



**CENTER FOR FOOD SYSTEMS AND
COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION**
VIRGINIA TECH.

2024 Summary of Impacts



Executive Statement

The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation is an Extension/Outreach center housed in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). We work at the nexus of food, agriculture, and society using a values-based and systems-approach to explore and catalyze the conditions for a more sustainable food system so that all may thrive. Our Extension and Outreach aims include:

- Address food system complexities with emphasis on community sustainability through programming, outreach, and partnerships.
- Conduct community-based research on historical and emerging food system issues.
- Enhance food systems curriculum related to community-university learning goals.

Our Center currently supports **six signature Extension-based programs** aimed at strengthening and transforming the ecological sustainability of our food system; the quality of life of food and farm system workers; food access, health and wellbeing; and the emancipatory potential for food systems in advancing the human condition in Virginia and beyond. Additionally, in 2024 the Center was actively leading and/or partnering on 13 research-outreach projects that support food systems and community transformation focusing on such key issues as: regional food systems, new farmer sustainability, agroecology and resiliency policy, regenerative soil health-building practice, agroforestry, urban agriculture, and farm worker health and safety.

Through our programs, projects, and events locally and nationally, we **meaningfully engaged with over 5,400 individuals in 2024**. This outreach included 929 participants at Center-led events and an additional 1,607 attendees at events co-hosted with our partners. Additionally, graduate students organized six Learning Circles for 43 peers, and the Center offered undergraduate student research experiences. Furthermore, 51 Center Fellows contributed to program implementation, scholarship, and outreach. **The Center also provided 24 invited presentations and produced four peer-reviewed publications, 12 Soil for Water case studies, an e-book, 15 creative community profiles, and 26 podcast episodes of 4 The Soil with ~440 monthly downloads.** The Center manages a 1,139-member listserv and active social media channels, building broad engagement across Virginia and beyond.

In 2024, the Center demonstrated a strong track record and team expertise in addressing food systems-based community development needs through community-based approaches and scholarship by **securing \$4,525,001 across 18 competitive federal and internal grants and grants**. Additionally, we hired a Postdoctoral Researcher and Research Assistant Professor to focus on interdisciplinary food systems research and policy research to practice.

This document highlights select impacts as a summary of our 2024 efforts.

Core Team

Our core team comprises individuals who work together to achieve Center objectives:

Kim Niewolny, Center Director and Professor, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Eric Bendfeldt, Center Associate Director, Senior Extension Specialist, Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems Community Viability Program, Virginia Cooperative Extension

Katie Trozzo, Center Associate, Food Systems Network and Outreach Specialist, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Lia Kelinsky-Jones, Center Associate, Research Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education

Pratyosh Kashyap, Center Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education (moved to Applied and Agricultural Economics in 2025)

Roberto A. Franco, Center Associate, Program Coordinator for AgrAbility Virginia, Virginia Tech and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Arogeanae "NaeNae" Brown, Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Madisen Plunkert, Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Frank Adusei Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

William McCausland, Center Graduate Fellow, Department of Agricultural Leadership and Community Education

Served part of 2024: David Smilnak and Justice Madden, Center Graduate Fellows.

Advisory Group

We are advised by a group of leaders from across the state. We communicate frequently and meet once annually. Our advisory group includes:

Jeanette Abi-Nader, Co-Executive Director, Cultivate Charlottesville, Founding Member, Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative

William Crutchfield, Director, Small Farm Outreach Program, Virginia State University

Daniel Goerlich, Associate Director for Economy, Community, and Food, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia Tech

Ellington Graves, Associate Professor of Practice, Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech

Kathy Hosig, Associate Professor, Department of Population Health Sciences; Director for the Center for Public Health Practice and Research, Virginia Tech

Janine Parker Woods, Associate Administrator, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia State University

Nicole Shuman, Community Agriculturalist and Educator Cornerstone Community Farm
Fairfield Middle School, Henrico County, Virginia

Max Stephenson, Professor and Director of the Institute for Policy and Governance, School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech

Signature Programs

Our Center is home to six state and/or regional “signature” programs supporting food systems-based community development at the nexus of food, agriculture, and society. These core Extension-based programs include:

- The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition
- AgrAbility Virginia
- Virginia Farm-to-Table: Connecting Food, Farms, and Health
- Virginia Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
- Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Program Team of Virginia Cooperative Extension
- Food Value Chain Coordination in Virginia

To learn more, visit: www.foodsystems.centers.vt.edu/Programs

Projects

Throughout 2024, we were engaged in 13 projects that support food systems and community transformation on the ground. These initiatives focus on developing regional food systems, fostering and sharing farmer agroecological knowledge, promoting regenerative soil practices and agroforestry systems, shaping climate resiliency policy, advancing support for urban farmers, and exploring farm worker health, safety, and wellness. **Projects are funded through a combination of federal, state, and internal grants and contracts.**

- National Urban Agriculture Initiative
- Advancing Urban Agriculture and Sustainable Food Systems in Virginia
- Roanoke Foodshed Network
- Stories of Community Food Work
- Community-based Health Equity Research to Practice Initiative to Increase Farm Worker and Agricultural Laborer Health, Safety, and Wellness in Virginia
- Expanding the Agroforestry Regional Knowledge Exchange Network in Virginia
- Agroforestry Facilitation and Capacity Building
- Supporting Food System Resilience in Central Appalachia: A Participatory Policy Project
- Increasing Access to Wholesale Markets for Historically Underserved Producers
- Soil for Water
- Soil, Conservation, and Place
- 4 the Soil: A Conversation
- Cultivating Rural Vitality in Virginia's Food System (CRRV) Project

To learn more, visit: www.foodsystems.centers.vt.edu/projects

Center Core Programming and Outreach

We offer a variety of targeted programming as core offerings related to advancing the work of the Center, Center Fellows, and partners. These include Learning Circles, Fellow Speaker Series, and resource dissemination to address a diversity of stakeholder needs and interests. Our outreach engagement included over 929 people who attended our 22 Center-led events and with another 1,648 people who attended 30 events we co-hosted with our partners with Extension field faculty, and community leaders local and nationally. Our listserv reached 1139 members across Virginia, the US, and even internationally. We share a bi-monthly update and 5 weekly readings. We also connect with our community through social media including Facebook (298 followers), X (412 followers) and LinkedIn (242 followers). Key outputs include:

- Center Fellows and the Fellows Speaker Series
- Graduate Student Learning Circles (GSLC)
- Five Pieces Worth Reading
- Bi-Monthly Update

Publications (books, chapters, journal articles, extension publications)

Kashyap, P., Niewolny, K., McElderry, J., & Ashton, W. "Expanding Access: A Review of Technical Assistance for Black, Hispanic, and Tribal Agricultural Producers in Wholesale Markets." Under review in *Agriculture and Human Values*.

Kelinsky-Jones, L., Niewolny, K., & Stephenson, M. (n.d.). "Magic" Concepts and USAID: Framing Food Systems Reform to Support the Status Quo'. *Development Policy Review*, 43(1), e12823. (accepted)

Kraak, V., & Niewolny, K. (2024). Governance Typology to Catalyze Social Movements for Sustainable Food Systems. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*. Published: 2024-09-02. Publication status: Published

Stephenson, M., Niewolny, K., Zanotti, L., & Erwin, A. (2024). *Editorial: Critical praxis and the social imaginary for sustainable food systems*. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst*, 8:1487397. doi:10.3389/fsufs.2024.1487397 Published: 2024-09-12.

Stephenson, M., Niewolny, K., Erwin, A., & Zanotti, L. (Eds) (2024). *Critical Praxis and the Social Imaginary for Sustainable Food Systems*. Frontiers Media SA.(e-book)

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Introduction to the Soil for Water Video Case Studies, (SPES-636NP) (SPES-636NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-636/spes-636.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Ellett Valley Beef Company: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-640NP) (SPES-640NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-640/spes-640.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Bramble Hollow Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-638NP) (SPES-638NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-638/spes-638.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Bean Hollow Grassfed Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-637NP) (SPES-637NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-637/spes-637.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Ember Cattle Company: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-641NP) (SPES-641NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-641/spes-641.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Cattle Run Farm LLC.: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-639NP) (SPES-639NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-639/spes-639.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Holsinger Homeplace Farms: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-644NP) (SPES-644NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-644/spes-644.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Glade Road Growing: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-642NP) (SPES-642NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-642/spes-642.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Heaven's Hollow Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-643NP) (SPES-643NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-643/spes-643.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Singing Spring Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-646NP) (SPES-646NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-646/spes-646.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Swisher Family Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-647NP) (SPES-647NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-647/spes-647.html>

Bendfeldt, E., Niewolny, K., Trozzo, K., & Didot, E. (2024). Shamoka Run Farm: A Soil for Water Case Study, (SPES-645NP) (SPES-645NP). Virginia Cooperative Extension. Retrieved from <https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/SPES/spes-645/spes-645.html>

Graduate Student Thesis and Dissertations

Justice Madden (2024). "Seeds That We Keep: Grounding Seedkeeping Praxis for Growing Black Food Futures in the Mid-Atlantic." Master Thesis, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg VA. Retrieved from: <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/items/cf7fcdea-d8b3-4c04-a005-8fa18e7edd22>

David Smilnak (2024). "A Critical Systems Case Study in Agricultural Technology Development at the Land-Grant University." Dissertation, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA. Retrieved from: <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/items/2094ace1-d14a-412c-840e-897a8035715e>

Summary of Impacts

Collaborative Engagement for Healthy Food, Soil, and People

Relevance

A resilient food system requires collaborative innovation, robust engagement, and responsive strategies to complex challenges in agriculture and community development. The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation (CFSCT), based in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech, was established to drive such efforts. As the first center of its kind at Virginia Tech, CFSCT integrates research, education, and outreach with a transformation-centered approach to food systems. Positioned to enhance Virginia Tech's national standing in food and farming initiatives, the Center addresses emerging needs across local, regional, and global food systems for long-term community resilience and sustainability.

Response

CFSCT operates at the intersection of agriculture, community health, and food systems by advancing programs that emphasize systems-based thinking and community-centered action. The Center supports six signature Extension-based programs and actively leads 13 research-outreach projects, tackling issues like regional food systems, new farmer development, agroecology, climate policy, regenerative soil health, and urban agriculture. In addition to numerous Virginia Cooperative Extension collaborations at the local and regional level, the Center partnered with organizations such as National Center for Appropriate Technology, Virginia Soil Health Coalition, Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), EasterSeals of Virginia and North Carolina, Illinois Institute of Technology, Virginia State University, and USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA) to expand impact. With strategic collaborations and community-university partnerships, the Center also enhances curricula, supports applied research, and builds leadership pathways for students. Over 2024, the Center secured \$4,525,001 across 18 competitive federal and internal grants and grants, demonstrating a strong track record and team expertise in addressing food systems-based community development needs through community-based approaches and scholarship

Results

In 2024, CFSCT engaged over 5,400 individuals through 22 Center-led events (929 participants), 30 co-hosted events (1,607 attendees), and 13 tabling efforts (2,845 contacts). Additionally, graduate students organized six Learning Circles for 43 peers, and the Center offered undergraduate student research experiences. Furthermore, 51 Center Fellows contributed to program implementation, scholarship, and outreach. The Center also provided 24 invited presentations and produced four peer-reviewed publications, 12 Soil for Water case studies, an e-book, 15 creative community profiles, and 26 podcast episodes of *4 The Soil* with ~440 monthly downloads. The Center manages a 1,139-member listserv and active social media channels, building broad engagement across Virginia and beyond.

Strengthening Urban & Small Acreage Systems in Virginia and Nationally

Relevance

Urban agriculture and small acreage farming systems are playing an increasingly critical role in strengthening sustainable food systems and enhancing local and regional food access. As the Commonwealth experiences population growth and increased demand for healthy and fresh food grown locally, urban agriculture offers innovative opportunities to convert and sustain urban and small acreage spaces into productive food systems. It also enhances community resilience, economic development, and food system diversity. Urban and small acreage producers, however, face distinct challenges that require targeted research, outreach, and infrastructure support. Recognizing these distinct challenges, the Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation (CFSCT) at Virginia Tech has elevated urban and small acreage agriculture as a strategic priority, following national priorities set forward by USDA agencies.

Response

To support Virginia's urban agriculture sector, the Center as lead, partnered with Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program, USDA Farm Service Agency, and USDA National Resources Conversation Service (NRCS), and local urban farmer partners to assist urban farmers, growers, and service providers through culturally appropriate education, landscape assessment, technical assistance, and outreach programming. Key activities in 2024 include co-designing and implementing urban agriculture enhancement project mini grants, conducting a Virginia Urban Agriculture Landscape Assessment, hosting the 2025 Virginia Urban Agriculture Summit, hosting regional urban agriculture convenings, and building organizational, farmer, and agency capacity to assist urban and small acreage farmers. Additionally, the Center partners with Virginia State University, in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension in providing backbone support for The National Urban Agriculture (NUag) Initiative, bridging the gap for urban agriculture, a project funded through a cooperative agreement with USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Results

In 2024, the team provided outreach and technical support to over 1000 youth and adult growers over the course of 72 program, workshop, training sessions, and targeted outreach events. Thirty-eight urban and peri-urban farmers received personalized support through field visits and virtual consultations, resulting in increased production planning, infrastructure upgrades, and improved farm operations. Collaborative efforts with partners enhanced the delivery of services and reduced barriers to resource access. Urban growers benefited from engagement in soil health and regional food systems programming, integrating them more fully into broader agricultural networks. A key result of the work includes the distribution of \$89,471 to urban agriculture initiatives in five cities across the Commonwealth: Petersburg, Richmond, Stafford, Roanoke, and Charlottesville. The success of the 2025 Urban Ag summit was apparent in the increase in networking and changes in knowledge about urban and small acreage production and marketing practices. Additionally, CFSCT lead a national learning exchange series reaching over 150 stakeholders was part of the NuAg project. And in collaboration with the National Urban Agriculture Initiative (NUag), team members from VT CFSCT, VSU SFOP, Happily Natural Day, USDA FSA and NRCS, co-hosted the 2024 Detroit National Urban Agriculture Conference. Team members co-led sessions and served on the planning committee. From Virginia to the nation, the efforts have positioned the Center as a leader in urban agriculture transformation, ensuring that urban and small acreage growers receive essential support to thrive in complex environments.

Appalachian Food System Resilience

Relevance

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, posing ongoing threats to regional food systems in Appalachia. The 2024 destruction caused by Hurricane Helene highlighted the urgent need for food systems capable of adapting and recovering from such disruptions. Despite growing attention to resilience planning, local and regional planners lack practical guidance and tools to advance this work. Food system resilience, through regional coordination, redundancy, adaptability, and sustainability, remains underexamined. Appalachia's distinct climate patterns and topographical challenges underscore the need for tailored, evidence-based strategies to safeguard sustainable agricultural production and community food access across Central Appalachian states.

Response

To address the gap in planning knowledge and coordination, the Center launched a USDA NIFA-funded research initiative in June 2024. The project began by conducting focus groups with municipal and regional planners across Central Appalachia. These discussions established a baseline understanding of current needs, revealing a strong interest in food system resilience despite limited technical resources. Concurrently, a Central Appalachia Food System Resilience Network was created, comprising 10 professionals from five states. The initiative was made possible through funding from the USDA NIFA in the amount of \$225,000. This advisory group is the first coordinated effort of its kind in the region and lays the groundwork for broader collaborative projects.

Results

This initiative has already catalyzed meaningful regional engagement in the domain of food system resilience. Focus group data revealed planners' readiness to act but a need for structured support and evidence-based frameworks. The formation of the Central Appalachia Food System Resilience Advisory Group is a milestone in developing cross-state collaboration, allowing stakeholders to share best practices and align strategic goals. The project's foundational research and networking efforts will inform future grant proposals. This work represents one of the earliest formalized approaches to coordinated food system resilience in the Appalachian region.

Agroforestry as a Pathway to Agricultural Sustainability

Relevance

Agroforestry, the intentional integration of trees, crops, and livestock, provides vital strategies for strengthening ecological resilience. It also supports long-term agricultural sustainability by diversifying farm income and improving land use efficiency. Virginia has emerged as a leader in agroforestry innovation, backed by robust research and training programs. Despite this, many farmers and landowners still face barriers accessing technical support and peer networks. Internationally, agroforestry potential remains underutilized in regions like Senegal, where facilitators identified the need for targeted training and capacity-building. There is growing demand for expanded educational and professional development efforts in both domestic and global contexts to support agroforestry adoption and impact.

Response

The Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation has advanced agroforestry through partnerships, education, and international collaboration. In Virginia, the Center led the SARE ARKx Project, "Expanding the Agroforestry Regional Knowledge Exchange Network." This initiative was carried out in partnership with 12 organizations, including Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), Virginia State University (VSU), Virginia Tech, NRCS, and the Virginia Department of Forestry. The project evolved from a previous collaboration funded by the Edwards Mother Earth Foundation. Internationally, the Center supported the "Forest Gardening for Diet Diversification in the Casamance Region of Senegal," in collaboration with Counterpart International. In 2024, agroforestry education activities included multi-day intensives, conference panels, webinars, and on-site trainings, along with international agroforestry workshops. The Center also helped bridge connections between VSU, ASD, and NRCS to expand technical assistance. These efforts have catalyzed both domestic and international momentum toward agroforestry integration.

Results

In 2024, agroforestry initiatives supported by the Center engaged hundreds across Virginia and Senegal. In Virginia, 300+ participants attended an inaugural Agroforestry Track at the VABF Conference. The "Ask an Agroforester" webinar series reached 189 attendees. In-person trainings at VSU Randolph Farm and Virginia Tech's Catawba Center reached 74 professionals. A panel at VSU's Small Farm Conference engaged 73 attendees. These efforts directly contributed to Virginia NRCS activating a forest farming practice standard and exploring a cooperative agreement with ASD for technical assistance. In Senegal, three agroforestry workshops trained 21 facilitators and 29 farmers. All facilitators expressed intent to train others and requested further education. Connections were made between Counterpart International and an international NGO for continued support. These collective efforts have expanded agroforestry education, professional development, and institutional collaboration, fostering sustainability in diverse agricultural landscapes.

Improving Virginia Farm Worker Health and Wellness: A Community-Based Participatory Research Initiative

Relevance

Agriculture, Virginia's largest industry, relies heavily on the contributions of farmworkers and agricultural laborers (FW&AL). However, these workers face significant vulnerabilities—including limited access to healthcare, stable housing, transportation, and culturally relevant services—which compromise their well-being and hinders the resilience of the food system. These barriers reduce the capacity of FW&AL to participate safely and effectively in the agricultural economy. Addressing these challenges is critical to protecting public health, ensuring compliance with labor regulations, and maintaining a stable agricultural workforce. In response, Virginia Tech's Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation (CFSCT), in partnership with statewide collaborators, launched a pilot project to assess and address FW&AL vulnerabilities. This initiative aimed to improve direct services, inform policy, and strengthen support systems across Virginia.

Response

Employing a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach and the CDC Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) framework, the CFSCT and partners implemented four research protocols to assess social vulnerability among Virginia's FW&AL. Data were collected from 125 individuals—88 FW&AL, 20 Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) professionals, and 17 agricultural employers—offering a comprehensive view of needs across the sector. The team also delivered 15 safety and wellness workshops to 165 FW&AL, covering topics such as farm machinery safety, ATV safety, and worker protection standards. A key component of the initiative's reach and impact included the development of a multistakeholder partnership network, including Virginia Tech's CFSCT, Center for Public Health Practice & Research, Center for Economic and Community Engagement, and local Virginia Cooperative Extension offices, Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program, Virginia Tech Environmental Health and Safety, AgrAbility Virginia Program, and the Legal Aid Justice Center. A new academic collaboration with Dr. Parrella's Life Sciences Communication course was also launched to explore farmworker digital literacy. This overall project effort was supported by a Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Integrated Internal Competitive Seed Grant.

Results

The pilot project generated meaningful outcomes and new pathways for action. This includes a focus on common themes affecting employers and FW&AL, such as labor and health care regulations and options, workplace safety, and communication and cultural competency, which are pertinent outreach and training opportunities. Several research and outreach presentations have been disseminated, and two peer-reviewed articles are in development. This project was situated in the praxis of community-based participatory research, which emphasizes the sustainability and maintenance of relationships to co-design, implement, and evaluate research as a partnership. The development of a VT-VSU-Community partnership was a core objective and will continue beyond the life of the grant to plan for additional program implementation and research grant proposals drawing upon the piloted mixed-method protocol.

Art-based Strategies for Transforming Food Systems

Relevance

As food systems transform, there is a growing need for innovative methods to engage communities in sustainable change. Cultural community development: integrating arts and culture into community engagement has proven effective in building trust, amplifying local stories, and fostering connection across the food system. In Roanoke, Virginia, this approach is strengthening local food networks by engaging residents, farmers, and youth through creative storytelling, theater, and artistic expression. Despite strong grassroots momentum, coordinated efforts and sustained funding are essential to deepening impact, enhancing participation, and building resilient local food systems anchored in shared identity and collaborative vision.

Response

CFSCT leads cultural community development programming through the Roanoke Foodshed Network (RFN), integrating arts-based activities with food system initiatives. Supported by two \$10,000 Arts and Culture Grants from the City of Roanoke, the Center partnered on a number of “Arts Connect the Food System” events including Okra Fest including a youth production by CommUnity Arts Reach and a Community Mural and Compost Fest, including a farmer storytelling event and circlesinging. In addition, the center led a film screening of *Rhythms of the Land* and a farm dinner theater gathering as part of this series and conducted a narrative inquiry project featuring food systems leaders in the Roanoke region. These efforts demonstrate how story, interactive theater, music and collaborative art, offers powerful, accessible ways to address food systems transformation. Activities were hosted in collaboration with organizations like the Roanoke Foodshed Network, LEAP for Local Food, and community artists, amplifying food system dialogue and participation.

Results

In 2024, the Center’s leadership in cultural programming fostered deep community engagement and connection throughout Roanoke. At Okra Fest, hundreds participated in co-creating a vibrant mural, enjoyed youth-led performances, and shared culturally relevant food, promoting intergenerational learning and celebration. Compost Fest highlighted the region’s first composting facility with farmer storytelling, live music, and participatory circle-singing. Over 15 published interviews captured diverse food system stories, amplifying community voices and fostering local pride. The Farm Dinner Theater united agricultural and health professionals through narrative-driven events, resulting in documented shifts in farm safety behaviors. These initiatives cultivated community ownership, catalyzed new cross-sector partnerships, and elevated the Roanoke Foodshed Network as a trusted, collaborative hub for regional food systems transformation and resilience.

Growing Healthier Communities and Soil

Relevance

Soil underpins Virginia’s \$4 billion farm-gate value and \$106 billion agriculture–forestry economic impact. Healthy soil regulates water, stores carbon, sustains biodiversity, and supplies food, fuel, and fiber. The 4 The Soil Initiative addresses this urgency by promoting four core principles: keep soil covered, minimize disturbance, maximize living roots, and energize with diversity. Despite growing interest, adoption of soil health practices, cover crops, minimal tillage, crop rotation, and livestock integration remains uneven. Broadening awareness beyond farmers to consumers, planners, and landowners is essential to scale stewardship across urban, rural, and development contexts. Positioning soil as a shared resource and collective responsibility can improve community and environmental health “from the soil up.” This approach ensures economic viability and ecosystem resilience for current and future generations.

Response

The 4 The Soil Awareness Initiative launched a two-phase campaign focused on education, public engagement, and collaborative outreach. It is supported by Virginia Tech, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia State University, USDA-NRCS, the Virginia Soil Health Coalition (with 47 partners), and funders including the Agua Fund, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and VT’s Community Viability program. Major outputs included 92 podcast episodes with 14,763 downloads, 12 Soil for Water video case studies, two youth coloring books, and the translation of soil health materials into Swahili and French for global outreach. Social media posts reached over 317,000 users in 2024, and 600+ newsletter subscribers received regular updates. The initiative also led educational programming for Master Gardeners, NRCS staff, urban agriculture groups, and food hubs. These efforts connected soil health to food systems, climate resilience, and economic opportunity.

Results

The initiative strengthened soil health engagement across Virginia and beyond. In 2024 alone, the 4 The Soil: A Conversation podcast achieved 5,303 organizational downloads, averaging approximately 442 per month. Its syndication through On the Farm Radio further expanded its reach across 85 Mid-Atlantic affiliates. Twelve Soil for Water case studies supported practical adoption of soil-building practices among farmers. Social media outreach expanded to 2,396 followers, averaging 868 people per post and generating an annual Facebook reach of 317,251. Educational tools were adopted by groups in Nevada and Mississippi, reflecting growing national recognition. Local partnerships with the Common Grain Alliance, Estate Whiskey Alliance, and regional food hubs advanced connections between soil health and value chains. The Virginia Soil Health Coalition’s integration of *4 The Soil* resources affirmed its role as a trusted platform, reinforcing a broad, values-based movement to sustain soil, food systems, and community well-being.

Sustaining New Farmers Through Training and Coalition Collaboration

Relevance

Beginning farmers and ranchers face significant structural barriers to success, including limited access to land, training, markets, and capital. These challenges directly threaten the sustainability of agriculture and the long-term viability of rural communities. In regions like Virginia, the Maryland Eastern Shore, and North Carolina, where agriculture remains central to economic and community well-being, the need for accessible, coordinated pathways into farming is urgent. The Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition (VBFRC), established in 2010 and one of the Center's core programs, continues to meet this need by supporting new producers through whole farm planning, technical assistance, and collaborative peer-to-peer learning. Foundational to the Coalition's approach is its network model, which builds capacity through partnerships among farmers, agricultural educators, service providers, and grassroots organizations.

Response

In 2024, Virginia Tech's Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation continued to provide critical backbone support to VBFRC through a \$179,209 USDA NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) subaward. As part of the multi-state project "Creating Opportunities for Sustainability for Small, Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers," Virginia Tech led efforts across Virginia and supported partners in the Maryland Eastern Shore and North Carolina. Efforts included hosting a statewide Coalition gathering, launching a Beginning Farmer Certification Program, facilitating webinars, managing communications, and producing evaluation reports. These initiatives were implemented in partnership with Virginia State University, Virginia Cooperative Extension, the Fauquier Education Farm, and other regional organizations. A core focus of this year's work was to strengthen the Coalition's educational infrastructure and increase regional collaboration.

Results

Key achievements in 2024 included: 1) hosting two statewide webinars—Grazier Mentor Network and Whole Farm Planning; 2) convening the in-person Coalition Partners Network Gathering on July 17 with 36 attendees; 3) conducting outreach through tabling at the Virginia Association for Biological Farming Conference and the Amplifying Indigenous Women's Voices gathering; and 4) launching the inaugural Beginning Farmer Certification Program, which received 42 applications and selected 13 participants who began at the VSU Small Farms Conference in November.

The Coalition also sustained strong communication efforts, reaching audiences through social media (Facebook: 3,500; Twitter: 279; Instagram: 482) and two targeted listservs that connected 238 service providers and 1,077 beginning farmers. Monthly newsblasts and regular website updates ensured consistent engagement. Additionally, six new advisory group members were elected, joining two existing members to help guide Coalition programming. Evaluation reports from VSU and other partners contributed to ongoing strategic improvements. Together, these efforts enhanced visibility, expanded support networks, and advanced sustainability for new and beginning farmers across the Mid-Atlantic.

Addressing Mental Health and Safety on the Farm Through AgrAbility

Relevance

Farmers in Virginia face increasing physical and mental health challenges worsened by age, disability, injury, and economic stress. The average age of farmers is steadily increasing, leading to a greater prevalence of health conditions such as arthritis, stroke, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions, along with physical impairments, hinder the safe operation of farms. Contributing factors include the physically demanding nature of farm work, exposure to environmental hazards, and the intense mental stress associated with managing agricultural operations. Simultaneously, mental health concerns, including stress, depression, and trauma are growing due to compounding pressures. These conditions not only impact aging farmers but also new and returning farmers, including veterans. Ensuring farm accessibility, health, and wellness is essential to the sustainability of agricultural livelihoods. AgrAbility Virginia addresses these intersecting challenges by enhancing on-farm safety, mental health awareness, and support through tailored education, outreach, and service coordination.

Response

AgrAbility Virginia, in partnership with Virginia State University, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Easterseals PORT Health, and other agencies, provided a suite of services to enhance farm accessibility and mental health. The team conducted 10 on-farm needs assessments and 15 virtual consultations, reaching 38 farmers. They also helped clients obtain support through the Bellows Fund and RAFI grant programs. Outreach included tabling and presenting at 23 events and hosting six Farmers' Dinner Theaters attended by 216 people. AgrAbility Virginia also created and distributed Farm Safety and Wellness Kits and conducted social media campaigns with 51 posts reaching thousands. Partnerships expanded with organizations like Mary Baldwin University, Valley Associates for Independent Living, and the Virginia Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services to produce resources for healthcare professionals. These efforts were supported by USDA AgrAbility and VDACS funding as part of broader Center funding initiatives.

Results

AgrAbility Virginia's services enhanced accessibility and safety on farms, supported diverse clients, and expanded public awareness. In 2024, 26% of clients were African American, 40% veterans, 16% women, and 22% beginning farmers and ranchers. Most worked in beef, dairy, vegetable, and poultry operations, with common disabilities including back and knee injuries, blindness, and PTSD. Farmers received recommendations for tractor lifts, steps, and assistive technologies. Farm Dinner Theaters promoted mental wellness, with participants sharing and engaging on health and safety. Outreach events reached over 1,000 individuals, and social media posts had a maximum reach of 2,200. AgrAbility published a peer-reviewed article, and two conference posters, developed two forthcoming publications with Mary Baldwin University, and was featured in the Virginia Farm Bureau Magazine. The program's network and listservs continue to grow, supporting sustained engagement across agricultural, health, and disability sectors.