

Date: October 15, 2014
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Contact: Community Alliance with Family Farmers
P.O. Box 363 Davis, CA 95617-0363
info@caff.org

CAFF Releases Report on Local Food Distribution

October 10, 2014: The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) recently released a report to share some of their lessons learned from their work to localize food systems over the past 15 years. CAFF is a member-based non-profit organization with the mission to advocate for California family farmers and sustainable agriculture. This report, entitled “Making the Invisible Visible: Looking Back at Fifteen Years of Local Food Systems Distribution,” describes CAFF’s efforts to promote local food and solve regional distribution challenges to improve the economic viability of family scale agriculture.

One of the primary goals of the report is to answer questions about the Growers Collaborative (GC), a food hub CAFF operated from 2004-2009 in two regions of the state. The USDA definition of a food hub is a “business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.” CAFF’s report comes at a time when food hubs are growing in popularity as a strategy to help small farms access more market opportunities while increasing access to fresh, local food for communities. While GC was the prominent distribution initiative in the organization’s history, it is just one of the methods in which CAFF has worked to support local food procurement and distribution in California. In fact, the take home message in CAFF’s report is that individuals and organizations should use caution when thinking about starting a new food hub in the state. As a result of their efforts over the last decade, CAFF concludes that new, stand-alone facilities and aggregation hubs, unless farmer owned and operated, are not viable enterprises in California.

Recognizing that the findings of the paper challenge a major trend in the local food movement, CAFF Executive Director, Diane Del Signore, points out that “We have taken many bold steps in our history of working in local food systems, some of which are described in the paper. Our perspective on food hubs is also bold. However, after experimenting with different models, we can say with confidence that the solution to regionalizing our food systems lies in working with current infrastructure and facilitating connections among supply chain stakeholders, not in creating parallel systems that compete with the existing distribution system.”

One of the biggest challenges is that new hubs in California tend to compete with the existing distribution system. The state produces about half of the fruit, vegetables, and nuts in the country. Varying scales of distribution infrastructure already exist to service this high level of production. By virtue of the additional complications of buying smaller volumes from many growers, hubs face a higher unit cost of operation and slimmer margins than larger broadline distributors. Food hubs often add on an extra layer of costs to the supply chain, duplicate existing efforts or infrastructure, and struggle financially without subsidy. It is also very risky to rely on a single entity to solve the distribution challenges of a region. It is much more effective to work

with all of the regional stakeholders to adapt their systems to serve more local food. Gail Feenstra, Deputy Director of the UC Davis Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program (SAREP), found that the conclusions drawn in the paper may be useful for other regions: "While there are some aspects to CAFF's story that are unique to California, there are several general lessons that I believe are universal and deserve attention. CAFF provides important insights that should be carefully considered by any organization that is thinking of starting a food hub. SAREP has been studying "values-based supply chains" and "food hubs" for several years in California and provides additional resources on their [website](#).

These realizations have led CAFF to develop their current "Farm to Market Strategy," in which staff focus on connecting farmers and different types of buyers, providing growers with a suite of sales tools and marketing materials, and helping to ensure that supply and demand grow together. Ultimately, CAFF concludes that by working with multiple entities – farmers, distributors, processors, a variety of buyers of different scales, and more – to build upon existing infrastructure and forge more direct connections, a stronger, more inclusive regional food system can be established that leverages resources and supports local farmers.

Founded in 1978, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers is a nonprofit organization that has played key roles in supporting growers in adopting on-farm sustainable practices, bringing fresh, local produce into school cafeterias and classrooms, and establishing programs to distribute locally grown produce to community grocery stores, hospitals, restaurants and farmers markets. Support family farmers through donating or becoming a member at www.caff.org.