

The St Louis Food Policy Coalition:

For a thriving, equitable, sustainable and local food system

Melissa Vatterott

St Louis, Missouri is home to approximately 308,000 people, with an additional 2.5 million individuals calling the Metro area home. St Louis is situated in the middle of the United States' heartland, which has long been regarded as one of the main centres of agricultural production and trade.

Although St Louis remains surrounded by an agriculturally dominated landscape, it has changed substantially over the past century. In 1925, the acreage of table crops (fruits and vegetables for human consumption) grown in the state was 50 % more than today. Despite the abundance of cropland (around 9.9 million acres) in the St Louis Regional Foodshed, over 7.5 million acres are now devoted to growing corn and soybeans for grain, and 9.3 million acres, or 94 % of the region's total cropland are used to grow "food system" crops (commodities processed into foods or as food sources for livestock feed). Strikingly, less than 0.01 % of the cropland within a 100-mile radius of St Louis is used to grow table crops.

Given the current regional food system, it is no surprise that disparities abound in the food environment across the St Louis region. Currently, over 700,000 people in the Metro St Louis region are "low income, have low food access, and live more than half a km. from the nearest supermarket", with more than half of them living in the city (56 %), and 25 % in St Louis County. Furthermore, the City of St Louis and much of the region is markedly racially segregated, with many of the black population residing in the northern parts of the city and county and in the western portion of St Clair County in Illinois. Unmistakably, food access is a racial equity issue in our region, with the majority of black residents having lower incomes, lower vehicle access, and lower access to supermarkets than white residents.



Logo for the new certification programme for environmentally-responsible farms

Leading up to and, poignantly, following the fatal police-related shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, many organisations, engaged citizens and elected officials have realised the importance of addressing the institutionalised and systemic racism facing our region and have taken great strides to address these concerns collaboratively. Members of the St Louis Food Policy Coalition and other allies have taken this to heart and are seeking to remove barriers to food production and to establish new food enterprises in areas of limited food access as one way to combat racial inequity in the region.

St Louis Food Policy Coalition

The St Louis Food Policy Coalition (STLFPC) was formalised in September 2015 after 9 months of outreach and assessment of the food system needs in our region, following the publication of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment's St Louis Regional Food Study. STLFPC has grown from 13 official members to 31 in just a little over three years. Most members are non-profit organisations but there are also a couple of businesses and a few individual members. STLFPC is housed within an environmental advocacy organisation, Missouri Coalition for the Environment (MCE), making it well positioned to receive support from staff who conduct effective advocacy for policy change. In addition, housing STLFPC within MCE provides a focus on environmental stewardship and environmental justice, which makes it stand out among other councils and coalitions across the United States.

STLFPC has three primary focus areas: 1) removing barriers to urban agriculture 2) increasing access to local, nutritious food, and 3) supporting environmentally responsible farmers within 150 miles of St Louis. Each of these focus areas has work groups that meet as needed. For example, the farmer-focused work group meets twice a month, while members of the urban agriculture work group meet mostly one-on-one with the MCE Food and Farm Director to advance a challenging strategy that allows permanent ownership of land for food production. The entire coalition, including official members and allies, meets quarterly. All are welcome to join to receive updates on the efforts of our three work groups, share important updates about their respective organisation, and network.

Funding

MCE, as the backbone organisation of STLFPC, received a two-year grant that supported general advocacy related to health equity from a local private foundation. This allowed MCE's Food and Farm Director to spend most of her time on



Hart Beet Farm in Eolia, Missouri, one of the environmentally-responsible farms in Known & Grown. Photo by Missouri Coalition for the Environment's

outreach, coordinating work group meetings, and executing most of the work groups' action items between meetings. During this initial two-year period most STLFPC members provided input and feedback on the action items that needed to be moved forward in the work groups and helped recruit new members. During the same period, MCE also secured a federal government grant to hire a full-time person to support the farmer-focused work group specifically and funding to hire an AmeriCorps VISTA – a year-long volunteer – to support the food access work group specifically. This allowed for significantly increased efficiency in executing the strategies of those work groups. At the end of the two-year advocacy grant, the private foundation funded a one-year extension of that grant, allowing the work to continue. After the AmeriCorps VISTA's year of service, another private foundation in St Louis committed to funding a full-time position at MCE to continue the community-led food access work.

The ability to secure private and public grants to hire staff dedicated to moving the STLFPC initiatives forward has significantly increased STLFPC's impact and success. Over the last three years, MCE has also seen STLFPC members step into leadership roles on various initiatives, helping to shift and spread the workload from MCE staff to the broader coalition.

STLFPC and MCE have struggled to secure funding for these projects, as they are affected by the funding priorities for regional infrastructure needs and the execution of long-term projects. This has led to a slower pace for some of the systemic changes identified in the local food system of the St Louis region.

Work to date and the future

Urban agriculture and livestock

Over the past three years, STLFPC has been successful in advancing policy change related to urban agriculture in the City of St Louis through the City's Board of Aldermen as a way to improve food access for low income residents and to spur economic opportunity in the city through urban farming.

Food access and community engagement

Recognising that STLFPC needs community input on our strategies to improve food access, and mindful of the racial makeup of the food access work group compared to the communities with limited food access, MCE conducted a year of community engagement across North St Louis City and North St Louis County to hear from residents about their food environment. The results of this engagement, including the community-backed strategies that came out of the project, are explained in MCE's North St. Louis Listening Session Report, which was published in May 2018.

Currently, the STLFPC food access work group is planning to launch a pilot of a retail audit initiative in partnership with a local university researcher to determine where our community food markets are best suited to expand, and where we can work with existing corner stores to increase the availability and variety of fresh foods.

After a study by STLFPC, MCE Food and Farm Director and interns conducted a citywide survey in 2016 to learn what agricultural activities residents would like or would not like to see in their neighbourhoods. Based on this survey, which revealed that residents welcomed urban agriculture, including more animals, into their neighbourhoods, and that there is a need for land, a new bill was passed in 2017 on numbers of livestock. In addition, the zoning administrator, defined "home garden," "community garden," and "urban farm" and indicated that the sale of eggs, honey and produce from these spaces is permitted as long as certain requirements are met regarding stand size, placement and frequency of operation. The zoning administrator brought this draft policy memorandum to the building commissioner, who agreed and issued the policy memorandum to permit the measures under his authority. Currently STLFPC is working to figure out how to address the land ownership desire identified in the 2016 survey. MCE hired a 2019 Food and Farm VISTA volunteer to assist with the large task of convincing our local land bank to develop a process where they can sell some of their parcels at an affordable price for food production.



Urban Ag Day at the St. Louis Science Center.
Photo by Missouri Coalition for the Environment's

Food justice

After the release of the Listening Session Report, STLFPC realised it needed a space for residents to engage and inform STLFPC's work on a consistent basis. As a result, MCE hired a new food justice organiser who was tasked to establish the Food Equity Advisory Board (FEAB). FEAB is a 12-person board made up of community champions from North St Louis City, North St Louis County, and East St Louis in St Clair County, Illinois, who are committed to advancing food justice. FEAB members meet monthly on Saturday mornings in a community meeting space setting. In contrast to STLFPC's quarterly meeting times that occur during workday hours, it was critical to find a time that worked for FEAB members, who all have their own full-time jobs, families and other responsibilities to work around. FEAB works to carry forward the community-informed strategies from the Listening Session Report as well as initiatives/projects they have identified in the community as needing increased support. FEAB members are welcome to attend any STLFPC events and the food justice organiser ensures that FEAB has the opportunity to weigh in and provide input on the work of STLFPC to ensure the projects that are moving forward are really the most effective and needed to support food justice.

Farm infrastructure and food hub

Shortly after the establishment of STLFPC, the farmer-focused work group began talking with farmers about their needs to grow their farm business and reach new markets. It became clear that a central aggregation and distribution point (a "food hub") would be valuable for the region's farmers and would facilitate greater local food sourcing for area schools, universities, restaurants, supermarkets and other institutional buyers. In 2017, MCE hired a new local food coordinator to conduct the detailed analysis needed to

determine which institutions and farmers would get on board with a food hub and how that food hub would need to function to be successful for all parties. STLFPC believed this work was important in order to support environmentally responsible farmers in the St Louis region and to build up the local food economy. Through regular farm visits, semi-annual regional farmer meetings, and additional surveying, three immediate needs became apparent that need to be addressed prior to the brick and mortar food hub being built: development of a communication platform for farmers to communicate about sharing resources and best practices, support to increase coordination between farmers so they can distribute their products more efficiently distribute into St Louis, and identification of existing processing kitchens that could be better utilised to save farm produce from perishing and getting that produce into the hands of smaller institutional buyers.

MCE and the farmer-focused work group will continue to move forward the three immediate needs identified by farmers, while seeking funding to develop needed resources, and working toward the establishment of a brick and mortar food hub in the next five years, after learning from these immediately needed resources.

In addition to better delivery, distribution and processing of produce, farmers indicated early on the need for support with marketing. As a result, STLFPC established a committee to develop a regional certification for farmers who use environmentally responsible, humane and safe practices. This certification was launched in the summer of 2019.

The priorities of STLFPC have been community informed and stakeholder led from the very beginning. MCE has been very fortunate to hire staff who can lead these initiatives forward at a pace that other FPCs may not be able to do with only volunteer committee or work group chair support. We are also fortunate that foundations in the region have recognised the importance of supporting our food system, making it possible for MCE to hire staff and receive federal grants with matching funds from private foundations. Over time, STLFPC members have increased or decreased their involvement depending on their other commitments and the status of the work group initiatives. However, we have always been able to find a core group of members who will regularly meet to keep efforts moving forward.

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Notes

- MCE's Food Access Story Map www.moenvironment.org/northstlfood.
- Publication of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment's St Louis Regional Food Study. www.moenvironment.org/stlfoodshed
- MCE's North St. Louis Listening Session Report www.moenvironment.org/listeningsessionreport2018.