



Connecting the Dots Between Food and Climate in Your Community — Getting Serious about Food and Climate Change

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Introduction

This report is an effort to share my perspectives, reflections, and experiences gained to date by working with Healthy Community Food Systems (HCFS) in connecting local food system work with efforts to address climate change. Much of this experience comes from participating in a Climate Showcase Community grant awarded by the EPA to La Plata County, Colorado, and administered by 4CORE. The role of HCFS in this project is called the **Climate-Friendly Food Systems**¹ project. The thrust of this funding, and of this report, is to reduce greenhouse gases, i.e., mitigation, but adaptation is included to an extent in this model as well, as explained below.

These lessons learned also came from HCFS work in La Plata County and in the Four Corners states of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah as a partner of the Southwest Marketing Network (SWMN) over the past several years. These perspectives are presented as a summary of main points, a suggested community model for other communities to consider, and specific experiences from the La Plata County EPA project. **In an effort to keep this report succinct, the endnotes point to many resources on the HCFS website that came from this work and help explain this suggested community model.**

Summary of main points forming the basis of this community model

Harm has been done: Our industrial food system has already contributed greatly to climate change. Agricultural production, inputs for production, shipping, processing, meal preparation, and food waste all contribute to increased greenhouse gases. The industrial model of agriculture and the food system as a whole tends to maximize the carbon footprint of these activities. The harm done has set climate changes in motion that we are feeling already and that will impact us for longer than most people realize.

An urgent need: Significant reforming of our food system must take place very quickly in order to be of help in reducing additional climate change. While very significant climate impacts are already “locked in”, intensive efforts to very quickly lower greenhouse gas emissions can reduce some of the additional climate impacts that could be extremely serious. Reforming our industrial food system through localization and increased sustainability throughout the system can play a major role, but must proceed much more quickly in order to avoid these much greater climate impacts.

Mitigation and adaptation strategies overlap: Many improvements throughout the food system to reduce additional climate change can also help us adapt to change already in the works. Increasing the organic matter in soils is a prime strategy to adapt to a hotter and drier climate, but at the same time reduces greenhouse gases by sequestering carbon and reducing the need for fossil-fuel based fertilizers, pesticides, water pumping, and traction. Relocalizing food reduces food miles of course, but can also make communities more self-reliant in the face of climate-induced disruptions of shipping, food prices, and availability. Multiple benefits such as these abound in food system renovation efforts.

Whole system improvements needed: Local food systems that stress sustainability from field to plate can greatly reduce our carbon footprint. Placing the blame on the farmers, or the shippers, or the processors misses the mark. For some foods, production is the main culprit, for others it's the processing and packaging, for some it's the shipping. For most all foods, the trip home from the store in a nearly empty SUV and the wasted food put in the landfill are major components, so we must look at the whole system — including ourselves.

Connecting with people's values is critical to engagement: People have quite specific values, passions, and concerns about food and how it is produced — values that can be used to engage them in practices that will address climate change. A relatively small number of people are willing to help change the food system simply because of its impact on our climate. Many others, while accepting the seriousness of our impact on the climate, are more readily motivated to action by concerns over health, or hunger, or economic development, or culture, or the environment more broadly. Others may simply like the idea of growing and eating local or caring for the soil without long hours of serious thought about why. While it could be argued that everyone should be motivated to action directly by the specter of climate change, all these actions, whatever the motivation, contribute to a better future.

Localizing food is a key tool: Building on the growing interest in local food is a wise community-based strategy for combating climate change due to its potential impact and to the fact that it can involve everyone in the community in positive change. Local food tends to have less embedded fossil fuel energy from shipping and processing, which is a big plus. Fortunately, people seeking local food often want it to be sustainably produced, and have the opportunity to find that out from their local farmer or rancher. These discerning consumers not only reduce their carbon footprint by what they eat, but can also use their food dollars to move producers to more and more sustainable methods. These same consumers can influence local policies that encourage more local and sustainable food production.

Healthy soil is powerful tool: Food production methods that protect and build the ability of the soil to hold carbon are especially critical to both climate change mitigation and adaptation. Fuel efficiency, renewable energy, reduced water pumping, methane capture, and more are all critically important, but improving soil quality by increasing organic matter has broad appeal, applies nearly universally, and can not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions but actually sequester carbon. Engaging producers, and the consumers that support them, in building soil quality may open the door to the other critical improvements needed.

A positive and enjoyable challenge: Rebuilding local, sustainable food systems can be one of the most positive and enjoyable changes we can make to address climate change, and one that everyone can play a role in. In our pursuit of a more climate-friendly world, we will have many choices to make, expectations to reconsider, and lifestyle changes to make in many sectors other than food. Many of those changes may be harder and less enjoyable to make than those in the food sector. Feeling better with a healthier diet, nurturing a garden, getting to know your local growers, celebrating with friends over food that respects ourselves and the world around us may not be so hard after all.

A suggested community model with a few examples from La Plata County

There are a wide variety of approaches to community organizing around any particular issue, depending on local conditions, resources, and viewpoints. This latter issue of viewpoints can make organizing around climate especially challenging. Here are some commonsense suggestions for consideration in planning a climate action plan around food, gained from experiences in Southwest Colorado and the

surrounding Four Corner states. Endnotes are provided to point to useful resources, most of which are on our Healthy Community Food Systems website.

Basic approach: Use a comprehensive community food system approach that recognizes the deeply interrelated issues, multiple values that engage and motivate stakeholders, and practices that can produce multiple benefits to integrate climate-friendly practices into existing local food and sustainable agricultural initiatives throughout the community.

Strategies:

Engage people and organizations through the values they are passionate about: There is a great diversity of sustainability values that people want to see in their food.² As mentioned above, a small proportion of the community may be very active in addressing climate change. The main message for them is that tapping into the local, sustainable food movement in their community can help them achieve their goals. For local food activists not yet working on climate change per se, the main message is that for whatever reason they are motivated to work on local food, climate change is an additional, and very urgent reason to redouble and speed up their work.

In some cases, individuals and organizations may not want to hear about climate change, or about human involvement in it, or about measures to reduce it. In these cases, it may be most effective to talk about the measures that do address climate change but in terms that 1) simply emphasize the other reasons for these measures but for transparency also cite the climate benefits, and 2) avoid red flags that may not contribute to implementing a specific practice (such as mentioning a carbon tax). There is so much common ground among different political persuasions around local food and healthy soils, two broad strategies we find very useful in addressing climate, that these may in fact be issues that tend to break down unnecessary barriers in the community. It may also be effective to use the concern over climate impacts being felt now, such as drought, floods, and storms, to mobilize communities to help reduce additional climate change.

In La Plata County, we are fortunate to have many people and groups working on climate change and sustainability³, and many others working on local food initiatives.⁴ As in most communities, there are people not yet ready to begin to address climate change per se, but very supportive of healthy local food, healthy soils, and resource efficiency.

Simplify the messaging for the broader public: For those audiences very motivated to work on climate change issues, ensuring that they are aware of all possible ways of reducing greenhouse gases can be effective. Their keen interest will move them to wade through the possibilities to find the strategies they need to implement or promote. For the broader public, it may be wise to concentrate first on the outreach messages that are 1) readily understandable, 2) are widely applicable, and 3) have high potential impact on reducing climate change.

In the La Plata County Climate-Friendly Food Systems project, a comprehensive list of potential measures throughout the food system was made available on our website for those who were willing to explore a large number of options.⁵ Messaging for the broader public was narrowed down mercilessly to 1) local sustainable food⁶, 2) resource-efficient food production (farm and garden scale), and 3) healthier soils through increasing organic matter.⁷

Integrate into existing community efforts: It may be feasible to start a new group focused on climate change action steps, but in many communities there are many existing groups that can be enlisted as partners to carry on their respective parts of this work. Sustainability, food policy, or environmental groups are often already very attuned to the climate change movement, so outreach to those groups is wise. Unfortunately in the climate action planning process that many communities embark upon, food is often not a sector by itself but disaggregated into agriculture and forestry, retail, industrial, transportation, waste, etc. It takes a concerted effort, but it is possible to look at food as a sector and thereby increase participation by much more of the community.

In many communities there are a large number of groups working on various local food-related issues, so connecting with these groups can greatly increase the impact. Due to the many wider benefits of local food, there can be opportunities to form creative partnerships with groups not usually associated with food or agriculture. For example, the promise of job creation throughout the local food system can be a powerful argument for engagement. The intersection of the biodiversity crisis and climate change can bring in another very passionate sector of the community to work on climate and food to help preserve wildlife and biodiversity. Case studies of these connections as well as of resulting producer involvement can be very helpful in communicating to the public.

In La Plata County, climate-friendly food practices were promoted and integrated into the efforts of groups working on obesity prevention⁸, local food policy⁹, food security¹⁰, school food, sustainability, resource efficiency¹¹, local buying¹², school gardens, and even a fruit tree gleaning program¹³ to make good use of existing fruit and avoid conflicts with bears in town.

We worked both sides of the marketplace: outreach to consumers on how to look for sustainably produced local food¹⁴ and then corresponding materials for producers on how to incorporate sustainability of production into their operations and their marketing.¹⁵

Use existing programs if possible for data collection: Data collection can be difficult, and the type of documentation of results depends on the project funder. The EPA Climate Showcase Community grant, for example, asks for documentation of actual greenhouse gas emission reductions. There are very good calculators available for greenhouse gas reductions from agricultural practices, especially for larger scale operations, and these may be the most quantifiable results for a community project. For the impacts of local food, there are so many sectors involved that emission reductions can be difficult to calculate. Compounding this, even the increases in the production and use of local food itself can be difficult to measure, but tapping into existing initiatives tracking local food purchases can be helpful to capture parts of the picture. By establishing suitable community-wide indicators now and committing to monitoring over time, more thorough evaluation of project effectiveness will become possible.

In La Plata County we are currently working with the local independent business alliance on a variation of the national “10% Shift” campaign designed to promote and document consumers shifting purchases in a number of categories, including food, to local sources.¹⁶ We are also monitoring the progress of the local college participating in the “Real Food Challenge” which attempts to shift dining services purchasing to more sustainable products including local.¹⁷

Challenge the community to take action: After sufficient outreach has been done to establish the need to address climate change and the opportunities to do so, it may be important to challenge the community to step up its efforts — to ask ourselves if we are doing enough of the most strategic things to combat additional climate change and doing these things fast enough. The local food movement has made very impressive progress in many communities, but these questions must be asked at the same time that we celebrate that progress.

In La Plata County, after considerable outreach and development of website resources to support needed action, a series of outreach pieces has begun. The initial piece, “Getting Serious about Local Food” asks the three questions with climate change being one of the main calls for urgency: Are we doing enough? Are we doing the right things? Are we doing it quickly enough?¹⁸

Conclusion

It is hoped that these examples, perspectives, and suggestions will help other communities develop thoughtful and effective strategies to use food system improvements to reduce future climate change with the added benefit of increasing resiliency in the face of a changing climate. Due to the site-specific nature of food production, climate changes, and public viewpoints, this work to connect food systems to climate deserves strong support and assistance from state and federal sources, but is best designed and carried out at the community level.

Notes: These specific links are best followed in the electronic version online at www.hcfs.org or www.gettingseriousnow.org

¹ Climate-Friendly Food Systems: <http://www.hcfs.org/Clim/Clim.html>

² Sustainability Values List: <http://www.hcfs.org/page6/assets/ValuesList.pdf>

³ Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado: <http://sustainableswcolorado.org/>

⁴ Local Food Initiatives: <http://www.hcfs.org/MVG/MVI.html>

⁵ Climate-Friendly Food System Measures: http://www.hcfs.org/Clim/Clim_assets/MeasuresList.pdf

⁶ Food System Tools: <http://www.hcfs.org/Res/Tools.html>

⁷ Resource-Efficient Food Production: <http://www.hcfs.org/Res/Effic.html>

⁸ Healthy Lifestyle La Plata: <http://healthylifestylelaplata.org/>

⁹ HCFS Food Policy Page: <http://www.hcfs.org/Res/Pol.html>

¹⁰ Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado: <http://www.growingpartners.org/>

¹¹ Four Corners Office for Resource Efficiency: <http://www.fourcore.org/>

¹² Local First: <http://www.local-first.org/>

¹³ Fruit Tree Gleaning Program: <http://www.hcfs.org/resources/BareThoseFruitTreesFlyer.pdf>

¹⁴ Sustainable Food Choices: <http://www.hcfs.org/Res/Tools.html>

¹⁵ Incorporating Sustainability into Your Marketing: <http://www.hcfs.org/Res/Tools.html>

¹⁶ National 10% Shift Campaign: <http://www.10percentshift.org/>

¹⁷ National Real Food Challenge Project: <http://www.realfoodchallenge.org/>

¹⁸ “Getting Serious Now” website from Jim Dyer: <http://www.gettingseriousnow.org/>