

FOOD AS A CATALYST · BUILDING HEALTH, WEALTH, AND REGIONAL PROSPERITY

Setting the Table

What we mean when we say “food systems”

Kelli Kelly

Agriculture & Food Systems Business Advisor, Nevada SBDC

START WITH SOMETHING FAMILIAR

Where did you eat breakfast? Where was it bought? How did it get there? Who packed it? Who grew it?

Food is regional infrastructure.

Roads

Broadband

Water

Energy

Food

A WORKING DEFINITION

A food system is everyone and everything that moves food from farm to fork, and back again.

01

Grow

Farms, ranches

02

Aggregate

Food hubs, co-ops

03

Process

Kitchens, butchers

04

Distribute

Trucks, cold storage

05

Sell & serve

Grocers, schools

06

Eat

Households, health

07

Recover

Food rescue, compost

Around every stage: policy and regulation, land and water, capital, workforce, infrastructure, and culture.

Three systems run side by side

Conventional

Built for linear efficiency at scale

Looks like national brands, big-box grocers, long supply chains

Emergency

Built for meeting immediate need

Looks like food banks, pantries, meal programs, food rescue

Local & regional

Built for circular regional wealth

Looks like farmers markets, food hubs, farm-to-school, independent grocers

Built for linear efficiency

12¢

of every dollar spent on U.S.-grown food reached the farm in 2024. The other 88¢ paid for processing, transport, packaging, wholesale, retail, and food service.

What it does well

Abundant, affordable, year-round food at enormous scale

The trade-offs

Most food dollars and decisions leave the region, and long chains are fragile when they break

Built as a stopgap, now permanent

250+

food banks in one national network

60,000+

pantries, meal programs, and agency partners

What it does well

Reaches neighbors in crisis quickly and rescues food that would be wasted

The trade-offs

Depends on donations and shifting funding, and fresh, healthy food is the hardest to supply

Built for circular regional wealth

	Supply chain	Value chain
Goal	Lowest cost	Shared success for every partner
Relationships	Transactional	Long-term partnerships
Information	Origin is often hidden	The story travels with the food
Price	Set by distant markets	Negotiated to cover real costs

The trade-offs: higher costs, seasonality, and the hard work of building the businesses in the middle.

WHERE THEY MEET

The best work happens in the overlaps



Emergency + local

Farms growing for pantries; food banks buying from regional producers

Conventional + local

Independent grocers and regional distributors carrying local products

All three + health

Food as medicine: health care paying for healthy food for patients

Five capital pillars of regional food

CAPITAL

Economic

From selling commodities to retaining wealth: more of the food dollar stays in the region

CAPITAL

Physical

The middle of the chain: aggregation, processing, cold storage, distribution

CAPITAL

Social & human

New farmers, year-round food manufacturing jobs, and a healthier workforce

CAPITAL

Risk & resiliency

Supply chains that hold when a highway closes or a national supplier runs short

CAPITAL

Natural

Land, water, and soil: the base every other pillar stands on

58.1

Average age of a U.S. farmer, and about 38% are 65 or older. Succession is a workforce issue.

Mario's Westside Market: health and wealth on one corner

The need

A **low-income, low-access** (LI/LA) area, where many residents live far from a full-service supermarket

An independent, locally owned grocer serving the neighborhood since 1997

The braided capital stack

New Markets Tax Credit financing	\$2.9M
City of Las Vegas (ARPA)	\$1M
Clark County	\$1M
Owner investment	Balance

The results

Opened October 2023 in a vacant former pharmacy, about twice the space

Produce from 16 to 60 feet, plus a bakery and deli

60 jobs supported

The bottleneck is in the middle

Plenty of farms, plenty of eaters, too little in between: a logistics and freight problem

Fundable fixes: regional food hubs · commercial kitchen incubators · co-packing · shared cold storage

Where SBDCs help the business

Planning and business fundamentals

Navigating the rules nexus

Capital readiness for lenders, SBA, and CDFIs

Where this room shapes the system

Space: land, water, shared-use facilities

Influencing the rules: model codes, planning help, convening local officials

Capital they can't reach alone: grants, credits, abatements

The foodshed is your scale

A town

Too small to build a food hub on its own

A state

Too big to see one farmer's bottleneck

Your region

The right size to connect rural producers with urban and institutional buyers

Braiding funds

- EDA infrastructure and planning dollars
- USDA Rural Development
- Community Development Block Grants
- Your federal regional commission, where one exists
- New Markets Tax Credits and local partners

FIND YOUR EXPERTS

You don't have to be the food expert

Start with your food policy council

Cross-sector groups that bring producers, businesses, health, anti-hunger, and government together to study the local food system and advise policymakers. Hundreds exist across the U.S.

Find yours: Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future directory and map at foodpolicynetworks.org

In Nevada: Southern Nevada Food Council · Nevada Council on Food Security · Northern Nevada Food Council

Also call:

Cooperative Extension

Regional food organizations

SBDCs

Food banks

Health districts

TODAY'S PANEL

Four perspectives, one table

Perspective	Speaker	Where it sits
Small business support	Kelli Kelly, Nevada SBDC	Businesses in all three systems
Regional food organization	Lyndsey Langsdale, Reno Food Systems	Local meets emergency
Economic Development District	Kimberly Hobbs, Southern Georgia Regional Commission	The regional strategy
Business	Kendall Kirk, NourishedRx	Food meets health care

Listen for:

Which system?

Which overlap?

Who had to be at the table?

A public-private partnership: win, win, win

The farm

Low barriers to entry on public land, so it can focus on growing food

Washoe County

A caretaker for a parcel that must stay green space, and it stays open to the public

The community

Fresh food grown and sold on site, with the rest donated to food pantries

Watch for it on the map: **local meets emergency.**