolds, et al., 2013). However, research and Extension strategies to navigate risks and uncertainties in these markets lack coordination across states in order to share best practices and reduce duplication (Reynolds, et al., 2013). Between the two stakeholder groups (consumers and producers) are a myriad of complex community and private sector business systems that can either help or hinder viable connections between those who produce foods locally and those who most desperately need new avenues of access.

While the breadth and depth of research and Extension expertise within the proposed group has the potential to address many of the priorities related to local and regional foods, the region must first develop capacity internally to develop a robust, dynamic, and seamless team approach. The benefits of this attempt at coordination are many, including:

- Guide strategic investment of resources at a regional level.
- Engage both traditional and new stakeholders in innovative ways.
- Accurately gauge impacts resulting in the ability to articulate public value.
- Promote economic development in both rural and urban settings.
- Strengthen competitiveness in research proposals in high-priority areas.
- Forge stronger relationships between research and Extension.

- Build capacity of field staff to meet community needs.
- Increase efficiencies by reducing duplications and sharing workloads across state lines and across disciplines.
- Enhance or contribute to the growth and development of a resilient food system.

III. Objectives: Assisted by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (S-SARE), and the SRMEC, Research and Extension Land-Grant faculty seek to establish integrated multi-disciplinary, multi-state working groups in order to holistically address high-priority issues related to local and regional food systems in the South. To accomplish this goal, the initiative will:

1. Identify the top 10 pressing **issues** in food systems work within the region to direct future Extension and Research activities.
2. Create distributed **learning communities** of land grant professionals from at least 15 land grant universities in the South and local, state, and federal partners around high-priority needs in the food system in the next three to five years.
3. Design a user-friendly and robust **repository** of local foods system resources that meet the needs of Extension and Research professionals in the land-grant system by 2020, with measurable increases in use and quantity of resources by 20 percent per year.
4. Strengthen the capacity of research and Extension professionals in the Southern Region for gathering, communicating, and promoting **impact** data and analyzing secondary data through identification and sharing of common measures, resources, and tools by reporting on an annual basis.
5. Identify successful processes, collaborative leadership, networking frameworks, creative staffing, and **organizational structures** of land-grant universities participating in the development of local and regional food systems.

IV. Procedures and Activities: Given these challenges, the team proposes five working groups to guide each of the five objectives noted above. Each team has developed a draft work plan to outline steps they will take to accomplish the goals. These are attached in Appendix II. To ensure seamlessness among the teams, co-chairs (composed of one research and one Extension professional) from each group will meet on conference calls at least quarterly. The entire group will meet in the fall 2016, once this proposal is approved, to finalize the Work Plan and begin implementation. Subsequently, the team will meet face-to-face annually to ensure progress and to chart new paths. Working groups will meet monthly via conference calls to ensure progress. The SRDC's listserv of LGU professionals engaged in local foods work will be used to communicate opportunities and recruit additional participation.

V. Expected Outcomes and Impacts:

Expected outcomes are: (1) Prioritized needs for the South related to local/regional foods, (2) One to five multi-state, multi-discipline working groups formed to address prioritized needs, (3) A system for sharing identified resources in order to reduce duplication, (4) Consistent impact measures with tools aligned to assist in gathering data, and (5) Identification of best practices and models for addressing complex food issues.

Potential long term impacts: While the breadth of research and Extension expertise within the proposed group has the potential to address many issues facing the region, even the few initial steps show clear potential for expanded work on farm efficiency and profitability, rural

communities and entrepreneurship, community food security, human nutrition, and food safety. The ultimate impact of this work could be seen in increased consumption of locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables, enhanced systems for the production and distribution of local foods, increases in food access and security, increased equity in access to food system resources by underserved populations, an increased understanding of the economic and social impacts of local foods, and recognition of the land-grant university system at the forefront of this movement.

VI. Internal and External Linkages: As noted above, the SRDC, S-SARE, and SRMEC have all voiced interest in aiding this group. Additionally, the proposed team has met twice in preliminary meetings supported through an AFRI Planning Grant secured by the SRDC. More than 50 individuals were present at each meeting, including 1862 and 1890 LGU researchers and Extension professionals from all of the South's 13 states, plus West Virginia and Maryland. Participants also included federal agency representation from three USDA agencies: NIFA, Rural Development, and Agricultural Marketing Services.

VII. Educational Plan: As the team makes progress on respective goals, dissemination of findings and resources will be shared through various networks. For instance, the SRDC is committed to hosting a webinar series to showcase each team's work as progress becomes solidified. Additionally, the Center maintains a email list of LGU research/Extension professionals interested in this work. The list will be used to provide regular updates from the various working groups. Finally, a number of national conferences and network communities are well suited for presentations and outreach efforts related to this work, as are professional journals. For example, the eXtension Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Community of Practice serves as a national platform for resource development and sharing and cross-sector collaborations. These and other venues, including university courses which could serve to share findings and also engage students in project work, will be tapped to share impacts and findings as work progresses.

VIII. Governance: Leadership will include a chair, chair-elect, and secretary, each of whom will serve one-year terms, then roll up or off. Each of the five working teams will select co-chairs, one from research and one from Extension to guide the work. These leaders will join the three overarching leaders to form a leadership committee. The committee will meet at least quarterly on conference calls to ensure the work remains on task and seamless among the various groups. Working teams will meet regularly via conference call to sustain progress. An annual face-to-face meeting will be held to track progress and chart new courses as the work continues.

Appendix I. Literature Cited

Goodwin, Jr., H. (2013). Theme Overview: Developing Local Food Systems in the South. *Choices*, 28(4). Available online: http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/pdf/cmstheme_342.pdf.

Goodwin, Jr., H.; Rainey, R.; Marini, S. (2014) Developing Local Food Systems in the South: Peeling Back the Layers. Poster session presented at the meeting of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, Minneapolis, MN.

Lamie, D.; Dunning, R.; Bendfeldt, E.; Lelekacs, J.; Velandia, M.; & Meyer, L. (2013). Local Food Systems in the South: A Call for a Collaborative Approach to Assessment. *Choices*, 28(4). Available online http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/pdf/cmsarticle_348.pdf.

Onozaka, Y., & Thimany, D. (2011). Does Local Labeling Complement or Compete with Other Sustainable Labels? A Conjoint Analysis of Direct and Joint Values for Fresh Produce Claims. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 93(3), 693-706.

Palma, M.; Morgan, K.; Woods, T.; & McCoy, S. (2013). Response of Land Grant Universities to the Increase in Consumer Demand for Local Foods in the South. *Choices*, 28(4). Available online: http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/pdf/cmsarticle_345.pdf.

Reynolds-Allie, K.; Fields, D.; & Rainey, R. (2013). Risk Management Issues for Small Farms within Local Food Systems. *Choices*, 28(4). Available online: http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/pdf/cmsarticle_344.pdf.