The Local Foods Resource Mapping (LFRM) project examined Mississippians’ perspectives on local foods, with the goal of understanding the local food system infrastructure, possible gaps in local foods systems, and discerning participants’ use of various online food directories. Ideally, the project will also lead to the identification and creation of business opportunities for entrepreneurs interested in entering the local foods arena in the six pilot states involved in this project: Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, Kentucky, Mississippi, and North Carolina.

The rationale for this study is that gaps in understanding the overall picture of statewide local food systems exist. Furthermore, barriers to entry may prevent the deepening and growth of local food systems in rural and urban communities. Much remains unknown about how local food moves from farms to consumers, as consumer demand varies across states and remains relatively poorly understood.

Focus group participants believe that local is difficult to define; however, they routinely define local by distance, geographic boundary, product, or as a relational sentiment. Definitions of local foods, then, are extremely personal, and firm definitions are necessary for organizations and institutions, such as grocery stores, farmers’ markets, schools, hospitals, and universities.

Participants see the demand for local foods as increasing—or, at worst—stagnant; however, numerous ideas were expressed about why local food isn’t “growing” faster. These reasons generally centered on three categories: the consumer, the grower, and the market. Overall, chief concerns expressed included price, uneducated consumers, restrictive regulations, and lack of institutional support for growers.

Abundant suggestions of how to boost local foods were offered by focus group participants, including remedying the concerns listed above, as well as garnering support for youth programs. Participants were largely uninterested in discussing advertising or marketing tools and...
techniques for local foods. The current local food marketing tool, Market Maker, was not well known or valued by participants.

Participants were most enthusiastic in discussing their ideas about how to boost local food production and strengthen local food systems; however, when asked those questions, the conversation routinely drifted into a discussion of the faults of “today’s consumer.” Today’s consumer, for the majority of the focus group participants, is uneducated, lazy, has no cooking skills, and desires junk food. Participants stressed that, with interventions designed to change consumer behavior, demand for local foods would grow; however, they were often skeptical of the feasibility and effectiveness of programs and interventions to change consumer behavior.

**METHODOLOGY**

The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), Mississippi State University Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University Extension, and Mississippi State University Department of Agricultural Economics, coordinated and planned focus group events, called “Local Foods Meetups,” around the state in the following 12 municipalities:

- Corinth
- Greenwood
- Gulfport
- Hattiesburg
- Hernando
- Lorman
- Marks
- Raymond
- Jackson
- Oxford
- Starkville
- Verona

Five distinct tourism regions in Mississippi were identified (Capital/River, Coastal, Delta, Hills, and Pines) and served as appropriate food system regions when thinking about local foods within a regional context during the focus group events.

Several stakeholder organizations assisted with the project by inviting key local individuals to the Local Foods Meetups. For example, Alcorn State University Extension Program’s Mississippi Small Farm and Agribusiness Center was instrumental in reaching small producers and alternative agricultural enterprises in the Mississippi Delta. In addition, networks through the Mississippi Food Policy Council helped with outreach and dissemination of focus group meeting information. Through the help of stakeholder organizations, a broad group of individuals was invited to participate.

In total, 134 individuals participated in the focus groups. Of the 134 participants, 34 percent were minority and 49 percent were female. Participants were asked to identify which group or groups they represented. The following list represents the categorical breakdown of attendees:

1 Participants could select more than one group identification; therefore, the percentages do not equal to 100.
Participants were briefed on the purpose of the project and responded to a series of questions related to local food systems. Participants were also shown state-level maps showing basic production, distribution, and consumption data, along with questions designed to guide the discussions and provide actionable insights. In addition, the Market Maker online marketing tool was demonstrated to gather feedback on ways it can be used as an important resource for all local foods stakeholders.

**Moderator’s Guide**

The moderator’s guide and focus group questions were developed by the project team and used at each focus group to ensure continuity across each individual session. Moderators used the following guide to conduct the focus groups:

*Introduction and Welcome*: Participants were invited to sit, get snacks or drinks, and introduce themselves. The moderator also introduced him/herself before moving into the following questions:

*Question 1*: How do you define “local” when you purchase “locally grown/caught/raised” food products? Think about this in terms of radius and other values.

*Question 2*: Do you think that the demand for local food is growing in your region? Why or why not?

*Question 3*: Discuss if the cost of local food in your region is more or less than what people pay for non-local food.

*Question 4*: What sources of information do you use to determine your market for locally grown/caught/raised products?

*Question 5*: How do maps like the ones we’ve seen help people to plan a local food-related business in your region?
Question 6: What assets or resources are needed for this region to have a strong local food system?

Question 7: How is local food brought from farm to market (distributed) in your region? “Market” for purposes of this question will be broken down into direct to consumer, intermediated, and wholesale.

Question 8: Describe the need for cold storage in your region.

Question 9: Describe the need for processing facilities in your region.

Question 10: Name one opportunity you think would strengthen the local food system in your region.

Documentation
All focus group sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. Quotes used within this report denote the location of the focus group and the transcription line in MAXQDA that corresponds with the comment. Participants’ names, gender, and any other identifying information have been removed. To respect participants, comments were left in their entirety when possible. The vast majority of comments and responses were left intact when quoted in this report; however, longer responses were shortened due to length constraints. Any shortened comment contains ellipses. Comments were transcribed without any grammatical changes; therefore, participants’ statements may contain repeated words or grammatical errors.

Coding and Analyses
Focus group data was coded on MAXQDA Plus 12.3.1. The coder read each document multiple times and then conducted open coding of 11 transcripts and one set of field notes. After the initial round of coding, the coder performed several rounds of focused coding, refining codes and sub-codes. After completion of the coding, analysis, and interpretation process, all emergent observations and themes are included in this report.

FINDINGS
Focus groups often yield rich information about individuals’ perspectives and opinions on issues and topics. Across all 12 focus groups, participants shared various ideas and answers to the 10 questions (detailed above in the moderator’s guide) asked by the moderators. The aim of this report, then, is to report in detail their ideas, suggestions, and opinions using their own words. Direct quotes as well as summary themes are detailed below in the findings section.

Defining Local
Participants varied in how they defined and conceptualized local. They commonly used four ways of defining local: by a geographic boundary, by a distance, by product, or through a relation. Almost all described defining local as “difficult.”
Geographic Boundaries

Many focus group participants stated that local foods are defined by their fit within certain geographic boundaries, usually the city or county line. Participants often stated that local food is defined by a state line, stating that local is:

“Anything that was grown in state.” (Greenwood, line 55)

“In state.” (Corinth, line 9)

“Because of the diversity of the state, I would say the state.” (Jackson, line 75)

Others defined local by a single zip code, summarizing that local is identified by a much smaller geographic boundary than a state line. For example, one participant shared that they see local:

“By a zip code.” (Hattiesburg, line 157)

A popular conception of local was to define it in relation to a geographic boundary in the middle—not as large as a state line, yet bigger than a single zip code. Participants used county lines and summarized that adjacent counties to their home constituted “local.” For example:

“When I think of local I think within 2 to 3 counties around. I don’t think Alabama or Tennessee you know. I think you know that’s what I think of local, but this is coming from someone who truly is local, most of my food comes from right outside my door.” (Oxford, line 232)

“Yeah I think for me local would be within maybe adjacent counties even. You know not 20, 30 miles; I mean local is local.” (Starkville, line 68)

Distance Radius

Another Starkville participant who described adjacent counties as “…not 20, 30 miles...” (line 68), shared,

“I really think that local is dictated by distance or radius.” (Starkville, line 66)

Many other participants shared this viewpoint. While several individuals used this conceptualization for local, their ideas of how large or small the distance should be were varied. Several individuals emphasized that local is:

“100-mile radius generally is.” (Corinth, Line 4)

“I’d say 100 miles too; I don’t know why.” (Hernando, line 187)

Others gave varied answers on the mileage number for defining local:

“We define local as 150 miles as the crow flies.” (Starkville, line 70)

“My opinion on local is about a 50-mile radius.” (Gulfport, line 353)
Participants also conceptualized local by time spent driving, rather than an actual mileage count. For instance, some participants shared:

“Local means to me that it was produced by someone [within] an hour, and I’m probably a little bit more stringent on the definition to most people.” (Gulfport, line 351)

“We can go there and back ... we can go there in 3 or 4 hours and make it back in 3 or 4 hours, so that’s what we say is local.” (Jackson, line 77)

**Product Related**

Participants acknowledged that foods are not grown in some areas due to natural growing restrictions, such as the need for a certain climate condition or soil type. Instead of using a rigid boundary line or distance radius, local for them meant the closest the product could be produced with the necessary conditions. For instance, one participant thinks in radiuses or inside state lines; however, it truly depends on the product:

“I think it depends on the product; because I think if you’re talking about catfish, but I hear locally produced, Mississippi is kind of my radius; but if you talk about honey, if they talk about the benefits, allergy wise, to having locally produced honey that has flowers and everything around you, for that case it would be closer to zip code.” (Hattiesburg, line 158)

A participant from the Mississippi Delta also explained:

“[I] think it’s important to think about crops when we’re defining local, so it’s whatever the minimum distance versus what that crop would be; so we have sweet potatoes right here in Mississippi, so maybe it’s two counties away that would be great, but if we have a crop that isn’t local in Mississippi but we’re pretty close to Tennessee or Arkansas that it might be closer to get something from Arkansas than it is at the coast, so I think it’s just kind of putting that, having to think about is terms of each crop as it goes to just to arbitrary number.” (Greenwood, line 55)

Local, therefore, is very product-specific. “Local” shrimp, for a resident of Starkville, probably means shrimp harvested from the Mississippi Gulf Coast since north-central Mississippi does not produce shrimp. Similarly, “local” sweet potatoes, for someone living in the Mississippi Delta, might mean Vardaman sweet potatoes, a location outside the Delta, because sweet potatoes are not commonly grown in that region.

**About a Relationship**

Several participants described how defining local is more about a sentiment or a relationship. Local for them could not be defined in terms of driving distances or labeling of where it was grown. Their conceptualizations of local were relational. For example:

“I’d say if you knew the family and kind of their story and just knew where generally comes from. If you know where it comes from and you know obviously near states around you.” (Starkville, line 62)

Local, therefore, means that you know the place where it was grown. Local also means knowing the farmer and having a relationship with him or her.
“I tell my customers some of it was close enough for me shake the farmer’s hand when he brought it.” (Verona, line 112)

“I think just one other thing uh I think about when I purchase is uh a preference local for some kind of a relationship with the farmer that grew it, so it’s like a certain kind of trust that I put in a farm whether be for quality standards people have mentioned what (sic); whether it be the way they treat their workers, there is a certain level of getting to know them and who they are and what their values are I think.” (Jackson, line 121)

Eschewing all of the technicalities of defining local as a distance or radius, local for these participants is a relational sentiment and a value.

**Summary -- Defining Local: It is difficult**

During the focus groups, some participants had strict, set guidelines of what they considered local. The majority, however, viewed local as something in flux and guided by one of the above four premises or a blend of several of them. For instance, one man in Verona shared that his market uses whichever factor works in favor for the grower—distance or adjacent county rule:

“Um, [we use a] 60 miles radius. Sixty mile radius within Mississippi or over in Alabama a county that touches Mississippi, so it’s about three counties on the Alabama side that they got in too.” (Verona, line 105)

At the Starkville focus group, one participant summarized that they, too, have multiple ways of defining local:

“I think that is good example of that combination of definitions where we take distance or story, connection, relation to who it is, and knowing like I said that product, which is kind of a combination of all those: what the product is and knowing the back story behind that product and how it is grown and you know where it is coming from….” (Starkville, line 99)

Two participants at our Jackson and Verona focus groups politely concluded:

“I think there are different ways to define local….” (Jackson, line 85)

“So local can mean it means something different to about every person you talk to. It depends on whether you are the seller or the buyer to this.” (Verona, line 102)

Their statements sum up the responses from participants—there is not a singular way of defining local. Different growers, consumers, and markets define local differently—and there is not a right or wrong answer.

**Demand for Local Foods**

When asked about the demand for local foods, not a single participant across all 12 focus groups stated that the demand for local foods is lessening or weakening. Participants were divided unequally into two groups—those that thought the demand for local foods is increasing and those that thought the demand for local foods is currently flat or stagnant. A robust discussion of stagnancy in local foods only occurred at one focus group. The majority of participants argued that the demand for local foods is growing, but their arguments were predicated on their conceptualizations of how to measure “growth.”
Demand is Growing

Participants overwhelmingly believe demand for local foods is growing. They agree that local foods infrastructure is growing, local foods marketing is increasing, and there are more local food growers. For instance, a participant at the Verona focus group shared that demand is growing because of the increasing number of growers attending local food conferences:

“And then the other is, um, with our conference we did every February for the last 10 years, we have seen increasing participation every year and new member participation every year, so that leads me to believe again that the demand for local foods is growing.” (Verona, line 120)

Others saw demand for local foods as growing because of increased visibility of local foods at grocery stores. A Jackson focus group participant shared:

“I think it has increased significantly um as on (sic) Rainbow and Whole Foods. I will go to Kroger, and to see a chain such as Kroger have a shop-local section, that says a lot; and they kind of rotate the different products in and out to make sure that they have everyone represented, um, locally.” (Jackson, line 123)

In addition to higher visibility and prevalence of local foods in grocery stores, others believe that demand is growing because of the increasing number of farmers’ markets. For example, one participant shared that local is growing because:

“Based on um two things, well maybe more than two, the number of farmers’ markets that have popped up in the last 10 years—just Northeast Mississippi we have gone from 6 to 18 or so um and that’s state wide, nationwide and everything the number of farmers’ markets had greatly increased um. And the number of producers at those farmers’ markets has increased at almost all of the farmers’ markets, so that that tells me that there is in turn a demand.” (Verona, line 116)

Similarly, growing demand for a Gulf Coast grower meant that the demand for community supported agriculture (CSA) was high. The participant shared:

“The demand is there, definitely in our area; I can’t keep up with demand; if I have to close our open enrollment every season before everybody gets taken care of, that’s so I know I can produce what I need to produce.” (Gulfport, line 424)

Demand, for these individuals, meant that there were more growers, more visibility for local foods and local food markets, and more interest in the direct purchase of locally grown foods.

Demand is Stagnant

Other participants, couching their ideas about demand around their perceptions of farmers’ markets, commented differently. The only robust discussion of demand that included a debate about stagnancy occurred at the Oxford focus group. At this focus group session, participants shared that they viewed demand in their area as at a plateau for several reasons, chiefly the lack
of growth in growers or consumers at the farmers’ market. For instance, one participant stated:

   “Just observing the people coming through the farmers’ market week in and week out. You see most of the same faces. I don’t really see a lot of new faces coming through.” (Oxford, line 262)

Another participant continued by sharing:

   “The quantity is not increasing.” (Oxford line 271)

While this consensus at the Oxford focus group may be an anomaly, it is worth noting because it shows the intertwined relationship between place and demand. While the demand for local foods may be growing in some areas, some may feel that it is not growing near them. A participant at the Raymond focus group alluded to this idea:

   “You know sometimes people are saying it depends a lot on where you live, on how populated the area is, seems like demand may be increasing because that access, because they have Whole Foods or they have hiring restaurants that serve local foods, or they have more access to farmers’ markets, and maybe some of the more rural, they’re not seeing the demand grow as much.” (Raymond, line 43)

The idea of local foods—food produced near you, “locally”—is inherently place-based. Therefore, it is logical to assume that there are various place-based factors at play in demands for local foods, which is what the above comment and the Oxford discussion indicate. Future research should examine the reasoning for various conceptions of demand in relation to place-based factors.

**Summary: Demand is Dependent**

When asked about demand, the vast majority of participants viewed it as growing. A few participants saw it as stagnant, whereas none viewed it as weakening. Regardless of their perception of demand, participants commonly answered the question with a cursory response and then transitioned the conversation into ways to increase demand or problems in growing demand. These ideas are considered in depth in the next two sections.

**Problems for Local Foods**

Participants had ample ideas about why local food demand is not as great as they would like. They shared their thoughts and conceptualizations of problems for growing local foods when asked almost any of the 10 questions used by the moderators—regardless of whether the question specifically related to problems facing local foods. Participants viewed problems as divided among several categories: consumers, growers, markets, and restaurants. Each category is considered individually below.

**Problems with the Consumer**

Focus group participants overwhelmingly viewed the consumer as the chief problem in growing demand for local foods. The responses regarding consumers were about how mainstream consumers do not align with growers’ values and farmers’ markets ideals. Participants viewed other problems as being “for” the other category—for markets, for growers, etc. Problems with
local foods for consumers was reinterpreted as problems for local foods with consumers—a slight difference in words, but a major difference in meaning and connotation. Consumers were characterized as wanting cheap food, seeking convenience, craving junk food, and having very little knowledge of how to prepare local foods and/or the health benefits of local foods.

Consumers were characterized by participants as not knowing how to cook fresh, local foods:

“Well the average couples age and younger don’t really like cooking. Near as much as that age and above. I mean it’s there is no doubt about that” (Verona, line 191)

As the above comment from a Verona participant shows, focus group participants were convinced of consumers’ lack of cooking skills. The same statements resonated across focus groups. For example, Starkville and Corinth residents surmised:

“...because people don’t necessarily know what to do with the stuff they buy at the farmers’ market anymore. You know people don’t know, people don’t cook anymore and you know like the CSA, whole, the whole concept of a CSA I think is not going be very long-lived because people get some stuff in their box that they don’t know what to do with.” (Starkville, line 115)

“We’ll have especially a young mother will come in, and I can either hand her a five-pound bag of rice, but she’d rather have the minute-made bag, because she has no idea what to do with the rice.” (Corinth, line 71)

In addition to not knowing how to cook local, fresh foods, focus group participants argued that consumers are generally lazy and desire convenience in purchasing foods. For example:

“It’s just a lot of it comes down to laziness you know, I didn’t get up to go to the market on Saturday, so I will just run to Walmart.” (Starkville, line 410)

“...it’s about convenience, it’s about picking up stuff that has long shelf life, it’s about you know, um, not about cooking anymore.” (Greenwood, line 31)

“It’s convenience and social, I mean people are eating a lot of really expensive crap…” (Jackson, line 141)

The consumer was also viewed as wanting unhealthy, junk food—not the fresh and healthy food offered by growers and at farmers’ markets. These consumers, typified as junk-food junkies, were often also characterized as being younger than the focus group participants. For instance, participants shared that:

“...they’re not into putting a pot on the stove, putting a pot of greens and potatoes, they want to go and have a hamburger and French fries and a drink.” (Greenwood, line 30)

“Um, I hope I’m wrong with this, but observation I’ve made in the last few years getting more involved with the youth and the school system is we’re raising a generation of kids who don’t eat vegetables, they want to eat potato chips, hamburgers, pizza, and chicken strips.” (Marks, line 74)
At the Hattiesburg focus group, one participant stated that another problem—in addition to those listed above—is buyers wanting cheap foods. He said:

“Just from my perspective, I see a lot of the consumer, if you make, when cheaper food in Mississippi is made available, that’s, and the grocer knows it, that’s what a lot of times ends up filling the market. It is a major social factor in Mississippi, they’re cheap buyers, just go back to your previous slide they were saying just 30% eat less than 1 serving of vegetables a day and 50% eat one serving of fruit per day; they’re just cheap eaters, so the grocers have filled that niche, they know that and that’s what they cater to. I mean, there are whole aisles where you go in the grocery stores and you have a $1 aisle and you go buy the store, everything is a dollar, it doesn’t matter what it is.” (Hattiesburg, line 10)

Overall, participants viewed the consumer as lazy; unwilling to devote funds to fresh, healthy foods; and having a desire for cheap food. Hence, participants viewed the prevalence of this type of consumer as the chief problem for local foods.

**Problems for Growers**

While the lamentations regarding consumer behavior permeated discussion, participants also routinely argued that growers cannot keep up with the demand for local foods from their existing customers. While these ideas seem contradictory, recall that participants conceptualized the key problem for bolstering local foods as problems with the non-local food consumer. Within the existing local food landscape, producers had strong feelings regarding problems within the system that inhibited producers’ ability to meet the growing demand for local foods. Participants cited an inadequate labor force, overbearing regulations, and needing an expanded local foods infrastructure in Mississippi. In Jackson, one participant shared:

“What is the biggest barrier? Labor—labor is hands-down the biggest barrier. We can work on the food safety, we can work on the marketing and finding the distribution outlets, and work on those other things, but labor is not a solution that a single farmer can solve.” (Jackson, line 426)

In addition to an adequate workforce, participants also argued that various government regulations limit local food growers and producers.

“I also find that there is a huge barrier to people starting up...I get people that want to expand, and the things that are put in their way is that there are no facilities to rent, there is nobody to tell them how to do it, and once they have done it, there is no—they’re from Mississippi, they can’t go across state lines for several reasons; because if you’re selling meat across state lines, there is not one group that will do USDA, so, big businesses come from small beginnings, and those small beginnings are not being met at all.” (Hattiesburg, line 152)

Like the participant from Hattiesburg, an individual at the Raymond focus group discussed the struggle with state and federal laws:

“[We] were looking at pasture poultry and we started trying to dig in to understand the rules, and it’s a big, crazy, knot thing that nobody could really explain so that we could really understand it except it wasn’t going to be good...” (Raymond, line 102)
Growers felt overburdened by state and federal food production regulations, especially those that they felt put undue stress on smaller or nontraditional farms. A lack of equity in regulations among farm sizes, according to the focus group participants, is a key problem for local food systems.

**Problems for the Local Farmers’ Market**

A large majority of focus group comments on farmers’ markets centered on affordability, arguing that farmers’ markets are often not as affordable as grocery stores, and, as a result, people do not purchase items there. One participant summed:

“People come to our market and they’re like, they’re there for a deal, they want it to be less than the grocery store.” (Corinth, line 100)

In Oxford, when several focus group participants brought up prices at the market, our moderator asked:

“Moderator: So do people complain about the prices at the market?

Participant R: Yes.

Participant H: Well, most of the time they don’t complain they just don’t buy.

Participant R: Yeah, they walk by.” (Oxford, lines 354-357)

When discussing pricing, some focus group participants argued that food is more expensive at a farmers’ market, but it is healthier. At Starkville, the following two comments were made about food and health:

“I think what is not included in this and what most people don’t include when they do price compare is the food quality. Food quality is something that nobody talks about and it’s, you know, if I buy this here or this there, the food quality can be tremendously different, and people don’t qualify the food quality as a price factor, you know. They don’t say this is so much higher food quality; therefore, it should be worth more.” (Starkville, line 159)

“If I have got to pay for my cell phone plan every month, or am I going to buy food, or am I going to have cable service, and I am going to have good food. It’s choices you make and people, you know, a lot of people are not willing to make that choice if you have the lower quality, cheap food available or processed food available, and I think that goes right back to raising consumer awareness where people need to decide, am I going to make that choice for my health and live healthier and spend more money, or not?” (Starkville, line 177)

A participant in Gulfport shared a similar sentiment:

“....talking about local food and the health benefits...I think this is only a certain demographic that feels like they can afford [local foods] and are justified in spending money on local and sees the health implication of it.” (Gulfport, line 440)

Those who viewed local foods sold at markets as more expensive saw the reason that it was costlier. They argued that it was for good cause—farmers’ markets offer a better value
than grocery stores because buyers are getting fresher, healthier foods. Interestingly, an almost equal amount of individuals commented that farmers’ markets are cheaper than the grocery store, but people just don’t realize it. For example, when asked if food is actually cheaper at farmers’ markets than at the grocery store, participants shared:

“I think it has to do with the farmers’ market, I think they are extremely competitive, and I think it is often cheaper, but the perception is that it is more expensive. I don’t know why that is, I cannot figure that out.” (Gulfport, line 448)

“I mean, from what I see, um, most of it is a little cheaper.” (Verona, line 156)

Like demand, the affordability of the farmers’ market is most likely place-based and varies across Mississippi. Therefore, general conclusions about cost cannot be made. However, by and large, participants view local farmers’ markets as often having to unfairly battle consumer misconceptions and misunderstandings about cost and value of the local food products. In those discussions, participants commonly took two stances—the food at local farmers’ markets is cheaper than a grocery store, or the food is healthier and therefore justifiable in costing more than food found at the grocery store.

**Restaurants, Grocers, and Institutions**

A limited amount of respondents remarked that they struggled with restaurants and grocers peddling non-local food as local. One “big box” store was deemed as having too large of a radius of “local,” whereas local restaurants were described as deliberately falsely advertising the location of their sourcing. The majority of the participants, however, discussed that a problem for local foods is how difficult it is to get local foods into institutions.

In Marks, one participant summarized the discussion on the imperative of getting local foods into institutions by stating:

“...if we can get into hospitals and schools and all God forsaken prisons, and you know, if we can get into these institutional markets because they’re here and they’re not going anywhere, you know, we can talk about Kroger, Walmart, whatever, they have the opportunity to buy from us or anywhere in the world, but if we can get into institutions that are invested in our communities, that our communities are using, that we can go to our families, our friends, our churches and say, tell these places you want local produce so that we can have community support backing that demand and saying to the hospitals, the schools, the prisons, to all the colleges, we want you buying from the local farmers. I think that could create an opportunity for economic growth and, um, for the farmers, but not just the farmers, but for our whole area...” (Marks, line 282)

Institutions, then, were said to be central to the success of local foods; the lack of local foods in institutions is a central problem for local food systems and growing demand for local foods.

**Summary: Problems for (and with) Local Foods**

Participants viewed the uneducated, lazy consumer as the chief problem for local foods. They argued that local foods cannot grow and flourish without changing consumer behavior—
consumers’ view of health, the time they are willing to spend shopping and cooking, and their cooking knowledge. According to participants, health and economic support of the community should be the goal of consumers, instead of convenience and junk food’s empty calories.

Suggestions for Bolstering Local Food Systems

Just as participants were eager to discuss problems for and with local foods, they were also zealous in sharing potential solutions for bolstering the demand for and sales of local foods as well as strengthening local food systems. Their suggestions broadly fell into four categories: changing consumer habits, providing resources for growers, modifying regulations, and improving processing and distribution infrastructure. These groupings echo the difficulties mentioned in the previous section on problems for local foods.

Change Consumer Behavior

The principal suggestion for growing the demand for local foods and strengthening the local food system was encouraging change in consumer behavior. Participants offered numerous suggestions as to how to change consumer behavior, including food-related classes and experiences in the school system, cooking classes in the community, and health education and awareness programs. Education, for participants, was viewed as the crucial component of creating consumer change and increasing demand for local foods.

In Oxford, a participant shared how their farmers’ market has cooking classes and demonstrations, explaining:

“We do at our farmers’ market try to educate people how to use what’s there and, at least once or twice a month, I do a cooking demo myself and go around to each of the vendors and gather up what is available and do a cooking demo and offer that to our patrons at the market so that they can see what they can do with what’s available at the market and in season right now. And most of them are amazed at how well they can eat and how their kids accept it, and so it is there, we go back to education again and teaching people how to use the food that’s available local.” (Oxford, line 383)

Others shared the importance of programs in schools. A participant who is an active volunteer at a high school shared:

“So I think what I’ve realized is just like that exposure to a school garden can have [a positive impact] even if it’s not something that’s super integrated with a certain child’s life; it’s just like kids’ minds are so like sponges, right? So that exposure to understanding how food is grown; there’s lots of other resources out there they can connect with school gardening; you could do stem education, there could be cooking, there could be so many things, and that could you know influence future generations of people that might want to go into farming or the food industry or just become consumers, so I think that the educational side can have a huge impact.” (Hernando, line 413)

One participant summarized the popular sentiment of the need for education, explaining:
Comments on education were specifically targeted towards certain groups—young adults, adolescents, and children. For instance, participants stated:

“…what else is missing in the system is to do with the younger generation and how that all ties together, like the chicken and the egg.” (Jackson, line 219)

Discussion of youth and eggs also occurred at the Greenwood focus group, where a participant shared:

“…what jumps out to me is the fact that so few young people know how to cook; they really don’t know how to boil an egg ... you know, when I was going to college and didn’t have much money, I could go get a dozen eggs and make an omelet you know and a piece of wheat bread and you know and have protein and some good food, but so few you know—and I tie that in with the whole vocational education and high school, too, um you know we’ve done away with home ec and done away with shop all that, i just I really think that’s um you know early education and what to do with the food is important...” (Greenwood, line 34)

As these statements illustrate, participants viewed consumer education as sorely needed, and specifically highlighted the need for education for the “young people” or “younger generation.”

**Stronger Agricultural Programs for Youth**

In addition to consumer education, participants often expressed an interest in expanding youth and agricultural education via Mississippi State University Extension. Here, one participant expressed the need for more funding for and emphasis on 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA). Numerous participants voiced this perspective across our focus groups:

“From a policy perspective, especially with Mississippi State at the lead, I think there’s a lot of room for improvement with 4-H and FFA programs and Extension demo; and Extension is always underfunded and underappreciated and I think a tremendous resource, but don’t have any money do anything with all those resources that they have, so many people don’t know what’s sitting right out on Highway 7 or in the Extension office, and, even when you go there, the people there don’t really know what they have themselves or how to translate it to you, um so I think getting more resources to our county Extension agency. Being able to put out information on how to can or preserve, what’s available seasonally—they have so much information on this stuff already, but there is no money available to get it out to the public.” (Oxford, line 397)

Consumer education was not the only concern for growers—general agricultural education was, too—especially for youth with interests in agriculture.
Participants emphasized that training is needed for the consumer and for the grower. Discussion developed about training growers in year-round production, as well as about seeing more local foods in local institutional settings. In Starkville, a participant explained the link between growing year-round and getting into institutions:

“And it goes back to that some of the education growing year round. I think a lot of our farmers deal with, like it’s difficult for a grocery store or restaurant to work with you like four to five months out of the year, but then the other six, seven months they have to figure out what else to do. So I think they get a little, you know, it’s high maintenance for them, um so again, if we can push them to that year-around growing and they have that continual year-long relationship where they continually work with them in terms of their menus and what to expect; um that restaurant wise but also grocery stores, I think, too. It’s just hard for them to work to get such a small scale.” (Starkville, line 364)

In Verona, a participant summarized:

“The grocer told me that, if he buys anything from me, he would pay wholesale cost at that time, so I don’t know what he is going to do…unless he can get like say quantity and quality and all that consistently.” (Verona, line 208)

Consistency, then, is key to being able to meet the demand of institutions. Once growers are producing large quantities of local food year-round, participants stressed that additional help is needed from state government and institutional leaders to encourage institutions to purchase local foods. For example, one participant stressed:

“I would love to see resources like Mississippi Ag Department, uh Mississippi State University’s school of agriculture, uh, show a lot more commitment and advocacy around a strong local food system. I think it, maybe, I think Alcorn is doing some more, but they’re not really in our part of the state so I won’t bump into them as much, uh but even to have a community college uh do that. And there are some state land-grant institutions—UK is one for sure and I think Clemson—while they have big ag programs, they also have uh sustainable farms and… students majoring in ag can focus in that direction, and those departments also seem to be very strong advocates for producing local food for those states.” (Starkville, line 299)

Participants stressed that, in addition to needing help from institutional leaders, they need regulation changes.

Changes in Regulations

Participants overwhelmingly desired changes in state regulations to make farming in Mississippi friendlier to small operations. A Starkville participants stated:

“And I would mention, you know, the state government—I don’t feel like they [are] especially supportive and encouraging. I think Mississippi State Ag Department is much more oriented towards, you know, big ag and big business and corporate ag and stuff like that… So I think that uh the institutions (sic) could be a lot more supportive and stronger advocates for smaller small scale.” (Starkville, line 147)

Several different types of regulations were discussed. The majority of participants stressed the need for changes in meat processing, cottage foods, and transportation regulations. An exchange at the Gulfport focus group illustrates this:
“Participant I: We shared vendors and we shared nightmares because, before this year, the state department of consumer protection, I think...they didn’t worry because...when you’re going to sell something, 3 or 4 hours in a market, it actually keeps things colder when you’re in an isolated little cooler, then you can monitor the temperature; if you’ve got a car or a truck and you’re opening the door, you know, and I’m going off a law that is written for grocery stores for farmers’ market; it doesn’t make sense...

Participant T: Do we need to make an appeal?

Participant I: No, no, we need a new law, we need to change.” (Gulfport, lines 164–166)

In Hattiesburg, a participant shared:

“...every time we try to move forward, somebody comes up and says, ‘We’re going to have to regulate you, you can’t do this and that.’ ...I don’t know if you all know the two hardest states in the U.S. to farm are Iowa and Mississippi because of regulations, and they’re more for large ag.” (Hattiesburg, line 112)

Storage, Processing, and Distribution Infrastructure

Participants often highlighted the need for additional storage, processing, and distribution infrastructure. The bulk of participants expressed a current need for more infrastructure and acknowledged the importance of building infrastructure as local food production grows. Cold storage was an initial concern for many participants:

“Because storage...would be the one thing I’d say that holds you back the most on the farm...” (Greenwood, line 296)

On the Gulf Coast, participants noted that Mississippi once had cold storage for local foods; however, it was not rebuilt post-Hurricane Katrina. In the Gulfport focus group, several participants discussed cold storage, concluding:

“Participant L: so, I would say, for the cold storage and processing needs, it’s kind of, because I don’t [know] that we have a critical mass of producers to warrant cold storage and processing; however, we possibly would have more producers if we had cold storage—it’s a possibility.

Participant B: You definitely without a doubt would.

Moderator: So, it’s kind of like the chicken and the egg?

Participant L: But right now, we don’t have any critical mass.

Participant B: Or you would have the producers that are current, would ramp up production.

Participant L: Yes, maybe they would ramp it up...it’s a great location for it because you need to get farmers from all around.

Participant G: I would say, for this area, we, looking at what you’re asking, we need cold storage back here,” (Gulfport, lines 620-650)
In addition to cold storage, participants desired additional processing and distribution centers. One participant commented that:

“We saw that there is not a whole lot of that infrastructure; especially in this part of the state, that infrastructure doesn’t exist...” (Hattiesburg, line 346)

In addition to larger distribution and processing centers, participants strongly favored mobile processing units that would connect with a larger processing and distribution hub. For instance, a Marks focus group participant shared:

“We need a mobile processor for the smaller farms. They can pick it up right there and leave it there because some stuff is going to sell on-site, and some people want to sell most of it to the bigger processor, but, you know, like a mobile processor, we got to utilize that.” (Marks, line 251)

Throughout the focus groups, participants heartily shared desires for storage, processing, and distribution centers. The majority of comments were simply a chorus of “yes, yes!” (Marks, line 38) comments or “yep” (Jackson, line 457) statements and nods of affirmation when discussion turned to infrastructure needs.

The discussion thus far has focused on the ideas, comments, and themes that participants shared during the focus groups. The next section focuses on issues that were not discussed at length or in depth by focus group participants.

**What Wasn’t Important?: Marketing and Pricing**

Focus group participants were asked questions about how they marketed and priced their products, as well as what techniques or tools they used to help them accomplish their marketing and pricing. The responses were generally indifferent; participants did not express much interest in discussing marketing and pricing.

When asked how they priced their products, their responses were concise and apathetic:

“I’ve seen websites.” (Raymond, line 155)

“Online, looking at comps. Just looking at the competition, uh.” (Starkville, line 206)

“I, um, google.” (Marks, line 137)

Whereas we expected a robust discussion on how participants decide to price their products—just as they had talked at length about the affordability of farmers’ markets—there was little interest in discussing pricing. Participants seemed to view marketing and pricing as nothing more than an intuitive process that occurs, implying that they first look at someone else’s (online or neighbor) pricing and then just naturally do their own pricing without much thought.

Similarly, participants did not freely discuss marketing or advertising. When prompted, the focus group participants answered questions on marketing services (see next section for a discussion of Market Maker); however, the focus group participants were generally uninterested in discussing advertising strategies or tools. In the few instances that marketing was discussed, it was for farmers’ markets, not for individuals. For example:
Here, this participant stresses that word-of-mouth is the key mode of advertising. While participants did not expressly share how they market their products, from the lack of their interest in it and from the aforementioned comment, we conclude that farmers feel comfortable with their current marketing practices and, like pricing, feel that it is intuitive and natural, as it is simply a word-of-mouth process.

**Summary**

The larger study sought to understand Mississippian's perspectives on local foods, with the aims of understanding the local food system infrastructure, possible gaps in local food systems, and discerning participants’ use of various pricing and marketing tools and strategies. This section examines the third aim and specifically focuses on the discussion of Market Maker, a national food networking website and mobile application (app). Mississippi is a Market Maker partner state.

Several key themes emerged when specifically discussing Market Maker, including a lack of knowledge, indifference, and a feeling that the information is out-of-date. Overall, participants were largely unaware of Market Maker. Across all focus groups, there was only one active Market Maker user. No participants mentioned Market Maker at any of the focus groups when discussing local foods and marketing until specific questions about Market Maker were asked. When they asked participants if they use Market Maker, the moderators were often met with blank stares and only a limited show of hands.

After the moderators previewed Market Maker and explained it to participants, most of the individuals expressed a lack of interest in it. While respondents were not asked specifically what they did not like about Market Maker, participants freely shared problems with Market Maker: the data is out of date, no one knows about Market Maker, and, finally, it is easier to use an internet search engine or a social media platform to search for data than to use Market Maker. Participants also offered suggestions of how they would change Market Maker, including making it more like Facebook. These suggestions showed their preference for a website and app that are regularly updated, interactive, and user-friendly.

Findings from the focus groups, as well as participants’ recommendations of ways to improve Market Maker, are outlined below.

**Findings**

Overall, the majority of participants were unfamiliar with Market Maker. At each focus group, participants were asked, “Who is familiar with Market Maker?” One to three hands were usually
Repeatedly, participants at each focus group said they were unaware of Market Maker and/or how they could use Market Maker.

The majority of those who had heard of Market Maker were Mississippi State University Extension employees or government employees who had knowledge of Market Maker from their workplace. Our moderator depicts that here, posing a question to the group and remarking on the show of hands:

> “Is anybody out here familiar with the term ‘Market Maker’?” [Pause and a show of hands.] So we have a few Extension folks, few other folks know what I am talking about, okay.” (Jackson, line 11)

Several Extension employees discussed their knowledge of Market Maker from teaching it, rather than using it. For instance, one Extension employee shared:

> “I teach it.” (Hernando, line 7)

Whereas another Extension employee added:

> “We push as many people through Extension as we can to Market Maker, but, uh… It’s so completely underutilized…” (Verona, line 230)

Those who knew about Market Maker were more likely to be Extension employees; however, there was typically at least one other individual familiar with Market Maker at each of the focus group sessions.

The responses of those who were familiar with Market Maker are divided into two groups—those who have never used Market Maker and those who are previous Market Maker users. Findings below reflect these two groups.

“I have never even heard of it.”

Of those who had heard of the website and application, only a select few had ever visited the site and used the available tools. At the Marks focus group, one participant shared their disappointment, explaining:

> “But right now, like you asked the question earlier, [does] anybody know about Market Maker? Nobody but two people had.” (Marks, line 182)

And to his comment, another participant replied:

> “Yeah, I had heard about it..., but I have never used it.” (Marks, line 183)
Participants who knew about Market Marker but had not used it gave very vague reasons why. One offered:

“As a consumer, I see it more, I would find it easier by searching the media than I would thinking about going to this...” (Corinth, line 346)

Others commonly gave suggestions of how to improve Market Maker instead of offering reasons for their lack of use. In Marks, one participant explained:

“So he kind of said some of what I was about to say, um, I’ve known about it, but haven’t used it. I’ve known about it for years and never used it. So, I have two things, um, I think the maps would be more useful, um, again...” (Marks, line 186)

This participant continued with a lengthy summary of the concerns with Market Maker: a lack of updated, current information; a lack of training on using the system; and a non-user friendly map system. Suggestions like these are discussed at length below; however, it should be noted here that, while only a portion of the focus group participants were familiar with Market Maker, many of those have actively chosen not to use Market Maker in the past.

“This isn’t a good tool for me...”

Where the familiar-with-Market-Maker non-users offered very few explanations for their lack of use, participants who were familiar with Market Maker cited numerous reasons for not using Market Maker. Growers and farmers’ market managers stated that the lack of returns from using Market Maker was a factor. Growers also speculated that consumers dislike Market Maker because the data offered is not current and that they would prefer to use other online search tools. These responses are detailed below.

**Growers’ Lack of Returns**

Numerous growers cited consumers’ limited knowledge of Market Maker as a reason for not using the tool. An individual from Gulfport flatly stated,

“Because what good is it if nobody knows to find anything.” (Gulfport, line 568)

This response mirrors comments from a person unfamiliar with Market Maker in the Corinth focus group. This person said using a general internet search engine is easier than using a website-based or app-based tool that very few individuals are aware of.

A grower from Hernando also discussed limited returns, stating,

“Well, I was saying that I’m probably one of the ones that you know went on there and created the profile and then just kind of forgot about it, and I did; I went on there and put our profile on there, and I think, in like four months, I had only gotten like two phone calls, so I said, ‘This isn’t a good tool for me,’ and I just kind of let it go.” (Hernando, line 365)

Across the state, growers echoed these sentiments when asked about Market Maker.

“But people are not using it.... ” (Hernando, line 499)
These comments summarize growers’ general indifference to Market Maker and their view of it as an unused resource by consumers, which makes it unworthy of their effort and time.

**Growers’ Thoughts on Consumers’ (Possible) Frustrations**

In a discussion about the ins-and-outs of Market Maker, a grower from Greenwood remarked,

“Um, it doesn’t really stay up-to-date; that’s really about all I have to say on it.” (Greenwood, line 139)

Focus group participants lamented the lack of current data on the website. During the discussion at several focus group locations, Market Maker was opened for a demonstration. An exchange at the Oxford event showed growers’ frustrations:

`Focus Group Leader: “…do it by zip code [enters zip code]. Do it within a mile radius [enters number and search results are returned] … Is that you full time [pointing to farm on the screen]?”`

`Participant P: No, it, they don’t exist anymore. This is a perfect example. (Oxford, line 472)`

This participant’s comment explains why Market Maker is frustrating—the data is old. Growers shared their frustrations at other locations, as well. At the Starkville focus group, the almost exact scenario repeated itself as the focus group leader and a Market Maker technician struggled to find local producers. When Market Maker returned the results, the focus group leader remarked:

“See it is updated—in 2010…” to which a woman countered a few comments later, “…if the information is not up-to-date, it’s worthless.” (Starkville, line 220)

Participants seemed discouraged by the lack of current data and limited returns; hence, they often chose to quit using Market Maker.

“…give them a list of what they are looking for”

Across all focus groups, there was only one active Market Maker user. He remarked that,

“…I have used Market Maker for a lot of our locally owned grocery stores; once their produce people are short on produce and they want to get something local, they will call me and I will just log into Market Maker and give them a list of what they are looking for…” (Hattiesburg, line 342)

Other than this participant, who uses Market Maker as a networking tool to connect local grocers with local food growers, not a single consumer or grower at any of the 11 transcribed focus groups actively uses or knows of anyone that actively uses Market Maker to find or market local foods. Unfortunately, he offered little other comments about his use of Market Maker and ceded discussion to other participants who were interested in discussing problems with Market Maker and suggestions for improvement. The in-depth discussion below captures respondents’ concerns with Market Maker.

**It’s Antiquated: Strengths and Shortcomings**

“[it’s] just one more tool”
When demonstrating Market Maker and discussing its capabilities, focus group participants offered countless comments and ideas about its value and its inadequacies.

**Strengths**

Participants shared several comments on Market Maker’s strengths. A focus group participant from Verona best summarized these comments:

“It’s a great source if it is utilized.” (Verona, line 254)

Participants viewed Market Maker as having the potential to be a great tool. Another individual at a different focus group added:

“There are layers upon layers upon layers of data already in Market Maker.” (Jackson, line 330)

The bulk of participants, however, did not share this positive outlook on the amount of data in Market Maker; instead, they said that, while there is a lot of data in Market Maker, most of it is old. Nevertheless, the amount of data within Market Maker was seen an asset by some participants.

**Weaknesses**

The key weakness of Market Maker for the focus group participants, as previously mentioned, was that it is not regularly updated. Connected to that idea, participants also shared that farmers do not have time to keep it current or are too old to know how to keep the data updated. A participant at the Hernando focus group shared:

“Because I think the challenge is, in reference to the Market Maker, when you have any type of website, who’s going to take time to update it? And who’s going to find the time? I’m just thinking, as a grower, would you have time to go in there on a daily basis? You don’t have time for that, and that’s the challenge.” (Hernando, line 338)

Others shared that it is not just time that farmers lack; they often do not have the knowledge required to keep a website updated. Age, participants explained, is a limiting factor:

“…because for that age group of farmers, they are not gong go; you gonna just have to…do it for them...” (Jackson, line 381)

At a different focus group meeting, a participant remarked:

“...we did do a class on this, and we taught our members about the system and how to use it; of course, our older vendors are not as comfortable using a computer...” (Hernando, line 519)

Participants shared two additional chief weakness of Market Maker: no one knows about it, and it is unnecessary due to the ease of using internet search engines.

One woman summed up participants’ remarks when she stated:

“I mean, my job is to market the market—I mean to bring consumers to the people who are selling at the market, and...I learned Market Maker on the spot years ago. I don’t really think about it, you know. I think there would have to be some assurance that people are actually going to Market Maker to find a market. My energy is put into making sure like, when people
Here, the participant is pointing out that they (and others) believe that people do not use Market Maker. Therefore, the participant puts effort into using other online platforms and options to market products. Another participant stressed: 

“...I know they can find [your restaurant] a million other ways, but that’s just one more tool.”  
(Verona, line 254)

Market Maker is “just one more tool,” and participants were not enthralled enough with it to be continuous users. While no participants specifically labeled Market Maker as “outdated” or “antiquated,” their listings of problems and suggestions for revisions to the website (below) implied its lack of usefulness and obsolete nature in light of Google and Facebook.

**Suggestions for the Future—“I am gonna want....”**

When prompted to provide suggestions for ways to improve Market Maker, participants overwhelmingly expressed the desire for Market Maker to function like the social media giant Facebook and other data-gathering websites like TripAdvisor or Yelp. Users want Market Maker to provide analytics of usage; allow users to leave photographs, ratings, and feedback; be easily searchable; provide suggestions; link to direct sales; have aggressive marketing; and, finally, have consistently updated, current content.

**Remove Inactive Users**

Participants were overwhelmingly in favor of inactive users being removed from the system. One participant shared:

“See, I have been thinking about sites like this that they need an expiration or a required renewal feature.”  
(Oxford, line 486)

Participants viewed removing or deleting users who do not have current data as an easy method of avoiding outdated data.

**Enhanced User Experience**

Continuously updated data (discussed above and in other sections) and an enhanced user experience were the principal requests. At the Oxford focus group, the focus group leader and a participant had the following exchange:

*Participant: “And another thing, this needs to be a, an app for mobile devices.”*

*Focus Group Leader: “It is an app.”*

*Participant: “It is?”*

*Focus Group Leader: “Um hum yeah.”*  
(Oxford, line 505)
They continue debating the merits of apps and mobile notification reminders, and one participant interjected:

“When we’re in such an instant society—we all have smartphones, like he said—an app would be better than this.” (Oxford, line 596)

Their conversation depicts the common sentiment at the focus groups: Market Maker is not as user-friendly as familiar websites and apps such as Facebook, TripAdvisor, and Yelp. In their eyes, to be of value, Market Maker needs to first enhance its user experience.

Specific suggestions for enhancing user experience include making the search and map features more responsive. For example, one participant expressed:

“Okay, but I think on the map thing, we need to have, if you could put a program in there, if somebody [is] looking for greens, they could click on ‘greens’ and it would automatically identify each farmer that has greens and the location of where those greens are at; if you want cabbages, you just click on ‘cabbages,’ [and] all those farmers will come up.” (Marks, line 181)

Others asked for additional features and the ability to interact with those features. One participant suggested linking menus for restaurants:

“Only thing I would say: if a restaurant is going to go through the trouble to register for it and I am going through there and I find it and I click on it, I am going to want to go look at their menu.” (Verona, line 491)

Others suggested photographs:

“Well, I was thinking if it is for consumers, consumers probably want pictures and want to know if this is a place I can go and visit, take my child; some people really get excited about going and taking their children to the dairy farms.” (Hattiesburg, line 337)

Or, even user commenting or interactive ratings. Two Hattiesburg focus group participants discussed the idea of having user comments and interactive ratings:

Participant D: “Maybe a feature on commenting on that aspect of the business would be helpful, just like—”

Participant L: “Or Trip Advisor, yes”

Participant D: “Yes, that could be really helpful because if these sites are vague and people are picking them up, then you could have a ratings score.” (Hattiesburg, line 299)

Also, several individuals mentioned the desire for user statistics, such as those found on many social media and internet search engine platforms.

“About updating, if there’s a way that the system can trigger out, I would think biannually, um request for update and, but to get a busy person to do something like that, there has to be value behind it. So um I’ll tell you what Yelp does. Yelp send their business a uh weekly score card, that’s what they do. So I get a weekly email that says, ‘You have had so many people click
Facebook, for this participant, was the only outlet needed, as it was working to “serve us well.” Other participants echoed this sentiment—Market Maker does not currently have the tools to meet their needs.

**Concluding Thoughts on Market Maker Findings**

Focus group participants were overwhelmingly unfamiliar with Market Maker. For those who knew of it, only one participant used it. In considering using Market Maker, one participant explained:

“I think you are just putting it out there, but you don’t know what’s getting where or who is seeing it or you just have no feedback, you know. … Is anybody going to see it? You don’t know.” (Starkville, line 276)

A lack of concrete returns was a major problem for participants when considering using Market Maker. In that light, a participant from the Oxford focus group shared:

“Someone could just post on their Facebook page, ‘I need to get rid of this stuff’ and have instantly a whole lot more.” (Oxford, line 603)

And previous to this comment, the focus group members in Oxford discussed:

Participant F: “The need to market it on social media. I mean that’s where most people are.”

Participant M: “Marketing dollars and such.”

Participant F: “… but a lot of that can be free, too. There is a lot of marketing that happens on Facebook that’s like not that expensive.” (Oxford, line 518)

During discussions and demonstrations of Market Maker, the focus group participants continually focused on the ways that it differed from Google, Facebook, Yelp, and even Tinder. They had the same expectations for Market Maker—be current, user friendly, and interactive, and offer user statistics. Essentially, they wanted Market Maker to be much, much more dynamic and more mainstream. As the previous comments imply, some participants also did not see the need for Market Maker because they do not believe it offers a better or different product than the currently available social media platforms.

However, other participants did not imply there was a lack of need for Market Maker. Instead, they suggested multiple improvements (to make it like Facebook and other social media sites) and an aggressive advertising campaign to make others aware of Market Maker. Participants wanted to see Market Maker more well known, especially outside of growers and producers:

“I think Market Maker needs to actually make its presence known; I don’t know anybody who knows about Market Maker that’s not in the farming community.” (Hattiesburg, line 308)

A participant from the Gulfport focus group summarized the strengths and potential of Market Maker:
“Because, if you’re a farmer, small business, whatever, and you’re utilizing this, it’s up to you how much you utilize it and how well you utilize it. You can just put in your name, phone number—some people totally utilize it and they’ll list their crops, what is being picked this week, you know, so it’s an imperfect system; it’s a good idea, but it’s imperfect, but I think the more people go up, the more Market Maker changes, the better it can become.” (Gulfport, line 563)

It is an “imperfect system,” but definitely “a good idea” and one that has the ability to implement the aforementioned suggestions for improvement. While the success of Market Maker and the success of local food systems are not dependent on one another, gains for Market Maker equate to gains for the local food systems in the state, which all participants strongly support.

CONCLUSION

Twelve focus groups were conducted across the state of Mississippi, and participants were asked about their perspectives on local foods and local food systems. One hundred thirty-four focus group participants—from various backgrounds across the state and representing different sectors of the industry—generated robust conversations about how to define local foods, the demand and affordability of local foods, current struggles within the local food system, and ways to strengthen the demand and production of local foods.

Focus group participants were overwhelmingly positive about the future of local foods and candid about their views of current struggles. Participants identified several key areas for improvement, namely consumer behavior, government regulations, infrastructure, and resources for future generations of growers. Conversely, conversation was limited on marketing, advertising, and pricing.

In providing their perspectives, we have aimed to offer a more extensive picture of local food systems within the state of Mississippi. While no picture is ever complete, we hope that our summary of Mississippi focus group participants’ viewpoints on local foods adds to the discussion and helps further local food systems not only in the Magnolia State, but nationwide.

AUTHORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chance McDavid</th>
<th>Leslie Hossfeld</th>
<th>Kelli Russell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Extension Associate</td>
<td>Professor and Head Department of Sociology</td>
<td>Graduate Student Department of Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Rural Development Center/Department of Agricultural Economics Mississippi State University Extension</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
<td>Mississippi State University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>