

Extending Roots of Fresh Stop Markets Across the Southeast Region

Ellie Browning | University of Kentucky | Community and Leadership Development

Background

Food insecurity in the United States is becoming an increasingly relevant social issue attributed greatly to access disparities. Lower-income, historically-disinvested communities have ready access to overly-processed, high calorie foods with low nutrient density, and poor access to fresh produce. The food justice movement advocates that food access should be local, affordable, and racially just. Founded in 2013 along these truths, nonprofit organization New Roots, Inc. developed the Fresh Stop Market (FSM) model.

FSM shareholders pay for their shares, which are distributed at FSM pop-up markets hosted in local community centers, using an income-based sliding pay scale. Due to advanced pay for shares and volunteer led markets, supplying farmers are alleviated of certain drawbacks associated with Farmers' Markets. Alternatively, the stability of FSMs allow farmers to engage in food justice by reducing market waste and supplying low access communities, while remaining economically viable. The FSM model frames farmers as food justice advocates, whose economic priorities must be met in order to sustain the communities they feed.

Since its inception, this research project has implemented numerous participatory research methods in order to ensure the direct observation of the needs of low access communities, and small and mid-sized range, limited-resource farms. The goal of this research is to: produce a toolkit of instruments needed to replicate the FSM model; establish a means of tracking the social, economic, and environmental effectiveness of the model in practice; create a three-part video series to advertise FSMs, each following a different unifying stakeholder theme; and, empower farmers to become local community leaders.

Training Goals

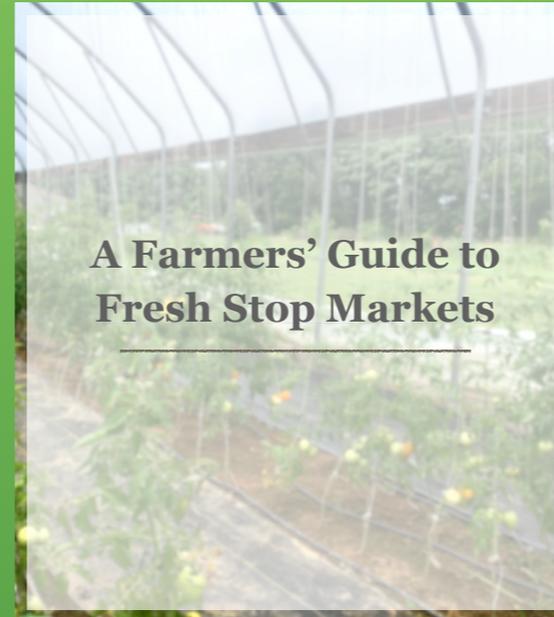
- Develop a more in-depth understanding of the three criteria associated with both sustainable agriculture and food justice: ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially just
- Analyze the social components required for community buy-in to be achieved
- Engage in participatory research by observing farm operations, and FSM farmer, stakeholder, and staff interviews
- Produce a resource guide for FSM farmers to be distributed at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists
- Inform of different social perspectives on how to effectively implement sustainable agriculture in an industrial agricultural economic climate
- Exposure to rural lifestyle and geographic features previously unbeknownst, given student background

Outputs

A Farmers' Guide to Fresh Stop Markets : A summary description of the FSM model, this pamphlet includes the preliminary information and resources necessary in order to engage farmers with the benefits and support associated with FSMs. It highlights the key motivations for adapting the model from a farmer's perspective. It is to be distributed at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists.

Lessons Learned

- Power of community organizing: While visiting one of the pop-up markets, I was able to fully experience the community organizing aspect of a successful FSM in full fruition. I watched as shareholders greeted the market staff like friends, by name and with care to ask about their day. Staff described the fresh produce in passionate detail to regulars, and described the whole method of FSM to newcomers. It spoke volumes to the broader power of a few when they are united in values and commitment.
- Ethics behind food justice: From conversations with farmers, I learned more about the ethical dilemma experienced when making a living on stolen land. A clear purpose to "reclaim the food system" was embedded in each farmer's perspective. Each farmer addressed the common goal of broadening food access, using role in community to enact justice, and reforming the modern disconnect between consumers, consumption, and land.
- Fruitful interview questions: During the shooting process to produce a three part video series, I was privileged to sit in on the farmer interviews and learn from experienced interviewers. The questions asked were thought provoking, well developed, smoothly articulated, and appropriately personal. While providing enough guidance to make sure the bullet points were hit, the interviewers encouraged farmers to speak their truths. The interviews effectively communicated the community, geographic, and economic facets associated with FSM.
- Community-minded approach to sustainable agriculture: Many shareholders and farmers articulated a desire to empower community food systems. They basically described the mutual relationship in terms of "in order for food to sustain us, we must sustain it."
- Observational research skills: Being my first time participating on a research project, I went in unaware of how to conduct observational research. It was quickly exemplified to me that asking questions and making non-research oriented connections were fundamental to the success of my project. After imploring to do so, I learned about numerous cultivation practices, farming tools, market difficulties, community issues, and much more.



Reflections

- Learning first hand from community actors and local farmers was an invaluable contribution to my education and personal interests. This extracurricular experience has informed me in aspects of agriculture difficult to grasp in any means besides first hand, such as the ethical dilemmas of working within an inequitable food system, the complex balance between economic and social sustainability, and the power of community organizing in producing sums which exceed all parts.
- My participation in this project has ultimately solidified my interest in sustainable agriculture as it relates to community food systems, and empowered my further pursuits of food justice. I became particularly interested in researching shared ownership of the food system. This interest originated from a conversation I had with a farmer about the appropriative foundations of American agriculture. What does it mean to engage everyday in a system that only exists because of land displacement, slavery, and stolen intellectual property? From that question, I've since transitioned to: how can sustainable community food systems fix it? I intend not to leave that unanswered.
- All future research and education I engage in will be informed by the perspective this experience has fostered. Presently, I plan to declare a minor in Sustainable Agriculture to accompany my B.S. in Community Leadership and Development. I look forward to learning more about how food can be transformed into a vehicle for equity and justice.

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