

Groundbreakers



Potential in Distribution *Statewide*

THE DISTRIBUTOR ANGLE

Six years ago, Greener Fields Together (GFT) formed as a program within PRO*ACT, which is a national network of independent, regional produce distributors. GFT works with partnered distributors to increase sustainability and the prevalence of local food in the supply chain. According to Jennifer Boone, mid-America sustainability coordinator for the organization, distribution in farm to school is the hardest part to implement and has the most possible impact.

Despite inherent pricing challenges when introducing distributors as an intermediary between farmers and schools, the economics can work out in everyone's favor. Farmers who believe in the local food movement can benefit from the distributor model because they have access to a larger market: economies of scale depend on the size and type of farm. Distributors who are anticipating an increasing

demand for local food products can respond to that demand by learning how to communicate with local farmers. Conversations about price point can reveal a mutual benefit.

Boone reports, "The willingness of both parties to negotiate for the greater good of being able to get fresh, healthy food into schools is incredibly important." Working together, farmers and distributors can help increase the scale of farm to school by helping to standardize the practice.

With a dedicated food safety department, GFT provides multiple types of support to farmers who sell at least a case a year to their distributors. For example, in 2017, the organization granted \$75,000 to local farmers looking to scale up



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production or capacity. Further, the organization takes what Boone describes as a "hand-holding approach" in walking farmers through compliance with food safety regulations, including writing food safety plans and getting certified. GFT has a contract with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to perform the USDA Harmonized+ audit; the \$2000 cost is covered when farmers schedule their audit through GFT. Finally, GFT stays up to date with the new Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), as requirements continue to roll out into the 2020s. >>



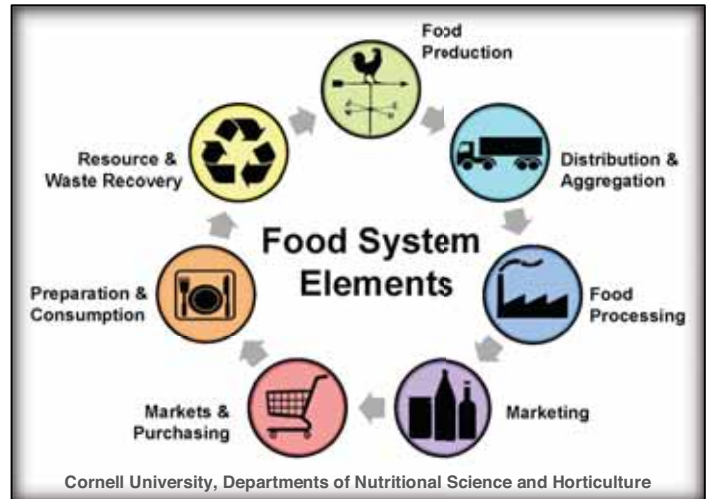
▲ PRO*ACT is a country-wide network of independent distributors, including GoFresh in Arkansas. The Greener Fields Together initiative supports sustainability and local food, a growing sentiment among other distributors.

ARKANSAS ON THE MOVE

>> Boone explains that food is at the center of many issues, including education, public health, and economics. It is her hope that children in schools can consume local produce and “teach up” in their families and communities, by bringing their experiences home. Further, it is within the purview of schools to advocate for more local food from distributors, and spend their Department of Defense dollars with distributors who buy local.

“There’s such a huge space for growth in Arkansas.”

Because her job is regional, Boone has a multi-state perspective on Arkansas’ farm to school movement. “I see a whole lot of progress in Arkansas”, she says, “after my first visit, I came back and was really excited. There’s such a huge space for growth in Arkansas, and people are ready. There are people actively working on this and people are ready to make that change.” As evidence of this, Arkansas recently passed the Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Act, which seeks to increase purchasing of local food by institutions receiving state financing. Furthermore, GFT’s networked distributor in the state is GoFresh, which labels produce grown locally (within a seven-hour drive) as “GL”. Beginning just last year, three Arkansas farms are currently undergoing the food safety audit process with GoFresh. ↪



▲ *Distributors can play a vital role in the farm to school food system by connecting farmers with schools locally.*

Advice for Producers Contacting Distributors

1. Contact a distributor and ask if there is someone who deals with local procurement OR contact a retailer who champions local produce and ask if they can connect you with a distributor committed to locally-sourced products.
2. Have a list of items that you are growing or that you plan to grow. Distributors prefer that you know what you like to grow and what you grow well.
3. Have a food safety plan or GAP manual that you adhere to. Plan to undergo a food safety audit, as most buyers will ask for one.
4. Try to align your pricing with USDA market pricing, as distributors are generally very price-sensitive.
5. Start with a smaller volume so you can make adjustments. Once you establish the relationship, consider increasing volume.
6. Be prepared for the following questions from the distributor:
 - a. ~~X~~ What kind of volume can you provide?
 - b. How do you package? (Retail pack size or foodservice?)
 - c. ~~X~~ What is your pricing?
 - d. Do you deliver or do you need the distributor to pick up? (If you deliver, do you have temperature-controlled vehicles?)
 - e. Can you provide samples?

*Many thanks to Jennifer Boone, the Mid-America Sustainability Coordinator for Greener Fields Together, part of PRO*ACT, LLC.*