

Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Food System Assessment

Draft RFP Language

Summary:

The Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission (RRRC), a five-county rural region located in north central Virginia, seeks the assistance of a consulting firm well-versed in economic analyses related to agriculture, to conduct an economic assessment of the region's food system. The award will be based on best value.

Purpose:

The purpose of this Request for Proposal (RFP) and the resulting contract is to compile comprehensive, quantitative economic and production data concerning the conditions in the local farm and food economy of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region's food system. This project defines a food system as a collaborative network that integrates food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. This assessment is not to include non-edible agricultural products such as equestrian and horticultural operations, but will encompass all other components of the agricultural economy, including commodities and wineries.

Study Area:

For the purposes of this assessment, the food system will encompass the following Virginia Counties and Cities: Loudoun, Fairfax, Prince William, Fauquier, Stafford, Rappahannock, Culpeper, Madison, Greene, Orange, Spotsylvania, Albemarle and Louisa Counties, and the cities of Arlington, Alexandria, Fairfax, Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Charlottesville.

Project Goals:

- Provide a better understanding of existing conditions within the region's agricultural economy
- Quantitatively pinpoint issues with the local food system
- Establish a baseline to measure progress

Background:

The Rappahannock-Rapidan Region is located in the Northern Piedmont of Virginia. The five counties that make up the region – Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock – cover 1,965 square miles and are home to 166,054 persons. RRRC is the Commonwealth-chartered planning district commission for the five-county region (Planning District 9).

A predominantly rural region, agriculture and related business remains a key component of the Rappahannock-Rapidan Region's economy. The main agricultural products are commodities, including beef cattle, hay and grains; and specialty crops, such as greenhouse-grown products, apples and grapes. Small vegetable farms are beginning to emerge in modest numbers, and agritourism is also key component of the economy. However, according to local experts, the region's agricultural economy is in decline. Mid-sized farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with larger operations, and while there has been a surge in new farmers coming into the region, their operations are small and frequently fail.

Initial studies have shown that there is untapped demand for locally grown food and agricultural products in the Washington D.C. food shed. There are many small-scale farmers in the region that may scale-up with assistance, through promotion of agricultural and rural economic development, local foods and tourism. Agriculture and agro-tourism are key to the success of the Rappahannock-Rapidan region's overall economy.

RRRC held a workshop on Fostering Sustainable Agriculture for Economic Development in April 2012, to kick-off its regional sustainable agriculture effort. Responses indicated strong interest in this topic throughout the region and amongst a broad range of stakeholders, though several issues were also raised. One of those issues was a lack of detailed data concerning the regional food system from a trusted source that local organizations could draw from in convincing local elected officials and funders to pursue projects to foster the local food economy. Another issue was a lack of focused goals and priorities amongst the stakeholders. RRRC's food system planning effort seeks to address these issues.

As the first phase of its regional food system planning effort, RRRC, together with its partners, seeks to conduct an in-depth regional food system assessment to gather critical data on local food economies. Significant outreach to the agricultural community and other key local stakeholder groups will accompany this effort in order to raise awareness, solicit local input and build partnerships to carry forward into future phases. The assessment will cover RRRC's five-county region, plus an additional six to encompass the region's food system.

Two public meetings and multiple steering committee meetings have been held to define the scope of this assessment, which is the first phase of this effort. Future phases will include 1) a local resource assessment and stakeholder surveys, and 2) development of a regional food system plan.

Scope of Services:

- Compile data from the 2007 and 2012 Agricultural Censuses showing farm and production characteristics; acreage devoted to organic food production and value of commodities produced; and value of direct sales from farms to consumers.
- Compile food consumption estimates for the region using Bureau of Labor Statistics data.
- Compile data published by the Bureau of Economic Analysis data covering personal income in various industries, including farming, for the period 1969-2013, for the region's food system.
- Compile additional data from these and other public databases to illuminate issues that are unique to the region.
- Having compiled this data, consult will prepare (a) a written summary and (b) a PowerPoint presentation illustrating the most important findings, which may include several charts or tables, for local partners' use in outreach, publicity and marketing. Local partners will have access to any data compiled for this report.
- Present assessment results three times: (a) once to the regional project steering committee and (b) twice to larger groups of stakeholders during public meetings held within RRRC's five county region.

- As a potential option: conduct an input-output analysis using IMPLAN software. The report will estimate the overall employment, sales, and income impacts of agriculture in the five-county RRRC region only. Economic impacts will be identified as direct (the expenditures attributable to agriculture and related activities such as agri-tourism), indirect (impacts attributable to purchases of local production inputs), and induced (impacts attributable to additional worker household spending). The study will acknowledge and attempt to quantify when possible other economic contributions of agriculture to the region. They include beneficial environmental effects, effects on quality of life (e.g., open space preservation), and health and wellness. (To be cost out separately)