



APPALACHIAN ACCESSIBLE FOOD NETWORK



SEVEN-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE
2014-2020



SUMMARY OF IMPACTS



The Appalachian Accessible Food Network (AAFN) is a partnership formalized in 2014 to accelerate the distribution of local foods into low wealth and underserved Appalachian Ohio communities. Generous funding from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville has enabled three anchor organizations to strengthen local food access, production, processing, distribution, and consumption.

Appalachian Ohio local food systems have become a driving force in the region's economic revitalization. AAFN makes sure that the growing demand for local, fresh and affordable food reaches everyone in our rural communities. With help from numerous partners, the AAFN has leveraged donations, sponsorships, revenue generation and grants to implement a detailed work plan grounded in an equity framework.

Inclusion and resilience are integral to our shared vision.

This alignment of social context and leveraged infrastructure has significantly increased the production, aggregation, processing and distribution of local food to people and places experiencing chronic food insecurity. The AAFN 7 year focus on demand channels has included Farm to School initiatives, Country Fresh Stops in rural villages' convenience stores and gas stations, the Community Food Initiatives' Donation Station, Mobile and Farmers Markets, and multiple Buying Club models. Critical to our success are the linkages between the anchor organizations' facilities: The Chesterhill Produce Auction, The Rural Action Incubator Farm, The ACEnet Food Ventures Center and Food and Farm Enterprise Center.



COVID-19 created challenges and opportunities for AAFN. Relationships, a track record of trust, and a willingness to pivot allowed the network to serve our constituencies without interruption. In 2020, two initiatives were launched with healthcare and community partners: Rural Action's Produce Prescriptions, distributed through Federally Qualified Health Centers; and Community Food Initiatives' Veggie Van, a mobile market designed to increase food access in underserved communities. Additional innovations are on the horizon as we expand our impacts on the region.

ANCHOR ORGANIZATIONS & FUNDING



Rural Action



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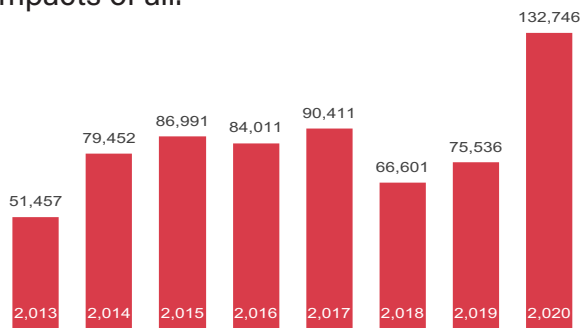
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AAFN 7-Year/ 3

CREATING LOCAL DEMAND

DONATION STATION

Donation Station collects both food and monetary donations and reinvests donated funds into the local economy by purchasing food from regional growers and producers. All donated and purchased food is distributed to partners who serve individuals facing food insecurity. The Donation Station is representative of our network's collaborative approach to food access. CFI collects the donations and purchases the food, Rural Action organizes the Chesterhill Produce Auction, and ACEnet's Food Ventures Center (FVC) provides the necessary storage, refrigeration, and processing space. This mutually beneficial relationship is a snapshot of the larger networked approach to building an equitable local food economy that allows each organization to build on each other's strengths and magnify the impacts of all.



DONATION STATION POUNDS OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED

VEGGIE VAN

In 2020, we piloted The Veggie Van, a donation-based mobile market that carries locally-grown fruits and veggies to rural communities in Southeastern Ohio 10 months out of the year. The Veggie Van drives to town centers and offers locally-grown produce in exchange for any level of donation. All unsold produce is distributed to our food pantry partners. This model supports our local farmers while also ensuring that fresh, local fruits and veggies are accessible for all.



COUNTRY FRESH STOPS

Rural Action partners with corner stores, gas stations, roadside markets and healthcare providers to equip them with produce, marketing support, and the infrastructure needed to sell local produce at an affordable price. These rural partners are crucial to improving access to produce in communities where fresh food is inaccessible due to the lack of a supermarket or other large food outlet.

In 2021, we were approached by a retail store in Stewart, called Poston's, who heard about Country Fresh Stops from a Nourishing Networks event. Their primary barrier to selling local products was the need for a standup fridge and freezer, so we worked with them to purchase a two section glass door merchandiser for the store. They are eager to begin selling local foods this winter such as dairy products and frozen goods, and to begin receiving fresh produce from the CPA to sell next growing season as our newest Country Fresh Stop.

FARM TO SCHOOL

Farm to School brings high-quality local food into school systems, where students are able to eat and learn about the importance of local food and how to prepare it. By increasing access to fresh, local foods in schools, we are building demand

from the younger generation. It is common for students to share what they learn about local food with their families, and we have seen many families who increased their consumption of local produce as a result.

Recently, we have shifted the focus into a new framework of Farms to Families to better reflect our holistic programming and wide-reaching impact. In addition to our direct work with students, we aim to connect entire families to fresh, local produce in order to create multi-generational access to and demand for local food. We reach families through projects like community gardens, produce prescriptions, and the Veggie Van, described elsewhere in this report.

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY GARDENS

Through the School Gardens program, students engage in regular hands-on lessons to learn formally about gardening, the environment, nutrition, and plant science as well as informally about how being outdoors and getting your hands dirty can be fun and educational. When possible, the produce grown in school gardens is available for taste tests and in cafeteria salad bars. In summer, volunteers keep what they harvest and give any excess produce to the Donation Station. School gardens cultivate interest in local and healthy food that will stick with young people over time, and spread to other community members as they share lessons and enthusiasm from the garden with family and friends.

Community gardens are an important piece of the food security puzzle, allowing residents or renters who don't have space to grow food on their own land to take part in the food production process. CFI facilitates



community bonding and increased agency in the local food system by providing shared tools, water, mulch, and other supplies. Gardening and culinary workshops engage participants of all levels of experience, and shared garden work days connect gardeners to each other and promote shared investment in maintaining and improving garden sites. To further encourage community gardeners, CFI hosts annual seed exchanges and plant giveaways, including providing thousands of pounds of seed potatoes every year.

SEO FOODLINK & NOURISHING NETWORKS

SEO FOODLINK is an online resource hub created through collaboration between CFI and the Food Justice Lab at West Virginia University. An interactive online map helps visualize and share information to connect people and food resources. With increased participation, the map and resource hub will grow to reflect the resilient food assistance network across Southeastern Ohio. Building off this platform, the Nourishing Networks approach integrates education and discussion, supporting community members to share their perspective on existing local food access, and providing the



opportunity to apply for activation funds that support new projects which meet specific community needs. Through convening Nourishing Networks workshops, offering facilitator training, and supporting grassroots projects, we are building community self-reliance and empowering non-traditional decision makers.

FARMERS MARKETS

The Athens Farmers Market (AFM) is a primary source of easily accessible fresh produce in Athens County, and an important collection site for the Donation Station. We have collaborated with the market in various ways to support their growth and increase their capacity to support local farmers, artisans, and consumers. ACEnet has worked

with the market since 2006 to help maintain a regular location through multiple obstacles that arose from the owners of the mall parking lot where the market currently sits.

Additionally, our network helped to increase the acceptance of SNAP tokens, WIC coupons and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons, and implement the Produce Perks matching program. We have also used staff and funding to develop logos, signage, and printed materials to improve recognition and consistency of the Athens Farmers Market brand.

In 2021, we worked with AFM staff to plan special events and promotions during National Farmers Market Week, including performers, food demonstrations, auctions, and special vendors. We are continuing this



work into 2022 as we help the market prepare for its upcoming 50th anniversary season.

In 2021, ACEnet staff worked with AFM staff to plan special events and promotions during National Farmers Market Week, which took place in August. Some of the celebrations included food demonstrations with recipes using local products, a 50/50 raffle fundraiser for Community Food Initiatives' Donation Station program, musical guests, activities for kids, special one-time vendors and more. Looking ahead, our staff and AmeriCorps VISTA member are involved with the market's 50th anniversary planning committee.

2022 will be the market's 50th season, and ACEnet's Multimedia Designer is helping the team create a new logo, a promotional video, and other marketing materials.

Meanwhile, our AmeriCorps VISTA is a member of the planning committee and is helping to coordinate and plan various special events for the 2022 season.

The Meigs County Farmers Market, currently in its third season as of 2021, is a rising local market where we have helped to improve marketing, expand SNAP/WIC benefit accessibility, build entrepreneurial capacity, and contribute in other ways to grow the numbers of customers and vendors each year.

PRODUCE PRESCRIPTIONS

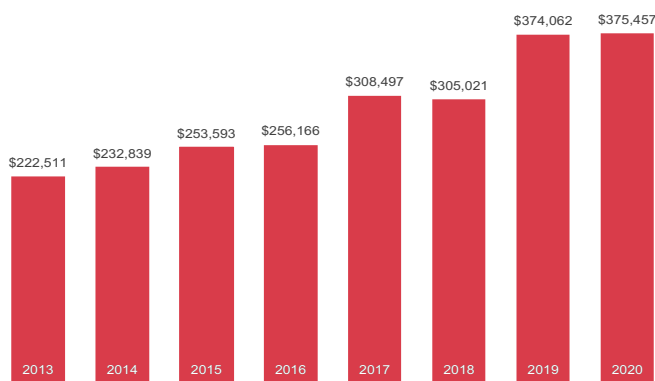
In 2020, we expanded Country Fresh Stops to include partnerships with healthcare providers to create "produce prescription" programs in which patients are prescribed healthy food to manage their chronic health conditions.

STRENGTHENING SUPPLY & INFRASTRUCTURE



CHESTERHILL PRODUCE AUCTION

The Chesterhill Produce Auction (CPA) serves as a hub for customers and growers in Southeast Ohio to buy and sell produce. Not only is it a key market for Appalachian producers but it is also a crucial piece of our food access work that provides much of the food used in our programming. As we continue to drive demand for local food, the auction is a critical tool to continue building the capacity of local suppliers and expanding production.



CPA ANNUAL SALES

CPA INCUBATOR FARM

The incubator farm at the CPA is designed to bolster local food supply by providing accessible land, educational resources, and startup capital for beginning farmers and food entrepreneurs. Beginning farmers who participate in the program have no fees for the first year and receive a small plot on the farm along with marketing and business planning assistance, basic field preparation, a stipend for tools and supplies, and access to workshops and support from Rural Action staff. Individuals can participate in this program for up to three years, which enables them to start production, gather sales records, finalize a business plan, and establish legitimacy when they graduate from the program and apply for a loan to purchase their own land or grow their business.

Since launching in 2018, the Incubator Farm has had five participants, all of whom have sold products through the Chesterhill Produce



Auction. In 2021, the Incubator Farm hosted two participants. The first was a family who grew produce on a quarter acre. They sold \$100 in produce and grew food for their family that they preserved for the year. They plan to expand to a half acre next year to increase their production and develop a second income. The second participant was a beekeeper who began at the Incubator Farm in 2020 when she established four hives on a quarter acre. In 2021 she started her business, called Queen P's Bees, and began selling honey in the CPA Country Store and at Coonskin, a gas station and Country Fresh Stop in Amesville. She planted buckwheat, clover, and a pollinator patch in her quarter acre and will continue on this plot next year.

WHOLE FARM PLANNING & MENTORING

In 2021, Rural Action implemented a comprehensive training program for beginning farmers in Southeast Ohio and West Virginia. The

aim of this program is to help new farmers in developing their farm businesses with whole farm planning, a process that looks at the farm holistically to create diversified sources of income that grant more security to the new farmer. This can include producing specialty products, value-added goods, providing agritourism opportunities, and more. The program resulted in a series of online meetings where participants learned from experienced farmers and other community members. New farmers were also paired with experienced mentors to provide more individualized attention. After successfully graduating the first class of beginning farmers in spring 2021, we are currently building on our experience to prepare for a new cohort of farmers this year.



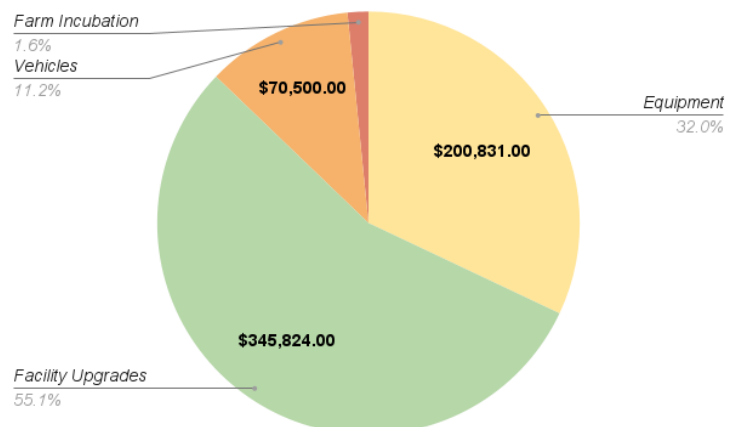


FOOD VENTURES CENTER & NELSONVILLE FOOD AND FARM ENTERPRISE CENTER

The ACEnet Food Ventures Center in Athens houses a 3,000 sq. ft shared-use kitchen space with dry packaging room, a 1,000 sq. ft thermal processing room, and a 3,200 sq. ft warehouse. It provides necessary infrastructure for processing and storing produce for the Donation Station and Farm to School programs, as well as serving as a business incubation space for local producers looking to expand their food businesses to include value-added products.

The recently-developed ACEnet Food and Farm Enterprise Center in Nelsonville, a 94,800 sq. ft space which houses a state-licensed meat processing facility, preparation and processing space for other food products, and a large warehouse with multiple walk-in freezers, has

greatly increased the capacity of our network to store and process food. With more storage room than the Athens facility, our recent improvements to the Nelsonville facility pave the way for expansion of all our programs as we continue to improve the space.



INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

ESTABLISHING A SHARED VISION

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & OUTREACH

The Appalachian Accessible Food Network continues to evolve and expand as a network of networks. No one stakeholder can do this work in isolation. We will continue to connect with like-minded organizations, agencies and institutions to build a just, local food economy.

Recent initiatives include deepening our connections with Live Healthy Appalachia and HAP-CAP; partnering with Buckeye ISA as community liaisons; securing more investment from Ohio University to support the adoption of a local purchasing policy; and joining the Ohio Nutrition Incentive Network to advance policy and shared learning. We will continue to broaden healthy food distribution channels by forming new business and school partnerships for Country Fresh Stops and Farm to School programs. AAFN members are also engaged in various meetings and conferences including the Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association Conference, the Ohio State University Farm to School Advisory meetings, the Athens City-County Creating Healthy Communities Coalition, the Mid-Ohio Growers Meeting, the Appalachian Funders Network Food and Ag Systems Working Group, the Ohio Food Policy Council Summit, America's Rural Enterprise, Live Healthy Appalachia's Appalachian Health Summit, FOODLINK Resource Seminars, and the Health Policy Institute of Ohio: State Assessment Regional Forum.

Network facilitation remains critical to the future of our food systems. As we innovate more pathways of access to underserved communities additional investment and coordination will be needed.



BY THE NUMBERS

2014



IN THE PAST 7 YEARS:

DONATION STATION

- Distributed **614,748** lbs. of food, equaling **513,123** meals
- Served **216,781** food insecure individuals
- Grew to serve **59** pantries in **7** counties
- In **2020**, alone, we invested **\$51,856** in our food system

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY GARDENS

- Managed **101** community garden plots
- Supported **12** school gardens
- Taught **607** lessons in school gardens
- Led **310** Discovery Kitchen educational cooking events
- Reached **8,991** individuals through Discovery Kitchen tasting tables, workshops, and recipes promoting local, seasonal food

FOOD VENTURES CENTER & NELSONVILLE FOOD AND FARM ENTERPRISE CENTER

- Leveraged **\$380,524** to build-out **10,100** sq. ft. of food sector space
- Built **3** additional walk-ins to expand refrigerated storage space
- Launched **60+** new food businesses and farmers creating value-added products
- Opened the **first** Ohio Department of Agriculture licensed, artisanal meat processing facility in the state
- Established a new room for vegetable processing, dehydration and flash freezing to increase Farm to School product development



COUNTRY FRESH STOPS

- Distributed over **68,796** lbs. of fresh produce
- Established and supplied **11** Country Fresh Stops
- Served **6** counties

FARM TO SCHOOL

- Distributed over **65,000** lbs. of food to **30** schools in **8** districts
- Processed food with over **200** volunteers
- Hosted over **700** second graders for our "School Day at the CPA" field trip at the Chesterhill Produce Auction
- Supplied produce to the Fed-Hock summer food bus
- Delivered about **5,000** apples to **12** schools annually for Apple Crunch Day
- Offered professional development trainings for cafeteria staff
- Hosted re-entry employment training in food processing
- Participated in CCMEP program for at-risk youth, employing individuals to assist with Farm to School processing
- Leveraged funding to secure **3** grants to develop shelf stable and fresh processed foods

CHESTERHILL PRODUCE AUCTION

- Grew auction sales by **56%**, grossing **\$375,457** in **2020**
- Served about **200** producers each year who sell through the auction
- Launched and expanded Buying Club, which delivered **143** weekly shares of fresh produce to **5** sites in **2020**
- Launched the Rural Action Incubator Farm
- Built the livestock barn to accommodate auctions and support additional producers
- Expanded the store to sell more goods and crafts
- Hired an auction manager with leveraged funds from a CCHD grant
- Purchased a refrigerated van in **2019** to expand distribution

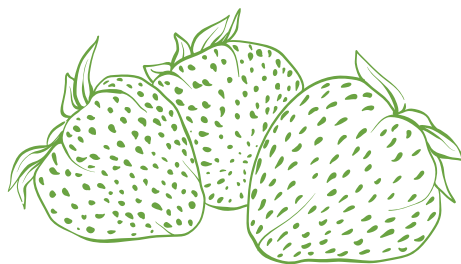
IN 2020 WE:

VEGGIE VAN

- Launched the Veggie Van!
- Distributed **3,866** lbs of food
- Served **382** Veggie Van customers

PRODUCE PRESCRIPTIONS

- Purchased, packed, and delivered **350** bi-weekly "produce prescriptions"
- Distributed **3,310** lbs. of food to **4** locations
- Partnered with **3** healthcare providers



BUILDING ON 7 YEARS OF WORK

Building on key lessons from the pandemic, AAFN partners will grow our demand channels, expanding into new communities and deepening the partnerships that make the existing programs successful. Through community leadership curriculum, such as CFI's Nourishing Networks, we will identify food access needs with low income residents. Particularly, we will look at lingering weaknesses in the regional food system that were exposed during the pandemic. We will work with communities to recognize remaining barriers to food access, identify existing tools to meet these needs, connect with more regional partners, and build up market-based opportunities to meet the food security needs of our region. Through this intentional approach, communities will ultimately lead our work and continue to be the proponents of equitable food access.



FUTURE OBJECTIVES

1. Coordinate actors and stakeholders all along the supply chain to increase **DEMAND** and make local, healthy food available for all.
2. Grow the **VOLUME** and variety of fresh, healthy foods in order to ensure that all consumers in the region have access to local food.
3. Expand and improve the needed **INFRASTRUCTURE** to grow, process, and distribute local and healthy foods.
4. Ensure equity to healthy, local food in all communities through new **DISTRIBUTION** strategies and food access initiatives.
5. Increase **EMPLOYMENT** and ownership opportunities for underserved individuals to create sustainable livelihoods in low wealth communities.



OUR PARTNERS



TO LEARN MORE:

<https://acenetworks.org/healthy-food-access-2/appalachia-accessible-food-network/>

