Food System Opportunity Statement – Appalachian Transition

Appalachian Transition: Moment of Opportunity
The Appalachian Transition is an emerging regional movement that is focused on building a resilient future for our economy and communities. It is a response to the combination of factors that have shaped the present moment of need and opportunity in the region, including challenges such as the decline of the coal industry as a source of employment and economic growth, a pervasive public health crisis, the undervaluing of natural resources and working landscapes, and prolonged underinvestment in our region’s organizations, businesses, and community capacity. Appalachian Transition is about overcoming these challenges by capitalizing on the current alignment and energy across the region. The Transition movement is gaining traction as it pulls in a diverse and growing coalition of actors who share a common vision: a region of healthy communities and locally-rooted economies that promote sustainable and broadly-shared prosperity.

Food System Investment Opportunities in Appalachia
Nowhere is the promise of a new Appalachian economy more apparent than in the food and farming sector. Local and regional food systems are beginning to realize their great potential as a means to address economic, health, and environmental goals simultaneously. Local food is booming nationwide, with rapid growth in consumer demand and increasing support from federal, state, and local government. Here in Central Appalachia, a strong local food movement has emerged, with a well-connected network of development practitioners and food-focused funders. Together, these regional actors are pursuing aligned strategies that grow food businesses, create jobs, preserve food heritage, conserve farmland, protect natural resources, and increase food security and access to fresh, healthy foods.

Food and Agricultural Systems Working Group
The philanthropic and non-profit infrastructure in Central Appalachia is especially strong in the local food sector. Non-profits in the region have been collaborating to pursue food systems development for decades, and are increasingly organized and aligned in their approach. Significant investments from grantmakers such as Kellogg Foundation, Ford Foundation, USDA, Appalachian Regional Commission, and various regional philanthropies have laid a strong foundation for the region’s food system capacity. Now, the Central Appalachian Network, a group of non-profit organizations, has partnered with the Appalachia Funders Network to coordinate a regional Food and Agricultural Systems Working Group. This working group connects food system practitioners across the region, and brings together funders who are interested in food systems to learn from practitioner efforts, build a shared analysis of investment needs, and share funding strategies. The working group objectives are to:

- Strengthen relationships between grantmakers and practitioners working in agriculture and local food systems
- Foster deep cross-sector learning and analysis within specific sub-regions and across the region
- Increase resources within the region targeted at creating stronger agriculture and local food systems
- Enhance the connectivity and capacity of the region’s key agriculture and food system actors

The Food and Agricultural Systems Working Group has focused on developing a collective set of capacity-building strategies within various sub-regions of Central Appalachia. Across Appalachian Ohio, Southwest Virginia, Northeast Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, and Western North Carolina, the working group brought together funders, non-profit leaders, government officials, public health actors, and grassroots groups to create a shared analysis of the capacity gaps in their food system and a set of priorities for strengthening that capacity. The resulting strategies were organized into a successful multi-state application for a USDA Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) grant, which provides $250,000 in federal funds to match existing investments and is currently supporting implementation of the co-designed strategies at the sub-regional level, as well as cross-sector peer exchange at the regional level.

The working group structure allows for approaches and models to be shared across Central Appalachia, as funders and practitioners come together through regional convenings like the Appalachia Foodshed Conference in September 2015, peer learning exchanges, calls, and other forms of coordination. By bringing
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together the analysis, best practices, and strategies developed in each sub-region, we will be able to understand
the leverage points and prioritize actions that can accelerate the development of healthy and resilient food
systems across the entire region. The RCDI project goals are:

1. Develop common analysis of capacity gaps and establish shared strategies to build food system capacity
   within each sub-region.
2. Connect funders and practitioners through strategy-sharing, peer learning, and other activities, to better
   inform food system development efforts across Appalachia.
3. Leverage federal, state, and philanthropic resources to influence grantmaking strategies and increase
   external investment into Appalachia’s food systems.
4. Strengthen the capacity of local food actors, including farmer groups, non-profits, local government,
   public officials, food banks, schools and other institutions, and food entrepreneurs.

Food System Strategy Areas
While the Food and Agricultural Systems Working Group provides an important platform for aligning
strategies, connecting food system actors, informing funder approaches, and leveraging resources, it is building
on a broad body of food systems work that is ongoing across the region. Some of the current food system
development strategies that are moving work on the ground in Central Appalachia right now include:

Producer Capacity-Building and Business Training: Farmer capacity-building around production
techniques such as season extension, and business training to help farm businesses navigate regulations and
increase financial viability.

Direct Sales Support: Farmers market support programs and associations to create sales opportunities for
the smallest farmers and increase healthy food access for local consumers.

Processing, Aggregation, and Distribution Infrastructure: Infrastructure development to expand the
opportunities for processing, aggregation, and distribution of local food products.

Intermediated Local Food Value Chains: Local food value chains to connect farmers to wholesale
markets through a fair trade supply chain of produce auctions, food hubs, processing centers, and purchasers.

Farmland Conservation and Access: Farmland conservation programs and improve access for the next generation of farmers.

Branding and Marketing: Branding campaigns, communications platforms, certification programs, and
promotional efforts to publicize Appalachia’s local food movement.

Public Education and Training: Programs that train low-income families to grow their own food as a
source of nutrition and income.

Access to Fresh and Healthy Foods: Efforts to address obesity, malnutrition, and food insecurity through
increased access to fresh healthy foods and nutrition education, and collaborations to get fresh food into
pantries and food banks.

Join Appalachia’s Food Movement!
This document offers a glimpse into the major strategies and philanthropic investment prospects in the
region’s food systems. These sector-specific opportunities are embedded within the region’s historic context
and build on collaborative philanthropic infrastructure and the locally-rooted momentum for Appalachian
Transition. We invite you to learn more about the region, this work, and the organizations and networks
working to leverage the wide variety of existing resources in the region. If you want to get involved, possible
next steps include:

- Contact Becky Ceperley (ceperleyb@gmail.com) to learn more about a particular strategy or the region
- Join the Food and Agricultural Systems Working Group and the Appalachia Funders Network to
  access additional learning and networking opportunities
- Visit the region and participate in learning journeys and site visits to demonstration projects