



Shortening the food chain

We can feed the world's hungry — and local consumers — by improving the efficiency of harvesting, shipping and selling food

By Danielle Nierenberg and Amanda Strickler

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The [United Nations](#) predicts that by October, the number of humans on the planet will exceed 7 billion. The organization simultaneously reports that nearly 1 billion people on the planet are hungry. The knee-jerk response is that farmers can't keep up.

But from our back yard in the Mid-Atlantic to countries overseas, new programs are focusing not on producing more food but on improving the food chain — the system of harvesting, packaging, storing, transporting, marketing, selling and buying of foodstuffs. Governments are investing in technology that makes food availability and pricing more transparent; businesses are providing regional farmers with centralized points for processing and distribution; and financial support through public grants offers a leg up to local food producers trying to secure a consumer base.

Farm land is quickly becoming a scarce resource, amid clashing demands for agricultural production, urbanization and agrofuels. Innovations that minimize food wasted in traveling from farm to fork and practices that make the most of the food that farmers are already growing warrant a closer look. A thoughtfully constructed food chain can alleviate hunger and increase incomes from farming without planting any additional seeds.

One example of a successful innovation overseas is the creation of the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX), which has provided smallholder farmers with standardized pricing on agricultural products. Created by the Ethiopian government in 2008 with both public and private investments, the ECX was established as a forum where individuals from across the supply chain — farmers, traders and investors — meet in person, increasing transparency and agricultural collaboration.

The United States has been working to revamp food systems as well.

In 2009, the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) announced "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food," a program anchored by a monumental database providing information on farmers markets nationwide. The resource has been

especially helpful for consumers in the Mid-Atlantic; the Maryland Department of Agriculture now counts 137 farmers markets.

Greater consumer interest means more markets. At the heart of "Know Your Farmer" is the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), which awards grants to aid in establishing, growing and marketing local agricultural products. Different funding lines of the program have allowed smallholder farmers in Maryland and Virginia to address food chain gaps while also making a profit.

A Farmers Market Promotion Program grant supported Seaberry Farms on Maryland's Eastern Shore to expand its processing capacity to include products like homemade jams. Similarly, the Shenandoah Valley Beef Initiative in Virginia received funding to form a cooperative and streamline local processing, distribution, and marketing in the region.

The USDA has also begun to promote "food hubs" to facilitate collection, storage, processing, distribution and marketing of local and regional foods. Food hubs allow foodstuffs to reach consumers efficiently and more frequently than is possible through weekly farmers markets and CSAs alone.

In Washington, the D.C. Central Kitchen recently opened a food hub to collect produce grown within a 200-mile radius of the city. Since the Central Kitchen buys "seconds" from the farmers — often produce that is simply misshapen or bruised — less food goes to waste and local farmers still profit. The additional space will allow the Central Kitchen's catering program, Fresh Start, to take on more contracts throughout the city while also employing more D.C. residents in need of jobs.

Down the valley, the nonprofit Local Food Hub in [Charlottesville](#), Virginia works to distribute, supply and provide access to foods produced by farmers operating within 100 miles. Local residents' enthusiasm for the service has been so great that in the first 15 months of operation, Local Food Hub purchased more than \$340,000 worth of products from more than 50 area farms. So far, more than 95 buyers in Charlottesville, including the [University of Virginia](#) Healthcare System, have begun to buy locally produced goods thanks to the ease of working through a single distribution channel. The organization also operates Maple Hill Educational Farm, which doubles as a business workshop facility for farmers and as a learning center for at-risk youth.

Working to increase food chain efficiency makes sense. Without converting more land for farming, improving the ways that agricultural products reach consumers wastes less of the food we already grow — and supports small-scale farmers at the same time.

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