

Local Farmers in the Shadows of Monopolies

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Food supply has progressed tremendously in the past few decades. Our health is now being affected by the food we feed ourselves. According to the USDA Agriculture Fact Book, the National Center for Health Statistics stated that “an astounding 62 percent of adult Americans were overweight in 2000, up from 46 percent in 1980. Twenty-seven percent of adults were so far overweight that they were classified as obese (at least 30 pounds above their healthy weight)—twice the percentage classified as such in 1960. Alarming, an upward trend in obesity is also occurring for children in the United States (P 140).” Becoming obese is not just about the weight we gain, but more importantly the diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol that comes with it.

Our society has become highly dependent on processed food. There is a big gap between the intake of processed food and that of natural food. As the world population has gone past 7 billion, it has increased the demand for food. The food industry is one that has seen great, but what do we know about the food we eat? Where does it come from? Does it travel a long way?

For the past few years, I have grown more curious about the food I eat. I came to question if the fruits and vegetables I bought came from local farmers. What are the challenges local farmers, both women and men, are facing today? Agriculture is the backbone of the North Carolina economy. It is mostly comprised of small local farmers. In the United States, one third of the farms are operated by women. The few women farmers I talked to at the local Farmers Market informed me many of the farmers worry about making profit. Large grocery stores and supermarkets buy their produce from farmers that deliver large amounts. On the other hand, the small local farmer can only sell his or her produce at local markets, some grocery stores, restaurants and schools.

I. Shifting Era towards Industrial Agriculture

Peter Pringle, author of *Food, Inc.*, states in his book, “In developed countries during the last half of the twentieth century, the average crop yields of wheat, corn, and rice doubled or tripled, the number of tractors in the world rose from seven million to twenty-eight million... The production increases drove down prices paid to farmers, while farmers’ costs rose. The loss of the family farm became the sad anthem of rural America as the nation and the rest of the developed world shifted to industrial agriculture.”

Industrial agriculture is feeding millions of people. Its benefits range from cheaper cost of food to increased production for export. At the same time, it comes at a great cost to the environment and small farmers. Large commercial farms produce most of the food we eat, though there are only a few of them. On the other hand, what small farmers produce is significantly a smaller portion of the overall food production in the US. However, the small farmers make up the majority of farmers in this country. A balance between the two is needed.

North Carolina’s agriculture industry has been growing. The Research Triangle Park has been attracting many people from across the world. Consumers in North Carolina have been buying more healthy foods and locally grown. Two hundred farmers’ markets are estimated to be present in North Carolina. “Consumer interest in local, organic and sustainably produced foods continues to increase despite the recent downturn in the economy. National sales of organic foods have almost reached the \$25 billion mark and local food sales are expected to reach \$7 billion by 2011 (Curtis, Jennifer, et. al).”

II. North Carolina at a Glance

The North Carolina economy is highly dependent on Agriculture. Mike Walden of the College of Agriculture and Life Science at NCSU, shares that the agriculture industry employs 17% of North Carolina's total employees, 688,000 out of 4 million. Just in 2008, the state's Gross State Product was around \$400 billion. Fifteen to sixteen percent of the income came from agriculture was specific to food, which in sum was \$61.5 billion. Agriculture with the inclusion of food, fiber and forestry industries accounts for \$73.4 billion, 18.6% of the \$400 billion. It is clear that agriculture plays a major role in the economy, culture and livelihood of North Carolina.

Every five years the United States Department of Agriculture performs a census. The 2007 Census of Agriculture illustrates that there are more women farmers in 2007 than there were in 2002. There are about 3.3 million farm operators in the US where more than 1 million are women operators. Women farmers make up 30.2% of farmers in the United States.

In the US, there are 306,209 farms (64,264,566 acres) whose principal operators are women (2007 Census of Agriculture, p 630). Eighty-five percent of women operated farms that are fully owned by the farmers themselves and 66% of farms that are male operated are owned by the men themselves. It means that farmers are not producing for an employer or are not renting farm lands. They grow their crops on their own land.

Today, the state of North Carolina has 52,913 farms which total 8.4 million acres. The average farm is 160 acres (2007 Census of Agriculture, p 281). The 2007 Census of Agriculture, further shows that North Carolina has 7,016 farms or 514,123 acres of farm land that is principal women operated (2007 Census of Agriculture, p 630). Women operators make up about 27 percent of farming activities. Across the United States, there are 942,035 farms with a woman

operator. The total women operators are 985,192 in the US. North Carolina has 19,167 farms that are operated by women of 20,146 (2007 Census of Agriculture, p 631).

	2007	2002	% Change
All Farm Operators	3,337,450	3,115,172	+7
Women Farm Operators	1,008,943	847,832	+19
Women as % of Total	30%	27%	+11
All Principal Farm Operators	2,204,792	2,128,982	+4
Women Principal Operators	306,209	237,819	+29
Women as % of Total	14%	11%	+24

Fig1. Women and agriculture

As shown in Fig 1 in the year 2002 up to 2007, women involvement in agriculture has increased. The number of all farm operators has increased by 7%. The percentage change within the five years for women farm operators was impressively 19%. Most farms in the United States are family run. Hence, it is wonderful that the number of women farm operators is increasing. Women as principal operators has seen a 29% increase since 2002.

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Services shared its National Directory of Farmers Markets which is updated annually since 1994. Farmers Markets are becoming more popular in the United States.

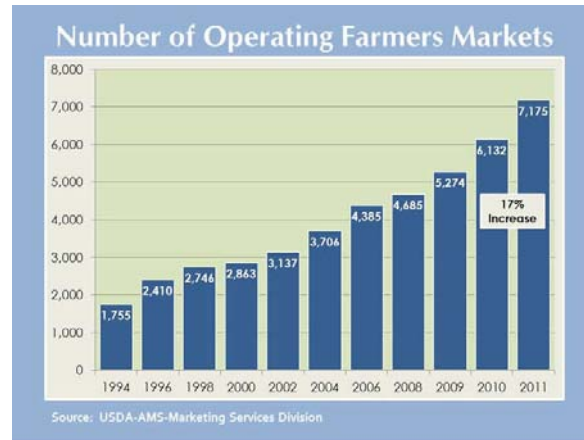


Fig 2. Farmers Markets in the United States

The above figure shows that in 1994 the number of Farmers Markets in the US was just 1,755. Last year, it came to 7,175. Since 2010 alone, Farmers Markets have seen a 17% increase. The North Carolina Farmers Markets Association states that there are over 200 farmers markets in North Carolina.

III. Fresh Produce to Schools

Obesity since the 1980's has increased both in adults and children. The obesity in children increased from 7% to 10% between 1994 and 2000. Between the early 1990's and 2008, adult men who are obese rose from 19% to 32% and adult women's obesity rose from 25% to 35% (Health, United States 2010, p 21 and 22).

Living in a time where there are abundant fast food restaurants and packaged food has brought about increased obesity, blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol. The pursuit towards a better health has increased the demand of fresh fruits and vegetables across the nation. Hence, bringing change in what we consume and where we get it from. What better way to leave a root than by educating children and providing them fresh fruits and vegetables at schools. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA&CS), Food Distribution

and Marketing Divisions and the U.S. Department of Defense Produce Merchandising Office (DOD) started a North Carolina Farm to School Program in 1997 (NC Farm to School). The program was placed so that local farmers can sell their fresh fruits and vegetables to schools in North Carolina. This initiative connects students to their local farmers and educates them about where their produce comes from.

The NC Farm to School program was first started through the distribution of North Carolina grown strawberries. It has now expanded to include tomatoes, sweet potatoes, different varieties of apples, cantaloupes, broccoli, blueberries and watermelons. These locally grown produce consumption encourage local farmers to cultivate more fruits and vegetables to meet the demand. "NCDA&CS Food Distribution Division works with the Child Nutrition Directors across the state to see what items of produce the school cafeterias can utilize. Next, as the various produce items come into season, Food Distribution sends out order forms to the school districts to verify quantities needed" (NC Farm to School).

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Market Division along with the North Carolina commodity associations and different farmers' works to harvest and pack the produce. It is then shipped to storages units with climate controlled facilities to maintain the quality of the produce. The Food Distribution Division picks up and delivers the produce to the North Carolina schools. There are also educational materials and promotions that are given out by the Marketing Division to bring further awareness to students. Students learn about the lives of these farmers, what they produce and when they started.

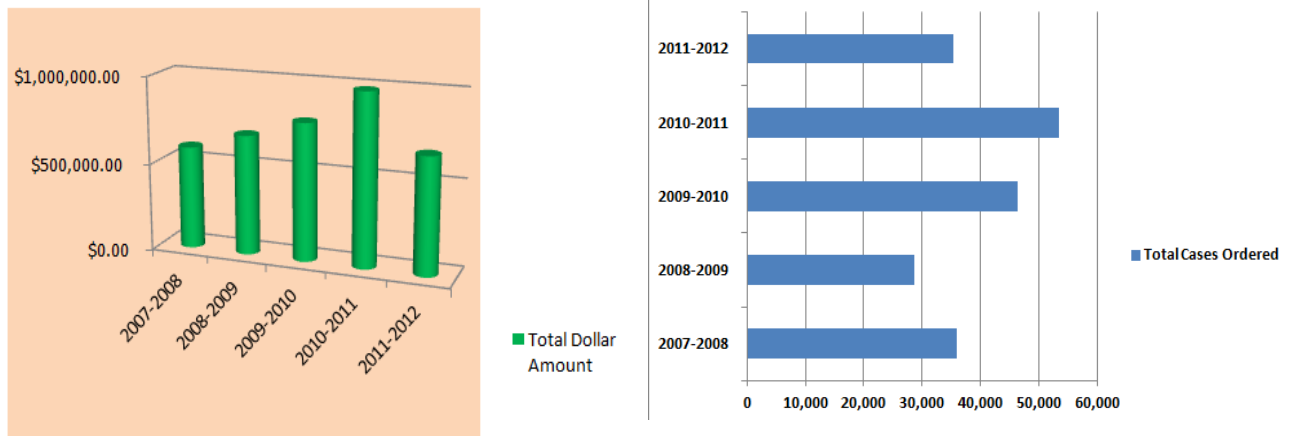


Fig 3. Total Dollar Amount earned and Total Cases Ordered from NC Farm to School

The above two figures show the revenue and total cases ordered through the NC Farm to School Program. The first figure (left) shows there has been a steady increase up to 2011. The Total Dollar Amount earned under the year 2011-2012 is only showing fall season earnings only. Hence, when school closes at the beginning of summer, the spring season earnings will be added to the 2011-2012 Total Dollar Amount. The second figure (right) demonstrates the number of cases of produce demanded by the North Carolina Schools. The timeframe following 2007-2008 there was a decline in the cases ordered. Until 2010-2011 a steady increase up to 53,000 cases had brought in revenue. The top bar, 2011-2012, is currently showing fall season ordered cases only. According to the NC Farm to School website, there are about 20 growers that supply to the school cafeterias. Seventeen to nineteen different crops are delivered, such as tomatoes, apples...Etc

In 2009, the General Assembly of North Carolina passed House Bill 1823. The North Carolina Department of Agriculture will be given \$65,000 “to establish a position in the Department dedicated to the administration and operation of the Farm to School Program”, (House Bill 1832 page 1). The bill further states, that an annual report be submitted on the progress of the North Carolina Farm to School Program and childhood obesity.

IV. A Farmer's Share

The United States exports more agriculture than it imports. The U.S. Agricultural Trade Totals for November 2011 had exports of about \$12.5 billion and imports of \$8.6 billion (Global Agricultural Trade Systems). For millennia, farmers have been the backbone of society. In the past, farmers mostly did not own the farmlands. Feudal systems in different countries had pressured farmers to donate huge sums of their crops to their rulers. In the 21 century, problems such as those experienced by farmers decades ago are prevalent in very few societies. The hardship of today's farmer in the United States is the inability to make good profit on his or her hard earned crop. How much is a farmer's share? Patrick Canning is a senior economist of the USDA's Economic Research Service. In his publication, *A Revised and Expanded Food Dollar Series: A Better Understanding of Our Food Costs*, Canning analyzed data to determine what a dollar pays.



Fig 4. What a dollar pays

The figure above shows how small a farm share is in the 2008 Marketing bill. The farm share was 15.8% and the marketing share 84.2% (Canning IV). According to Canning,

“marketing bill, which identified the costs of marketing the raw farm commodities contained in a typical dollar’s worth of U.S.- Produced food and the share of the typical food dollar going to farmers. The costs of marketing farm commodities to U.S. food consumers were an average of 4 cents higher per consumer food dollar than was previously reported between 1993 and 2006. In 2008, the farm share was almost 16 percent” (Canning IV).

With the 20,000 to 35,000 types of foods sold in grocery stores and supermarkets, only 15.8% went towards the farmers. The 2008 Industry group series illustrates that 11.6¢ went to farm and agribusinesses (Canning IV). Canning further states that “the farm and agribusiness share differs from the farm share in the current marketing bill series ... in that it does not include nonfarm value added. In 2008, 4.2 cents of the 15.8-cent farm share was value added from nonfarm supply chain industry groups, such as energy, transportation, and financial services.” What is more shocking is that the highest share is accounted in food services and food processing. The above figure clearly clarifies where a dollar is allocated to whether in marketing or industry group of food.

V. Rural North Carolina

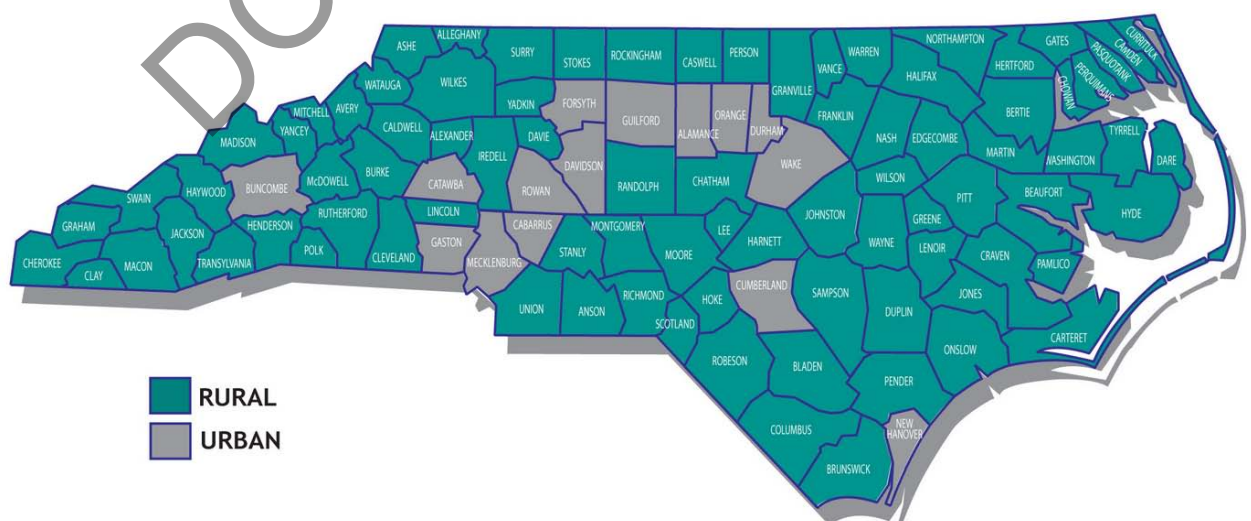


Fig 5. Rural and Urban counties in North Carolina

The map above shows the 100 counties of North Carolina differentiated between rural and urban areas. Around 85 of those counties are the rural parts of North Carolina. The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, Inc. is a private nonprofit organization that serves 85 counties with a mission to “develop, promote and implement sound economic strategies to improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians (NC Rural Center).” The N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, Inc. further clarifies that,

“The state's farming community, however, continues to be challenged by a number of powerful forces, including natural disasters, regulatory pressures and events in foreign markets. As a result, the number of farms and the number of farm jobs are declining rapidly. One underlying cause is the small percentage of the value of retail food products that is retained by the farmer - only about 20 cents on the dollar. While the value of all agribusiness-related production and distribution continues to increase in North Carolina, the farmer's share has remained relatively flat” (*Rural/Urban Counties in North Carolina*).

The rural part of North Carolina has a population of 4.5 million. In fact, 1.7 million live in poverty or teeter on the edge (*Rural North Carolina in the Aftermath of the Great Recession*, p 5). The rural North Carolina has two sides. One is growing and attracting more settlers and the other is comprised of people struggling to make it up the poverty line. The above publication relates that rural folks have gone through tough hardships in their lives. Just as they are making it their way up, a sudden crisis occurs beyond their control. For the past several decades, there are four occurrences that have left a great scar among the rural population (*Rural North Carolina in the Aftermath of the Great Recession*, p 6).

The first was the 1996 Hurricane, Fran, which hit the southern coast of North Carolina. It brought great damage to businesses, farm lands, houses and public facilities. It took the lives of thirty-seven people and the total damages were worth around \$5 billion. The second one was also another hurricane that ravished two-thirds of North Carolina, Hurricane Floyd of 1999. It is remembered as the worst natural disaster in this country's history. It flooded the rural parts with floodwaters and 20 inches of rain. Floyd took the lives of fifty-two people and destroyed 8,000 homes. Neighborhoods were under water for weeks. It damaged about 67,000 houses. "Crop damage was extensive, and huge numbers of livestock drowned – including more than 30,500 hogs and 2.8 million poultry... Twenty-four wastewater treatment plants had to close because of damage. Public water systems and private wells were contaminated. Total damages exceeded \$6 billion (Rural North Carolina in the Aftermath of the Great Recession, p 6)."

The third disaster was the 2001-02 recession. It was the automation, outsourcing and closing of the manufacturing jobs that were big employment opportunities in the rural communities. A majority of the rural counties announced layoffs that totaled 70,000. The full impact of the recession was felt, "North Carolina moved from the 12th lowest employment rate in the nation to the 11th highest. Rural unemployment, which hit 7.6 percent in 2002, consistently exceeded the state average" (Rural North Carolina in the Aftermath of the Great Recession). Lastly was the impact of the 2007-09 droughts. There was great water shortage. The drought affected three summer growing seasons and livestock. Let us not forget the global financial recessions during these times as well. In conclusion, rural North Carolina has been going from one hardship to another on a national scale.

VI. The Produce Box

The Produce Box was founded by Courtney Tellefsen. It is a company dedicated to the delivery of locally grown and farm fresh produce to your door every week. The Produce Box only works with North Carolina farmers and envisions stronger relationship between the community and local farmers. The box contains fresh fruits and vegetables, depending on what is in season, that are delivered in the NC Farm Fresh boxes. Members of the Produce Box have the wonderful opportunity to take part in local wine tastings, farm visits and community garden programs (The Produce Box).

The Produce Box is a community of women and a few men, as well as their families who are dedicated to delivering fresh produce to customers. This organization was first started in 2008. It was first named the Produce Connection. However, it later changed to the Produce Box due to the fact that there was another business with that name. Courtney Tellefsen was inspired to start this business after reading some books. She soon began a quest to understand where our food comes from, where it is grown and the lives of farmers. Courtney researched other ways of getting food besides the traditional way of buying it through the grocery store or supermarkets. She was shocked to discover that North Carolina was the first place to experience a loss of farms in the last two decades.

Courtney learned more about the benefits of supporting local farmers from her friend Dr. Nancy Creamer whom is a distinguished horticulture professor, as well as of sustainable and community-based food systems at North Carolina State University. Dr. Creamer is also the director for the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS). What Courtney found out was that the average food travels about 1500 miles from the farmland to our dinner plates. She

also came to understand that spending 5% of our grocery shopping on locally grown foods adds \$792 million to the local economy.

The Produce Box is a for profit business that runs April through November. It follows the North Carolina agricultural season. The company is on its 5th successful season. Courtney was first involved in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). This group is where a community of people come together to support agri-businesses. They will then buy shares from farms in a seasonal operation. One hundred people put \$500 to \$650 each and every individual will get 1/100 of the farmer's harvest. It accounts to about a bag of produce. These bags are brought to a central location where the customers would go pick them up. With the CSA model, there was less flexibility and it was inconvenient for working parents. There is no canceling option or skipping weeks for people going on vacation. The pickup times were specific frames that worked for some people and did not work for others. All in all, the Community Supported Agriculture would come from the farmer whose shares one bought. This signifies that whatever is grown on that one farm is what is in the bag, which leaves less room for variety of produce. If the crop fails that season then it is a loss for the farmer and the customer because there is no replacement.

Courtney then came up with an idea that would be of convenient for a lot of people because time is precious. Courtney approached her neighbors about her idea of delivering produce to people's homes. In 2008, twenty-five of her neighbors in Quail Hollow agreed to be customers to her newly developed company. She hired three of her friends and soon started serving 200 families. Customers were recommending the Produce Box to their neighbors, family and friends. Demand was increasing quickly. In 2009, the company started with 450 customers and ended with 950. In 2011, that number increased to about 3500 loyal customers.

The Produce Box has been gaining members for some specific reasons. However, they had to face big challenges in order to succeed. First, they had to comprehend the reasons that prevent farmers from selling their produce to large buyers. In order to provide a solution, the problem must be well understood first. Many farmers are surrounded by uncertainties of weather which leads to crop failure. This prevents them from providing consistent crops. They also do not have a packaging infrastructure. Hence they do not use standard packaging because it adds more expense and reduces the profit they are struggling to make. Furthermore, they do not have the logistics and delivery channels. Lastly, they do not have large storage capacity and no coordinated ordering.

The Produce Box started by locating local farmers. The company did not want to be dependent on just a few farmers. They wanted to put their eggs in different baskets to spread the risk of crop failure and at the same time try to benefit as many farmers as they could handle. The company now works with 30 farmers. Five to seven of those farms are owned by women farmers. The next challenge was finding enough diversity of products within these farms. For instance, if all 30 of the farmers grew the same 10 types of fruits and vegetables, it becomes hard to provide the customers the variety of produce they are seeking. Today, the farmers all together provide about 85 different products. Setting a price that allows the farmer to make profit and at the same time is affordable to the customer was not an easy task.

Lastly, another challenge that the Produce Box overcame was logistics. Cooperation and communication is the fuel for the success of logistics. The farmers bring their produce to the warehouse that is operated by the Produce Box. The company has 30 people working at the warehouse that pack the boxes. Then these boxes are delivered to people's homes by 85 neighborhood coordinators, who are also employees of the Produce Box. These people are

comprised of many stay at home moms and a few dads. It takes a maximum of two days from the time the produce is delivered by the farmers to the warehouse to the time it is delivered to people's homes. The company has one crop-coordinator whom makes sure that the crops are fine and sometimes advises the farmers.

Every week members will get an email with the 5 different options. One box always contains just organically grown produce that has not been sprayed with pesticides. Courtney stated that currently the interest in organic produce is about 20%. The other four boxes are conventional produce which about 80% of the members buy. However, Courtney is optimistic about the future. Organic food production is becoming more prevalent. States, such as California, have become organic food consumption havens. The organic movement in North Carolina has also been drawing in more consumers. In 2007, the state had 418 farms that were in organic production and 376 more were being converted to organic production (2007 Census of Agriculture, p 603). The first step is to get more people to eat fresh produce then. What will follow is that people will become more interested in organic produce.

On the other hand, customers of the Produce Box have the option of buying a box that just has different fruits in it and no vegetables. The one box that the majority of the customers get is known as the "default box". The offerings in these boxes always changes week to week which adds great variety for customers who do not want the same thing every week. There is a local contact that lives in your neighborhood and is ready to answer any questions or address any concerns. As a result, it builds more relationships within the community. The Produce Box also offers special-order programs for customers wanting to order bigger amounts of a specific item. Besides fruits and vegetables, the Produce Box delivers products, such as local honey, jams,

Lilly's Maple Butter, cheese, bread, salsa and more that are made by local men and women as add-ons to the box.

Members of the Produce Box receive emails about potential future items that will be added in the coming week's boxes, as well as recopies and more importantly email from the farmers or about how the farmers are doing. For instance, Courtney gave an example of a farmer whose cucumbers were completely damaged. There was great sympathy towards the farmer from customers because of the connections that resulted from knowing the farmer. Customers are less picky. They were encouraging and much more understanding of the farmer's situation than if it was just a farmer supplying to large sellers whose customers might not know where their food comes from. Hence, they might not hear or know what happened to the farmers produce.

The Produce Box program is very easy to join. Customers enroll at the website (theproducebox.com). There is an \$18 enrollment fee that lasts through the North Carolina season and is renewed each year in January upon your choice. The \$18 goes toward paying for the boxes which costs \$2 each from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture. The box is delivered once a week. It costs \$23 each week plus the price of any add-ons. This price also includes sales tax and the cost of delivery. Customers either pay with their credit or debit card.

The delivery box and any small cartons inside it is recyclable and reused till it is damaged which helps the environment. The Produce Box greatly benefits the farmers in several ways. Farmers are seeing their produce to customers who love their products and understand their lives. Orders are placed to the farmer before harvest. Farmers go out and pick based on the orders they receive which greatly reduces waste. Sometimes, when farmers have extra of a fruit or vegetable that extra will be added in the box to prevent unwanted waste. This increases cooperation among farmers.

Another benefit to the farmers is that they only do one trip a week to one destination, which is the warehouse. This reduces the money farmers spend for transportation. It saves the farmers' great time because they do not have to take their produce to the farmers market everyday or every weekend where they sit for hours. Farmers will not spend marketing their product or time taking customer requests. It allows the farmers to focus on their main goal which is to take care of their produce. Hence, more attention and time is given to taking care of their crops.

The Produce Box benefits its customers because they have the option to skip when they need to or to cancel without a penalty fee. Customers pay weekly and have the option to choose from several boxes. They have the opportunity to customize their box and add extra things. Lastly, customers are not inconvenienced by having to drive far away due to the fact that the box is delivered to their door once a week at a time they themselves choose.

The Produce Box program is growing every year. It visits the farms at least once a year. It pays its farmers upon delivery to the warehouse. Through the technology of email, it reaches its customers quickly and efficiently. It maintains a long term relationship with its customers and farmers. The Produce Box now sells its products at corporate farm fairs and corporate events. It maintains the conversations and relationships between the farmers and the members which in turn are connecting communities. It is a sustainable agri-business. The company has started a new initiative to deliver boxes to low income communities. It has assigned \$20,000 for that.

Today the Produce Box has 6000 customers, half of which are customers who buy a box every week of the season. It has sister companies in Richmond and Atlanta. Last year, the company had its first four interns whom had different concentrations. The Produce Box creates a circle between the company, the farmers, the employees and the customers. It takes away the risk

of picking produce too early for the farmers, provides a way for farmers to get their product efficiently, provides stay at home moms and dads with income to support their families and needs minimum time investment. The circle allows families to give back to the community. Middle to high income customers are subsidizing the lower income boxes for the families that do not have access to fresh local produce. Three dollars out of the \$18 goes to a Farmer Gift Fund that was given to the three farmers whose land was destroyed by a tornado.

One big difference between buying your produce at the grocery store or supermarket is that the small local farmer is often shut out. Little or no infrastructure exists for these farmers to bring out their products because they are small suppliers. However, at the Produce Box it is the small local farmer that is the supplier. Courtney hopes to see grocery stores and supermarkets bring in the small local farmers.

VII. Conclusion

Acknowledging the need for the ratification of CEDAW, Article 14 states that rural women play an important role in the survival of their families ("Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979"). Small local farmers can no longer compete on price against large commercial farmers. However, we can conclude that these local farmers in North Carolina are creating a niche market whether it is through schools, CSAs or local businesses. They are differentiating themselves from the fruits and vegetables sold at large supermarkets because their produce has a touching story and journey.

There is a term in economics called elasticity. It measures the responsiveness of the quantity demanded of a good or service to a change in price. The elasticity of buying local

produce has decreased. It means people are becoming less sensitive to the price. People want to become or to stay healthy. As for the local farmers, women and men, their voices and concerns are being heard.

Agriculture is a main source of income for majority of women in the world. Around 98 percent of the world's wealth belongs to men. Despite the fact that in third world countries women are the backbone of the agriculture, they do not earn enough to support their family. According to an FAO publication, "Food security in times of crisis: rural women speak out," most women give food to their family and eat little themselves. Women farmers in developing countries stressed that they lack information on what is beneficial to grow and owning or accessing land has become a great issue. In North Carolina, women do not have as much hardship in food production. Their concerns are marketing and distributing it to customers in an efficient and effective way.

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