

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO RUNNING FARMERS' MARKETS:  
THE NORTH COAST GROWERS' ASSOCIATION EXPERIENCE,  
HUMBOLDT COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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## ABSTRACT

### A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO RUNNING FARMERS' MARKETS: THE NORTH COAST GROWERS' ASSOCIATION EXPERIENCE, HUMBOLDT COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Portia Boni Bramble

In this study I explore the revolution in food consciousness currently progressing in the United States, with an emphasis on the important role farmers' markets play in supporting access to healthful, nutritious fresh produce, rural economies, and community building. Through a year of transition from intern to Executive Director of the North Coast Growers' Association (NCGA), I gained invaluable first-hand experience in running a successful, healthy, and robust farmers' market in Humboldt County, California. A review of the relevant literature revealed a lack of resources to guide market managers in the various processes necessary to support and manage a farmers' market. This paper builds upon existing literature to provide a detailed manual for running a successful farmers' market.

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## INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this project comes from the current growing trend towards a greater consciousness about food. The burgeoning popularity of the local foods movement is stronger today than ever before. The production of food in the United States and throughout the west has become highly mechanized, corporatized, and globalized. The distance food travels from farm to table has grown ever further, with an average item traveling approximately 1500 miles from place of production to the super-market. Globalization of the world food trade system has led to the degradation of farming cultures across the globe. The globalization of the world food trade market and over-dependence on imported food products in the global north has increased the need for large-scale agricultural production in developing nations. This dependence is negatively impacting farming culture, the economy, health, and food security across the world. Large-scale agricultural production threatens indigenous knowledge and culture leading to a loss of unique food production practices and an increased dependence on selected crops grown for export. In response to these trends, a revolution in food consciousness is emerging, exemplified in particular through the growing popularity of farmers' markets in the United States.

This project was conducted in collaboration with the North Coast Growers' Association (NCGA), along with numerous other local activist groups. My research was conducted over the course of two years of intensive daily research as the Executive

Director for NCGA. Through this study, I created a comprehensive manual to running a successful, healthy, and robust farmers' market. This manual is meant to educate, inform, and inspire not only market managers but also farmers, state and county Department of Agriculture employees, city managers, urban planners, professors of agriculture, and consumers.

The North Coast Growers' Association is a non-profit organization, managed by one full-time and three part-time employees, with a membership of over 100 local farmers and their supporters. We run five farmers' markets in Arcata, Eureka, and McKinleyville in northern Humboldt. Formed in 1978, our largest market, the Arcata Plaza farmers' market is the longest continuously running Certified Farmers' Market (CFM) in the state of California. As these markets grew, countless people contributed to their function and development of our organization and markets. Through the very generous support of the residents of Humboldt County we are able to grow bigger and better each year. Humboldt has a long and rich agricultural history and contains some of the more fertile soils and favorable weather patterns in all of Northern California. Because of the abundance and variety of produce that can grow here, we have a large cluster of small family farmers contributing to our farmers' markets, co-ops, schools, and restaurants. All of our over 100 farmer-members are growing within Humboldt, a very unique trend seen nowhere else in the state.

This study explores the revolution in food consciousness currently growing within the United States, with an emphasis on the important role farmers' markets play in supporting access to healthful, nutritious fresh produce, rural economies, and community

building. The manual provides specific focus areas that I have identified as key elements to achieving the goal of a successful farmers' market, including achieving and maintaining certification, support from the city, support from the county and state Departments of Agriculture, an informed community committed to supporting local food economies, small and qualified management with farming knowledge, creating a space that supports and builds community, managing necessary finances, networking with related organizations, and giving priority to local farmers.

I begin with a review of the literature pertaining to the growth of the local foods movement in the United States. I identify core topics addressed most frequently by the experts and found a stark gap in the literature regarding the process by which farmers' markets are actually developed, managed, and maintained within a community. While there exists a small but growing body of literature surrounding alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs) as well as numerous studies on food-miles, organics farming, fair-trade certification and similar topics, there exists virtually no literature regarding farmers' markets in the United States, and specifically nothing on the topic of management of farmers markets (Higgins, et al. 2008). While experts and the public agree that farmers' markets are an integral part of a localized food system and sustainable farming techniques, very little attention has been paid to running these markets. Today there are approximately 520 CFMs in California, compared to 2 when the CFM program was created in 1977 (Feenstra and Lewis, 2009 and CDFA). In Humboldt County, there has been a steady increase in the number of customers shopping at our farmers' markets as and an increase in the total sales figures over the last four years. Hopefully in the near

future the number of farmers' markets will increase as the localization of food becomes more popular. We will therefore need careful planning for how to maintain successful farmers' markets. This project is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature and provide food for thought to inspire others to continue to explore this topic further.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The current trend towards localization of food systems can be seen as a rejection of the globalized, capitalist food system existing in supermarkets. To understand why a change in the current food system is necessary and what the revolution of the relocalization of food looks like, I found the work of Michael Pollan very beneficial. Pollan writes extensively on the issue of the Western diet, modern food creations, and the role of family farmers in securing a sustainable food system. Pollan intertwines useful advice on nutrition with his personal experiments in gardening and farming, to develop a discussion of food and agricultural policy (Pollan, 2002, 2008).

One of the things that makes Pollan unique is that he is not only a renowned writer on the topic of food policy, but he is also a gardener, homesteader, and self-proclaimed foodie. Because Pollan encompasses all levels of the movement from grower to local food advocate to celebrity writer, he is able to bridge the divide between various factions of the communities involved in the movement towards a localized food system. There often exists a vast divide between farmers and those who are interested in the trendiest new food fads and have the money to read main-stream best-sellers and buy organic. Shopping locally and exclusively at the farmers' market is sometimes more costly and requires more time, effort, and advance planning. By prioritizing local and organic foods, these requirements can be adapted to virtually any lifestyle and budget. A major part of promoting the movement is finding a voice that can inspire and influence

the public to engage in the cause. Michael Pollan, among others, has been one of the most influential participants in this process.

Wendell Berry is world-renowned for his writing on the topics of the agro-food system and the growing movement to resist corporate agriculture and move towards a localized food system. As a farmer himself Berry provides a unique insight into the possibilities of a locally centered food system. Wendell Berry argues that conservation cannot ignore the farmer and farming. Berry argues that we are all farming by proxy, as we can eat only if land is farmed on our behalf, somewhere, and in some fashion. “If conservationists will attempt to resume responsibility for their need to eat, they will be led back fairly directly to all their previous concerns for the welfare of nature” (Berry, 2003).

For a thorough discussion of the current trends in food studies, Jennifer Clapp’s work “A Global Outlook on Food Studies” is a short but informative paper (2008). Clapp acknowledges that food studies are a broad and multifaceted field which can be viewed through many different lenses. Clapp begins by expressly orienting the paper in the context of the global political economy. This perspective is important and useful, stressing the importance of building a local food system is not to suggest that a region should not engage in trade. As Clapp explains, the corporate global governance of food has undoubtedly led to a loss of understanding and appreciation of local food production and the cultural dimensions of food consumption. The accompanying manual will highlight farmers’ markets an example of local food production and the cultural dimensions of food.

While there are many integral parts to a localized food system such as community supported agriculture programs, school gardens, and efficient trade routes, farmers' markets are an ancient tradition and successful component of a healthy local food system. Farmers' markets have continually proved to be a successful alternative to the traditional supermarket-based food system. Bill McKibben explains "A single farmers' market, for instance, may not seem that important compared to a Wal-Mart, but farmers' markets are the fastest growing part of our food economy. They've doubled in number and in sales and then doubled again in the last decade, suggesting new possibilities for everything from land use patterns to community identity" (2008). While clearly not a silver-bullet solution to all modern problems, farmers' markets can provide huge benefits to a community. Primarily, farmers' markets increase access to fresh, seasonal foods picked the same or previous day, not stored for long periods or transported over long distances. The average carrot, for example, typically travels over 1,838 miles from the farm through various distribution networks to the supermarket and eventually to the table (Pirog and Benjamin, 2003). A farmers' market carrot, by contrast, changes hands only once and travels less than 50 miles from the farm to the final consumer.

While some states, such as Texas and Vermont, operate some state-run markets, California is the only state in the United States that has a mandatory certification program for farmers' markets. The accompanying manual will be particularly useful to those operating markets within the state of California, but the ideas can be adapted to virtually any farmers' market. This certification program itself is contentious and deserves appropriate attention. Certified Farmers' Markets (CFMs) came about in opposition to

agricultural standardization laws enacted in the 1970s. Because of the stringent regulations established through standardization law, small farmers simply could not afford to comply, and it was unfeasible for them to sell on the large scale necessary to compete with the larger producers. The state then formulated the system for CFMs that allowed small farmers to forgo certain standardization regulations if they were selling at a CFM or at their farm with farm stands (CDFA). Details of the regulations governing direct marketing in California are complex and beyond the scope of this project.

The need for farmer input in the development of certification schemes is ultimately an attempt to localize regulation in the same way CFMs localize the food trade economy. Studies have shown a need for farmer buy-in and ownership of process in development and land reform projects and the same need exists in certification and management of farmers' markets (Po, 2008 and Wilson, 2008). In his 2007 best seller, Bill McKibben argues that building a local economy will mean ceasing to worship markets as infallible and consciously setting limits on their scope (2007, p.2). Economics and community cannot be separated; as much as community and place are interdependent, economy cannot be excluded in the formula. McKibben suggests that community is the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction (p.2). Farmers' markets represent a place for community building as well a market alternative to the traditional supermarket based food system.

One major challenge to this type of research is how to address an issue that is so deeply rooted in place. Agriculture is inextricably linked to regional climate and weather patterns, water availability, altitude, native flora and fauna competition. The structure of

a farmers' market is also greatly affected by regional differences in agricultural production. This brought to my attention the need to address the role of place-based knowledge and local expertise. If community is a function of the landscape, then it is also inherently tied to concepts of place. Tim Cresswell explains place is not simply something to be observed, researched and written about but is itself part of the way we see, research and write; place is deeply metaphysical (2003, p.15). Place is an experience, a process, and a location.

Robert Feagan provides a discussion of place, which is variously described as the local and community in the local food systems literature. Feagan does so in conjunction with the geographic discussion focused on questions and meanings around these spatial concepts. Feagan argues that we have a need for emplacing our food system, while simultaneously calling for careful circumspection and greater clarity regarding how we delineate and understand the local (2007, p.3). Understanding the local is an essential concept to developing a farmers' market that will be successful. Feagan urges us to "see the importance of local social, cultural and ecological particularities in our everyday worlds, while also recognizing that we are reflexively and dialectically tied to many and diverse locals around the world" (p.3). This point is instrumental in addressing the need to bear in mind that an exclusively local food system is virtually impossible; however, a food system that is based on a large majority of local products is attainable. Our nutritional needs require some food trade, as do pre-existing historic traditions (coffee and tea are a prime example of something that would be unrealistic to imagine the American public giving up). A locally-focused food economy that values the locally

available products above all else and appreciates the contribution of local farming to the community and its economy is ideal. Creating the system to support these efforts are the focus of this research. Creating a locally-focused food system requires the consideration of the local place, growing capacity, and also local culture and knowledge. Numerous studies exploring the interactions between certification, local farming cultures and food trade are presented in the literature, several of the seminal works are summarized in the following section.

Sarah Lyon explores the impact of shade-grown coffee certification on the local community where the plantations exist (2006). Specifically, Lyon argues for the need to know your place as a local expert in order to interpret what works for your local culture and ecology when it comes to building food systems. Lyon examined locally run coffee cooperatives in Latin America that have employed the technique of growing coffee in the shade of other native plants for the purposes of creating habitat for migratory birds under the regulatory framework of northern certification programs. This study shows how Northern fantasies of “purity” influence the management of coffee plantations where outside managers are often brought in to advise the locals.

Research findings show that outsiders brought in to enforce certification requirements are often unfamiliar with local culture, history, and politics and lack local agricultural knowledge or expertise (Lyon, 2006 and Albertin and Nair, 2004). Lyon’s case study is a prime example of how outsiders can misinterpret the needs of the farmers and the ecology of the region; through the implementation of a certification scheme developed without consultation of the local farmers, the community and the ecology is

damaged. According to Lyon, there exists contradiction between external influence and producer empowerment can be alleviated only through more structured and diverse farmer input into the construction of certification systems and the marketing of sustainable products in the name of environmental protection (p.386). While there are many differences in the certification of shade-grown coffee and California CFMs, the importance of being a local expert remains equally vital and was identified as a key component in the accompanying manual.

Albertin and Nair, 2004, conducted a similar study on the topic of farmers' perspectives on the roles of shade trees in coffee production and identified discrepancies between the farmers' opinions and the existing literature on the topic. The authors conclude there is a definite need for further research in this topic, with particular attention paid to perspectives of the farmers, a point that supports Lyon's findings (p.463).

As Lyon observes, the contradiction between external influences and producer empowerment can only be alleviated through more structured and diverse farmer input into the construction of certification systems (p.388). Indeed, she notes, while the process of achieving and maintaining certification and secure, long-term markets may resemble a process that happens *to* the farmers, transforming them into the objects of external surveillance and regulation, they are not pawns of neo-liberal expansion(p.388). As Lyon showed through her research with the shade grown coffee market, agricultural certification systems and access to alternative markets provide demonstrable economic and organizational benefits to small farmers. The same logic can be applied to CFMs.

The economic market that CFMs provide for small farmers in California is absolutely essential and their survival surely wouldn't be possible without the direct marketing system. The concern of Lyon's and my own study is not just the benefits of the certified markets, but rather how policies that regulate these markets are formulated and what makes them successful.

The type of community a group of people chooses to build is inherently tied to their economy, and subsequently to their food system. Mushita and Thompson explore various traditional farming techniques to present many models of food systems that are sustainable and abundant, making a case that the system we see in mainstream American agricultural production is not the only available option (2007). The authors highlight cases in Zimbabwe in which the smallest plots of land are farmed more intensively, and therefore, the seed itself is carefully tended and preserved as a precious commodity (p.10). There, small patches are farmed so carefully and intensively that experts estimate they yield as much as the best commercial farmers. Because these people often live on small plots in cities, they resort to urban farming, increasing access to fresh produce for more people (p.10). This is also true of small-scale family farmers who grow a biodiverse selection of crops in abundance on smaller plots often incorporating animals, practices not observed in mainstream American corporate-agriculture. This is particularly exemplified in Humboldt County, California.

According to Mamen et al. in their extensive study *Ripe for Change*, which explores California's food trade system, small-scale farmers who utilize practices such as these are contributing to more ecologically sustainable management of the land (2004,

p.48). Besides wearing out the resource base with abusive, toxic, and ultimately unsustainable production methods, large-scale monocultures further destabilize ecosystems by eliminating biodiversity, both within the crops grown and in the wild. While agrochemicals damage wildlife populations directly, expansive monocultures eliminate wildlife habitat and displace native crop varieties (p.50). A German study revealed that industrial farming is that nation's leading contributor to the loss of biodiversity, with more than 500 plant species endangered or extinct due to agriculture (Korneck, D. and H. Sukopp, 1998 in Mamen, et al. p. 52). The research regarding the dangers of mono-cropping, chemical additives and agribusiness is thorough and Mamen, *et al.* 2008 provide a very comprehensive introduction to the topic.

One of the main impediments to making any shift away from monocultures and globalization of food may be attributed, in part, to consumer choice. While the governments of the global north nations dominating world politics may indeed be perpetuating the advancement of capitalism through globalization, consumers are simultaneously (whether consciously or not) adding fuel to the fire by being participants in the system. Esteva and Prakash argue that, while the system of globalization is flourishing, even the most single-minded and ambitious free-trade advocates cannot fail to recognize the social and human costs of the policies they are promoting (2004, p.20). It is *how* consumers go about voicing their concerns, and *how* they attempt to subvert the system that has fallen short of being effective. Esteva and Prakash argue that no challenge to the proliferating experiences of people's powerlessness succeeds when

conceived and implemented inside the institutional and intellectual framework, which produced it (p.20).

How does one respond to the progress of globalization and systems of capitalism? By keeping their focus on the local, as opposed to the global, Esteva and Prakash provide a warning against the arrogance, the far-fetched and dangerous fantasy of acting globally; to make a difference actions should not be grandiosely global, but humbly local (p.21).

The authors point out that none of us can ever really know more than a miniscule part of the earth; in order for global thinking to be feasible, we would then have to be able to think within every culture on Earth (p.23). This is obviously unattainable; an increased value must be placed on the ideas of localism. The farmers' market is one of the few places where the individual consumer has a relationship with the farmer, intimately knowing their local food and understanding its production. One of the negative impacts of consumers not knowing the means by which their food is produced has been an increase in over-consumption.

One of the main reasons consumers are led to over-consumption and accumulation can be explained through an analysis of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism can be defined as the tendency of people to see the production of their labor in terms of relationships between things (commodities), rather than the social relationships between people; people view the commodity only in terms of the characteristics of the final product while the process through which it was created remains obscured and, therefore, unconsidered (Hudson and Hudson, 2003, p.413).

Hudson and Hudson provide a useful analysis of commodity fetishism, highlighting the fact that it is a phenomenon peculiar to the capitalist system (p.415).

The authors point out that the organization of production through the purchase of commodities provides a highly effective mask over the exploitative class relationship within the capitalist economy (p.415). This theory attempts to explain the disconnect between consumers and food producers. This disconnect can lead to a lack of concern or interest in the production process. The consequences of commodity fetishism can be seen in the lack of consumer consciousness as to where their food comes from and how it's grown. Agriculture is an intensive process whether operating a large-scale mono-crop farm requiring intensive chemical inputs, or a small farm with dense and diverse plant coverage requiring intensive knowledge and attention. Knowing the origins of your food, and the conditions under which it was grown or raised is the first, but most invaluable step towards a sustainable, local food system and a reduction in commodity fetishism. It is a step that the consumer can only make if local food choices are available.

The research shows a need for changes in the economics of food trade in the United States, focused on the localization of both policy making as well as the localization of production systems, and valuing lived research and different forms of knowledge production. As was noted in the examples of small intensive farming in Zimbabwe, the more a person is connected to the land, the better they can understand what is best for the land, and in turn, their community. Mushita and Thompson state that ontologically knowledge is not the same as material property because the characteristics of knowledge are antithetical to the characteristics of property. Knowledge is incremental

and interactive; it is often not a separate entity (Hudson and Hudson, p.65). Knowledge is derived from living and doing, therefore when creating policies or rules that will govern the lives of farmers, those farmers should be consulted and their opinions valued.

There are many ways to create and possess knowledge. Research and knowledge are not only academic terminology; they are cultures and histories of individuals and communities. To limit research to its traditional structure promotes a continuation of the current and historical culture of dominance and oppression. As Leela Fernandes suggests, we must recognize power-laden relationships without being trapped by them; we must promote transformative knowledge (2003, p.84). As seen the case study by Sarah Lyon, outsiders are often brought in to make evaluations of certification schemes before the farmers themselves are consulted.

Fernandes writes extensively on knowledge creation and reproduction, advocating for allowing our understanding of knowledge to sit within a sense of mystery. This sense of mystery, of the unknowable, is intrinsic to universal knowledge, which is inductive knowledge (p.99). This humbling sense of mystery can prevent us from turning our own perceptions and experiences into the colonizing will to make others conform to our definitions of life. Eliminating the colonizing impulse that has distorted the meaning of knowledge into a will to conquer will allow the necessary transformative knowledge practices to emerge (Ibid.).

This notion of transformative knowledge allows individuals to carefully consider their place in their community and what contributions they are making to society at large. Many of us in the United States lack an understanding of this sense of mystery: we live in

an overly structured society where we assume to have an answer to all questions and life is more often than not dictated from above. In order to realize the importance of the mystery Fernandes describes a paradigm shift towards more transformative ways of thinking and knowledge production is necessary. We must begin by truly realizing that the food system we are a part of is deeply flawed and unsustainable. As McKibben writes “After all, for almost all people throughout history (and for most people still today), “the economy” is just a fancy way of saying ‘What’s for dinner?’ and ‘Am I having any?’” (p.47). McKibben argues it is possible to separate ourselves from the system and engage in a localized food system, to ultimately contribute to the reinvention of the economic structure that sustains us (p.49).

The direct marketing approach to a localized economy embodied by farmers’ markets is a successful example of an alternate food trade system, born out of the capitalist, globalized food system meant to represent a movement towards localization and direct marketing. The revolution in food consciousness has begun and the growing prosperity of farmers’ markets is a testament to this fact. The growing amount of research on the topic of food trade and localized economies also proves the importance of this topic. However, the current literature still lacks the perspective of farmers and those who are involved with orchestrating this alternative direct marketing economy. This research can begin to fill that gap in the existing literature and open the door to further research with an emphasis on local experts’ knowledge.

## METHODS

This project grew directly from my work experiences with the North Coast Growers' Association (NCGA) in Humboldt County, Northern California. I began my work with the NCGA in February 2008 as an intern earning credit for Service Learning hours for an economics course. I soon took on the position of Market Manager and very quickly moved up to the role of Executive Director. This position was challenging and the transition was difficult due to the speed with which I needed to take control. Through much support from the farmers and a lot of hard work I managed to accomplish the necessary tasks. This experience of taking over a small business with a large operating budget and over 100 members taught me the lessons that have informed the development of the manual (Appendix A).

It was through inspiration from the farmers and the association, and all the local activists working in an effort to support local farming that I developed the idea of a project that supports the amazing work going on within this community. The unmatched richness of the family-farming culture and deep connection to the land that influences all who live in Humboldt (whether they realize it or not) helped shape my work. I used a mixed methods approach to my research for this project in order to allow the research itself to guide the direction of my work. I began this project with a comprehensive literature review of all topics relating to the fields of farming, local economies, direct marketing, globalization, trade policy, food policy, and farmers' markets. I determined

that there exists a definite and obvious gap in the literature regarding the management of farmers' markets. Noticing this gap and realizing the wealth of knowledge through thirty years of experience running farmers' markets that exists within the NCGA, the concept of a manual was born.

My experiences over the past year have included managing two farmers' markets, overseeing three other markets, and participating in numerous community events surrounding my involvement with the NCGA. I have been an active participant and current board member for the Humboldt Chapter of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers helping to organize numerous local food events supporting local farmers. I have been actively participating in efforts to support the interests of the farmers and protecting agricultural lands in the ongoing Humboldt County General Plan Update through writing and distributing letters of interest and being a representative at public forums. I have worked closely with employees of the North Coast Co-ops in collaboration on special events and networking. I have also worked closely with the Humboldt Plan It Green to organize a very successful conference titled Green Wheels: Transportation for the Future. I am also a founding member of the Humboldt Poultry Cooperative working to build a local poultry processing facility to fill the demand for a niche market locally. All of these experiences combined with my broad duties as Executive Director for NCGA have contributed to the knowledge behind this manual. Throughout the time of my research I conducted participant observation, defined as conscious and systematic sharing in the life-activities, interests and affects of a group of persons (Jackson, 1983). This type of research typically includes the use of field notes, flexibly structured interviews and

sampling or enumerating to document frequency data, all of which I utilized (Jackson, p.40).

In this project, I utilized a mixed methods approach because, as Creswell points out, that all methods have limitations and are subject to triangulation therefore it is necessary to crosscheck the methodologies one is using (p.15). My research methodologies will be sequential, expanding one method's findings with another method; concurrent, converging data and findings; transformative, viewing the data and subjects of research through a theoretical lens. This approach has allowed me to draw upon many different methods and not be constrained by the design. I have allowed the emphasis to remain on my area of study, and not the method of studying it.

The methodological approach that I followed was Participatory Action Research (PAR) and participant observation. I place emphasis on the fact that I am a product of the academic system as a graduate student, yet I remain an independent, freethinking community member. I contend that our community, myself included, is suffering the injustice of an unsustainable and harmful food trade system that has been perpetuated by the capitalist interests of corporate agro-business and conservative government institutions. PAR can be thought of as a means for breaking down the distinction between researcher and researched and the subjects and objects of knowledge production through participation in a people-for-themselves method of attainment and creation of knowledge (Fals-Borda, 2003, p.34). I am committed to involving those who are most affected by the problem and to using the results of my research for education, the development of consciousness, and towards the mobilization for action. I conducted loosely structured

interviews with local farmers, local food suppliers, farmers' market workers, consumers, restaurant owners and patrons, and local government officials involved with food and agricultural policy in the creation of this manual. By directly involving those who are most affected by the problem, I have been able to constantly reshape my research around what is needed to benefit these community members. PAR has allowed me to pursue something that has directly affected me, allowing me to be both researcher and researched, and also involving others who have been similarly affected and have invaluable knowledge and experiences to enhance the research and further the cause.

Grounded theory has played an important role in my methodological approach. Grounded theory can be thought of as a constructivist design making it flexible and adaptable. Kathy Charmaz argues that grounded theory can be applied to studies of social justice (2001). Food equity and access to local, fresh foods is an issue of social and environmental justice. Grounded theory is both a method of inquiry and a product of inquiry; a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development (Charmaz). I maintained central focus on management of farmers' markets as I carried out this project, but as issues arose and I grew to understand the process better, I reevaluated my approach and often times changed my specific areas of focus and particularly which topics I would address in the manual.

Other methodological approaches I employ are the concepts of lived research and witnessing. bell hooks describes the concept of lived research, promoting the integrity of

research conducted through daily life rather than coming into a situation as an outside observer (1994). I conducted lived research as a farmer, market manager, consumer, and community member. We are all a living experiment when it comes to the health effects of modern food products such as GMOs and chemical additives. Lived research can be the most interesting and complex research because you must be self-reflexive, constantly comparing your findings with your own actions and choices, and also be objective in evaluating the findings for others who are unlike yourself. This leads into the concept of witnessing developed by Leela Fernandes (2003, p.85). Witnessing can be a spiritual practice and way of connecting to the subject of your research. Witnessing encourages true passionate belief in the cause you are promoting and a commitment to fully embracing the knowledge gained (Ibid.). Witnessing is a learning process where you can fully open yourself to what you are researching and experience it in a changing way, not just observe and report your findings without emotion. Running successful and robust farmers' markets has become more than a job, it is my life. I truly care about and am personally invested in this project for the future benefits it will provide for my organization and people across the country. I have even experimented with an entirely local diet.

Research as a participatory, lived, and witnessed ethical responsibility has been my goal throughout this process. This has allowed for the creation of knowledge in a meaningful and new way. Through the creation of this manual I am promoting a food trade system that is vastly different than the standard market-based capitalist structure currently employed in the United States. There should be nothing more sacred than the

health of our own bodies, and this can best be achieved through wholesome foods. Attaining equitable access to healthy food while decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and combating climate change is both a creation of transformative knowledge and a rebellion from political and corporate domination. Farmers' markets have been a successful alternative market system rooted in response to the capitalist, globalized food economy. Throughout this project I kept a focus on myself as an environmental subject; this position emerged from by struggle for access to the resource of healthy foods with a small carbon footprint, as a response to new institutions of greater and greater corporate power and government repression, and through changing calculations of my own self interests and notions of self (Agrawal, 2006).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary outcome of my research is detailed in the accompanying manual (Appendix A). The focus areas discussed in the manual were determined to be amongst to most relevant to running a successful farmers' market through the interviews, observations, and experiences throughout my research. These topic areas include achieving and maintaining certification and what the certification system is; a thorough discussion of how government regulatory authority effects the management of markets and the associated rules; the importance of maintaining a positive working relationship with local government and business communities; the importance of educating and encouraging a community in support of a local food system; management strategies and the need for a management team with local knowledge and farming knowledge; how farmers' markets are a place for community building the necessary financial commitments associated with running farmers' markets; the need for networking with related organizations for mutual benefits; and finally, always giving priority to local farmers.

As indicated by the literature, I found that indeed food studies are a broad and multifaceted field that can be viewed through many lenses (Clapp, 2008). I approached my research through the perspective of someone participating in a changing system of food distribution. This project is an attempt to fill the large gap that exists in the literature surrounding the growing field of alternate agri-food networks (Higgins, et al. 2008). The

work of family farmers and the people that support them, myself included, has yet to be given the deserved respect by the academic community, as indicated by the lack of literature pertaining to the topic of farmers' markets. The work I have been doing throughout this project will hopefully shed light on this fact, and the growing changes in localized food systems.

Through conversations with the NCGA farmers I found a consistent desire to see more written work about the management of farmers' markets with attention paid to the farmers' perspectives. This desire for farmer input supports the research findings of Sarah Lyon and Albertin and Nair who focused on certification schemes for shade-grown coffee, finding a greater need for farmer input. Through interviews and interactions with local government officials I found that there is a lack of institutional knowledge about the management of farmers' markets. There also exists a lack of understanding of the role different government agencies play in regulating farmers' markets. For example, the city government officials consistently lacked an understanding of what it takes to achieve and maintain certification through the CDFA. The lack of literature on these topics partially explains why these individuals lack an understanding of the organization of farmers' markets making the importance of the work I've done here significant.

One striking result from numerous interactions with customers who shop at farmers' markets is their total lack of understanding of the concept of CFMs and the complex set of regulations one is subject to. This supports the idea that the accompanying manual will be useful to a wide-ranging scope of readers. Shoppers whom I spoke with that claimed not to shop at farmers' markets generally lacked an understanding of the

negative impacts of agribusiness and the transport of food over long distances, the health benefits of seasonal fresh produce, or the fact that farmers' markets support the local economy. This supports the ideas of Jennifer Clapp who argues that the corporate global governance of food has led to a loss of understanding and appreciation of local food production.

From interviews with experts in the field of agriculture and farmers' market managers in other parts of California I found that almost no one knows the extent of the farming community in Humboldt County. This supports Robert Feagan's call for a need of emplacing our food system as well as careful attention and greater clarity regarding how we understand the local. The accompanying manual will help to spread the knowledge about the rich history of the farming community in this county and the lessons learned through our experiences, while also encouraging people to look more closely at their local food system.

Through the research conducted for the formulation of this project I was able to gain invaluable insight into the necessary practices for management of a successful and robust farmers' market. The information contained with the accompanying manual will provide knowledge and suggestions coupled with numerous resources and a rich collection of stories about a tradition of family farming in an unlikely remote region of Northern California. This manual is expressly intended to serve farmers' market managers, government officials, and farmers around the country. It also captures the culture and history of Humboldt County agriculture.

The NCGA has grown from a small group of farmers into one of the most well-known and active local non-profit organizations operating farmers' markets that are consistently called the best. Our markets have been estimated to generate over \$2 million dollars a year, a significant contribution to the local economy. This figure does not include the countless wholesale accounts that our farmers maintain as well. Collectively our farmers donate over 90,000 pounds of produce to food banks and those in need all across the county. All of this success came about through many lessons learned that are detailed in the manual.

A localized food system based on local family farmers takes many years and much hard work to achieve. The experiences catalogued herein stretch across many decades and account for the work of thousands of individual and many organizations. The privilege of working with so many people with incomparable knowledge and experience has given me a unique perspective on this topic. Above all, what I have learned is that a food system is more than just what we eat. The development of a healthy food system requires the commitment of a whole community and a struggle against the status quo. Every day in the fight for a local food system is a battle against the corporate interests of mainstream agro-business and a corporate sponsored government. The very existence of a flourishing farmers market and local food system as I have described in the accompanying manual proves that there is a possibility to achieve an economic structure that represents an alternative to the dominant capitalist market system based in a separation of production and consumption. This should provide others the incentive to continue the fight. As the popularity of farmers' markets continues to grow this work will

become increasingly relevant and useful and will undoubtedly provide a jumping off point for others to conduct further research and expand greatly upon the topics covered here.

Among the most useful benefits of conducting the research necessary for this project I have gained a deep understanding of the complex food system associated with local farming in this county. This system involves the work of hundreds of farmers, numerous local organizations, city and county government entities, and a large number of local consumers who have dedicated themselves to eating locally and seasonally. This in depth knowledge has already proved useful in aiding in the development of an even stronger localized food system through grant writing projects to increase funding for such endeavors. The experience of doing this work is unmatched in value and truly unique. There exists no place with the same appreciation for local food, blessed with such abundance of local food, and as committed to the food revolution as Humboldt County and I am very proud to be a small part of it.

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## APPENDIX A

### A Survivor’s Guide to Running a Successful and Robust Farmers’ Market The North Coast Growers’ Association Experience Humboldt County, California

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## **Introduction**

The North Coast Growers' Association (NCGA) is a non-profit organization, managed by a handful of people, with a membership of over 100 local farmers and their supporters. We run five farmers' markets in Arcata, Eureka, and McKinleyville in northern Humboldt County. Our largest market, the Arcata Plaza Farmers' Market is the longest continuously running Certified Farmers' Market (CFM) in the state of California, formed in 1978. Over the course of the growth of these markets countless people have contributed to the functioning and development of our organization and markets. Through the very generous support of the residents of Humboldt we are able to grow bigger and better each year. Humboldt County has a long and rich agricultural history and contains some of the more fertile soils and favorable weather patterns in all of Northern California. Because of the abundance and variety of produce that can grow here, we have a large cluster of small family farmers' contributing to our farmers' markets, coops, schools, and restaurants.

I began my work with the NCGA in February 2008 as a curious student looking for an internship. Over the course of the next few months my role rapidly changed. I started as the manager for the McKinleyville and Arcata Plaza markets, and quickly I took over as Executive Director. Needless to say, this was a rapid transition and a difficult one. Not only was I taking on a large organization and a very large and popular farmers' market, but I was also a full-time graduate student in the Master of the Arts in Social Science program at Humboldt State University. Through much support from my

family, co-workers, our NCGA Board of Directors, the farmers and my professors, I made it through the season and started the next season successfully.

I have learned a great deal in a short time about how to efficiently and successfully run a farmers' market. As the popularity of local produce continues to grow, managers who maintain well-run farmers' markets will be an increasingly valuable asset. This manual is meant for anyone interested in how to run a market; this includes managers, farmers, patrons, city managers, urban planners, professors of agriculture, and state and federal Departments of Agriculture employees. There is a surprising amount of effort that goes into the running of a CFM from the countless, often vague and conflicting regulations to unmatched challenge of negotiating the varying personalities and needs of so many unique farmers. Identifying a lack of resources to guide one in the challenging task of managing a large and growing CFM, I decided to write this manual. The success story that is the NCGA and the Arcata Plaza Farmers' Market is the true inspiration for writing this, and I have been fortunate beyond my dreams to be a part of this. Unless you have experienced our market first hand, you cannot truly appreciate the magic that happens here, but through reading this account you can learn from it and hopefully translate some of what we have done to your own region, spreading the success of the movement towards localized food systems.

I have included in this manual an in-depth discussion of the key focus areas that I believe have made our markets and our organization so successful and popular. I must state first and foremost that the number one reason, by far, that any of this is possible is due entirely to our local farmers and the work they do to bring the most diverse and

bountiful selection of healthful, beautiful, and priceless products to market. We undoubtedly have the world's best farmers. This fact aside, this manual is useful for people in any region, no matter what your growing season or how many farmers you have. Every town needs a farmers market, and this manual will give you the knowledge necessary to run one. The topics covered within are key elements to achieving a successful and robust farmers' market, but they certainly do not represent a complete list of all the necessary tasks. Using this manual you can get a great head start on a successful market, from there it just takes hard work, long hours, and true passion. Know your region and love good food.

## **Certification**

Only a handful of states currently have a system of certification of farmers' markets and California is the only state that has a mandatory certification program. It does seem natural that California would be among the first and have the most comprehensive and extensive sets of regulations being that the state is the number one agricultural production region in the country. Farmers' markets are a part of an economic system known as direct marketing, a system that was conceived as an alternative to the mainstream, capitalist-based, system involving producer, middleman, and consumer. Direct marketing allows the producer to deliver their product directly into the hands of the consumer eliminating the middleman and allowing for an unmatched unique relationship to form between farmers and consumer in the case of CFMs. This exact relationship is what I believe makes farmers' markets so important, opening the eyes of the consumer to the reality of food production. Knowing the farmers and how and where your food was grown increases your awareness about the importance of growing without the use of chemical additives, the seasonality of produce, and the importance of localizing food production in order to support your local economy. The CFM program began with the standardization of agriculture.

In the 1970's the big agricultural producers in California and across the country began to see problems with how their products were being labeled, transported, and most importantly priced. As an example, one farmer in California might have 25 apples in a box and another farmer in Washington might have much bigger apples, and perhaps a smaller box, he might fit only 10 apples in a box. Both boxes would be labels "apples"

and sent via a large truck to a shop in San Francisco. The consumer might say to the store clerk, “I need two boxes of apples”. The customer would surely be disappointed to get home and realize he had paid the same price for a box of 25 apples as a box of 10. This is a simplified example of a growing problem within the agricultural industry. The solution is a very complicated regulatory scheme referred to here-in as simply “standardization.”

The standardization of agriculture touches on nearly every point of production from the size and maturity of produce to the box size, labeling requirements, packaging for transport, and the list goes on. There have been numerous studies and articles written on the topic of standardization. Unfortunately this system which is meant to support the agricultural industry had unforeseen and devastating impacts on smaller farms. The complicated regulations require unmanageable and unaffordable infrastructure and supplies that smaller farmers simply could not and would not adhere to. Many farmers rely on on-site sales through road-side farm stands or preferred to get together with other small farmers on a Saturday afternoon downtown, which become the modern American farmers’ market. As the popularity of these markets grew a need arose for a system that would simultaneously exempt these farmers from some of the more extreme rules and regulations of standardized agriculture but still protect the integrity of the product and allow for some measure of uniformity. The California Department of Agriculture developed the Certified Farmers Market system and an extensive list of regulations to govern it. Today, certification comes from your county’s Department of Agriculture and is controlled by the County Agriculture Commissioner. Certification requires that an

agricultural producer, a non-profit organization, or a government agency take responsibility for acting as the CFM organizing body, paying a \$25 fee, and complying with all necessary regulations.

In California a farmer must abide by either the rules of standardized agriculture or be a part of the direct marketing system and sell only at a CFM or a farm stand. The location of such stands is even regulated, needing to be on the farm property itself or at the nearest county road. Needless to say, while exempt from certain rules, CFMs are highly regulated, much more so than the average consumer would think. Some of the regulations seem truly without reasonable purpose, such as allowing the processing and sale of jams but not the grinding of grain flour. Others rules are clearly in place to protect the health and safety of the consumer and the ability of the farmer to have a viable business, such as requiring identity and quantity labels on sealed bags. Bottom line, it's the law to be certified and its necessary to follow the rules. This in the end protects the farmers and the market from the bureaucratic headache that follows rules violations. If you live in a state without a CFM system it is equally important to be in contact with the organizers of the other markets your farmers attend to insure that you are all following similar practices. This way the farmer knows the rules and can easily comply, rather than being forced to follow varying or even conflicting regulations.

Our biggest and most popular market, the Arcata Plaza Market, began with a handful of farmers who would get together once a week to sell vegetables. There was no system in place to govern them and no managers to run the market. As Dennis Potter of Potter's Produce, one of the original farmers who still sells at our market, said "We'd

only make about \$10 and we were happy about it! Once in a while a guy with a guitar would come around and play and keep us all entertained.” It was a simple beginning but it quickly grew into one of the first CFMs in the state and now the longest continuously running. Being around a long time does not in fact translate into a clear understanding of the rules or perfect compliance. It is very important to always ensure that you are aware of new or changing regulations and that you follow them. Maintaining a good working relationship with those in positions of power to regulate CFMs is among the most important parts of ensuring a successful market.

## **Government Regulatory Authority and Rules**

In the state of California the authority to regulate agriculture falls in the branch of government called the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA).

Nationally the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates certain parts of agriculture across the nation and across state lines. For example the “cattle industry” (beef and dairy) is regulated by the USDA, while “poultry” (which actually refers to chicken, turkey, all other game birds, and rabbit) is regulated by the CDFA. The CDFA is housed in the state capitol of Sacramento where one government employee oversees the entire state CFM program. The next tier of regulation is the county Department of Agriculture, where one individual government employee, who answers to the aforementioned individual, oversees all aspects of CFMs and often has numerous other duties related to agriculture as well. As you can probably see, with such concentrated authority it is very important to develop a good relationship and open communication with these individuals.

The direct marketing CFM system has been constantly growing since its conception, and as with governmental regulation in general, the rules are often lagging behind the reality. Many of the regulations governing CFMs are quite vague and open to the interpretation of the individual inspector or commissioner assigned to your region. Many of the regulations can be interpreted in a directly conflicting manner. Because of this fact it is always important to fully investigate rules and be sure you are getting a clear explanation of the reasoning behind that rule and the exact implications of it. I have found that our farmers have often brought up an issue that has never before been

experienced in our region and has never been addressed by our agricultural commissioner. This means that it is a first for everyone and some amount of research is necessary to ensure that we are simultaneously following the rules and satisfying our interests.

We have experienced this issue multiple times since I have been a market manager. The two biggest examples of conflicting regulation and the need to work closely with those in the position of governmental authority are introducing beef, goat, lamb, and rabbit to our CFMs. Although Humboldt County has a huge concentration of producers of grass-fed beef and lamb and a number of small meat producers, our markets had not included these products until the 2009 market season. The beef, goat, and lamb presented markedly different challenges than did the rabbit. Rabbit, as mentioned before, is regulated as a poultry product because of the size and means of processing utilized in the harvest. Because poultry is regulated by the CDFA we needed to get authorization from the country Departments of Agriculture and Environmental Health and the CDFA. It took a serious persistence on the part of our rabbit producer working with these regulatory authorities to develop a way to have the rabbit processed in accordance with all regulations. Collectively we discovered an exemption to the regulations that allows for on-farm processing of poultry products for producers who process 20,000 or less birds/rabbits per year.<sup>1</sup>

In introducing beef, lamb and goat to our markets we had to face different regulatory obstacles. Because these products are regulated by the USDA we realized that the only certification necessary was a USDA label from the processing facility. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Bramble, personal interview Dr. Aquino, USDA

markedly different than the usual process an agricultural producer must comply with to get certification. When faced with the new problem of how to get permission to have meat at the market we had to network with both the Agriculture Department and the Environmental Health Department as well as other CFM organizations in the state. We began by investigating the regulations to see how and in what manner meat is allowed at market and who has the authority to regulate it. We then explored examples of how other CFMs in California went through the process and how they were able to introduce meat successfully to their markets. While it may seem as though meat products are obviously agricultural products and should therefore be allowed at a CFM there are always regulations and rules to consult and abide by. As discussed in the “certification” section, there are a lot of rules that govern CFMs.

Through a process of doing our own research and working along side the governing regulatory authorities (Agriculture and Health Departments) we found a number of regulations that supported the inclusion of meat at the market. This was a huge breakthrough and has allowed us to greatly increase the diversity of product at our markets improving the overall shopping experience for our customers. This experience proves that while you do need to keep up with the always-changing rules, sometimes rules are not black and white and finding a way to work within that grey area can be of great benefit.

## **Local Government and Business Community**

The local government at the City level controls many of the opportunities available to a farmers' market or farmers' market association. Effectively communicating the needs of the market and maintaining a good working relationship with city officials has played a major role in the success of our markets. Farmers' markets are more often than not held on public property, be it at a park, a town square, or on a closed-off street. While it is possible to hold a market on private property, and we do, 3 of our 5 markets are held on public property belonging to the cities of Arcata and Eureka. Not only is maintaining good communication with the city important, but also with the local business community of which your market will become. Local merchants often feel competition with the introduction of a farmers' market, yet we have found that adjacent businesses and our markets are mutually beneficial.

A vital key to success with a farmers' market is to design your market around the local community and its culture. In choosing a location it is important to identify a space where farmers can easily access their spaces and where you can ensure a reliable flow of customers. Positioning the market close to the central shopping center is often an important consideration. While city officials may not be receptive to the idea of blocking traffic and shutting down a street, given the right argument they are sure to see that a farmers' market is an asset to the city. Forming a good working relationship with city officials is very important to ensuring that when problems arise you will be able to get the support you need.

One major battle that we fought with the City of Arcata had to do with the removal of vehicles illegally parked in the space permitted for our Saturday market. This is an interesting case that required persistence, persuasion, and lawyers. Over the course of a number of years we struggled to find a system for the removal of these vehicles. We created a parking ordinance, installed permanent signs, worked with the towing company, and still in 2008 the City tried to take away our right to remove the vehicles. The Chief of Police actually mandated that the farmers themselves should bear the cost of removal. It took almost 8 months of negotiating and petitioning the City Council before finally the city attorney was brought in to figure it all out. In the end it was determined that because we had a no-parking tow-away ordinance in place, it was the obligation and duty of the city to cite the illegally parked vehicles and organize their removal.

This was a major breakthrough for us, saving the farmers a significant amount of money and setting the precedent for other areas in a similar battle. None of this would have been possible without a commitment to working closely with City officials and keeping open and honest communication. Support for us during this struggle also came from the local business community. We found that through being involved with our local Chamber of Commerce, attending business functions, and actively engaging local store owners to make sure their needs were met as well as those of our market that we in turn get generous support back. All of these things are about the preservation of the sense of community that is so vital to a successful farmers' market.

### **A Community in Support of a Local Food Economy**

If there is one thing that we have here in Humboldt that may in fact be hard to find elsewhere it might just be the unbelievable support we receive from a community of individuals who are incredibly committed to the cause. Humboldt County has been attracting people who seek a lifestyle of independence, open space, and consciousness since the sixties. We are extremely fortunate to live in a place where the majority of the population is aware of the importance of local food systems. Not only do we receive tremendous support at our markets, we also have two food cooperatives and a number of independent natural food stores that have been very successful in the region and are an important source for information and active participants in the area.

A prime example of how committed the region is to local foods is the fact that each year the Humboldt County Board of Supervisor's along with the Cities of Eureka and Arcata give a proclamation that September will be "Local Food Month." Numerous local groups carry out events in support of local food during this month and involve the community in supporting our local food economy, especially at the farmers' markets. The North Coast Coops have instituted an Eat Local Challenge that encourages local residents to take the challenge to eat only local or locally produced foods for the month of September with a variety of levels available to choose from. This has led to the creation of a number of locally based cookbooks and gardening guides as well as fun activities like the 250 mile pot-luck. This challenge has become immensely popular and contributes to a rise in attendance and sales at our markets.

With a committed community of conscious individuals we are able to carry out these types of fun and educational events. These events contribute to the larger push to shop local and support the farmers' markets in our community. As always it is most important to keep in mind the local culture of your region and to be adaptable to changing with the times. Linking the local food movement with similar cultural or educational activities will help ensure community support for the movement. Using these ideas as an example you can develop similar type events for your local region that will encourage shopping locally at your farmers' markets and support the culture of your community.

## **Management and Local Knowledge**

The choices you make in who will manage your markets are more important than may be evident. The market managers are the ones who are ultimately responsible for the organization of the market and achieving success. A recent study conducted by the University of Oregon examines the relationship between the size of a market and the management strategies that will be most successful. This study states that the “number and intensity of the tasks required will be relative to the size of the market” (Stephenson, et al., p.3). This study also identifies the importance of having a set of rules as part of the successful management of a market. As discussed above, there are many rules mandated by the State, but rules specific to your markets that are agreed upon by your farmers are equally important.

Identifying the needs of the market and what type of management team and system of rules is most appropriate for your market is vital to the success of the farmers, the customers, and the organization. An important distinction must be made between responsibilities of the farmers and responsibilities of the managers so that the farmer can be sure he or she is meeting all of their obligations to the market and the greater organization. In our organization all the farmers are given the opportunity to discuss and vote on all important rules and decisions. While the management carries out the vast majority of the work, very few decisions are made without the input of the whole group. This ensures that everyone is aware of all changes to the rules and that the rules are unique to our situation and our farmers.

A management team that is local and has extensive farming knowledge is very beneficial to a market organization. The Oregon State Study focused almost exclusively on the relationship between the size of your market and your management team. As one of their interviewees points out, however, the breadth of knowledge a manager must possess changes with size and with time (Stephenson et al., p.12). The stricter the rules governing farmers' markets become, the more competitive they become and the larger, the more knowledgeable the manager must become. We have found that in order to preserve the locally focused nature of a farmers' market, a locally knowledgeable manager is vital. Because the market becomes a community gathering space the manager will be faced with a wide-ranging scope of questions from merchants and customers alike. Similarly, the more your managers know about farming the better equipped they will be to understand the needs of the farmers. As my colleague David MacCuish simply put it, "If I didn't care about these people, I wouldn't do a job good. I *really* care about these people."

While it is definitely the hard work and dedication of the farmers themselves that make farmers' market a viable economic sector and a community gathering space, a qualified manager is an invaluable asset to the market. Farmers themselves have the enormous task of working the land, planning for the year, harvesting, washing and prepping the produce, and getting to market. While they are busy with the duties on the farm, someone must be responsible for obtaining the necessary permits, paying the bills, and orchestrating the difficult task of mapping out the market each week. Because farming is a delicate and constantly changing lifestyle no farmer knows for sure whether

he or she will be ready for a market each week. Our farmers have up until 48 hours before each market to cancel or confirm their space. This makes mapping out the market a last minute task, but allows the farmers control over their own independent business and their lives. It is always important to bear in mind that they come first. Some market organizations have instituted contracts and seasonal obligations, but we give our farmers the freedom to choose up until the last minute.

Having things set in place for the market is extremely important to the farmers and this is the primary task of the market manager. This often requires numerous hours of phone calls and emails, assessing the space available and who is coming each week. While the total number of hours the manager will work each week will vary, in order to ensure that you have a qualified manager the compensation for their time must be sufficient to ensure dedication and attention to the needs of the market.

As identified in the Oregon State study, a small and dedicated group of individuals has proven more effective in management than simply more people. The relationship that forms between the farmers and the management team is very important to the health of the market. We have a core staff of four individuals and a handful of supporting staff that work as independent contractors. Together we run five markets that include over 110 farmers and upwards of 15 food vendors.

## **Community Building**

Creating a space that supports the culture of your community is perhaps one of the most important aspects of a successful farmers' market. Part of what makes a farmers' market unique to any other shopping experience, other than the fact that you are buying direct from the farmer, is that the market is a place where your customers want to spend their time. At our markets we provide free local music for the enjoyment of our customers and farmers, and we believe this greatly benefits the markets. Having local musicians ensures that the customers and community members who are visiting the market will enjoy the selection of music we have chosen. Having music draws people who may not even be shopping at the market but come to simply enjoy the free show and socialize. The longer you can keep someone at the market the better the chances they will start shopping or spent even more. This is just one of the many techniques a market can employ to ensure you are creating a space for community building. Simply put, community building is activities that support the needs and wants of a place and its people.

We constantly get support and feedback from shoppers who are visiting our markets from out of the area and they continuously remark that our Saturday market is the best farmers' market they have ever attended. Because our Saturday market is in Arcata, a university town, we keep in mind the students and their visiting families. We reach out to the students through advertising in the university newspaper, attending job fairs and non-profit fairs, and attending local festivals. The more the students are familiar

with our organization's name and the more they understand that the market is about socializing as much as shopping for fresh produce, the likelier they are to attend.

Farmers' market merchandise created by a local artist is a big hit with the visiting families of students. For many years now we have had the privilege of working with an artist who explores the local farms throughout the season, finds a favorite scene and paints a watercolor. We then have the image digitized and silk-screened onto T-shirts and tote bags. We use exclusively local producers and organic cotton. These pieces have become locally famous and as popular with our regular customers and farmers as they are for families to bring home as a reminder of where their young students are studying. The number of people who wear our merchandise exemplifies the pride that our community has in our markets.

We make space available for local non-profit organizations to have informational tables at all of our markets free of charge. This provides a venue for these valuable organizations to do promotion and outreach to the community and also provides our customers with some interesting information and something more to engage with while at the market. We also partner with other organizations to hold special events during the Saturday market, this draws customers that might otherwise not come to a farmers' market. Examples include an annual Oyster Festival, a Pastel exhibition where artists cover the entire sidewalk with beautiful images, and a Harvest Festival highlighting the bounty of the Fall season and Halloween.

For all of these reasons, and the simple fact that good local and seasonal produce encourages people to engage with their community, farmers' markets can become a

central space for community building that many people rely on for their weekly social time.

## Finances

There are numerous expenses associated with running a CFM, and simultaneously there is a need to generate income. The common structure for organizations such as the NCGA is to charge vendors a fee per market that goes directly towards the operating costs of the organizations. Many people wonder what it costs to run a farmers' market and the answer is actually fairly simple. The State of California charges CFMs \$00.60 per vendor, per market. On top of this fee there are the costs for events permits from cities and counties, insurance, salary for employees, and other site supplies. Obviously, as in life, there are always hidden costs and unexpected expenses that will arise, but the basic formula is easy to estimate.

In order to ensure that all costs will be covered the organization must decide how much to charge for the vendor fee. Across the state endless possible structures exist, the NCGA charge approximately 10% of sales with a minimum of \$15 and a maximum of \$32 per market.<sup>2</sup> This varies from our weekday markets to the Saturday market. Some organizations charge a straight percentage, while others have no set structure and vary from vendor to vendor. Whatever method you choose, setting a yearly budget and calculating the necessary income to meet your expenses will help create a base formula. From here there are a few tricks and tools to lower expenses and manage your finances.

As an organization that manages one or more CFM, you qualify for non-profit status. There are numerous groups like our own and the Pacific Coast Farmers' Market Association that operate as tax-exempt non-profit organizations. However, for a number

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<sup>2</sup> For details and updates on NCGA fee structure visit [www.humfarm.org](http://www.humfarm.org)

of years we struggled to attain this status for a variety of reasons. Many lawyers may not be all too familiar with the concept of a growers' association or CFM management group. Identifying a lawyer and accountant familiar with these topics will greatly benefit your organization.

Customers often ask us where the money that we collect from the farmers as stall fees actually goes. People don't often realize the expenses associated with operating a farmers' market. At the same time I have encountered numerous groups who want to organize a market in their hometown but feel like to costs will be prohibitive. While it does take money, having the right tools can help you cut unnecessary costs and make it affordable.

The biggest expenses associated with running a CFM are definitely taxes, liability insurance, workers compensation insurance, and permits. Because these are all necessary costs, the best way to avoid spending more than you need to is by finding a way to become a tax-exempt organization or by partnering with an existing tax-exempt non-profit organization. We currently have attained the exemption under the State of California, but are still waiting for a decision from the Federal Income Revenue Services.

Another important decision you must make when starting a CFM management organization would be whether to seek grant funding or to operate independently. Our organization operates almost exclusively independently which allows us control over our finances and ensures some amount of sustainability into the future. Relying on grants for the majority of your funding can be risky as getting funding again is always uncertain in the future. We have found grants very useful in helping with special projects such as the

introduction of food stamps at our markets. Through the grant funds we were able to purchase special Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) processing machines that allow individuals to spend food stamps money at the farmers market. This has been a tremendous boost to our markets and allowed us to target a population in need of the nutritional foods we provide easy and equal access.

Seeking advice from other CFM organizations about finances, taxes, and grants is always the best first step. Always remember that someone has probably already encountered whatever problem you are facing and can offer useful tools for managing it. While it takes some money to run an organization like ours, with the right kind of fee structure in place and proper management of income and expenses you can gradually work your way up to a healthy savings to put back into your markets. For many years the NCGA struggled to maintain a consistent budget and a clear and transparent bookkeeping system. Today with the help of professional computer software, our tax-exempt non-profit status, and good management we have consistently has an operating budget of close to \$100,000. A monumental moment happened last Spring when our membership voted to accept the budget recommendation of our Board of Directors without discussion, quite an impressive accomplishment.

## **Networking with Related Organizations**

Linkages is the term in economics for the relationship that forms when you network between related and supporting organizations. The development of linkages has been shown to be an important part of supporting economic industries. Farmers' markets are a unique economic market and finding support from other related groups can be difficult, however once you identify supporting groups the relationship that forms will be mutually beneficial. We have formed some very useful relationships with other local organizations over the years that have become invaluable.

Food For People (FFP) first opened in 1979 as a small food pantry and today coordinates access to food for everyone throughout Humboldt County. FFP is based in Eureka and supplies food pantries throughout the region as well as coordinates drop-off and pick-up food baskets and countless educational activities.

FFP operates a gleaning program at our four weekday markets as well as other markets in the county. This means their employees come to the market and collect whatever the farmers are willing to donate of what is left at the end of market and distribute it directly to those in need. The program is responsible for providing tens of thousands of pounds of fresh, local produce each year to people who otherwise could not afford access to this nutritional asset. FFP also operates an annual Fresh Food Drive where customers purchase directly from the farmers at market and donate directly, this is meant to be a thank you for all of the donations the farmers do through the year with the gleaning program.

The other organization we have been working with for over 17 years is the Arcata Food Project, formally the North Coast AIDS Project. The project is housed through the Open Door Clinic of Arcata and services clients living with HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis C, and other chronic diseases. Coordinators from Open Door and volunteers glean produce left at the end of our Saturday market and then distribute it directly to their clients in a safe environment where they feel comfortable. This service provides invaluable access to fresh produce helping to promote health in this particular community. The total amount of produce donated each year by the NCGA farmers is over 90,000 pounds.

Another of our main partners is the local chapter of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), a statewide organization meant to serve as a hub for community projects relating to the region's food system. The local chapter was born directly out of our markets and a desire to do more than just provide a venue for direct sales of local agriculture. Today the chapter operates Farm-to-School programs which bring school children to the farmers' markets and local farmers. CAFF also participates in a variety of market development activities aimed at promoting local foods in restaurants and institutions such as hospitals and schools. CAFF also actively engages with current policy planning processes to ensure the best interests of the farmers are being accounted for.

This relationship has resulted in numerous benefits for the NCGA as well as our individual farmers. CAFF has helped to establish institutional sales accounts with a number of our farmers and Humboldt State University, local hospitals, and the Arcata Unified School District. CAFF has also been actively running a campaign to help local restaurants transition towards using more local produce through their "Buy Fresh Buy

Local” program. Finally, CAFF has been also been in the process of establishing cooperative distribution routes to aid farmers in working together to transport their goods to the outlying parts of the county, utilizing existing companies’ routes and trucks, and ultimately significantly decreasing the number of trucks and the roads and miles the food has to travel.

Another partner organization we work directly with is the Arcata Service Center (ASC). The ASC provides food assistance and helps provide jobs to those transitioning and recovering from substance abuse or suffering from homelessness. ASC employees have been providing much need support services for us for many years now including the set-up and breakdown of our traffic barricades, a very important and necessary task.

All of the partnerships we have with these groups and the countless others provide us a support network. Working within your own region you can identify potential partners and establish relationships that can help both your markets and those partners’ needs.

### **Giving Priority to Local Farmers**

While up to this point I have not made a clear argument as to which of these key topics is most important or the order in which they need to be addressed or achieved, I think it is safe to say that giving priority to local farmers is by far the most key element in a successful and robust farmers' market. Here in Humboldt County we are blessed with some of the richest and most fertile soils, favorable weather patterns, and a variety of microclimates that allows for the concentration of so many successful farmers who propagate an amazing array of varieties of produce. We have a year round growing season along the coast for many products and our market season, which runs April through November, could easily be extended. Within Humboldt we grow everything from peaches and lemons to chestnuts, Asian pears, grapes and kiwis, pomegranates, quince, celery, Jerusalem artichokes, barely, wheat, shallots, and an endless variety of the more common market produce like heirloom tomatoes and apples. At our markets we also have local grassfed beef, lamb, goat, and rabbit along with free-range chicken eggs, honey, organic wines, mushrooms, hand-spun alpaca, llama, and angora bunny products.

All of the above named products come from within Humboldt County lines. We chose to limit our markets to Humboldt farmers because the abundance of local farmers; we had to place a limit because we have space restrictions and can only accommodate a certain number of producers. Now, even if your regional distinction isn't your county line, keeping the focus on localization of food production and always giving priority to your local farmers is a necessity for a successful farmers' market. The essence of the farmers' market is directly related to the fact that they are a purely local event organized

by locals, featuring local products and meant to serve the local community. While farmers' markets will always be a wonderful stopping point on any family vacation, it is your regular, faithful, weekly customers that will make your market successful and viable.

Numerous studies have shown that the best way to increase sales at your market is through increasing the amount of produce your regular customers are buying, not necessarily recruiting new customers. Getting an individual to shift from buying their weekly goods at the supermarket and buying fresh produce exclusively from the market is the ultimate reward and the best boost to your markets income. Henceforth, when your customers are locals they want to see their community represented behind the tables too. They want to be able to chat about the weather this week and how it affected the crops. They want to know exactly where the farm is that grew their lettuce. So, even if your "local" encompasses three counties in Southern California or all of the state of Maine, always give priority to local farmers.

## **Conclusion**

This manual was born out of two years of work as a dedicated farmers' market manager and a rich 31 years history of a very successful and entirely unique association of family farmers. Our experiences here in Humboldt County have proven that through hard work, adapting with time, and a commitment to the local a vibrant and robust local food economy can be sustained through successful farmers' markets. Looking towards a future of greater food independence, the tools provided herein will become increasingly useful across this country and across geographic and cultural divides. The lessons learned in my short, but intensive, experience and over the course of the life of the NCGA can be applied or adapted anywhere.

While I did identify a gap in the literature regarding the management of farmers markets, I acknowledge that this work can only fill a small part of that gap. I hope to inspire others working in the agriculture industry to reflect upon the importance of their work and experiences and to share those with the world as well. The lessons learned on the ground have proven repeatedly throughout history to be some of the most useful knowledge, however simple or routine they might seem.

Farming is a way of life, a tradition that is a part of the roots of modern American culture. Unfortunately the traditions have been lost in many parts of the country and certainly in the mainstream, globalized system of food production. Family farmers who make their life's work through direct marketing at farmers' markets are reviving a tradition and a culture vital to the health of our communities, our bodies, and our future. We have already begun to see a rise in the popularity of farmers' markets and also a

marked increase in the number of young farmers just beginning. It is my hope that my work here can provide some useful tools to aid them in this task.

The modern global food system is immense and raging out of control becoming highly mechanized, chemically dependent, and ultimately destructive. While farmers' markets are not a single solution to these problems, they are an alternative system that supplies communities and individuals a kind of nourishment beyond the healthful benefits of a local, seasonal and organic diet. Farmers' markets are helping to revive community spirit and inspire community activism. I hope that some day soon everyone can enjoy access to fresh, local produce delivered directly by a local farmer.

I would encourage everyone reading this to visit your local farmers' markets and experience it in a new way. Think beyond the bounty of the harvest but also to the unbelievable hard work the farmers have accomplished, and also those who run the market. Remember, buy fresh, buy local, and always thank your farmer.

