



CASE STUDY | JANUARY 2025

Building Resilient Agriculture through Forward Purchasing Commitments and Direct Farmer Financial Investment

THE
GEORGIA
ACRE
Collective

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The Georgia ACRE Collective



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Executive Summary



This case study examines an example of forward purchasing commitments and direct farmer financial investments: two key strategies deployed in Georgia to build the capacity of farmers and other food producers to meet the growing demand for fresh, local, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food within community-based anchor institutions like schools and hospitals. Empowered by the security of wholesale purchasing commitments, producers able to meet this demand have greater confidence to invest in their operations, more readily achieve profitability, and even scale their operations.

This case study aims to provide interested stakeholders a blueprint to rebuild their region's food systems. We also aim to communicate a sense of urgency: The time is now to invest in resilient, local, and sustainable food systems to revive rural economies while improving community health outcomes. Federal programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) offer meaningful learning opportunities to consider how procurement changes can be leveraged for food system reforms.

Introduction

The United States' once-thriving regional food production, distribution, and retail systems have been decimated following decades of agricultural policies and lending practices that encouraged consolidation across every agricultural sector. Moreover, the losses have not affected communities equally: A stunning number of farmers have been driven out of business by these same forces with a disproportionate impact on Black farmers and ranchers.

The concentration of power and wealth in our food system limits the production of local, healthy, sustainably produced food, endangering U.S. communities' health and economic vitality. Today's independent and beginning farmers face nearly insurmountable obstacles as they struggle to stay in business. Yet against this backdrop, we see a rising demand from consumers for fresh, wholesome, locally-grown and -produced food and an opportunity to engage public institutional demand.

We must seize this opportunity and build a more equitable food system, one in which everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. This will require building new infrastructure while dismantling racial, economic, and other structural inequities.

THE AMERICAN FARMER IS ENDANGERED

Small farms are struggling

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack reported that 2022 was the most profitable year for agriculture in the history of the United States. However, he also shared that 92.5% of that wealth rests in the hands of only 11% of farms.



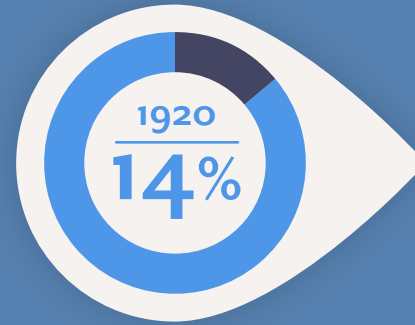
92.5%
of agricultural profit



went to just **11%**
of U.S. farms

Black farm ownership is vanishing

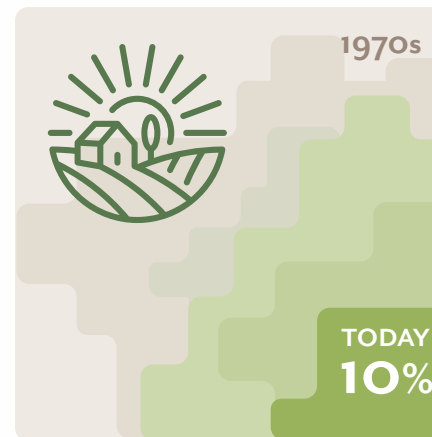
The statistics are even more stark for farmers of color. In 1920, 925,000 Black-owned farms represented 14% of the farmland in this country, according to *The New York Times*. As of 2017, only 35,000 Black farmers remained, representing a mere 0.5% of farmland — after losing an estimated \$326 billion in acreage.



Americans are eating much less food grown by American farms



70% of fruit and
50% of vegetables
are now imported
in the United States



Acres in food
production
fell by 90%
...even as soybean
and corn acreage
surged 120% and
30% respectively



The Georgia ACRE Collective:

The Common Market Southeast
The Conservation Fund
Health Care Without Harm
Georgia Organics
The Turner Environmental Law
Clinic at Emory University

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation provides external project evaluation.

In 2022, with support from The Rockefeller Foundation, The Common Market led the formation of the Georgia ACRE Collective: a coalition of local and national organizations advancing Agriculture Community Resilience and Equity (ACRE) through values-based procurement. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, ACRE shares a vision of creating vibrant, equitable food systems that benefit both urban and rural communities.

The ACRE Collective aims to meet two primary goals

- 1 Organize demand for good food:**
Create market opportunities for values-aligned producers through anchor institutions such as universities, hospitals, and government agencies.
- 2 Build supplier capacity:**
Strengthen the ability of local and often historically underserved producers to meet the growing demand for sustainable food products.

ACRE's work is critical to Georgia's communities and the overall economy. Food production and distribution occupy a central place in our society: when these systems are inequitable, so too is the distribution of wealth, opportunity, and good health outcomes.



About the case study

This case study uses Georgia's agricultural economy to illustrate **successful strategies** deployed by the ACRE Collective to **rebuild resilient local and regional supply chains** that meet the needs of farmers, institutions, and community members.

Georgia's rich agricultural economy hosts many large-scale wholesale producers and a vibrant network of smaller farms focused on direct market relationships. Yet the area surrounding Atlanta lacks a significant number of mid-sized farms between 25-300 acres that grow food for wholesale markets using ecological practices. Moreover, many farmers of color have long faced unequal access to resources like credit, fair market opportunities, and technical support programs.

Through our efforts to correct this imbalance and enrich the region's food supply, we drew from our collective experience gleaned in the field: **To be successful, all farmers need access to land, markets, and capital.**

As part of the ACRE Collective's efforts to **expand land access**, the Conservation Fund runs the **Farms Fund program**, which acquires farmland and transitions it to farmers at reduced cost by leveraging conservation easements. This model ensures the protection of the land

and the farmer's success. In 2023, the Conservation Fund's Georgia Farms Fund **secured 10 farms and more than 1,000 acres of farmland for next-generation farm businesses**. By the end of 2024, the Farms Fund anticipates having **20 farms** in its program from Atlanta to Charlotte to Chicago.

To address farmers' needs for **markets** and **access to capital**, ACRE has deployed **forward purchasing commitments** and **direct farmer investment**: two equitable strategies to build producer capacity and increase the supply of local, sustainably grown food.

*Jibb's Vineyard
Quality Fruits and
Vegetables
Byromville, GA*



Benefits of forward purchasing commitments and direct farmer investments

A **forward commitment** is a pledge made by an institution (a school, hospital, or other community-anchored organization) to purchase products from a local farmer or rancher over a growing season or calendar year. These agreements allow the producer to plan around the institution's food procurement needs at the beginning of their season. The ability to plan crop production and forecast income across an entire season or year helps mitigate the risks typically associated with selling wholesale by creating a more stable and supportive environment for farmers.

Direct farmer investments provide producers with an infusion of capital necessary to grow or streamline their operations, enabling them to meet the needs of wholesale markets successfully. This support allows producers to focus on building their skills and capabilities, overcoming infrastructure limitations, and enabling them to meet the rigorous standards of larger wholesale buyers.

Together, these strategies meet farmers wherever they are in their operational development, offering flexibility, demand predictability, direct investment, and steady support. The ACRE Collective's ongoing commitment to grower success provides a "safe space" to experiment, learn from their mistakes, and make gradual improvements, which are critical for navigating the challenges of wholesale markets. This fosters long-term relationships built on trust.

As farmers gain confidence and expertise, they become more competitive and better positioned to expand their operations, further contributing to the growth of local, sustainable food systems. The very presence of more successful operations in the region acts as a beacon for others in the community, especially for those from under-resourced backgrounds. The visible success of these initiatives can inspire and attract a new generation of farmers and food system workers, demonstrating that a career in agriculture is both viable and rewarding.



The time is now to rebuild local food systems

It is important to note that these strategies leverage significant federal support designed to rebuild and strengthen local supply chains.

A rising demand for local food systems arose in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic-era global supply chain failures. In response, the USDA made significant investments in food systems and food access nationwide. \$464 million was allocated to help state, tribal and territorial governments purchase foods produced within the state or within 400 miles of the delivery destination to help support local, regional, and underserved producers. This funding helped families in need access fresh, healthy food.

In 2023, The Common Market Southeast entered into a \$4 million Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) agreement with the Georgia Department of Agriculture. Through this agreement, the distributor supplies fresh produce to Georgia's eight food banks.

The next year, an additional \$500 million was allocated through the "LFPA+" agreement, awarding The Common Market another \$4 million. **These contracts established a**



forward contractual commitment and allowed The Common Market to offer more than 20 Georgia-based, Black-, women-, and veteran-led farms a stable market for two to three years. This stability made it possible for these farmers to invest in their infrastructure, equipment, training, and certifications while putting hundreds of dormant acres into production.

In October of 2024, USDA announced it would direct an additional \$1.2 billion to help schools and other institutions purchase locally produced food, building on the successes of its Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS). Ongoing commitments from these programs create opportunity and financial stability for farmers while increasing communities' access to nutritious food.

Starlit Roots is a Black- and woman-owned diversified vegetable farm in Keysville, GA.



Case study goals

This case study will illustrate two highly effective strategies for building sustainable food systems that prioritize the needs of both farmers and consumers: **forward commitments and direct farmer investments**. These approaches have proven to be powerful tools in transforming how food is grown, distributed, and accessed, all while ensuring long-term resilience for local communities.

We will showcase the perspective of the farmers and buyers themselves, as their involvement is crucial to the success of any sustainable food system. By hearing directly from the people at the heart of these initiatives, we gain invaluable insights into the **challenges they face and the benefits they have experienced through these programs**. Their voices and values underscore the importance of equitable investment and forward-thinking strategies to ensure that small-scale, independent farmers can thrive.

We hope that these stories will inspire other stakeholders—food distributors, community organizations, or institutions — by demonstrating how these strategies have worked in Georgia to **enhance local food systems**.

STRATEGY ONE

Forward Purchasing Commitments

A forward commitment is a pledge made by an institution, like a school or hospital, to purchase products from a local values-aligned producer: a farmer or rancher who uses certain sustainable practices, or who comes from a culturally significant background. These agreements typically span a growing season or calendar year. They are established early enough for the farmer to accommodate the desired quantity of the product in their upcoming crop plan.

Although this sounds like a relatively simple concept, **forward commitments reflect a major paradigm shift in food procurement.** The current norm in institutional purchasing is to require products to be purchased for the lowest dollar amount. However, cheap and processed food often has hidden costs not paid by the institution: Other communities must absorb the costs of underpaid workers, exploited natural resources, climate change-related disasters caused by pollutive practices, and negative health outcomes.

A forward commitment is a pledge made by an institution like a school or hospital to purchase products from a local values-aligned producer.



A growing awareness of these hidden costs has led to an increase in the number of purchasers changing their practices. Institutions entering into forward commitments are guided by values such as a dedication to the community's economic vitality, the environmental sustainability of farming and ranching practices, and racial and cultural equity.

How forward commitments benefit farmers

Conventional institutional food procurement is conducted on a week-to-week (and sometimes daily) basis: Institutions decide what they need, place an order, and expect delivery on their dictated time frames. This model is laced with uncertainty and risk for farmers; for example, at the beginning of every growing season, farmers cannot predict with certainty whether the crops they're planting will find enough buyers within the short production window. The difficulty of reaching buyers with perishable products is compounded by small-scale and independent farmers being blocked from many conventional markets, such as retail grocery stores that exclusively contract with large, industrial suppliers.

This disconnect between the supply of fresh products and the markets willing to accept them wastes farmers' time, financial resources, and the food itself. For farmers who

have faced generations of discrimination and other systemic barriers, and for beginning or small-scale farmers whose operations have extremely small margins for error, this lack of stability can be devastating.

Forward commitments reduce these risks by creating a consistent market for farmers' products, allowing them to plan ahead and even make growth-oriented investments in infrastructure and production.

The co-owner of Cornucopia Farms in Avera, Georgia, Jonathon Green, says the mechanism of a forward commitment mimics the financial infrastructures used by large, profitable growing operations, and allows his small farm to operate with similar security and efficiency. "The large corporate farms — they don't put anything into the ground until it has a home. That's what a lot of independent farms struggle with."

"What we've been able to do with The Common Market is go to companies like Aramark and Morrison's Healthcare...and demonstrate our ability to provide the product they're looking

for,” says Green. “In return, The Common Market has said ‘We’ll make a forward commitment so you guys have the confidence to [grow this product] and know you have a committed customer on the other side.’”

And “with a purchase order in hand...you can make financial decisions, you can feel comfortable to take on debt if you have to. You know it’ll pay off in the end,” continues Green. The forward commitments his farm secured with various institutions “accelerated the timeline on our business plan and our business model. We wanted to grow four to five [varieties of lettuce] at scale. The forward commitment...allowed us to get to that a lot quicker. It made the farm a lot more efficient and profitable sooner than it would have been without those commitments.”

Throughout the Southeast, 18 institutions made forward commitments in 2023. By offering reliable market access to beginning, small-scale, and underserved farmers, these agreements will help keep many more of these important operations in business — and even help them thrive.



“ The Common Market has said ‘We’ll make a forward commitment so you guys have the confidence to [grow this product] and know you have a committed customer on the other side’...With a purchase order in hand...you can make financial decisions, you can feel comfortable to take on debt if you have to. You know it’ll pay off in the end. It made the farm a lot more efficient and profitable sooner than it would have been without those commitments.”

Jonathon Green, co-owner of Cornucopia Farms in Avera, Georgia (right)



How forward commitments benefit buyers

When schools and hospitals use their procurement dollars to grow wealth in their communities, combat the climate crisis, and shift resources to historically marginalized people, they become investors in a future rich with equitable opportunity — rather than mere buyers of a product.

But why would a business choose to do this? Forward commitments enable institutions to purchase food locally and equitably while providing many of the same efficiencies as conventional procurement of industrially produced products. From a purely operational perspective, a forward commitment ensures consistency, says Thomas Sewell, Division Chef for Morrison's Healthcare. Knowing “which farms are going to be growing our produce,” he says, enables him to “strategize and look forward on menus.” Taking the guesswork out of purchasing makes for smoother kitchen operations, says Katelyn Repash, Aramark's Responsible Sourcing Procurement Director. “When we commit to consistent purchasing volumes...our chefs know the product is going to arrive when they planned for it.”

Thomas Sewell, Division Chef for Morrison's Healthcare, right, with Bill Green, Executive Director of The Common Market Southeast.



In addition to this stability of supply, says Cornucopia Farms' founder Jonathon Green, forward commitments offer buyers stability in price.

“Foodservice operators — they can’t change the price every day. [They’re] contractually bound to service meals within a price range. [With forward commitments,] not only do they know what the supply is, they know what the price is as well.”

“Although we’re a small farm,” Green says, “we try to approach the market like the big guys: if you commit to us, we can grow exactly what you want, how much you want, [and] pack it how you want it.” Chef Tom deeply appreciates the consistently higher quality of the produce he gets through forward commitments. “[When] we’re serving something local, it’s always going to be better...the fresher a product, the less you have to do it.” Speaking of the zucchini he’s purchased through a forward commitment with local D&J Berrys Farm, Chef Tom notes that “it’s so fresh. We do a lot with it without even cooking it — shaving it raw, serving it in salads. We just let it speak for itself.”

Forward commitments enable institutions to respond to the growing consumer demand for fresh, local food. “People want local, people want fresh, people want clean,” says Jonathon Green. “They’re not going back.” Chef Tom agrees: “People are so much more knowledgeable about food,” he says. “Being local

is a big thing. We’re able to tell the story to our guests and also to our patients. If we communicate to them that our peaches are coming from Georgia, 100% [of] people want to know that.”

Sourcing locally and from organic farms is essential, says Chef Tom, because consumers are increasingly aware of the health benefits associated with eating the kinds of food procured through forward commitments. A “big piece” of Morrison’s decision to purchase with forward commitments is inspired by the food as medicine movement. “Our mushrooms were grown 25 miles away and picked three days ago, versus mushrooms picked three months ago and [sent] through some kind of processing.”

Finally, it’s important to remember that institutions are led by people — people committed to the well-being of their communities and to making purchasing decisions that reflect their values. Increasingly, institutions are recognizing the power of values-based procurement to drive meaningful change, ensuring that their purchasing choices support local economies, sustainable practices, and historically underserved producers. Since 2020-2021, this has included a stronger commitment to sourcing from Black farmers and other underrepresented growers, aligning procurement strategies with the broader goal of building a more resilient and equitable food system. Within its environmental, social, and governance (ESG) platform called “Be Well. Do Well,”

Aramark has a commitment “to source ethically and inclusively while enabling the wellbeing of the communities we serve,” says Katelyn Repash.

“Pursuing forward commitments is an essential component in how we approach sourcing and growth opportunities with small-scale farmers. Aramark seeks to support small and underrepresented farmers throughout our supply chain.”

By shifting their food purchasing standards to align with these core values, corporate leaders have found it is possible to meet their sustainability goals and even affect positive social changes — all by investing in the ability of their neighbors to grow fresh healthy food and helping to ensure there will be local farms to purchase from in the future. An additional benefit of this model is that it strengthens the community’s resilience by fostering meaningful relationships between farmers and institutions. Ultimately, the process of procuring food becomes more about the relationship than the transaction.

“It’s important to support local businesses,” says Chef Tom of Morrison’s Healthcare. “It’s the right thing to do.”

How forward commitments benefit the food system

Made between local institutions and their neighboring farmers, these agreements bolster the local economy and reduce the distance food must travel to arrive on a plate. Tianna Rose Neal of Starlit Roots, an organic vegetable farm in Keysville, Georgia, explains, “A forward commitment helps sustain the food system and natural resources. We don’t have to transport food from miles away when it’s being grown and distributed right here — all local farmers need are the commitments and resources to do so.”

Every transaction between a local food producer and a neighboring institution strengthens the regional food supply chain and economy. A healthy regional food supply chain keeps wealth within the community, employing its citizens and opening opportunities for adjacent businesses to thrive. Additionally, a healthy system of local food production, distribution, and retail will keep a community healthy and nourished even in times of global unrest and uncertainty.



STRATEGY TWO

Direct Farmer Investment

Many small-scale farms sell exclusively into direct-to-consumer markets, such as produce stands or farmers' markets. This model accommodates smaller volumes of produce but is time- and labor-intensive, and there is no guarantee a farmer will find a buyer for every item they grow. Conversely, wholesale markets feature reliable, large-volume purchasers like schools and hospitals. Farms can achieve greater efficiency and reduced production costs by growing larger quantities of fewer crops, and benefit from the certainty of arrangements like forward commitments.

Yet for many small-scale, beginning, and underserved farmers, the barriers to entering wholesale markets have been significant. A farm's infrastructure — such as its planting and harvesting equipment, wash and pack space, cooler and freezer facilities, and much more — must be able to accommodate larger volumes of produce. The farmers themselves must possess technical knowledge to operate the components of this upgraded infrastructure, as well as food safety processes and protocols.

The Common Market helped Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative with equipment upgrades to meet growing demand.



And of course, changing from a smaller-scale, direct-to-consumer operation to one with the necessary equipment and expertise to produce for wholesale markets requires significant capital investments. Small-scale, beginning, and underserved farmers often struggle to access capital because financial products that address working capital needs are limited and expensive. While more established businesses can secure lines of credit or use factoring to manage cash flow, these smaller farms are frequently left to rely on personal assets or networks to finance their operations. This lack of access to affordable growth capital prevents many farmers, particularly those historically excluded, from seizing opportunities to innovate, earn reliable income, and build wealth.

The ACRE Collective works to provide the financial and technical resources that empower these farmers to scale their operations and access sustaining markets. ACRE actively offers farmers two key forms of direct financial support: the Farmer Loan Fund and infrastructure grants. In addition, the ACRE Collective supports the ongoing success of the farmers in their network through a cohort of technical assistance providers.



Farmer Loan Fund

In 2021, The Common Market established a fund that offers working capital loans to farmers at zero interest. These loans cover farmers' upfront costs, such as seeds and equipment, before the growing season begins. Farmers repay the loan with farm products, reducing their financial burden while ensuring they have the capital to expand their operations, increase output, and meet the rising demand for healthy local food in their communities.

The ACRE Collective is financing the building blocks of a good food ecosystem by providing more Georgia growers with low-burden capital.

The long-standing relationships held by The Common Market and other ACRE members with farmers, ranchers, and processors enable the collective to identify points along the supply chain where investments would make the greatest impact, and allocate capital there. While this approach requires philanthropic support to cover the administrative costs of the fund, it can leverage modest philanthropic dollars to provide a much larger pool of capital.

Infrastructure grants

Recognizing that traditional lending and USDA programs are often insufficient or inaccessible, the ACRE Collective stepped in to fill the gap. Krisztian Varsa, Farms Fund Director for The Conservation Fund, says that in our current agricultural system, “we have two ends of the spectrum: industrial production...and market gardens.” Small and mid-sized family farms are rare in Georgia and around the country because we don’t have systems built up to support them, such as services to aggregate, transport, and sell their products. “If we want something in between, we have to build the systems for that,” continues Varsa.

The demand is there to support more family farms in regional food systems, says Varsa, and the farmers themselves are willing — they just need strategic infusions of capital to build “infrastructure that nobody ever thinks about.”

To help farms scale up for wholesale markets, members of the ACRE Collective—The Conservation Fund, Georgia Organics, and The Common Market Southeast—collaborated to deliver this strategic capital infusion. The resulting infrastructure grants fund improvements that increase farmers’ production capacity, improve wholesale readiness and ultimately contribute more healthy products to the local food system.



Averaging around \$11,500, the grants cover improvements such as new irrigation systems, fencing, and cold storage.

Starlit Roots Farm in Keysville, Georgia received a \$13,000 grant to build deer fencing because “deer fencing is as critical for a veggie producer as cold storage. Deer in Georgia could wipe out an entire crop in a night,” says Varsa.

In October of 2024, Rag and Frass Farm, which is also the operational base of the Middle Georgia Growers Co-op, received a \$13,000 grant to upgrade its farm infrastructure, originally repurposed from an old motel and convenience store. The funding will enhance the covered porch, which houses the two walk-in coolers and functions as the loading dock.

According to farm owner Julia Asherman, these improvements will “massively improve our ability to move produce in and out of [the walk-ins] and use the space to its fullest potential. I could

Krisztian Varsa, Farms Fund Director for The Conservation Fund (top). Rag & Frass (bottom) received a \$13,000 infrastructure grant.



be scaling without growing more just by wasting less, by selling more of what we're currently growing, [and] by moving more [product] for other farmers who are part of our co-op." Of the improved functionality, she says, "it's hard to imagine it won't be life-changing."

"I'm in farming for the long haul," Asherman concludes. With the grant's help, she can take "that essential first step that's paving the way for more capacity building over the next couple of years."

In collaboration with the Georgia Grown Innovation Center (GGIC), the grantees will also receive technical assistance (TA) around wholesale readiness, ensuring that farmers can meet market demand while improving their operations' long-term viability. GGIC TA partners will collaborate to conduct needs assessments for farmers, identifying gaps in resources, capacity, and infrastructure that may prevent them from growing their operations and accessing wholesale markets. These assessments will help tailor support to the specific challenges faced by each farm.

Through partnerships with TA providers, farmers will have access to **training, workshops, and other educational resources** designed to enhance their skills in areas such as business management, marketing, and wholesale readiness. This will ensure that farmers are better equipped to

accommodate the needs of institutional partners. TA partners will guide farmers on **improving processes and implementing infrastructure** projects funded by programs like the Farmer Loan Fund. This includes advising on improvements such as irrigation, cold storage, fencing, and equipment purchases, ensuring that farmers can maximize the value of the investments and improve their long-term sustainability.

Long after the loans or grants are issued, TA partners will still be there to help farmers monitor the effectiveness of the improvements and guide them through any challenges.

This **ongoing support** is key to ensuring farmers build sustainable operations that meet market demands. By working closely with these TA partners, the ACRE Collective ensures that farmers not only receive financial support but also the technical expertise needed to grow and thrive.

Impact of direct investments and technical assistance

The positive results of these investments have been significant, sustained, and wide-ranging.

Increased Production and Market Access

Farmers who receive loans can invest in their operations at critical times, allowing them to scale up production and meet increased demand. Asa Ysrael, a farmer at Local Lands Farm, received a \$45,218 loan to upgrade his egg production operation. This investment significantly increased his farm's egg production, allowing him to meet the demands of both the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Program and The Common Market's wholesale markets. "The financial investments by The Common Market, together with the forward commitments they make on behalf of the farmers, gives us the security we need to grow our businesses," says Ysrael.

Empowering Farmers

Many small to mid-scale farms have struggled to access affordable capital. Since its launch, the Farmer Loan Fund has provided over \$1.4 million in financing, with 82% of the loans supporting Black, Indigenous and women-led farms. To date, 28 loans have been

issued, including repeat loans to some borrowers. These loans help level the playing field by providing no-interest financing that allows them to innovate, secure reliable income, and build long-term wealth. Access to this capital is essential for overcoming barriers to growth in an industry where traditional financing options are often out of reach.

Sustained Regional Impact

The loan fund has been utilized across multiple regions—Northeast, Southeast, and Texas—demonstrating its broad impact on local food systems. By providing working capital, the fund strengthens the entire supply chain, ensuring that more healthy, locally sourced food reaches communities.

Since its launch, the Farmer Loan Fund has provided over \$1.4 million in financing to small and mid-scale farmers in The Common Market network.



Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Co-op

In 1998, a group of African American veteran farmers — including Jessie L. Rhodes, Lonnie J. Johnson, Roosevelt Clark, and David Richardson — came together to form **the Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative in Glennville, Georgia**. With over 80 years of combined farming experience, their goal was to preserve their agricultural heritage and continue growing high-quality, Georgia-grown vegetables.

When The Common Market Southeast first approached the co-op about selling to wholesale markets, trust-building was key. The farmers had no prior experience working with The Common Market and were initially hesitant to engage in the forward commitment program. However, after several conversations that included the co-op's technical assistance partner John Littles and McIntosh SEED, they agreed to start working together in small ways. By early 2021, the co-op was delivering 20 cases of yellow squash, zucchini, and bagged collard greens weekly to a handful of institutions committed to buying local produce from underserved farmers.

Members of Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative hold bagged collard greens, a product they supplied to schools, hospitals, and universities.



SPOTLIGHT ON RESULTS

The success of the first season opened the door to further support and growth. The Common Market provided technical assistance and helped the co-op with infrastructure upgrades to meet growing demand. During discussions, the farmers identified key equipment needs: a commercial greens spinner and freezer storage. The spinner allowed them to process larger quantities of greens more efficiently, while the freezer enabled them to store field peas and offer a fresh-frozen product. These upgrades, along with guidance on preserving fresh greens post-harvest, made \$125,000 in collard greens sales possible for the farm in 2023.

Reflecting on the relationship, **Benjamin Sterling Jr., McIntosh SEED Program Manager** and technical assistance partner for the co-op, compares The Common Market’s approach to that of other wholesalers. “If [farmers] are selling to a traditional wholesaler like Walmart, there’s red tape and bureaucracy.” He says that farmers like those at the co-op appreciate that The Common Market focuses more on the relationship than just the transaction.

Sterling also notes that The Common Market communicates “the full value of the farm, which adds to the value of the products.” This transparency and consistency have been critical in building trust with the co-op. “They met the farm where it’s at,” Sterling says.

In 2024, The Common Market and the Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative reached their third year of forward commitments. Over the past three years, the co-op has delivered more than 40,000 pounds of produce to universities and hospitals, all purchased in advance. Having stable, consistent institutional markets “means a lot for the business,” Sterling adds. “We talk about having an idea of pricing before something’s in the ground. It makes them feel like their farm is becoming sustainable — not just profitable, but sustainable as well.”



Using Forward Commitments and Direct Investment to Bolster Local Food Systems

The ACRE Collective's member organizations have gained the insights below through years of designing and implementing strategies to build local supply chains.

► The Importance of a Trusted Intermediary

A reliable third party is crucial for bridging the gap between small-scale farmers and institutional buyers. Jonathon Green of Cornucopia Farms points out that farmers are experts at growing food, not necessarily negotiating contracts, and may “need an intermediary. It's not on them to come up with the parameters of the agreement.”

► Trust Building Is Key

Transparency and regular communication are the foundations of a successful partnership. Clear discussions about pricing, product specifications, and delivery terms help prevent misunderstandings and build trust.

► Setting Realistic Goals

It is important for both farmers and institutions to establish

achievable goals early in the partnership. An intermediary can help define parameters that work for both sides, which ensures that expectations are aligned. Reflecting on his experience with The Common Market as an intermediary, Green notes, “They set realistic goals for both sides of the table. Not only do they have a lot of credibility, but they also embrace their role as mediator—both parties trust them.”

► Supporting Farmers with Technical Assistance

Beyond new tools and equipment, many farmers will require additional support to scale their operations. Providing technical assistance helps farmers more quickly meet quality standards and navigate the complexities of institutional requirements.

► Fostering Long-Term Relationships

The relationship between farmers and institutions should extend beyond initial agreements. It's important to emphasize continued engagement, developing multiple touchpoints — from the C-Suite to the kitchen staff — to ensure open lines of communication.

► Highlighting the Value of Local Food

Institutions benefit when they can communicate the unique stories and values of local farms. This connection enhances the value of the products and strengthens the relationship between consumers and local growers.

► Building Credibility through Consistency

Institutions appreciate the commitment to maintaining consistent product quality. This reliability reduces the risk of sourcing from small-scale farmers and helps reinforce their commitment to local, values-aligned producers.

Conclusion

The Georgia ACRE Collective's initiatives demonstrate the effectiveness of forward purchasing commitments and direct financial investments as strategies to enhance producer capacity and even bolster local food systems. By offering farmers stable, long-term markets and the financial support necessary for operational expansion, the ACRE Collective has significantly reduced the risk of wholesale market entry, empowering small-scale, beginning, and underserved farmers.

Now is the time to act. As urban and rural communities continue to struggle with access to good food and fair economic opportunities, the importance of these strategies becomes increasingly clear. By investing in the future of local agriculture, we can ensure a more just and sustainable food system for all.

This case study illustrates the potential of collaborative efforts among institutions, farmers, and intermediary organizations. It serves as a model for others looking to foster a more equitable and resilient agricultural ecosystem in their regions. Stakeholders can take inspiration from these strategies to shift procurement practices in their communities, build farmer capacity, and create sustainable, community-centered food systems.

► For more information, visit [The Georgia ACRE Collective](#) online.

