

Bonsack Farmer Listening Session transcript

The real point this is to come together as a community of farmers see what the dick needs barriers problem so that we can take this forward as a community and be more proactive about the future of agriculture in the area. What it looks like everyone has a different definition this is something just starting we have good relationships with the Farmers Market but local food systems are a lot more than just Farmers Market we also have some courageous Roanoke College who are trying to capture the word invoices of the people who are creating food for the community.

Scott: good to be with you all tonight I'm Scott Baker on the agriculture extension agent for Bedford County it's my role to try to guide the discussion and keep us on track so that we can get through our agenda and respect everybody's time and get out of here by 8 o'clock a few housekeeping type things. Chances are we don't all know each other. Items of common understanding some people called them ground rules but that sounds regimented these are just things to remember as you enter into the discussion. Everybody has at least one cell phone please silence them. we will keep things as informal as possible we want to capture everyone's conversation we are going to go around and introduce yourself who you are where you from what you produce or who you represent think about in smaller groups take just a couple minutes and think about this question what are the three main challenge that you face as a farmer. If you are not a producer you are here because you care about agriculture we want to capture those three from each small group usually what happens is there are some common themes. We're going to then ask you to vote on what you agree with we are going to take those 3 and those are the three we are going to dive into we will try to collectively determine what the top 3 are

Introductions

Brent Wills, one of the owners of Bramble Hollow Farm in the Montvale just down the road and we raise poultry and pork and a small herd of beef cows. We've been there 13 years we participate with the Virginia Association of biological farming I'm actually on the board of that group. we look forward to providing product in this area we've been working with leap for quite a while we used to do farmers market in Roanoke we don't anymore because my kids are too out of control for that nowadays but we like to support leap and Like to support a lot of other farmers in the area. That's why we are here

My name is Jeff Wood and Nancy and I are in the process of building and growing our Farm in Goose Creek Valley just north of Montvale

my name is Nancy Maurelli and I spend my time growing in Roanoke and Montvale this will be my second season with an urban flowers CSA and I'm going to be doing a Roanoke Market this season and I have prior experience in helping with a vegetable market CSA and urban farming in Roanoke I'm glad to be here

my name is Katherine Milazzo and I'm with Blue Ridge Mountain Bounty we are a local food Hub that is getting ready to Launch in the next few weeks we are working with farmers in Abingdon Wytheville and Roanoke areas to ever get food and we're also Distributing in those cities we hope to expand to the New River Valley this year and Harrisonburg next year

John Graham producer Graham bass fish farm obviously we grow fish we are in the town of Bedford and been doing so for about 6 years now

I'm Kathleen Reed and I'm the agriculture extension agent and I have Roanoke County and City Salem and I've been in the Roanoke area for about 6 months so I'm still settling in and getting to meet people and I'm excited to be here

My name is Liz Spelman and I just moved here the end of last year from West Virginia where I had a small CSA and sold at Farmer's Markets. My partner runs the Catawba sustainability Center and so I'm just getting settled in and meeting folks as well and working a little bit for leap

Andy Allen extension Craig County

Jim Monroe I am Green Briar nurseries here and we do the farm to table Market in South Roanoke area and we have over in West Virginia we have a pretty big production facility we have about 90 High tunnels and about three and a half acres of heated Greenhouse space producing a pretty large chemical free food on a pretty big scale. It's a pretty neat project we're doing a big USDA Grant right now where we are trying to make food more accessible on a daily basis in our Market in Beckley West Virginia area and also here in Roanoke. we are actually in a project over there call sprouting Farm where we have actually sold part of our production facility to a non-profit where there is so much displacement of coal miners in the southern West Virginia area we are actually training people to use their Farm hands for small properties to do things. We have a lot of pretty interesting initiatives going on and pretty involved in the local food movement here in Roanoke

Liz Akenhead from Bedford and we have sheep and some poultry

Beth Bays, I'm in Huddleston down south of Bedford, I raise beef cattle and the occasional soybean.

I'm Rick Williams lick run Farm which is an inner-city Farm in Roanoke. We raise seasonal vegetables mostly which we sell to the leap mobile market and we have some sales local restaurants as well

Dan Budi with Produce Source partners out of Ashland Virginia. I'm the director of retail sales I'm responsible for getting new Growers involved in our company we're an aggregator that supplies major retailers in the state of Virginia Giant Harris Teeter Wegman's Whole Foods Fresh Market and we're looking for qualified Growers to help us Supply our needs

I'm Nelson Mensch I'm an aquaponic farmer fish and vegetables I grow indoors year-round and basically whatever you need I can grow it

my name is Bob Wilkerson I'm a regional sales representative for Produce Source partners I'm on the other end of the spectrum I deal with local restaurants local colleges and stuff like that I'd like to see more Farms from my area versus east of Afton Mountain I'd like to be able to say that this stuff is coming from Roanoke from Bedford I'm pushing hard to see where this goes hopefully be able to take it a little bit farther

I'm Eric Pendleton I manage the historic City Farmers Market in downtown Roanoke I'm here to meet some new farmers

Well thank you that did take a little time but I think it is helpful when you have a new group come together. We have are college students back here at the very least tell us your names:

I'm Amelia Woodward I'm a senior Environmental Studies major

I'm Abby Peters I'm a junior Communications major

I'm Cisneros a Communications and Spanish double major

Anthony Teixeira I'm a psych major and a communication minor

Jay Flannery I'm a senior communication studies major

Fantastic so we have a wide spectrum of experiences and people coming from different places. So what we're going to do now, we are going to take about 10 minutes and we want you to turn to the person next to you or work in 3 or 4 or whatever makes you comfortable. Does everybody have something to write on? Think about this question from your perspective: what are the three main challenges you face as a farmer we've got growers we've got industry folks

If you could wrap up your final thoughts

Alright so sounds like we have some good conversation going on but I think we should wrap it up. the way I'd like to do this, as ideas are brought out if your idea is kind of long like two sentences will try to bring it down to a phrase so we can capture it hopefully everyone is okay with that and then we'll leave a little space between each idea so that when it comes time to vote it will be easier to see from one to the other and if ideas are repeated instead of making Maureen write it 4 times we'll add a checkmark to it. Is that okay with everyone? Alright so I could ask who would like to go first or I could ask if this group will go first

Betty - thanks for that Scott okay so our Main three there's lots but the main three are profitability, labor, and accessibility to Markets

How about this group over here? Liz - We had a lot around I guess profitability too or viability of production, steady Markets. Cost to grow and profitability are probably synonymous. Scott - Are you comfortable with us calling that profitability? Catherine - I think cost to grow should be by itself. Maureen - were you looking at the production end? Yes. Scott - So cost of production? What else you got? Regulations was another one, I think we all said access to Markets. Scott - okay so we're going to put a check.

Bob - Most of them have been touched one would be labor cost, finding help, qualified Growers and Supply consistency and volume/grade

Nancy - we said something I haven't seen up there is what we consider low prices or depressed prices that farmers receive for goods, so prices that don't necessarily get us where we need to go in terms of our profitability because there's a lot of competition between Growers that keeps prices really low or if you wholesale to restaurants or to produce suppliers or aggregators then again those people are taking a piece of the pie. So low prices is a problem. Production scale most people in our group are small scale and trying to come up with capital for equipment cost and production costs so that maybe cost of production. Scott - or is it capital? You mentioned capital. Nancy - well it's a scale thing, it's like investment to grow, scale of transition. you have really large Farms the kind that may be able to supply Produce Source partners for example and then you have medium or small scales Growers and we can't touch that we can't do a 150 person CSA for example and there seems to be this really big gap and so being at the small end of the scale has a unique set of problems for us. and then the last thing, I don't know why nobody else said this, I would call it internet marketing, like how you can juggle your actual work load with trying to be the friendly Facebook social media blogger agritourism hero local food bright light in the world. There's an expectation you're going to be able to Market in that way and satisfy your customers in that way. I find it's a technology problem. Spending hours doing a blog or whatever. Maureen - so technology marketing? Yeah

Tools and infrastructure for small-scale farmers - equipment building High Tunnel low tunnel irrigation fencing

consumer education and awareness, all of us know that we're in farm country but often times in my travels around there are people who are right down the road from one another that don't know what they're doing, they don't know that they're raising melons that they have this or that product that is for sale, lack of awareness on the consumer side of what is available

affordable land, folks who don't have land in their family who are going to get into it, and also juggling what kind of outside employment income do I need to have to pay off a mortgage on land I buy

Scott - so what we will do now is everyone will have an opportunity unlike the Democratic process everyone is going to see how everyone votes and that's okay, so take your and go up there and put them where you think

Alright did everyone get to vote? Alright do we got? Okay we've got now is these are the top three. we're going to keep all of these but in the interest of time we're going to drill down on what this group

thinks they want to talk about the most and we've got profitability, we've got accessibility to Market, and then we've got scale transition to increase production. so we'll just do one at a time, will probably do no more than 20 minutes per so that we have some wrap up time but we might as well start at the top with

profitability - this is an opportunity, this is a very Broad topic, this is where we're going to try our best to capture your thoughts around profitability, and it can be just what do you want to say about that topic and then we might ask you to clarify what you mean since it's pretty Broad, if you've got a solution for it we want to capture that too, this is all about capturing your voices, so this is kind of the class participation what do you want to say about profitability

Beth - Prices are low they're just kicking us in the gonads with beef prices right now so that's my problem

Nancy - And tractors still have to be bought and paid for

Beth - John Deere still wants that payment every month, **prices of everything are down**, we are not even breaking even yet prices are down in the grocery store people are still getting a premium or steaks at Food Lion

Nancy - I think consumer education is up because everyone is buying Angus beef at the grocery store for premium prices

Catherine - I kind of agree and disagree with the comment that you made about education. I do feel that more people are becoming conscious and aware of what they put into their bodies but buying Angus beef to me is kind of like oh it taste better, **the real value in local food and food that is grown sustainably in a healthy way, that is what people need to be educated about.** it's very convenient to go to Food Lion, I grew up in the 90s and everything is convenient and we're all about instant gratification and we're really spoiled, so I do feel there is a huge gap in education especially the younger generation is getting better about it and the older generation is getting better about it too but there's the people in the middle who are set in their ways

Beth - I'm just saying they're willing to pay higher prices

John - they are but to her point is it's there all the time. The problem we have **we go to market once a week** at this, **but the consumer wants something more often than we can provide**

Jim - We've limited ourselves to 4 hours or 6 hours on Saturday and expect the consumer to respond to that and that's the big thing we're working on right now with a big project with USDA is to try to create...I think the farmers market model is severely broken and we have to figure out different ways, where we are going to grow, and so we are trying to do is figure out a way to have a **farmers market 7 days a week**

John - they exist, there's one **just west of Winchester it's not a farmers market per se it's a farm market, they are open year-round** and farmers bring their stuff, I don't know what the exchange rate is but you as a producer have a place to take your goods year-round and you may or may not, I don't know if it's a co-op or not where you have to spend so much time helping out I don't know but it's something that's open all the time and they have product that's somewhat seasonal because most of us are seasonal especially in the produce world

Scott - sounds like what you are getting at is this, access markets hold that thought and let's go back to what you said about consumer education

Catherine - One of my favorite quotes is from Joel Salatin: people say local food is so expensive, have you priced out cancer lately? if you're buying stuff that's just really convenient you don't really know

how it was grown you don't know what is in it buying local food you can get your farmer you can make your decision on who you want to buy it from based on how they grow and raise their livestock right because what is the **true cost of food**

John - My experience is slightly different, tilapia for example, I can't give tilapia away. Why? Because they can buy frozen fillets. **they recognize I have a better product but we're still not quite there whether we're willing to pay that much extra as a population as opposed to a certain purchasing capability** and restaurants are the same way we'd love to have fresh fish but, I got to get it off the truck I can't increase my entree by this much

Scott - so your issue is being able to get the price you need

John - yes but if **people recognize that we have better product but when you go to cost and profitability it's hard to come to an agreement**

Bob - to tag onto that, prior to the job I have now, you know Autumn Olive Farm they do pork but they are renowned up and down the East Coast for having the best for that you can buy it's not cheap you have to pay for it so you know branding **building a brand** and building the name because the restaurant movement as a whole, the corporate sector is down tremendously, **people are spending their money in local restaurants** so I think that's an untapped market for a lot of you guys

Jim - I feel like profitability is not one of our company's main problems, it's more about **getting more than 1/10 of 1% of the market** involved in what we're doing and I think the reason is exactly what you're saying is I think **we tell the story of what we're doing really well** and we've done a good job of that and **so getting the prices for the product is less a problem then it is getting the consumer in a position to be able to buy it**

Bob - It's the same thing there could be a really good Dive restaurant somewhere that you've driven by 100 x but you've never heard of it so you don't stop you have to build your name and build your brand and eventually it will follow

Brent - the only way you can really control probability regardless of whether or not you're selling commodity wholesale or retail or a niche product is to control your input, that's what profitability is at the end of the day so **controlling the input costs** regardless of whether you're a huge conventional operation or whether you're a small backyard operation that's going to drive profitability, controlling and managing your input costs is critical regardless of size that's really the one thing I'm hearing the scale of production it's controlling input costs, because that doesn't have any control over beef prices and John has a specialized product, if he's talking to a restaurant that wants it at a specific time of year that he can't provide then he doesn't have any control over his price so it's more of controlling your input cost at the front end to increase your profitability at the end of the day

Nancy - I'd like to see more **cooperation between producers in combining to get purchase power**, for example like if I could split the cost on getting pallets of certain things that I might need for growing, **tool sharing** would be a lovely idea, I don't need to have a tractor but once in a blue moon so some of that would be helpful. and I throw this out before, let the producers control the Farmers Market instead of having the farmers markets controlled by other entities that are trying to figure out how that's really going to work because if the **producers were cooperatively managing their own Market** I think there would be a better situation. They would be less vulnerable

John - have you seen a market run that way? Nancy - Unfortunately no. John - There's a reason for that

Jim - I can tell you where **there's one over in West Virginia where they're all in a big lawsuit** with one another and ready to kill each other

Liz - **there are lots in West Virginia that are run by producers**

Nancy - I had an experience at the downtown Market in where the entity that was the umbrella pulled the plug on the group and left us all in the lurch and that left a really sour note. if you were at the mercy of whether or not you can actually participate in the market you feel very vulnerable

Jim - I think your point about working on **providing accessibility for smaller people to supply** is something we're an organization like LEAP could be really helpful, and that's one of the things we are doing at our place you're in Roanoke, we use a lot of the small German Baptist Growers in Giles County and Franklin County for Fringe Product and so **we are providing them with pricing** on a lot of Greenhouse plastics and grow covers and things like that just trying to help them cover their costs with our volume, so if anyone is interested in that pricing program I could provide information. That is the kind of thing that I think the nonprofit or government agencies who have people in place doing things, I think that's where they could be very helpful

Maureen - There's also a number of farms **in Floyd County, Seven Springs does a lot of Cooperative buying**

Nancy - I buy from Seven Springs and I paid the price that's in their catalog, **if I could buy 50 of the item I get a lower price but I can't use 50 but maybe this group could use 50**

Rick - And **Seven Springs pricing is not good for small producers.** I like seven springs but their pricing some things border on being predatory in my opinion

Nancy - where **group purchasing** could help and if there was an administrative body such as LEAP that was doing that then that might be a way to get our cost down to get better pricing

Jim - one of the things that we see is a lot of these small growers around here just don't understand, they are used to really conventional agriculture so we **could convert a lot of them more organic** _____ and things like that, it's **helping the marketplace too**

Dan - What we've done and what you might do with some of the people you end up selling is we offer to our Growers a box program. we knew that boxes in the beginning of the season they spend a tremendous amount of capital and then they store them in a trailer and we use boxes on the other side of our business so we went out and **bought boxes at our cost and sold them at our cost** and they can come in with a supply 25 cases of squash and pick up 25 empty boxes, new boxes which they didn't have to put in that big inventory so if you get someone that you are all selling to to do something like that it would save you money

Jim - And **we do the same thing**, we provide bushel _____ and tomato boxes and stuff at our cost to any grower in the area that wants to buy them

Scott - What I'm hearing is cooperation on both sides of the equation and that leads to communication

Jim - one of the things we talked about was **something as simple as a closed Facebook group** where people could go in there and say, 'hey, I need a tiller or whatever and try to make that closed group among roles within the Roanoke Valley and this area would be very helpful

Nelson - I apologize I lived in Las Vegas for about 8 years where it gets hot hot hot in the summer time and cold in the winter so what a lot of the people did **we opened an every day Farmers Market where we were all cooperative instead of competitive** and some people had meat some people had fish some people had vegetables and stuff. **I've got access to a humongous Warehouse** and if we could get a group of people and **I've got people who could publicize that** so you grow a little bit of this a little bit

of that, it's something to think about if anyone would be interested in cooperating in something like that, you don't worry about cold snow rain

Jim - one of the real missing pieces here, one of the big points is The **Branding of the product** which Liz can talk a lot about, I think you were pretty involved in that up in West Virginia, over there we had the **Greenbrier Valley Grown program** and you had to be able to prove that you are growing things with some mindfulness and consciousness and you have labels and you can take that product into the supermarket or wherever it was going, a restaurant could put it on their menu and Roanoke Market is lacking that kind of branding, the collaborative or **Collective Branding** as a group here that this is a product that was grown in the Roanoke Valley that meet some kind of criteria and the website that you could take those people to that says, **this is a grower that is using sustainable practices** and all those things and that's a huge missing piece here in our market

Dan - **they're doing that in the Northern Neck**, I've worked with a group of Growers, Northern Neck growers, and another example of marketing is the Hanover tomato. Jim - there is no such thing as the Hanover tomato. Dan - exactly, it's just grown in the county

John - Bedford has the **Bedford grown program**, they've been having that for a couple years they've got little marquees and little things that you can put on your stuff, I don't know that it's gone any further than that. **I haven't seen that putting Bedford grown on my stuff to mean much of anything**

Liz - I think a lot of the **branding coupled with the Co-operative tends to work well** because then the pieces just...

Brent - you can't just have a brand and then stick it out there, Let It Go on its own, It's **gotta be supported from the community that created it**, if it's not supported it's going to die

Jim - a sticker does nothing but a story of why that sticker is important is hugely important

Nancy - that's the **consumer education**, you know? They all think it's all so grand, but when the rubber hits the road **where are they actually spending their food dollars**, food lion?

Jim - we are getting that much of the market (holds fingers a millimeter apart)

Nelson - there's a grocery store on every corner, Walmart

Jim - **they're open 24 hours** a day and we're asking people in 3 hours to go buy their stuff

Nancy - we are asking for loyalty

Dan - I think **Appalachian sustainable development created a nice program**, they do a heck of a job of **marketing Southwest growers**. older tobacco Growers they got a group together and they do an awesome marketing job, they have a marketing director they **put their label Appalachian on it and they promote that label in the grocery stores** that we sell to, so **if a group gets together and you could put someone in charge of it it's a very viable thing**

Rick - so what grocery stores do you sell to? So you're an aggregator basically

Dan - we are an aggregator, we sell to Giant, Harris Teeter Walmart Whole Foods Wegmans Fresh Market and then small Independents and we just picked up Food Lion sorry folks, not around here we picked up 66 Food Lion this year within 50 miles of our home office

Rick - So you're aggregating from fairly large producers

Dan - no we don't, I was kind of offended by that, **we'll buy from whoever is a qualified grower** if you are willing to bring it to our Roanoke office or Ashland or will even send a truck, we'll pick up 10 cases or 15 or 20 cases, we are here to help the small Growers grow and in order to do that you crawl then you walk then you judge and then you run and we work with 25-acre Growers I work with a 10-acre grower up in Highland Springs right now so no we don't just want Five Hundred Acre growers, no we want to spread it out because if that 500 acre grower has a crop loss where are we going to go if I put all my eggs in one basket

Scott - Beautiful Segway because I think the next one is accessibility to Markets that's kind of what we were just talking about so why don't we go ahead and shift gears. Profitability is tied to Market access so is there something we haven't captured here that has to do with excess ability to Market, so those that identified that tell us a little bit more so that we can frame what we are talking about

Jim - well it's just the fact that **so few consumers participate, how do we get more people**, like we have a CSA program we have about 450 families participating which sounds like a lot to other people here but maybe have a CSA but it's diddly-squat, I mean 450 families in a several-hundred-thousand size city

Rick - well apparently there are some people because you sell to a bunch of different grocery stores and you have some people who are big producers and some people who are small producers and you put it all together and you take it all to the grocery stores who are buying that stuff

Jim - I think he would say if he had 20 times more the production he could sell it.

Dan - I could sell it and the thing is the markets we are selling to, the major Markets, it's not about Produce Source partners, we promote the grower, and **we have a marketing department that puts together a history of the farm with a picture of you on it and they insert that in the Harris Teeter cards** and that's why we ask that every case of product come in with your name of your farm and the location so that that produce man can then change that card that we have given them in the beginning of the year to promote, maybe that day he got 10 cases of squash from one of our small growers, the next time he gets a delivery it's from one of our larger Growers, he just takes the card out and we promote the grower, and Harris Teeter does that, Giant does that, Whole Foods does it, Wegmans does it. Now what Food Lion is going to do I can't answer because it's brand new for us. Fresh Market says they do it but we don't supply them with their materials so I can't vouch for them but we do supply them with their local produce.

John - do you buy Meats as well? Dan - very little I'm sorry

Bob - we just started, we are an SQS certified company, and this goes into the **regulation part of it, it's a lot of paperwork** but I would love to be able to carry your (product?), being able to put your trout out there, there are people out there like Charlie with local seafood delivery. John - don't get me started on that. Bob - but you see where I'm coming from, like I would love to be able to sell Autumn Olive pork, I mean we would slay it would be all over the place but the thing I'm getting at, I deal with the restaurant side I'm the guy who's in the back door of every one of the **restaurants, people are willing to spend the money**, that's where the industry is going

John - they are if they have the clientele that's going to pay for the entree.

Bob - you have to go where the clientele is, it may not be in Bedford, it may be in Roanoke, Roanoke's food scene right now is blowing up, it's ridiculous. Southwest Virginia as a whole, you have the Patisades in Eggleston, you have Molasses Grill in Halifax County, I mean that guy's probably the best

chef in the state, he's in the middle of Halifax County, so people are willing to spend the money. But my think personally that I run into an issue with I would love to see, and that's why I'm so strongly a part of what I would like this to be, if you were to draw a line from Danville up to Covington I don't deal with any farmers in this area and the reason being that **we have to carry GAP certification**, because of our SQS

Rick - so your suppliers have to be GAP certified.

Scott - so that's a barrier that's a challenge to Market access is GAP certification, from (aggregator's) standpoint, relating to produce - meat is handled by USDA.

One of the things we talked about here, you have a year round product but you don't have a year-round market, and so that's incongruent

Jim - our markets **this time of year are stronger than our summer markets** almost

Eric - I got a market if you want to stand outside, sell it all day long

Jim - I got heating

John - my experience is **that's not true I can show up and not sell a dag-gone thing**

Nancy - **it's very speculative**, and I don't know if small-scale people can really... I used to show up religiously and have a beautiful table and **everybody would take pictures and ooh and ah and wouldn't buy it, it was all entertainment**

Eric - the 'oh that's nice'ers

Nancy - that's very speculative, I want pre-sold, you know **I want to know I've got a customer when I grow that product** otherwise I'm just shooting in the dark

John - with my product you take it out of water, you don't put it back in, you know, so I **can't show up at a market and hope that I can sell stuff** I just don't have the volume to Hope on a sale, **I've been the pre-order drum for years now and it still doesn't catch on**

Catherine - I'd like to speak from a consumer point of view I'm just getting into growing stuff definitely don't have enough to sell yet but from my point of you I come from the industrial world for the past 8 years I've been in Industrial instrumentation so I went into factories I went into this huge industrial Farms and I realized it's not sustainable and I realize that I did not want to support that any more I wanted to provide my family with local food. Where I live there is a **seasonal Farmers Market and it is very limited**. I am in a very rural area there are not a lot of towns around where I live so it was just not realistic to provide my family with local food unless I was willing to drive 4 hours total every weekend and that's kind of like how this food hub idea began and also because I am from the younger generation I am technologically inclined and **we decided to create a year-round online Farmers Market** so people can shop whenever they want at midnight they Place their order and then one day a week we deliver to a city that's near them so it's convenient for them. something like that that caters to what people want, people want convenience, they can see where their products are coming from, they can know who it's from, they can meet their farmer if they want to, they can go and visit the farm if they want to. farmers markets are great don't get me wrong I love Farmers Market I think culturally they are so valuable people get together people talk people make relationships there I don't think that it's antiquated or something that needs to go away I think it's a really great thing but in this day and age the way that we've kind of been **trained to have instant gratification** and want everything so

convenient, being able to shop whenever you want and being able to have it conveniently delivered to you instead of having to travel so far to get it that's why we created what we are doing

Rick - so a food hub, it means the same as an aggregator?

Catherine - so it's a hub where we have a bunch of farms from the whole region and we aggregate all the foods in one place so the customers in Abingdon can order food from Roanoke they can order food from Wytheville but they don't actually have to travel to Roanoke they don't have to come to Wytheville we will deliver it to Abingdon for them on a specified day

Jim - Have you built the shopping cart for this already?

Catherine - no we are using a software called local food Marketplace so they have the infrastructure for it, we built the website our own website and we've done the marketing and everything. we are actually developing our own because we did a lot of research 'cause there's different software packages you can use and honestly they're all kind of old and I wasn't really happy with any single one of them but we didn't have the time we wanted to start up before we had a couple years to develop the infrastructure, so we are in that process but right now we are using a prepackaged called local food marketplace, there are softwares like that where **individual producers can pay a very low fee and create that kind of year-round online Market for themselves**, I would suggest looking into that, I think that's one way you can increase your accessibility to customers and also it's a pre-order these people are ordering before you deliver before you harvest

Nelson - so you don't have to take your fish out of water.

John - that depends on how they want the fish

Catherine - **we are selling primarily to individuals so we don't require any kind of GAP certification**, we highly advise you have the education because food safety is very important but we are not requiring that because we are selling to individuals when we start getting into Institution bigger wholesale buyer they require GAP certification

Brent - it's not so much GAP, it's processing. **not many Americans want to buy unprocessed** fish and how long can you keep it fresh and so forth, a lot of challenges

Dan - who is accepting the responsibility if one of your customers gets sick?

Catherine - well the producer accepts responsibility up until the point where they deliver it to us then it's our responsibility to transport it safely

Dan - accepting the responsibility if something happens that the end **consumer gets ill and comes back, they are coming back to you**, your organization

Catherine - it depends on the reason, for example let's say there's e coli, something that obviously originated from the production point, that would be the producers responsibility, if it's something where we transported it and it's spoiled and somebody got sick we would accept responsibility for that

Scott - so before we go too far this sounds like it's a regulation issue

Jim - that's not up there it's something that probably **should have been in the top 3 is food safety**

Numerous - overall **liability**

Scott - sounds like the whole group thinks that's a big deal

Nancy - well when you are selling direct, that's another **bonus for selling direct**, you're not going through middlemen you're not going through aggregators you're just eyeball to eyeball with your customer

Dan - that's right and I understand that and **you're going to get top-dollar that way but the 1 outbreak can ruin your whole business**

Nancy - I make sure that's not going to happen because I'm responsible all down the line

Nelson - for Catherine, your growers are covered for salmonella and stuff like that?

Catherine - we are **requiring that our growers have liability coverage** to be responsible for themselves so if something happens I don't want them to go out of business I want them to have coverage for that.

Brent - do you have growers that have that?

Catherine - yes and personally my homeowner's insurance will cover it I have two million dollars' worth of coverage and anything that I sell if someone gets sick off of my eggs my homeowner's insurance will cover it.

Brent - your homeowners insurance will cover that?

Catherine - yes

Brent - who do you have insurance through?

Catherine - USAA.

Brent - I would check on that, Farm Bureau doesn't even offer that through homeowners insurance.

Scott - sounds like liability should have been one of the top ones

Liz - I don't want too much because I just moved here I wanted to add that I work for a bunch of **food hubs** in the Appalachian region the ones **that are most successful are either run for Farmers alone not really on behalf of making super convenient for consumers**, for example ASD doesn't make any money, so they are in service of producer, so they are trying to build, you talk about Farm viability, producer viability and profitability for farmers then can you really have a system that works both for consumers and farmers or are those different stakeholders and how are you being really conscious of that, and also since we're kind of in the time of food Hub mania that's just popping up everywhere willy-nilly **the most successful food hubs nationally are cooperatively run and owned** and so I think that's also a really important piece for dealing with competition and driving prices down and all those things go together. not that I'm that consumers aren't an important piece of this, obviously that's how this whole thing runs, but if we are not **focused on** what begins the Food system from running which is **Farmers & Farm viability**, I think we are really missing something and just catering to the convenience of consumers and forgetting the producers

Rick - so many of these things like the food safety and liability issues, that's a small cost for a large producer, those things can be handled pretty easily and can be rolled into a large Broward General operating budget without any problem but they've become, at least for me, real serious issues on a real small scale they can be very difficult for a small producer

Catherine - we also have liability insurance for the Hub, I have coverage for what I personally produced but we also have insurance for the Hub and I think we have 2 million dollars' worth of coverage for \$900 a year that's less than \$100 a (month), I go through Farm Bureau is who I go through

Liz - Appalachian sustainable development does group GAP so there's that

Dan - Appalachian (ASD) is one of the ones that sponsors our GAP classes. our GAP classes cost \$10 the Gap class is taught by one of the best guys, Whit Moore, he used to be at Virginia Tech extension or whatever that is, for \$10 you get breakfast and lunch and he gives you a notebook this big and all you have to do is fill in the blanks, and then you're talking about cost, he teaches you how to make copies of it, send it ahead of time to the Department, they look at it on their own time, then you get another farmer close to you and you get certified the same day, you split the cost, and now there are companies, i.e. Wegmans, and ourselves, we're thinking about we are on the verge, we are going to pay a portion of your Gap costs to get GAP certified, to get growers in our group because we know or small Growers we understand even \$500 is expense but if you can get grants or if you learn how to take care of this expense through a group it knocks the cost almost in half. We just talked to some growers today about it, we have a class coming up they're going to attend. I'm just saying don't let the cost thing hold you back from getting something that's going to be law down the road depending on how large you are

Jim - how ___ was set up from the beginning they put out these big numbers and what they should have done was have classes where we have 20 people signed up and we split that cost between 20 people and people would have looked at \$50 instead of a thousand and that's kind of what got the thing off the rails to begin with. But we were GAP certified over in West Virginia, certification is common sense that you need to be doing to keep from killing people, it's one of the least government-regulated cumbersome programs I've ever seen really

Scott - so let's shift gears because part of what I think you were saying was about bringing people together and making it easier, which our third topic was scale and how do you transition to increase production so if it's alright with the time we've got left will spend a little time on that and wrap up with any final thoughts good? so we'll just switch gears which is not really Switching gears because all these are blending together a little bit but this idea, the idea that if you are at a smaller scale to grab economies of scale

John - but what I had found the last 7 years is that no lending Institution will lend to a farm with anticipated sales ideas. They don't look at business plans anymore, the banking is so tight, unless you can show cash flow, it's a chicken or an egg thing, so it's hard to scale up because you can't get the money to do it

Brent - well that's why you don't go through those guys

Beth - well that's not a hundred percent true the Farm Service Agency has great programs to lend money to beginner farmers beginner producers if you haven't filed a schedule for more than 10 years you're still a beginner farmer Rancher, they've got production loans and all kinds of stuff, crazy low interest rates

John - I've been denied every time I've applied

Beth - that's crazy because they give me money and I lose money religiously and they still give it to me

Brent - that's a systemic problem because she's raising a commodity and **you're raising a niche product and they don't see that as being profitable** because they don't have any records on it, they're only looking at numbers

Scott - so the issue with Lending but specifically as it relates to

John - so let's say you were buying meats and you signed a letter saying John if you produce 10000 pounds of fish a year I will buy it from I can't take that letter to an institution and say I need to scale up 5-fold to meet this company's - they're going to buy from me, that's still not good enough to get money

Scott - you're saying the reason is the product you're trying to sell

Beth - they have aquaculture programs they want shrimp farmers right now

John - will get it changes annually, the focus of want to try to do and shrimp farming, prawn farming yes especially for the old tobacco farmers that have these huge ponds with nothing else they can't do anything with it and prawn production is a simple type of entity to do that with, and it sells that fast (snaps) and it's a great product if you've got the land and the pond already, hands down I agree

Scott - at least for some in the room financing is an issue

Jim - **our issue with increased production is labor** and the fact that **there aren't many people available with the organization and the management skills who know how to grow food** so most of our growers are, the actual growers of our food, are nearly all Hispanic origin and right now those people are scared to death so we are at a Crossroads with what happens if we lose a lot of these people

Dan - you're not under the H2A?

Jim - we had done H2A, right now we have enough people in our area that are living there locally but **we have done h-2a and I wouldn't do that again**

Rick - you're talking about the 900 people who work for your business?

Jim - well it isn't 900 but I have a lot of Hispanic people and what I'm saying is to increase our production we need more people but we don't have the management people that can transcend from the office out into the field and back and forth those people are almost non-existent, that mid-level management person on a farm

Scott - so not just labor, what I'm hearing is **Workforce Development**.

Jim - yes exactly

Rick - but you are not talking about small farmers you buy from, you're talking about people who work for you

Jim - there are a lot of kids coming out of horticulture programs that really know how to grow food, they have a degree in Horticulture but they don't know how to do it

Brent - the schools aren't teaching them how to grow food the school. I have an ag degree and I wasn't taught how to grow food, I learned it all after school, so again that goes back to scale, if you want to participate in a very large scale and your education was from that then that's the route to go but that's a completely different Market access, that's a completely different issue with profitability, different labor issues, so it's really a dichotomy, two separate

Jim - if you were going to grow your business you are going to hit the point relatively quickly where you can't do everything, you can't be the janitor and the CEO and when you hit that point you have to depend on other people. That kind of training is a huge missing thing with all... Liz and I have had conversations more than once about hell there's 8000 agencies involved in local food, I can't even keep up with them, and if all that money got put in one place instead of 8000 places where you could know that this is the designated place that get stuff done and they were training people, this is what this Sprouting Farms thing is doing in West Virginia, we are going to teach people how to be growers and I think those people will go out I think they're pretty high labor prices in the market because they're going to have that expertise as this commitment people have to knowing where their food comes from continues to grow because it's a huge chasm of unqualified people

Catherine - I agree, my partner is a farmer and he is having a hard time finding someone to manage his farm for him. I mean there's a couple Institutes but they're all taken, as soon as they graduate they've already got a job somewhere

Jim - (to Dan) if you all polled your suppliers they would tell you this is a big thing

Dan - oh I know, I was at one suppliers this morning in Dublin and they are recognized for their whole training process, they bring in a new crew 67 people every year and they have classroom, they do the whole thing. and they don't come back they go on to higher paid jobs, they are actually teaching an H2A group how to make more money outside than working for them, I was very impressed with it to be honest, I'd never heard of that. I'm hearing from everyone if they've been with H2A they're fine, they are feeling comfortable, I haven't had any alarm set off yet

Jim - we are advertising for three growers right here in the Roanoke Valley right now and we have had almost zero applicants

Nancy - So why aren't the prices higher?

Jim - the prices are pretty high, I don't think the prices... I mean if you're marketing your stuff, creating a brand and people understand why you're awesome I don't think the prices are an issue

Nancy - well I don't know maybe in the area you're selling, but Bedford County and the eastern part of the City

Jim - well if you are selling at the West End Market that's different then Southwest County, there's no question

Nancy - we're not talking about the West End Community Market, it's not that level of wealth in those areas so even though they may want to or like the idea of it it's a matter of practicality, and even the downtown Market I can remember going down there and the farmers are selling gorgeous hand-picked fresh lettuce for a dollar less than you could buy it at Kroger and I'm like what are you doing and they're like well that's all I can get for it and I'm like you're making it tough for someone like me who wants to charge more than Kroger, there's that kind of mentality still going on

John - we see that with eggs as well

Dan - but you see that because they harvest it, they make the commitment to come to the market and they don't want to take it home, I don't blame them, I want to make the dollar, I don't want to throw it in the trash, so whether it's a dollar less than Kroger I'm going to take it at the end of the day because I'm not throwing anything away and at least I'm getting something

John - and that's why farmers work 3 different jobs

Nancy - and that's why they don't make any money and that's why no young people want to get into it

Jim - I think young people are dying to get into it.

Nancy - why are we having the labor issue then?

Jim - if they understood the opportunity and saw what they could do, I think there's a lot of people

Catherine - I agree I think it's education, like in the schools, we're not feeding kids local food in schools, not in my kids school, they have no idea where their food comes from and a lot of it is pre-packaged and that's crazy to me

Jim - the counties in West Virginia especially Monroe County and Fayette County are way ahead of the Curve with Farm to school than anywhere in this part of Virginia on the school programs

Catherine - lunch should be a blast, lunch should be an educational opportunity especially in this agricultural region, it's insane to me. and to your point (Brent), I think if may be producers, I'm not a producer I'm getting there I'm working toward it, but maybe if producers banded together and work together and demanded a price and said okay nobody's going to go below this price you guys could demand a higher price

Nancy - I don't think the markets will let that happen.

John - Can we just say 'shabam, free market'. There were some Central fish Growers who tried it, I don't know what...

Jim - the key to pricing and profitability is authenticity in what you're doing. like our Market I'm really proud of the (___) we have, I think we have a really authentic Market and we kick people out of there that weren't, that were selling bananas in the middle of winter and calling it local food

Rick - okay that can be a key... okay I have the worst business model ever, hands down unarguably, I mean I'm doing Urban farming in the middle of an inner-city food desert, my business model, I'm going really good produce to sell to poor people which is the stupidest idea that anyone has ever come up with, but, will you think it's awesome because it's a good feeling, everybody feels good, people come visit my farm all the time and tell me how freakin' awesome it is, but it's not it's bordering on failure. the only reason that my head is still above water is that LEAP buys my produce and they can pay a decent price because they get Grants to subsidize, to give money to poor people to buy this produce, none of that is a sustainable business model, sustainable only as long as someone at the federal level has money that they have and wants to give to LEAP to make that work

Jim - why don't you go talk to River and rail and local roots and sell more to those people

Rick - and that's fine, that's okay, if I want to make money then obviously I need to sell food to rich white people and that sounds harsh but honestly that's the way the world works

Catherine - I agree with you, I think it's crazy healthy food cost more than a Big Mac. That's ridiculous! I'm sorry it makes me angry. But I agree with you

Rick - all these comments you're making or perfectly apt and valid, I understand them and I agree with them, but it doesn't have much to do with me trying to grow food in the middle of the inner city because the key to pricing there is that **people don't have enough money to pay me a living wage** and at the same time pay the rent this month

Bob - I got a buddy of mine, this is something you might want to look into, he's actually from Roanoke, Lindsay Barrow, he started **Low country Street grocery in Charleston SC**, and the problem down there everything was on an island, James Island, John's Island, Kiawah Island, Charleston, etcetera. He gutted out an **old school bus, put refrigeration units in** it and started Revolution Farm. he got kids from the **inner city schools to work on the farm, he started teaching them about growing food**, you know Middle School level, but he was able to take that bus and they have it to where **they can take the EBT**, essentially food stamps, abused to buy that produce the kids are growing, so it's a full circle, he's actually doing incredibly well for himself down there, he's up to the point he's got three buses now but he essentially had the exact same business model that you did

Rick - well I mean we do the same thing only this split is between me and LEAP, **LEAP is the one who has the bus** and maybe buses in the future and they're outfitted to do just that, they go into these inner-city neighborhoods and they're **outfitted to take EBT and there's a double benefit program** where you get money and you know they have different grants to do that. I'm just saying it's barely working

Liz - Rick what's the difference between that and the billions of dollars that go to industrial farms in the Midwest, right? I mean **even if you're held up by a little bit of grant money it's still the same viable business**

Rick - well you mean in terms of sustainability?

Liz - I mean I'm not trying to say 'you've got a great business model, you're doing fine, what are you talking about?' I just mean if there's billions and billions of dollars going to the Midwest for these Farms that aren't feeding people maybe we should change the way we look at (subsidies?)

Rick - alright but the difference is **I can't buy a congressman**

Scott - what I think we will do, I think this is a good point to wrap up the discussion. part of the goal as I understand it from LEAP is we want to have a conversation is also a networking opportunity and there's probably some people you talked to tonight that you've never met before and maybe that could be fodder for some future collaborations. I think what we'll do is we will wrap it up. This is one of three sessions and my understanding is that all this will be collected and then you will utilize it, how?

Maureen - so this is not a dog and pony show for LEAP to say we're going to do all these things because that isn't sustainable for anybody and that's not actually doing anything with the community building of a viable local food system, but you know we get approached all the time especially about local food and healthy food, it's becoming more of an interest to organizations and funders, and we get asked all the time what are the big needs, what's going on, and we have a pretty good handle on Markets but we don't have a good handle on farmers, and aside from the Virginia biological farming Association, there really isn't another Statewide organization, and there really isn't a regional organization advocating for farmers. And so this is just one way for us. well to step back one step, the Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Planning Commission a couple of years ago was asked to bring together people to talk about local food and there have been a lot of good informative meeting over the past few years but there aren't any Farmers ever present in part because it's one of those things where the meetings are at 10 o'clock on a Wednesday and it isn't really a good time for farmers, and in part because there isn't

necessarily a good connection between urban and rural, I mean I see Rick on a pretty regular basis and any farmer to work with us at our Markets but you know the urban-rural Divide is something that is real in the valley and so how can we come together to say okay a lot of us throughout the region are dealing with similar problems, they may look a little different, but what are our priorities that we can come up with and say, hey, as a region, if we want to keep farming in 15 years in 20 years, in 50 years what can we do now to address that future, what can we do now to address something that should have been addressed 20 years ago. and you know whether that is a collaborative Cooperative model or that's somebody saying, you know, one thing that didn't really come up at all, which in some ways I expected, was slaughterhouses or meat processing facilities, as just a random example, someone said hey this is a business that we need, how can LEAP, how can the community support that to get off the ground to really provide that infrastructure? so I know that we are all kind of coming from different backgrounds and different production methods but the hope is that after these three listening sessions we will have a better sense of what's really going on, what the needs are throughout the whole valley, and then what are the big things that come across all the different groups, what are the big names in the food shed. And so I would like to just be pretty transparent: I don't have a clear path forward. a lot of other communities have food Council or Regional food council's or working groups so those are all things that we are kind of talking about and if there are things that you guys have seen in other communities that have worked really well, I mean at this point this is still information gathering, like what's really going on, but if anyone wants to step up and take some leadership that would also be amazing. Liz Spellman, we are really lucky to have her move to this area because she has a ton of experience with this and so she's kind of helping us function more in the farmer Advocate roll than we have before, but that doesn't mean I or we know the best way forward to really think about what local food looks like in the future. you know one thing that I really think about a lot having lived in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina for a few years and in Boulder Colorado is that we're not that far away from there being higher even higher prices on land and even more potential interest in local food but inability for anyone to afford to produce or pay for it. whether we like it or not a lot of people don't think about food especially any conversations I have with people who make decisions on the city level or county level, local food isn't on the top of their priority list, food security is not on the top of their priority list in terms of production and so what is it that we want to do as a community to continue to move it forward. I don't know if anyone else wants to share any thoughts, I do want to be respectful of people's time and I want to make sure that you will have time to chat and make the most of the time together.