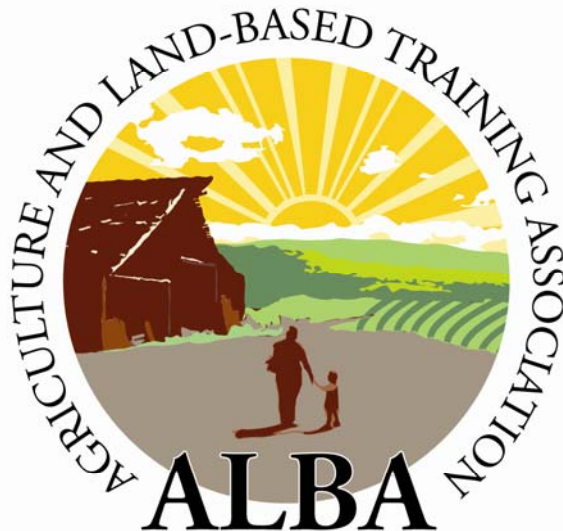


# THE FACE OF FOOD ON THE CENTRAL COAST

## **COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT**

Phase 1  
2005 -2006



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## 2. Executive Summary

*The Face of Food on the Central Coast* is the result of a comprehensive and participatory study of the local food system on the Central Coast. This report describes the findings of our assessment as well as the methodology utilized. The Community Food Assessment (CFA) was initiated by the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) and conducted in collaboration with community organizations that share concerns about our food system. The report format follows the development and process of the CFA, including a literature review of current food system research, the findings of the project based on focus group and field research, and concluding with current and recommended efforts to be undertaken in order to address regional food systems issues.

Community Food Assessments (CFAs) are being used across the country by a wide variety of organizations to help understand the issues that affect a local food system. At ALBA, we initially became interested in the CFA process in order to better identify local market opportunities for beginning farmers. What began as an attempt to determine the potential viability of low-income farmers selling produce in their own communities, quickly became an in-depth study of dynamic relationships among different food system components. The assessment was designed to explore the production, distribution as well as consumption patterns of local produce and it became clear that in our community there is much overlap between these sectors.

In Monterey County we may produce much of the nation's fresh vegetable supply but many times the farm workers here do not consume the healthy food they work hard to produce. Farm workers are often overlooked as a consumer group and it became clear in beginning our research that in order to understand the food system in our area we must explore the consumption patterns of these workers. Distribution patterns are also of particular relevance to a food system. Most often the poorest neighborhoods have the fewest options for food purchase. In our region this takes on even more significance as the structure of the agricultural industry leads to limited consumption choices as well as low wages for farm workers.

The primary objective of this Community Food Assessment is to determine if there are potential markets for local, organic produce in the low-income (and primarily farm worker) communities of the Salinas Valley. Based on the results of this market-driven community food assessment, there are strong indications that consumers understand the importance of supporting local *and* organic purchasing, and there is demand for greater access to local and organic produce. At the onset of the assessment process we postulated that the economics that have driven the sustained growth in the organic market in general are not necessarily transferable to the food economy of the Salinas Valley. In other words, it was our belief that retail consumers in the Salinas Valley were probably not going to be able or willing to pay the typical 20% price premium even if local and organic products were more widely available.

Through the assessment we found that little local organic produce is available in retail grocery stores within the Salinas Valley. Nor are available items labeled or marketed very clearly or aggressively. However, through our focus groups we learned that low-income as well as middle-class consumers are interested in buying local and organic products – especially under the following conditions - when these products are available where they normally shop; and if they are affordable (affordable was defined as not more than a 10% higher price than conventional produce).

The development of *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* is serving an important role in initiating a dialogue about food access in our community that examines the production, distribution and consumption patterns found here. **Assessment findings based on the 115 people involved in the 10 focus groups conducted, indicate that there is a demand for increased availability of organic and local food by low-income consumer groups on the Central Coast. This indicates the opportunity for change and a sign that organic is not solely a “fringe” or “elitist” product in our region. This opportunity for change highlights the potential for ALBA farmers and small scale producers to serve local markets, and thus provide real opportunities for the future of community food security efforts in the Salinas Valley.**

The solution to community food security problems must be a multifaceted cross-sector approach to food system issues that include the health sector, agriculture producers, land-use planners, economists and social justice advocates. *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* attempts to explore the food system issues of our local community and seek out ways to bridge the gap of injustice. Together, the many organizations that work hard to address these issues will unite to help foster long term solutions to the problems of our food system.

### **3. Introduction**

#### **a. ALBA’s Perspective on Community Food Security**

The Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) operates an established, dynamic program grounded in farm worker and Latino farmer communities. For 20 years, low-income families and individuals have built new opportunities in small-scale farming at the Rural Development Center, and many have continued on their own thereafter. ALBA is helping to expand local economic development, organic agriculture, and local food systems organizing into a potent force for change.

*ALBA's mission is to advance economic viability, social equity and ecological land management among limited-resource and aspiring farmers. In carrying out its mission, ALBA aims to contribute to a more just and sustainable food system.* ALBA conducts training and demonstration, provides technical and marketing assistance and access to land, at its two bi-lingual education centers in Salinas and Watsonville. Serving a primarily Latino audience, ALBA's work is grounded by the belief that in order for limited-resource and aspiring farmers to gain a foothold within California's highly competitive agricultural sector, they must have access to information, capital, and land. ALBA strives to provide an incubator environment for reduced-risk farming and business opportunities.

Integral to ALBA’s mission is its ability to market farmers’ crops. ALBA Organics (AO) was established in 2002 as a licensed produce distributor and fundamental link serving as a market option that offers education on consumer quality preferences and support in implementing direct marketing strategies. AO has just completed its fifth season of selling fresh produce on behalf of local organic farmers. Our diverse market base now includes universities, farmers markets, hospitals, restaurants, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and wholesalers.

The purpose of this Community Food Assessment—*The Face of Food on the Central Coast*—is to identify viable strategies to bring local small farmers’ produce to economically marginalized communities on the Central Coast. The assessment serves as a strategizing and organizing platform to help develop local food marketing strategies in order to increase the availability, visibility and viability of fresh and organic produce as an option for low-income families in the Salinas Valley.

**Goals of the Community Food Assessment include:**

- **Identify obstacles for small farmers to sell their products locally, especially in low income, farm worker communities.**
- **Identify obstacles for low income and farm worker consumers to purchase local, organic produce.**
- **Increase the availability of nutritious, organic, locally grown produce in low-income areas.**
- **Increase awareness about the importance of local produce to our food system, economy and environment.**
- **Engage in discussions with an informed voice to build alliances and community-wide strategies for shaping change in the food system.**

Through extensive review of the existing literature about our local food system, in-depth focus group interviews, and organizational collaboration; *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* has proven to be an exciting learning process. This report serves as a guide and testimony to our experience throughout this process. As we anticipated at the start of this project, the CFA initiated a learning and networking process that would take time to deliver fruits. ALBA is committed to this process for the long term, and looks forward to the opportunity to continue to collaborate with our partners in building a just and sustainable local food system here on the Central Coast.

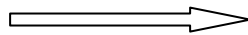


School Children learning about the life of plants at ALBA’s Rural Development Center in Salinas

# Community Food Assessment Purpose, Goals and Guiding Questions

## CFA Purpose:

Develop a local market for small farmers to sell fresh organic produce to low-income communities in the Salinas Valley

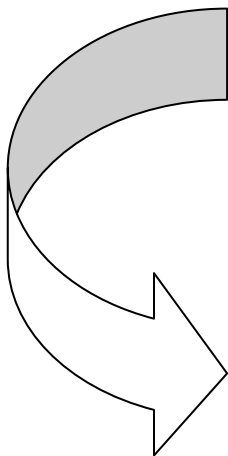
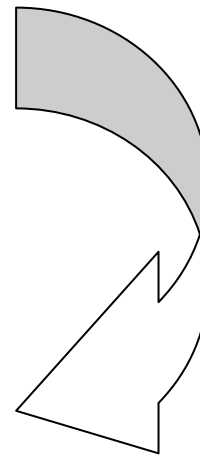


## CFA Goals:

- Increase awareness about the importance of eating local produce to our food system
- Increase the availability of nutritious, organic, locally grown produce in low-income areas
- Engage issues with an informed voice to build alliances and community-wide strategies for shaping change in the food system

## CFA conceptual questions addressing assets and barriers:

- \* How often do consumers buy locally grown produce?
- \* How many stores in the CFA area carry organic and/or local produce?
- \* What are the barriers to providing local/organic produce to low income communities?
- \* What actions might be taken to overcome these barriers?
- \* Do CFA stakeholders have knowledge of benefits to locally grown and organic produce?
- \* Are nutrition related illnesses prevalent in the CFA area?

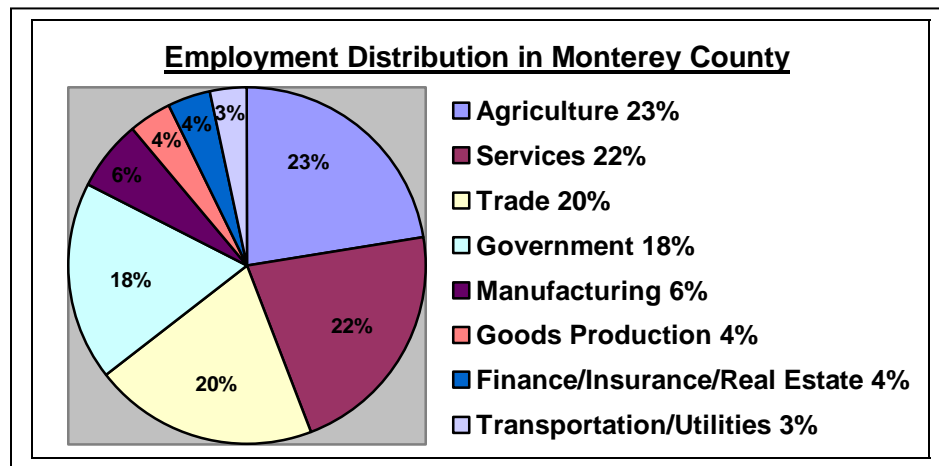


## Data sources

Monterey County Health Department  
Food Banks  
Focus Groups  
UC Cooperative Extension  
Agricultural Commissioner  
Local Community Organizations  
Community Food Security Coalition

## b. Local Food Production and Distribution Systems

The Salinas Valley is well-known for the abundance of fresh produce that is grown here. Agriculture is the largest employer in the county, followed closely by services and trade professions.<sup>1</sup> Agricultural production is essential to the county's economic productivity (see pie chart<sup>2</sup>).



About half of farms in Monterey County earn either less than \$1,000 per year (about 20.6% of farms) or over \$500,000 per year (about 29.5% of farms), while the average net cash farm income is over

\$650,000 per year.<sup>3</sup> This illustrates the disparity between large and small growers, but also demonstrates that small farms are relatively abundant in the area and comprise a significant portion of the local economy.

As much as 80% of the nation's leaf lettuce, 70% of its artichokes, 55% of its broccoli and cauliflower, and more than one-third of its strawberries, mushrooms, and celery are produced in Monterey County.<sup>4</sup> This represents a substantial portion of both the economic activity and land use within the county. For example, the acreage and dollar value of three of the most abundant crops follows:<sup>5</sup>

	Total Acres (2004)	Dollar Value (2004)
<b>Lettuce (all varieties)</b>	137, 594	\$950,534,000
<b>Artichokes</b>	6,183	\$48,210,000
<b>Fresh Broccoli</b>	34,527	\$173,612,000

According to one estimate, nearly 20% of the agricultural production in the state of California is exported to other countries.<sup>6</sup> However, our research did not uncover any resources detailing how much of what is grown in the Salinas Valley is distributed to other regions *within* the United

<sup>1</sup> *Monterey County 21<sup>st</sup> Century General Plan Update*. Retrieved from <<http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/gpu/countyfacts/employment.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Data for chart retrieved from *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> *2002 Census of Agriculture: County Profile: Monterey, California*. Retrieved from <<http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/census02/profiles/ca/cp06053.PDF>>.

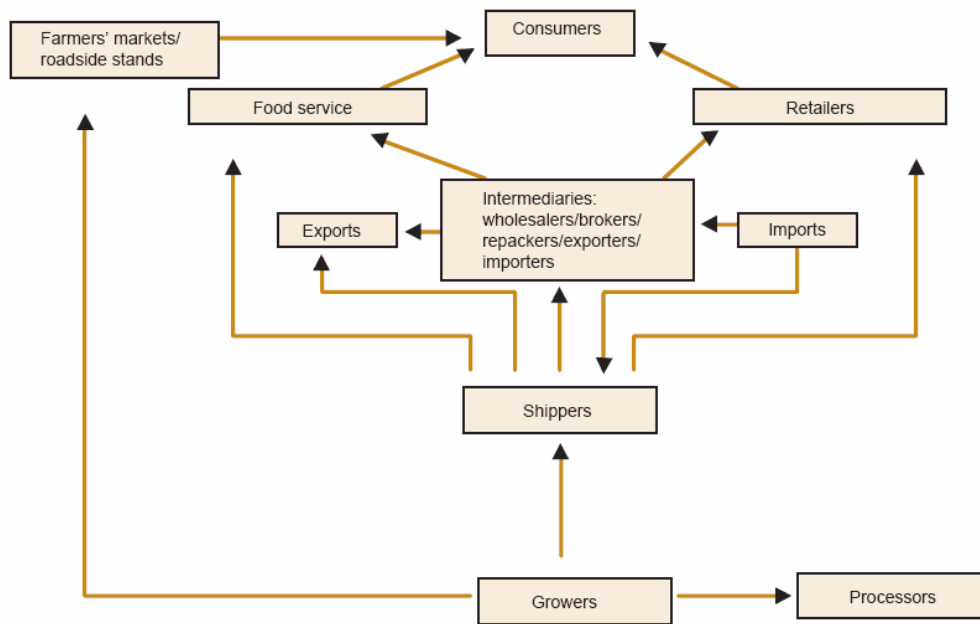
<sup>4</sup> "Forging a Partnership for Water Quality Protection," Commentary, *Monterey Herald*. July 20, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. *Monterey County 2004 Crop Report*. 2004: 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, Shawn. *Statement of the California Farm Bureau Federation at the California Specialty Crop Forum*. 2003. Retrieved from <[www.cfbf.com/issues/trade/specialty\\_crops.cfm](http://www.cfbf.com/issues/trade/specialty_crops.cfm)>.

States. Clearly, a significant proportion of produce grown in this area is transported across the nation for consumption, but general records are not available that outline the percentage of produce that leaves the valley for other markets (other than international export). Therefore, it is difficult to estimate what proportion of locally grown produce is *consumed* locally as well. Obtaining records tracing produce back to its source is also difficult. It is possible to track produce back to a certain point in production, but this is generally done with specific items when an outbreak occurs; and according to one source, complete tracing of entire crops is “impossible.”<sup>7</sup>

Those foods grown locally which are sold in local markets often are transported to distribution centers outside of the local area before delivery to grocery stores for sale.<sup>8</sup> Below is a chart detailing the general movement of produce through the market system:<sup>9</sup>



As the diagram shows, produce marketing channels represent a complex system with many steps. Produce is generally not sold directly by a grower to a consumer, but passes through one or more distribution channels on its way to the consumer. In this way, produce grown in the Salinas Valley must often travel to another location (for example, a distribution center in another part of the state) before being transported back to the area and into a retail store.

Traceability of food is important for health and safety reasons (e.g., to discover the source of an outbreak), but it is becoming increasingly important because consumers want to know where their food is coming from.<sup>10</sup> Information about ethics (such as treatment of animals), food safety, and the environment have become issues of concern for many consumers who want to

<sup>7</sup> USDA. *Traceability in the U.S. Food Supply: Economic Theory and Industry Studies*. Retrieved from <www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aer830/aer830.pdf>, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Roach, Bob, Assistant Agricultural Commissioner for Monterey County. Telephone interview January 11, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aer830/aer830.pdf>, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Howard, Philip H. “Central Coast consumers want more food-related information, from safety to ethics.” *California Agriculture*, Vol. 60, No. 1, January-March 2006: 14-19.

know more about where and how their food is grown and processed.<sup>11</sup> These concerns can influence what consumers purchase and where they shop; this market shift has implications for small and large growers alike as consumers “vote” with their dollar.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that consumers prioritize locally grown food and have a more favorable view of small family farms than of large corporate farms.<sup>13</sup>

The system illustrated by the diagram occurs on a global scale. What the diagram does not illustrate is a time and space component. When produce is grown, processed, and consumed locally, or within a relatively small geographic area, the time and distance between each part of the diagram is considerably shorter than when it travels a long distance to reach its consumer market. The literal and figurative distance between the grower and the consumer varies widely depending on the size of the grower and their market plan.

Because agriculture is such a vital aspect of our local economy, it is important to consider the implications of the production and distribution system for a sustainable food system and economy. Small farms are an important source of jobs and income for the people of the Salinas Valley, but many small farmers may have difficulty finding the right marketing channels as outlined in the diagram. For many local small farmers, direct selling at farmers’ markets is often a viable option for sustaining their business while offering competitive prices and high quality to consumers and ensuring their product is consumed locally. On the consumers’ side, buying produce from certified farmers’ markets is one of the only ways to ensure that one is consuming locally-grown products.<sup>14</sup> The illustration is a simplified representation of the distribution system. Community Supported Agriculture and “U-pick” are other examples of how some small growers make direct connections with their market, without going through extensive distribution channels. *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* explored market interest in these types of alternative distribution channels in the Salinas Valley, in order to generate marketing opportunities for small growers and to meet the demands of consumers.

A USDA study determined that 15.3% of consumer spending on food goes to pay for fruits and vegetables, and just over half of this amount was spent on *fresh* fruits and vegetables.<sup>15</sup> The study found that nearly two-thirds of fresh fruits, and more than two-thirds of fresh vegetables, cost less than 25 cents per serving, after adjusting for waste (portions of fruits and vegetables that are not eaten). Many of Monterey County’s most widely grown vegetables cost less than 25 cents per serving, and less than \$2.00 per pound (such as lettuce, broccoli, and celery).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the study found that, contrary to popular assumptions, a majority of *fresh* fruits and vegetables are actually less expensive to eat than frozen or canned ones.<sup>17</sup> However, although the area is abundant with affordable fruits and vegetables, many of the area’s poor do not have consistent and adequate access to fresh produce or are not fully educated about their affordability and health benefits.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. “What Do People Know about their Food? Measuring Central Coast Consumers’ Interest in Food Systems Issues.” *Center Research Briefs* No. 5, Winter 2005: 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bostrom, Meg for Public Knowledge, Inc. “Digesting Public Opinion.” *Perceptions of the U.S. Food System: What and How Americans Think about their Food*. W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 23-25.

<sup>14</sup> Roach, Bob.

<sup>15</sup> Reed, Jane, Elizabeth Frazão, and Rachel Itskowitz for USDA Economic Research Service. *How Much Do Americans Pay for Fruits and Vegetables?* Agriculture Information Bulletin Number 790, July 2004: 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38.

### **c. Health and Nutrition in Monterey County**

Despite the abundance of healthful, fresh produce grown in the Salinas Valley, Monterey County's population suffers alarmingly high incidences of nutrition-related illness and obesity. According to a recent Monterey County Health Department report, more than 70% of men and 52% of women in the county are overweight or obese, higher percentages than the state averages of 66% for men and 45% for women.<sup>18</sup> Considering that research shows a correlation between obesity and many other ailments – including cancer, cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis and hypertension – there is clearly cause for concern.<sup>19</sup>

All reported statistics invariably show epidemic levels of overweight and obesity in all segments of the U.S population with remarkable increases occurring within the last two decades. Estimates show that nationally, health care costs for treatment of illness related to being overweight or obese are as high as \$117 billion per year.<sup>20</sup> High costs coupled with scientific evidence proving the relationship between diet and health has brought considerable and overdue attention to the issue in recent years. Of particular concern is that this trend is pronounced among African-American and Hispanic children; between the years 1986 and 1998 obesity increased more than 120% among these groups.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that Latinos are one of the fastest-growing ethnic minorities in the United States, there is a conspicuous lack of research relating specifically to diet and health care for this population. The little that is known is discouraging. According to the California Department of Health, heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes kills over 60% of Latinos in the state.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, type-2 diabetes – typically caused by poor diet and overweight – is 1.5 times higher among Latinos than among other ethnic groups in California.<sup>23</sup> These statistics are troubling for health care professionals in Monterey County where over 64% of residents in Salinas consider themselves of Hispanic decent.<sup>24</sup> Precisely because of this, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) specifically targeted low-income Latinos and children in Salinas as part of a nationwide intervention program intended to reduce health disparities and promote quality health care. The Monterey County Health Department completed the initial surveying phase of this program in 2005 and confirmed that Latinos in the county suffer from high incidences of overweight, poor nutrition and low levels of physical activity.<sup>25</sup>

While there is no single answer that explains why Latinos and children suffer more than other groups from poor nutrition, a recent report by the California Endowment does link some

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<sup>18</sup> Monterey County Health Department, Epidemiology Unit. Health Profile 2004: Women and Men. March 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Go For Health. A Comprehensive Plan to Increase Healthy Nutrition and Regular Physical Activity Among Children and Youth in Santa Cruz County. 2004. <http://www.unitedwaysc.org/goforhealthplan.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Action Council of Monterey County. Where Do We Stand? Monterey County Child Obesity Study. December 2005. [www.actioncouncil.org](http://www.actioncouncil.org)

<sup>22</sup> California Department of Health Services, Center for Health Statistics, Office of Health Information and Research. (2004). *Ten leading causes of death, percent of deaths, death rates, and age-adjusted death rates by sex – Hispanic – California, 2002*. (Table 5-10A) [Data Table]. Retrieved June 22, 2005, from <http://www.dhs.ca.gov/hisp/chs/OHIR/tables/datafiles/vsofca/0510a.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> American Diabetes Association. (n.d.) *Diabetes statistics for Latinos*. Retrieved June 22, 2005, from <http://www.diabetes.org/diabetes-statistics/latinos.jsp>

<sup>24</sup> US Census Bureau. State and County Quick-Facts. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0664224.html>

<sup>25</sup> Monterey County Health Department. *Salud! Salinas Steps to Health. Steps to a Healthier Salinas: Evaluation Plan and Results (PowerPoint presentation)* [http://www.healthierus.gov/steps/grantees/Salinas\\_Monterey.html](http://www.healthierus.gov/steps/grantees/Salinas_Monterey.html)

important environmental factors to overweight and obesity. Many of these factors disproportionately affect low-income and minority groups. Factors highlighted by the study are:

- Excessive food portions, such as super size.
- Excessive consumption of high-calorie, high-fat, low-nutrient, snacks and soft drinks.
- Lack of easily accessible places for physical activity, such as safe parks and bike paths.
- Insufficient physical activity opportunities for children in schools and after schools and after school programs.
- Excessive time watching TV or playing video games.
- Limited access to supermarkets, farmers' markets, and other venues that carry affordable fresh produce in low-income neighborhoods.
- Widespread marketing of high calorie, low-nutrient cereals, snacks and drinks to children.
- Limited ability to be active at worksites.<sup>26</sup>

As poor nutrition gains recognition as a national health crisis, more and more people are beginning to see the connections between socio-economic conditions and food access. Even though nutrition-related illnesses afflict all segments of the population, they occur at much higher rates among people of low incomes and people of color.<sup>27</sup> Community food security advocates have, for some time, pointed to unfair distribution and social justice disparities in the food system, yet it is only recently that the health sector is noting the significance of these correlations. The connection between poverty, food security and health may seem obvious but is surprisingly novel throughout the literature.

Poverty is no stranger in Monterey County and the link between low income and poor health is no mere coincidence. Agriculture is the dominant industry in the county, employing well over 20% of the working age population<sup>28</sup> and some estimates claim that the number of seasonal workers during peak seasons is as high as 128,584 workers.<sup>29</sup> The state of California Department of Housing and Community Development defines the median income for a single person in Monterey County as \$35,200 and classifies anyone earning half that (\$17,600) or less as “very low income.” Agricultural workers in the county earn between \$7,000 and \$10,000 annually, well below the state-determined “low income” bracket.<sup>30</sup>

According to a relatively recent report funded by the California Endowment – one of the few completed studies on the state of health among California’s agricultural workers – as much as 96% of those surveyed consider themselves of Hispanic descent. Additional findings from the study include:

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<sup>26</sup> The California Endowment. “Preventing Obesity in California: A Call for Policy and Community-Based Approaches”, *Health in Brief*, September, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Prevention Institute. [Cultivating Common Ground: Linking Health and Sustainable Agriculture.](http://www.preventioninstitute.org)

<sup>28</sup> *Monterey County 21<sup>st</sup> Century General Plan Update*. Retrieved from <http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/gpu/countyfacts/employment.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Monterey County Government. *Applied Survey Research*. [http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/dss/affiliates/cap/downloads/farmworker\\_survey/5-Introduction.pdf](http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/dss/affiliates/cap/downloads/farmworker_survey/5-Introduction.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> US Department of Labor. *Findings From the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2000-2001*. March, 2005.

- Nearly one in five male workers (18%) had at least two out of three risk factors for chronic disease, high serum cholesterol, high blood pressure or obesity.
- A significantly larger portion of male workers surveyed had high serum cholesterol as compared with the U.S. adult population.
- Both male and female workers surveyed show a greater incidence of high blood pressure as compared with the incidence of hypertension among all U.S. adults.
- 81% of male subjects and 76% of female subjects had unhealthy weight.
- A significantly greater portion of persons surveyed suffer from iron deficiency anemia than the rest of the U.S adult population.<sup>31</sup>

It is sadly ironic that the hard labor and sweat of those who produce such an abundance of healthy fruits and vegetables suffer from the effects of poor nutrition. Perhaps even more discouraging is that recent studies show dietary trends among Latino immigrant populations worsening the longer they stay in the U.S. A Harvard School of Public Health study found that women who recently immigrated ate more fruits and vegetables than either U.S. born residents or women who migrated years earlier.<sup>32</sup> Additional research conducted by CHAMACOS (Center for Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas), a group involved in this report, found that Mexican born women had better nutrition during pregnancy than U.S.-born women of Mexican descent. Furthermore, among Mexican-born women, those who had lived in the U.S. for longer periods of time had diets lower in important micronutrients than more recent immigrants.<sup>33</sup> This trend is seen not only among Hispanic immigrants, but also white and Asian immigrants. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 8 percent of immigrants who had lived in the United States for less than a year were obese, but that jumped to 19 percent among those who had been here for at least 15 years.<sup>34</sup> Immigrant populations often face language and economic barriers to health care and other public services; a situation that makes these trends towards poorer diets especially worrisome.

Research invariably proves that nutrition-related illness and chronic disease weighs heaviest on the poor, and therefore it is essential that more effort be made to ensure that low-income communities have access to affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate foods; the definition of food security. Many poor neighborhoods do not have access to retail food outlets and fast food tends to be both more accessible and convenient for working people with limited incomes.<sup>35</sup> The solution to these problems must be a multifaceted cross-sector approach to food system issues that include the health sector, agriculture producers and social justice advocates. *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* attempts to explore the food system issues of our local community and seek out ways to bridge the gap of injustice. Together, the many organizations that work hard to address these issues will unite to help foster long term solutions to the problems of our food system.

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<sup>31</sup> Villarejo, D., Lighthall, D., Williams, D., Souter, A., Mines, R., Bade, B., Samules, S. & McCurdy, S.A. *Suffering in Silence: A Report on the Health of California's Agricultural Workers*. California Institute for Rural Studies. 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, Stephen. "For new Americans, a poorer diet." *The Boston Globe*. January 16, 2006.

[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/health\\_science/articles/2006/01/16/for\\_new\\_americans\\_a\\_poorer\\_diet/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/health_science/articles/2006/01/16/for_new_americans_a_poorer_diet/)

<sup>33</sup> Harely, Kim; Eskenazi, Brenda and Black, Gladys. "The association of time in the US and diet during pregnancy in low-income women of Mexican descent." CHAMACOS (Center for Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas). School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley, CA USA. 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Associated Press. "Immigrants arrive to this US thin, get fat." MSNBC 2004.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6712503/>

<sup>35</sup> Prevention Institute. Cultivating Common Ground: Linking Health and Sustainable Agriculture.

[www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org)



A typical Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) seasonal assortment of fruits and vegetables distributed to regional customers by ALBA Organics

#### **4. Community Food Assessment Methodology**

While the collaborators and partners on this project carry out diverse work, the common thread we share is a desire for a healthy food system. This process has enabled us to form new and lasting relationships within our community that will facilitate progress towards improving our food system.

*The Face of Food on the Central Coast* evolved initially out of a desire to pursue local market opportunities for ALBA farmers. Considering that the agriculture industry employs such a large portion of the region's population, naturally a look at produce consumption among agricultural workers seemed a logical place to start. After discovering the evidence of health and nutrition ailments among farm workers in the area, our attention turned to the community at large. A list of important questions emerged, including:

- Who has access to fresh organic produce?
- If it is true that people are not eating fresh produce, then why not?
- Is there a demand for locally grown produce?
- Do farm workers or farmers consume organic produce that they themselves cultivate?
- Are they able to enjoy the fruits of their labor?
- Do they have access to organic and locally grown food (aside from what they produce)?
- Does the family farm lifestyle allow a family to maintain a healthy and nutritious diet?
- How many stores in the CFA area carry organic and/or local produce?
- What are the barriers to providing local/organic produce to low income communities?
- What actions might be taken to overcome these barriers?
- Are nutrition related illnesses prevalent in the CFA area?
- Does the community understand the benefits of locally grown and organic produce?

A general concern for the food security of farm workers and small farmers became the centerpiece of our community food assessment yet we understood that we could not only look at isolated segments of the population. The more we investigated the more questions emerged. What are the reasons for the answers, and what are their implications? Food and agriculture affect each and every one of us. It became obvious that to explore these issues we would need to examine production, distribution and consumption patterns of our food system. Not only do we represent farmers, but ALBA is also a local organic distribution center and perhaps most importantly, our farmers -just like all farmers- are also consumers. Because of this realization, it seemed logical to us that we ask these questions of groups who represent multiple dimensions of the food system. For example, many of our farmers spoke both to production *and* consumption patterns. Additionally we interviewed food retailers who were able to provide important insight to distribution as well as consumption. One of the most important findings throughout the assessment was definitely that a food system is just that – a *system*. To understand the issues at hand we must understand that there are multiple dimensions to our food system and that many individuals participate simultaneously in different spheres.

At ALBA we are committed to pursuing economic opportunity, social justice and environmental stewardship and in order to do so, we need to focus energy on our local community food system. *The Face of Food on the Central Coast* is a summary of our efforts to explore these important issues.

*The Face of Food on the Central Coast* began with quite a bit of reading. We wanted to examine other CFA's across the country to get an idea of the different methodologies used. We received invaluable assistance from the Community Food Security Coalition which was there to guide us every step of the way. From their website we were able to retrieve information about others who have done food assessments and look at what worked as well and what didn't. Our next step was to look at the information available about issues of our food system in the region. We looked at information from as varied of sources as the Food Banks, the Health Department, the Ag Commissioner and the USDA. After compiling relevant information into a single literature review we then began contacting agencies throughout the region to see who would be interested in working with us on this project. The result of our inquiries was encouraging. There were multiple organizations that responded positively about this project and many ended up becoming partners and friends in this exciting process. Together, we determined that the best way to collect data for the purpose of our assessment was through focus groups that were conducted in Salinas, Watsonville, Soledad and Gonzales. The focus group approach allowed us to collect relative, personal data with a human face and proved to be an exciting means to learn more about our community.

We are extremely fortunate here on the Central Coast in that there is no shortage of committed and passionate organizations and they all work hard to improve living conditions for our most disadvantaged residents. Through this CFA process we have had the pleasure of working with a wide variety of knowledgeable and action-orientated people right here in our own community.

## **a. Literature Review and Other Community Food Assessments**

The first step in the CFA process was to consult the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) and investigate their extensive website.<sup>36</sup> The CFSC operates an impressive knowledge clearinghouse to assist information sharing among groups around the country who are interested in the CFA process. CFSC provided the invaluable *What's Cooking in Your Food System?*<sup>37</sup> This guide provided us with the necessary information to map out a path for *The Face of Food on the Central Coast*. Not only did this guide assist in planning, it also provides summaries of nine other CFAs which helped a great deal in our conceptualizing of the project at hand. In addition to the CFAs outlined in CFSC guide we also relied on a Nutrition Network publication titled *Lessons Learned by Five California Food Assessment Projects*,<sup>38</sup> assessments from West and East Oakland and a Fresno Food Assessment conducted by the Fresno Metro Ministry.

After reviewing the experiences of other communities in the assessment process we began gathering the latest information and statistics of our own food system. This set the background for a literature review which outlined the food security issues currently affecting low-income and farm worker communities in California. We used the literature review as a tool when making first contact with agencies and institutions, who were then invited to take part in our community food assessment. In addition, it helped to frame the questions we asked in the CFA.

## **b. Stakeholder Contribution**

Significant time was spent building a contact list of potential partners and contributors. We approached agencies working in the areas of health, food, social justice, immigrant rights, education, and advocacy. ALBA had no prior relationship with most of the agencies, as a major goal of our CFA was to reach out to community members whom we identified as sharing common goals. Building these relationships is one of the most critical and satisfying aspects of the project. Doors were opened for both ALBA farmers and our new partners. Our hope was that these new agencies would serve as a resource in gathering key community members to participate in focus groups for our assessment.

Identified stakeholders became an integral component of the CFA process. Not only did our stakeholders contribute invaluable information about our target groups, they also assisted in our focus groups, helped formulate questions, and provided positive encouragement along the way. Every CFA should be community driven and involve participatory research. ALBA approached potential stakeholders with an explanation of the project and an invitation to participate and help drive the process. The primary ways to get involved, aside from playing a leadership role, were to provide a venue of participants for ALBA to conduct focus groups or complete a written survey that was specifically designed for organizations that work closely with our target group.

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<sup>36</sup> [www.foodsecurity.org](http://www.foodsecurity.org)

<sup>37</sup> Kami Pothukuchi, Hugh Joseph, Hannah Burton, and Andy Fisher (2002). *What's Cooking in Your Food System? A guide to Community Food System*. Community Food Security Coalition.

<sup>38</sup> Marilyn Prehm and Susan Stuart (2005). *Lessons Learned By Five California Food Assessment Projects*. The California Nutrition Network.

### c. Focus Groups

ALBA conducted ten focus groups with a total of approximately 115 participants. Participants were recruited from Salinas and Watsonville with the help of El Pájaro Community Development Corporation (a business incubator for immigrant-owned micro-enterprises), La Unión del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) (an organizing and farm worker community advocacy group) and the Salinas Adult School's nutrition education department. The participants in the focus groups included Latinos, Latino farm workers, and white mothers of young children. Participants ranged from Caucasian mothers seeking to learn how to become better moms through Salinas Adult School child development and nutrition classes, to Latino and Latina organizers, who are active voices for the betterment of their communities, especially in the arena of farm worker rights and environmental justice. Within all focus groups, most participants were of low-income levels. All participants were offered organic strawberries or apples accompanied by healthy fruit recipes as a token of appreciation for their involvement.

In the search for participants, ALBA sent out a survey by email to agencies that showed interest in the project. This survey asked for information about the populations that the agencies work with or serve. It was used as a tool to not only gauge the interest level of organizations who were invited to participate, but also for ALBA to learn about agencies working with farm workers, Latinos, or individuals who were low-income (our targeted audience). The surveys were sent to 17 agencies on the Central Coast.

Based on agencies' responses, we established the locations and participants for ten focus groups which were conducted between September and December of 2005:

- Five focus groups were facilitated at the Salinas Adult School in parenting and child nutrition classes. Participants were primarily low-income Latino and White women.
- One focus group was held at each of the following locations:
  - Camphora farm worker labor camp, near Soledad, in cooperation with LUPE's comité of organizers, serving low-income Latino farm workers living in transitory housing.
  - Gonzales, with support from the LUPE's comité of Gonzales serving low-income Latino farm workers.
  - East Salinas, with the LUPE Comité of East Salinas serving Latino farm worker organizers.
  - Watsonville, in cooperation with El Pájaro Community Development Corporation, with food business owners, including owners of a frutería, taquería, and pizzeria.
  - ALBA's Rural Development Center, with current ALBA farmer participants.

**Find these regions on map 5 and 6 (appendix 9f)**

ALBA's focus group facilitators were trained by Community Food Security Coalition's Raquel Bournhonesque, with whom focus group questions were developed to be open-ended, in order to prevent skewed results or bias within subjects.

A participatory focus group protocol was developed to elicit discussion on a range of attitudes and behaviors related to food preparation and eating out, grocery shopping and produce selection habits, and purchasing potential if there was increased access to organic local produce within

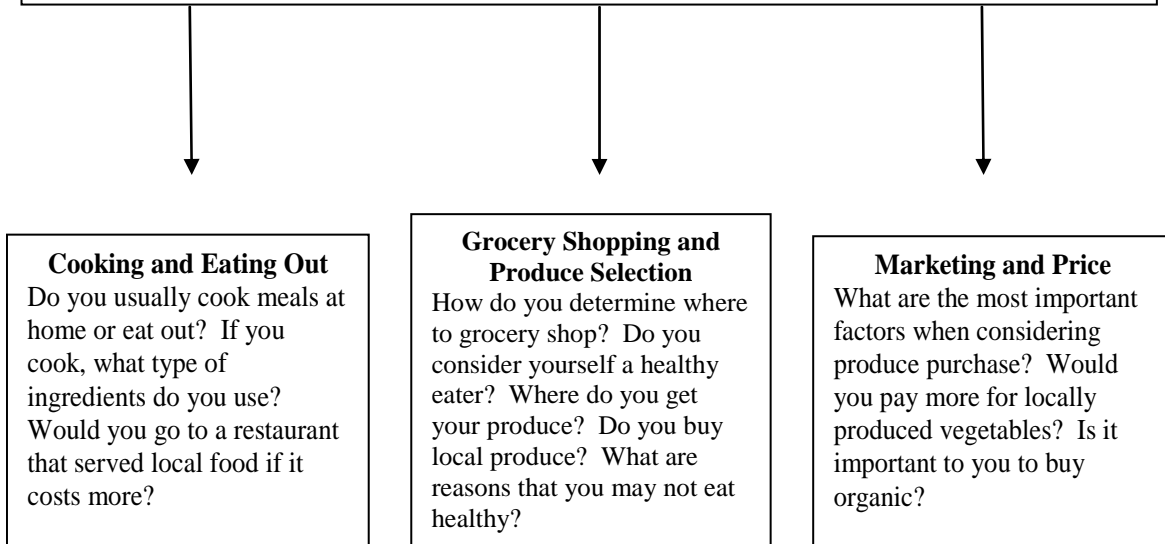
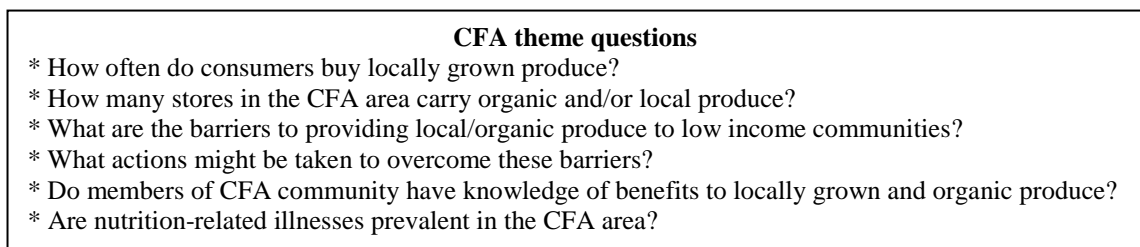
participants' communities. Two of the ten focus groups, with El Pájaro CDC and ALBA farmers, (made up of food-related micro-entrepreneurs and small-scale organic farmers), included discussions of marketing and food business topics, alongside the consumer-based questions.



Focus group held with LUPE's Gonzales Comité, November 2005

### Focus Group Question Development

In order to develop questions for the focus groups, we revisited the project goals and objectives. We formulated questions based on the original questions the CFA sought to answer, which are highlighted on page 8. Because our CFA studies food production, distribution, and consumption systems, we formulated three themes for focus group questions: Cooking and Eating Out, Grocery Shopping and Produce Selection, and Marketing and Price.



## **d. Produce Price Data Collection**

Throughout the CFA process ALBA tried to ensure that we examined production, consumption and distribution components of our food system. “Price” is as important to farmers as it is to consumers. If food is sold very cheap, benefit reaped for the consumer may impact opportunities for local family farmers. Striking a balance to meet the needs of both consumers and producers, and everyone in between, is one of the greatest challenges that we face in our working towards community food security. Selling “direct” or as direct as possible is one way to bring the greatest return to the producer while selling at an affordable price to the consumer.

Early into ALBA’s Community Food Assessment, CSUMB’s California Agriculture class expressed interest in participating in the project. We recruited five students to conduct field research in the market place. Data including produce availability, quality, and price, was collected within a two week period in October. A small slot of time was needed for the data collection, to defray the influence of regular and seasonal product variability, which affects the pricing structure as well as quality and availability of produce sales throughout the world. Agriculture is a precarious and constantly changing micro and macro economy that affects what every consumer pays for at the grocery store. The two-week snapshot that was created was an important tool to share and discuss with ALBA farmers.

ALBA’s Marketing Coordinator also visited three small-scale grocery stores in Monterey and four small-scale grocery stores in East Salinas. The purpose was to observe the dynamics of the stores’ produce aisles, to document the selection, quantity, cost, and to find out whether or not organic or locally-grown produce was offered. We were looking to achieve a basic understanding of what was being sold in our community, and if any of these types of stores could serve as potential market venues for small organic growers.

## **5. Community Assessment Findings**

### **a. Focus Group Findings: Consumer Preferences**

We found there was considerable unity of interest in food system issues among the 115 participants with whom we spoke. The following bullets encompass the key findings from the ten focus groups that ALBA conducted. Please see supplementary “findings chart” in the appendix for more details about varying information among individual focus groups. Over half of the focus group respondents spoke in reference to the following findings.

- Home cooked meals are preferred by the majority of participants.
- Fresh ingredients are generally sought whenever possible.
- Price and convenience are the determining factors in deciding where to shop.
- There is an awareness of “organic” and what it means, particularly among farm workers
- There is an awareness of pesticide impacts to human health and environment, particularly among farm workers.
- There is a general aversion to real and perceived higher pricing of organic food.
- It is perceived that little information is provided at point of purchase about farmers who grew product and where it was grown.
- There is a consumer desire to know where their food comes from and who grows it.

- Personal health concerns motivate individuals to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and less processed foods.
- People want more options to purchase local and organic foods at both existing venues and new venues.
- Consumers want to support local small scale farmers if it can be convenient and affordable.

Themes that emerged as universal and systemic in all of the focus groups included price (is it affordable?), availability of local and organic produce (where consumers normally shop), convenience (do people cook with fresh foods?), motivation of consumers to purchase local and organic products (why do people want to buy these products?).

**Price – Availability – Convenience – Motivation**

These themes are somewhat intuitive and inter-related, yet offer important insight into how to approach the development of wider access to fresh local food venues for a larger share of the population. Below we briefly explore each theme, and indicate some upcoming opportunities for ALBA in the near future that relate to each theme.

**Price**

We confirmed our hypothesis that low-income consumers are price-sensitive, and are generally not willing to pay a price premium for local and organic products. However there were small groups of low-income consumers in our focus groups who are willing to pay a price premium for local and organic products.



**Recommendation:** Based on ALBA’s opinion and the strong demand for local and organic products if they can be paid for using WIC coupons or food stamps through EBT machines we recommend the expansion of WIC-sponsored farmers’ markets and farmers markets with the capacity to receive EBT payments in order to serve this growing demand.

**Availability**

Through our retail produce research and consumer focus groups, we learned that very little local and organic produce is available in local retail food stores. What is available is not conspicuously labeled. Hence it doesn’t appear that farmers or producer distributors are trying to use this as a marketing angle. Many focus group participants expressed some frustration and confusion about not being able to easily compare organic and conventional products. The parent focus groups in Salinas expressed the need for more places to buy fresh produce (conventional or not) in Salinas. Many complained of the lack of a farmers’ market in Salinas and were not aware of the Northridge Mall market on Sundays nor the WIC market on Thursdays. There was some awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture among this group and the majority expressed interest in learning more or receiving guidance in how to make more informed food purchasing decisions.

“The organic section is often tucked far away in some corner of the store, making it hard for me to compare prices, especially with a full shopping cart, baby and all.”



**Recommendation:** An advertising and/or labeling campaign in junction with local retailers might be a good strategy for increasing consumer awareness and ability to purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables that are also organic and locally grown.

## Convenience

It became clear as we held more focus groups that it is important to distinguish between *availability* of local, organic produce, and the perceived *convenience* of purchasing and consuming local and organic produce. As explained above, we learned that not many local and organic products can be found in the local, retail food stores. We focused on neighborhood and corner stores, with the notion that they are convenient for consumers to shop at. The fact that little local and organic food products are available at the stores that are convenient for these consumers to shop at, lead us to the conclusion that purchasing local and organic food products is simply not convenient.



**Recommendation:** An increase in the number of farmers' markets, in addition to increased availability of local and organic produce at local grocery stores, will help to make accessing them more convenient for consumers.

## Motivation

Most (but not all) of the focus group participants we heard from were aware of organic products, were pre-disposed to purchase local organic food, but felt the cost to do so was often prohibitive. Other participants seemed unaffected or unaware of the often dichotomous nature of our conventional/sustainable food system.



**Recommendation:** The results of the focus groups in this regard lead us to believe that there is community support for sustainable agriculture and small farms among many types of consumers, and that consumers are ready and nearly willing to “vote with their dollars” when/if prices are deemed as affordable and when they understand what they are supporting through their purchases.

### b. Focus Group Findings: Farm workers' Preferences

Much of the motivation that was felt in the focus groups comes from the shared history that many participants have as current or former farm workers. We heard passionate statements about the importance of agriculture to society, the responsibility of farmers to take care of our natural resources and protect the health of consumers, and a concern for our disappearing culture of land stewardship.

Former and current farm workers have an intimate understanding of the effects of pesticide use as they often work with the harmful chemicals on a daily basis. In the three farm worker focus groups we held in Soledad, Gonzales, and Salinas, We found that there is a distinct awareness of what “organic” means. The ability to buy organic produce within this constituency is challenged by the obstacles of lack of availability and price.

“We are losing our heritage of farming and knowledge of how to take care of the land....Our children do not want to have anything to do with agriculture anymore.”



**Recommendation:** Farm worker residents of East Salinas frequent the WIC sponsored farmers market featuring organic produce on Thursdays and would like to see expanded farmers markets options in Salinas. Farm workers of more remote locations in Soledad

and Gonzales have extremely limited options for groceries and would love to see a weekly farmers market in their area as well. The majority of participants would like to there to be more education offered to children in schools about the important role of agriculture in our society.



### c. Focus Group Findings: Farmers' Preferences

The purpose of our focus group with ALBA farmers was not only to better understand their realities as producers, but to also understand how their position as organic producers translates to their consumer habits and visa versa. Are the organic growers with whom ALBA works also *eating* and *buying* organic?

We found that ALBA farmers do firmly believe in organic, whether both by the pitchfork and fork. Most not only seek to grow it, but also consume it. However, the issue of access in terms of availability and cost are significant factors for ALBA farmers, which became apparent in our focus group. Aside from farmers' own organically grown produce, organic food is not readily available in most areas of the Salinas Valley. Only a few selected grocery stores carry it, and in limited amounts. A handful of ALBA farmers present in the focus group will drive far distances to get it, such as in Monterey or Santa Cruz. They are willing to pay higher prices for organic, because they understand what it takes to grow it and appreciate the values of health and quality as consumers. Other farmers stated that cost is the most important factor when deciding where and what to shop. According to one ALBA farmer...

The above comment might put into context the food insecurity realities of many, organic farmers and non farmers alike. It might also speak to where consumers put their priorities.

“If organic is one penny more, I won’t buy it. Putting food on the table for my family comes first.”

For example, residents of high-income countries spend an average of 16 percent of their income on food, compared with 35 percent in middle-income countries, and 55 percent in low-income countries. Differences in per capita income are the principal force behind differences in food expenditure shares. People with very low incomes are forced to spend most of their income on food simply to survive.

39 Birgit Meade and Stacey Rosen. *Income and Diet Differences Greatly Affect Food Spending Around the Globe*. International Market Trends, Food Review 1996

As their incomes rise, they almost always buy more and better food. But as soon as basic food needs are satisfied, extra income will also be spent on other consumer goods such as clothes or entertainment. While absolute spending on food may still increase, its share of total private consumption expenditure will decline.

ALBA farmers have the advantage of access to organic fresh fruits and vegetables year round, either from their own field or their neighbor's. They may not often spend much on produce purchases because they are growing these items themselves. Many ALBA farmers have commented over the years that once they began farming in California, their diets and nutrition improved as they've become accustomed to a large diversity of vegetable varieties grown here.



**Recommendation:** The ALBA farmers expressed interest in the idea of developing an all-organic artisan grocery store and/or restaurant that would feature small-scale local family farmers. The sentiment is that as organic prices continue to drop while the organic sector expands in the next few years, small family farmers will not be able to easily compete. The way to “survive” as an organic farmer in the near future, as stated by some of our farmers, will be to differentiate one’s products from “mainstream” organic produce, and showcase instead the “face of the farmer” that grew them.

#### **d. Focus Group Findings: Food Business Operator Preferences**

In order to meet our goal of increasing availability of nutritious, locally grown organic produce in low-income areas, it became apparent that ALBA should explore the realities of small food businesses in order to understand what barriers these “distributors” face when selling food made of fresh, local organic ingredients.

El Pájaro Community Development Corporation’s business incubator for immigrant-owned micro-enterprises provided an ideal arena to investigate how purchasing and marketing decisions were made among small food business owners.

Those selling fruits and vegetables, like one frutería owner we talked with, enjoys selling tropical fruits and using them as ingredients for the fresh fruit smoothies and juices that she sells fresh. According to Maria, this precludes her from purchasing locally, as she says, “There are many things that are not available here, nor even in Mexico. There are no mangos available in Mexico, so I buy these things from Brazil.”

We found that there were perceptions about buying organic and local that exemplifies the lack of information or knowledge about accessing these items. For example, there are some tropical fruits grown right here within the state of California. Buying tropical fruits from afar proves to be an obstacle in providing the freshest produce available, as produce needs to be picked for export, before ripe.

We learned that a common business owner from buying already established relationships

“Bananas for example, can’t sell if they come to me already yellow.”

theme precluding a organic was loyalty to with conventional

produce sellers. Common for all businesses, an existing marketing niche provides an important source of support. We also found that ethnic loyalty was common among some, who felt that they were supporting their home country by purchasing produce imported from Mexico. It is not clear if indeed one would truly be supporting Mexican farmers by purchasing Mexican-grown

products. It would be necessary to trace back the produce to where, how, and under what conditions it was grown.

Other noteworthy discussion was around a perceived cost barrier to buying and selling organic produce. “I don’t buy organic because I can’t pay too much more or sell for too much more.” This is a common theme that emerged among businesses and consumers alike. We also found that some business owners were not necessarily motivated by organics, or were not under the impression that selling organic would boost their business even though they were already selling “health” through their marketing messages. “I could introduce organic fruit, but not if it would affect the business too much.” In response, ALBA suggested that,

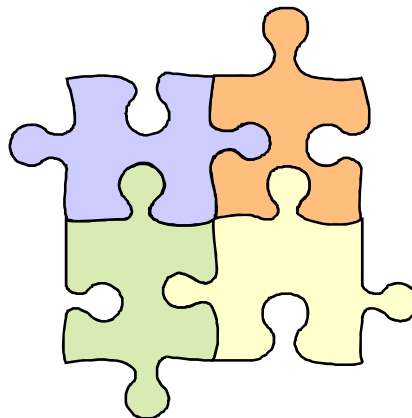


**Recommendation:** Perhaps those interested food retailers could start out by selling a small amount of organic *alongside* conventional as a worthwhile experiment without compromising their current business practices or risking any great loss. Taste testings and promotional material could help.

We learned from this focus group, that even in heavily-concentrated Hispanic area, Watsonville, there was a lack of some food items often loved and sought by Mexicans in their home country, such as nopales, or cactus pads. Like other dark green vegetables, nopales are an excellent source of beta-carotene, and are also rich in vitamin C. Another product mentioned was “tuna” or “prickly pear.” This fresh, many-seeded fruit is eaten raw or made into drinks. It is high in vitamin C and magnesium. This might be a good untapped market for local farmers.

## e. Conclusion of Focus Group Findings

While we learned a tremendous amount about our food system through the community food assessment process, the most important result will certainly be new relationships and opportunities. Focus group participants shared many ideas and were thoughtful and creative as they shared their perspectives on the food system. The most interesting learning that happened in the focus groups was not necessarily responses to our questions but a whole series of resulting discussion and ideas from participants that shed new light on our view of the food system. After pondering some of these suggestions we were able to identify new opportunities for ALBA to positively influence our food system and further our mission to serve limited resource farmers. The most common thread that came out of nearly every one of the focus groups was that there is a definite need for new markets; for both producers and consumers. ALBA aims to work with community partners to help establish new market opportunities that will make a lasting contribution to our local economy and food system.



## **f. Retail Produce Pricing and Distribution Findings**

*Please see appendix for the Produce Price Chart that was produced through in-the field-research by college students from Cal State University of Monterey Bay's "California Agriculture" class.* The chart provides a glimpse of what kinds of produce are being sold and for how much, as well as what stores if any, carry organic produce. The purpose of this small sample of data collection was to serve as a tool for determining if ALBA farmers would be able to enter any of these markets based on whether or not they could compete with the very low conventional prices found in a variety of stores in the East Salinas area, one of ALBA's nearest neighborhoods. The findings are not particularly encouraging, as the produce prices are very low and therefore hard to compete with.

### **Observations:**

Observations of local grocery stores proved that local buying plays a role in purchasing decisions if the quality and price is comparable to non-local items. Local items are sought during their season for both flavor and price considerations. In an effort to fulfill the produce needs of their community the buyers must choose, especially in the winter months, to purchase from outside the region, often from other countries.

### **East Salinas:**

The small grocery stores that were visited in the predominantly Hispanic area of East Salinas had modest produce availability compared to the grocery stores visited in Monterey where produce was the highlight of what was carried. Prices were low. Although there was generally modest quantity, Mexican-grown fruits such as guavas, papayas, and passion fruit, were readily available here. There was a wide availability of Mexican specialty foods. Large chain super markets in East Salinas have a wide array of produce at affordable prices and high quality. None of the stores visited in East Salinas carried organic or locally-grown items.

*See map 1 and 2 for more (appendix 9f)*

### **Monterey Area:**

Two of the four markets visited in Monterey and Seaside offered easily recognizable organic produce as they were sold in plastic bags with the organic company's logo, unlike the conventional produce that was sold loosely. Bags of organic and mostly locally-grown apples, oranges, lemons, kiwi, lettuce, and celery adorned an organic section in one market that focused on produce.

Of the four markets visited, two were owned by Asian families, one was White, and one was Latino. Three of the markets offered a large selection of ethnic grocery items targeting the Latino population in addition to foods represented by the heritage of the owners. The Asian-owned stores offered both Latino and Asian grocery specialty items, but no Latino produce items such as papaya or mango. The Latino-owned store featured exotic fruits from Mexico.

Quality of produce was high in most regards and prices were relatively low, although not as low as was found in East Salinas. The overall sense of our observations indicated that locally grown produce items were sought out in their seasons to highlight flavor and best price. The understanding of the overreaching effects of purchasing decisions was limited and would require one-on-one interviews with the stores' produce buyers and managers, to achieve a more-in depth analysis of how produce sourcing is decided.



ALBA farmer Emma Valdez at the RDC in Salinas

## 6. Recommended Actions

The process of conducting the community food assessment has increased the number of stakeholders and community members who are aware of and involved in ALBA's work. It has also inspired the ALBA farmers to consider how they may be able to develop their own business opportunities in low-income farm worker communities. Moreover, our basic outreach to leaders in the community has resulted in increased media exposure, general public awareness and interest in our work, as well as farm visits by interested groups and individual community members.

### **Below is a list of recommendations that emerged from ALBA's Community Food Assessment:**

- **HELP GROCERY STORES & OTHER PRODUCE OUTLETS "TAKE RISKS" SELLING ORGANIC AND LOCAL PRODUCTS FOR THE FIRST TIME BY STARTING SLOW, UTILIZING EDUCATIONAL AND PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL, AND PROVIDING FREE TASTINGS TO CUSTOMERS**

ALBA will be working to connect ALBA farmers with local grocery stores to pilot the selling of organic produce in stores that are not already doing so. We will help by providing promotional material to the stores that may guide their infrastructure needs to differentiate organic from conventional. CAFF and ALBA have developed a Spanish-language BUY FRESH BUY LOCAL campaign which is explained below under "Launch a Marketing Campaign to Advertise Benefits of Buying Local and Organic."

ALBA Organics has partnered with institutions Stanford University, UC Santa Cruz, Sutter Maternity Hospital, Dominican Hospital and others to pilot serving organic produce. ALBA is regularly involved in outreach activities to University students through field trips, class visits, tastings, etc. It is the strategy of ALBA Organics to utilize institutional markets as its primary sales venue and to directly link ALBA farmers to other (smaller) sales venues that they have the capacity to serve due to scale and price requirements. In this position, ALBA Organics will not likely "compete" with our farmers' own market base.

- **INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF FRESH, LOCALLY GROWN ORGANIC PRODUCTS IN GROCERY STORES AND FARMERS MARKETS**

Notably, one of the major developments in our food systems organizing is the increasing interest in farmers' markets on the part of community partners who have learned about ALBA's mission

largely because of this project. From the perspective of food access in low-income communities and the overall business development of ALBA farmers, these markets are crucial contexts for advancing our work. Until 2006, there were only two farmers' markets in the Salinas area – one at the WIC office in Salinas, (which is run by some ALBA graduates), and one operating on Sunday mornings at a major shopping mall. There are additional markets in development with ALBA's support, including:

Sacred Heart Parish – With 5,000 members, this is the largest Catholic Church in Salinas. Church education leaders are starting a small organic farm stand served by ALBA farmers, operating outside the church on Sunday mornings – both between and after services.

LUPE Committee, Gonzales – The social service wing of the United Farm Workers (UFW) has committees organized in farm worker communities throughout the state. The Gonzales LUPE group was involved in the community food assessment, where their expressed desire to start a farmers' market in Gonzales emerged. ALBA will work to develop this market opportunity through 2007 and encourage ALBA farmers to help them start with a critical mass of market vendors.

Oldtown Salinas Association – In 2006, the primary downtown business association in Salinas has developed a Saturday morning farmers' market next to the Steinbeck Center in the center of the city. This has the potential to become a major farmers' market in Salinas. Currently, five ALBA farmers are selling at this market.

A new open marketplace will be opening up in East Salinas in 2007 as a benefit fundraiser for two public schools in the neighborhood. ALBA is suggesting to establish it as a "certified" farmers market, where genuine farmers sell their crops directly to the public. A *Certified Farmers Market* is a location approved by the county agricultural commissioner where certified farmers offer for sale only those agricultural products they grow themselves, thus serving farmers and their customers who want to know about their food source. ALBA hopes that this new market will be a promising venue for selling and accessing fresh local produce.

### Policy Implications

There are myriad contexts for policy change to impact community access to fresh, healthful foods. ALBA farmers have been involved in the public planning meetings for the East Alisal Market Place, sharing opinions and perspectives about how to make it a success.

Two other local policy actions were recently adopted in Salinas. On May 2, 2006, the City of Salinas Redevelopment Agency (City Council) received testimony from ALBA and the Oldtown Salinas Association encouraging a \$1 annual lease for use of a city parking lot as the site of the new Oldtown Salinas Marketplace, a certified farmers' market featuring many local and organic fresh fruits and vegetables. At the same meeting, the agency approved a similar lease for a new community garden project lead by the CSU Monterey Bay Service Learning Institute and Dorothy's Place (Homeless Kitchen).

- **EXPAND EBT & WIC ACCESS IN ALL FOOD PURCHASING VENUES, INCLUDING GROCERY STORES AND FARMERS MARKETS**

ALBA is working with the Oldtown Salinas Association and the Monterey County Health Department to set up EBT machines and provide necessary training to operate the EBT machine, at their new (above mentioned) Oldtown Marketplace farmers' market.

## Policy Implications

Since many of California's low-income households face higher food costs and often limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, California Food Policy Advocates is encouraging a bonus value for fresh fruits and vegetables purchased with food stamp benefits. They want to link that effort with incentives and technical assistance to help small-scale grocery stores to add or expand shelf space for fresh produce.

Many organizations will work on food security provisions in the next federal Farm Bill – likely to be reauthorized in 2007. Ideas include increasing people's access to food stamp programs and related health education efforts; secure funding for Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs, such as those assisting senior citizens; increase resources for the Farmers' Market Promotion Program; and reduce federal penalties for state agencies whose nutrition education programs incidentally reach people without food stamp benefits.

- **LAUNCH A MARKETING CAMPAIGN TO ADVERTISE BENEFITS OF BUYING ORGANIC AND LOCAL.**

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Development – ALBA has operated a CSA program since 2002 that delivers ALBA farmer- procured seasonal boxes of fresh produce, and this year we expect to continue building on our relationships with schools (including one in the Alisal district) and businesses that have hosted drop-off points. However, one of the most important developments is the increasing interest of ALBA farmers in operating CSAs in their own communities. For example, early in 2006 one ALBA farmer, Domitila Martínez, sought training from *ALBA Organics* in hopes of launching her own CSA in Soledad, California – another farm worker-intensive community in the Salinas Valley.

ALBA has begun working with CAFF and Food Routes to develop a Spanish-language version of the BUY FRESH BUY LOCAL campaign (COMPRE-LO FRESCO DE NUESTRO REGIÓN) that has seen success in Santa Cruz, California. ALBA will utilize this campaign to initiate new relationships between retail outlets and ALBA farmers. The campaign includes a variety of promotional materials that advertises and educates customers about the food they are buying and the farmers they are supporting under this “label.”

## Policy Implications

The city of Watsonville and Santa Cruz have recently implemented a Local Food Month, thanks to the work of CAFF, which will be celebrated each fall in the town center and its farmers' market. An important topic to keep in mind is the debate about personal food choices as they relate to long-term health impacts. For example, there are the recent lawsuits against large fast-food companies and the argument that a person cannot sue because they chose to eat at those establishments. However, more and more people are asking the question of how a person's environment affects their food choices. If there are few fresh food options available, people may not eat the amount necessary to maintain health. As ALBA continues its work to promote fresh, local foods, we encourage people to consider how the environments in our communities impact food choices. The local food month sponsorships by the above mentioned cities are a good step towards changing food environments.

- **EDUCATE CONSUMERS ABOUT SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, STARTING IN THE CLASSROOM**

CAFF and ALBA together are making the effort to deliver organic locally-grown produce to elementary public schools like Alisal School, located in a primarily Latino and low-income area of Salinas. Paralleling this is CAFF's work in the classroom doing 5-a-Day activities and education about the organic produce they are now eating in their lunchroom salad bars. "Harvest of the Month" activities engage students directly with the locally harvested foods and the farmers that grew it. CAFF and ALBA have also worked together to develop a statewide "Growers Collaborative" and build upon their model produce distribution business in Ventura County. Already the Monterey Bay Organic Farming Consortium (composed of Central Coast farmers) is pioneering the concept on the Central Coast, serving the dining halls of UC Santa Cruz that incorporates organic produce into at least 20% of their menus.

### Policy Implications

Current and potential policy development related to broader community access to fresh, locally grown foods in Monterey County include:

AB 2121 (Nava) would create the Farm Fresh Schools Program that introduces California grown, farm fresh produce in school lunch programs and create more markets for California farmers. It would result in a competitive grants program for schools to start salad bars and other means to serve fresh produce. As of mid-June, its further approval is pending the allocation of state budget monies toward the effort. ALBA has supported the bill's co-sponsors, Healthy eating Lifestyle Principles (HELP) and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) in promoting the legislation.

The federal Child Nutrition program reauthorization in 2004 included a provision (Public Law 108-265 Section 204) that requires schools participating in the federal "school lunch" program to establish a school wellness policy for the 2006-2007 school year. Several local schools are adopting such policies, and we hope to leverage that effort to expand the purchase of fresh, local foods by school districts in the region.

- **DEVELOP A GROCERY STORE OR RESTAURANT BUSINESS IN SALINAS THAT FOCUSES ON LOCAL ARTISAN AND ORGANIC PRODUCTS**

ALBA is currently undertaking cost analysis and research to determine the viability of starting a food processing endeavor for cut and bagged vegetables or a new certified commercial kitchen in Salinas that could be utilized for ALBA farmers and others to develop value-added products from their crops.

## **7. Current Efforts to Address Food Security Issues**

### **a. Local Groups**

There are currently several organizations addressing food security and other issues related to food policy, health and nutrition, and hunger alleviation. ALBA only focused on particular food security aspects that are directly linked to our mission. We felt it was important to mention the valuable work that local orgs are accomplishing to improve food security in our region. From food banks to policy groups, these organizations provide instrumental support and services to our communities, particularly for low-income individuals and families in the Salinas Valley. In short, local organizations tend to focus on one or more of the following issues:

- Food aid for the hungry/food insecure;
- Improved nutrition and education for a healthier lifestyle; and
- Consumption of locally grown food and promotion of sustainable farming practices.

Food banks, such as the Food Bank for Monterey County, supply emergency food and provide community education and outreach with the goal of eliminating hunger in the local area. They work within the community and with other organizations toward this goal. One key organization that provides a great deal of fresh produce to food banks is Ag Against Hunger. Through this organization's gleaning program, surplus crops are harvested and donated by local farmers to food banks for emergency aid.

Because emergency food aid is not a systematic nor long-term solution to hunger alleviation, initiatives for systemic solutions are central to the missions of the food banks. The goal is for local residents to no longer depend on the banks, and for emergency food aid to be just that: for emergencies. The collaboration of food banks with policy groups to advocate for changes in our food system is instrumental in the journey to greater food security and greater nutritional health for the entire community.

There are several government programs at work in the local area which promote improved nutrition as well. Given the area's high rates of obesity, these programs are essential for improved health in the community. For example, the Monterey County WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Supplemental Nutrition Program) helps pregnant women, new mothers, and young children eat well and stay healthy through food coupons, information, and other resources. A farmers' market at WIC (in which the majority of the vendors are ALBA/RDC graduates now operating local organic farms) accepts food coupons from participants and supports local farmers. Nutrition education is also provided by the California 5-a-Day program, which encourages consumption of fruits and vegetables, particularly by low-income residents. Finally, the Salinas Steps to Health program, also known as Steps to a Healthier Salinas, is a local branch of a national initiative, seeking to improve the health of Salinas residents through healthy eating and increased physical activity. Food stamps and other government nutrition programs exist for low-income residents, but unfortunately these resources are significantly under-utilized.

Several coalitions addressing food policy and hunger have formed as groups and individuals have come together with a common concern. The Central Coast Hunger Coalition is a group of agencies dedicated to fighting hunger and creating awareness of food policy and food security issues within local communities. Also, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) fosters family-scale agriculture that is environmentally sound and promotes a sustainable local economy. Similarly, the Santa Cruz Food Policy Working Group (sponsored by CAFF) is concerned with public policy in relation to eating locally produced and nutritious foods. Together with other organizations such as the food banks, these organizations work for lasting policy change that will result in greater health on the Central Coast.

# Community Partners

## Steps to a Healthier Salinas

The *Steps to a Healthier US* five-year cooperative agreement program aims to help Americans live longer, better, and healthier lives by reducing the burden of diabetes, overweight, obesity, and asthma and addressing three related risk factors—physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and tobacco use.

The city of Salinas in Monterey County, California, received a grant to implement community action plans to reduce health disparities and promote quality health care and prevention services.

### Target Population for *Steps* Interventions

Elementary, middle, and high school students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and school boards; low-income Latino and white children and adults; agricultural employers; fast-food restaurant customers, focusing on children; adults > 60 years (especially Latino seniors), and adults and children who speak both Spanish and English.

### Proposed Interventions

All programs will involve input from community residents and be guided by evidence-based and cost-effective strategies tailored to the health literacy, linguistic, and cultural needs of Latinos and other groups in the community.

ALBA is a member of the Council for a Healthier Salinas, the advisory coalition of the Steps to a Healthier Salinas, which formed to collaboratively address barriers to healthy food in low income communities of Salinas.

## Healthy Eating Lifestyle Principles

HELP's mission is to promote Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Positive Lifestyle Values among Youth and Adults of Monterey County to Overcome the Obesity Epidemic and Increase the Consumption of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.

HELP's goals include:

- Measurable reduction in obesity and related diseases.
- Countywide parity in nutrition/wellness policies adopted by public and private schools and agencies.
- Nutrition, physical activity and health education in all school curricula.
- Functional partnerships between Agriculture businesses and public/private schools and nonprofit organizations.
- Government advocacy for funding, food purchases, policies, regulations and requirements for publicly run institutions.
- Membership based clearinghouse for information, resources, referrals and partnerships.

HELP represents a significant contribution by the agribusiness community in Monterey County to combat diet-related health issues. ALBA and HELP are currently in discussions regarding ways to work together to achieve our mutual goals.

## **b. ALBA's Involvement with Regional & National Policy**

Through the mechanisms described below, ALBA works to inform, motivate and organize its farmer constituents around issues of relevance. It is most important to ALBA that the farmers it serves can be their own advocates. Informing them about policy issues and providing opportunities to share their ideas with elected officials are essential steps in that process.

- ALBA is involved in policy work related to sustainable agriculture and food security in many ways. In particular, ALBA is interested in generating leadership and policy awareness among participating farmers.
- At the national level, ALBA is a member of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (SAC), and is represented on the Coordinating Council of SAC.
- ALBA is playing a leadership role in the Farm and Food Policy Project, as a member of the Steering Committee of that project, as well as leading its Family Farm Revitalization work group, which is developing 2007 Farm Bill proposals. Brett Melone is leading these efforts. He is also part of a Diversity Team organized by the Kellogg Foundation, which is a subset of the overall Steering Committee. The Diversity Team advises the Foundation on ways to increase the diversity of interests and representation in the project, to ensure that the project's policy recommendations are inclusive and representative of the diversity of our agricultural community.
- ALBA is represented on the steering committee of the National Immigrant Farming Initiative, which has recently become active in national policy related to immigrants and refugees, and sustainable farming. At the state level, ALBA is represented on the Steering Committee of the California Food and Justice Coalition, a coalition of over 150 organizations working on different aspects of food security in California, from farmers to food banks. ALBA also serves on the Policy Committee of the California Coalition for Food and Farming.
- ALBA is represented on the Board of California FarmLink, which serves beginning farmers with technical assistance and access to capital.

### Leadership Development & Advocacy

The number of Latino farmers in California is growing, but very few are engaged in policy advocacy or projects to advance a more sustainable food system. The 27 ALBA farmers who currently lease ALBA land have demonstrated an interest in communicating with elected officials and understanding how government farm programs, such as crop disaster payments, can advance their position among other local farmers for whom these programs are a mainstay.

ALBA is often called upon to speak for the farmers with whom we work, and we have done so. However, this is an inadequate model for the long term. There are many benefits for farmers with the confidence and ability to speak for themselves, such as greater marketing prowess. ALBA maintains collaboration with organizations that want to integrate the voices of Latino and minority farmers, in particular the ones mentioned above. We believe we need work harder to bring the voices of immigrant and minority farmers into these coalition efforts.

ALBA is confident that immigrant, minority and limited-resource farmers can become more active in policy coalitions and advocacy if they understand: 1) how they could benefit from farm

policies and programs, 2) the growth and role of immigrant farmers and family farm advocacy, and 3) the potential to improve opportunities for other immigrant and/or beginning farmers.

Through facilitated conversations at farmers' meetings, where ALBA tenants/farmers gather monthly, we have begun to define their policy interests. For example, there is considerable interest in small-scale meat processing options to generate opportunities for local meat production and marketing. In addition, there is interest in adjusted gross revenue insurance options that could alleviate significant risks in the marketplace. There is also interest in strengthening incentives, credit/financing and educational programs for beginning farmers. Finally, the farmers understand the potential benefits of farm-to-school and similar local marketing schemes that can build greater consumer awareness and affiliation with farmers.

## **8. Conclusion**

ALBA's effort to conduct a Community Food Assessment has certainly been an important learning experience for ALBA and participants, and has served to inform our feasibility and business planning around produce distribution in low income communities in the Salinas Valley. Far more important than any particular market opportunity or sale that may come as a result of this community food assessment, are the newly kindled community relationships and leadership development and organizing opportunities that farmers are experiencing as part of this project. ALBA is now an integral player in the development of at least two new farmers markets in Salinas. ALBA farmers have organized among themselves to represent themselves in these market development venues. The organizing of the farmers represents an important first step in their exploration of market opportunities. It also represents the trust that farmers have placed in ALBA and other community partners to support their endeavors. Through the community food assessment process it has become clear to ALBA and the many focus group participants that every one of us has a stake in building a just and sustainable food system that supports growers and consumers. That farmers are organizing to consider an important business opportunity is only a foreshadowing of great things to come in our local food system.