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South Carolina Food Hub Network Helped Farmers Feed More People in 2020

COLUMBIA — The South Carolina Food Hub Network helped food distributors in South Carolina buy and distribute more than $1.3 million of South Carolina-grown food in 2020, strengthening local food systems and buoying farmers during the pandemic.

Food Hub Network staff worked with four South Carolina distributors on their successful applications for contracts through the US Department of Agriculture Farmers to Families Food Box program, funded by federal COVID-19 stimulus money. South Carolina-based distributors bought, boxed and distributed more than $5 million in fresh food, $1.3 million of it from South Carolina farmers. Charleston food hub GrowFood Carolina secured a USDA contract with help from the Network, as did distributors Limehouse Produce, Senn Brothers and Taylor Boys Produce.

Also with the Network's assistance, Columbia food hub Axiom Farms Cooperative won a contract through the South Carolina Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Food Banks program to distribute 887 boxes of food worth $30,000 purchased locally and provided to families in the Midlands; and Charlotte food hub Freshlist secured a contract through a Carolina Farm Stewardship Association program called FarmsSHARE to buy food from South Carolina farmers for 1,897 food boxes.

"This year put the power of the network to the test and demonstrated how investing in the local food system increases our resilience," said Nikki Seibert, the South Carolina Food Hub Network's facilitator.

"The South Carolina Food Hub Network has helped build capacity for the state's food hubs, ultimately helping farmers grow more and feed more people," said Commissioner of Agriculture Hugh Weathers. "We've supported the Network through our Agribusiness Center for Research and Entrepreneurship (ACRE) and Specialty Crop Block Grants, and so far it's been a great investment for South Carolinians."

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Food hubs connect farmers to buyers like restaurants and grocery stores, increasing consumers' access to local food. Hubs often help identify market opportunities and support farmers in crop-planning accordingly, while shouldering some of the burden of marketing and reducing the carbon footprint of buying local through logistics and distribution coordination.

The SC Food Hub Network helps the hubs work together and provides resources and education. It also increases the buying power of each individual hub and increases the capacity for selling local foods to larger buyers.

In 2020, Network staff underwent training from the USDA, National Good Food Network, and the National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition in order to provide their services to South Carolina food distributors – both food hubs and non-food hubs – to help them secure food box contracts.

South Carolina now has six food hubs, including more established hubs GrowFood Carolina (Charleston), Swamp Rabbit Café and Grocery (Greenville) and Catawba Farm and Food Coalition (Chester), and newcomers Axiom Farms (Columbia), ACE Basin Growers (Orangeburg) and Lowcountry Fresh Market and Café (Bluffton). Freshlist, based in Charlotte, also serves several South Carolina counties.

Looking forward, the Network has begun collaborating with more organizations, such as FoodShare SC, to extend support in buying local food for food box programs targeted towards under-resourced communities.

For more information, visit foodhubnetworksc.com.

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