Oconee County Food Systems Assessment

SEPTEMBER 2022

Preface

This report is a condensed version of the 2022 Oconee County Food System Assessment (2022 OCFSA) conducted by the Oconee Food Council (OFC), which is a group of county stakeholders formed in October 2021 to identify and implement strategies concerning food access, nutrition, and the local production, processing, and distribution of food. The purpose of the assessment is to provide the people and leaders of Oconee County, South Carolina with the information necessary to understand the food systems that connect us all, to raise awareness of our most pressing food system issues, and to point us in the direction of viable solutions. OFC staff assembled and led a team of multiple volunteers and contributors that carried out the project over the course of 2021-2023.

The initial objective of this project was to assess the local food system sectors of agricultural production, processing, distribution, and consumption, and the outcomes of community food security and nutrition as a foundational step in establishing the food council. It proved to be a challenging but rewarding exercise. Our research led to unexpected outcomes, and helped us better understand the interconnectedness of all sectors of the food system as well as the historical contexts in which they developed. Data compiled for the 2022 OCFSA will not be featured in its entirety in this publication, as certain facets are better suited for education and outreach purposes. These forthcoming assessment products will be disseminated through events, workshops, and publications. The assessment will evolve as we collect additional data and discover new information. Food systems are continually growing and changing. Research will be needed to follow these trends, note changes, and track progress. The OFC and other organizations are committed to this ongoing work of research to identify solutions for improved food security, availability of nutritious foods, and community resilience.

The following provides a snapshot of the county's food system(s) with pertinent local, regional, and national data. The outcomes of our analysis led to the identification of key themes that emerged from a grounded theory approach. The study employed a number of methods, including analyzing centralized data from federal and state agencies (United States Census, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Center for Disease Control (CDC), and South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC)), reviewing community feedback from events organized by local food movement leaders, and conducting informal interviews with open-ended questions of individuals knowledgeable about the county's history, local agriculture, and emergency food assistance work. The purpose of the 2022 OCFSA is: 1) to serve as a planning guide for the food council, 2) to raise awareness of local food system issues in Oconee County, and 3) to be an accessible resource for local individuals and organizations to support community efforts such as program and policy development, direct action, and creation of food and agricultural initiatives. Our hope is that this assessment will open doors of opportunity for the resolution of systemic deficiencies negatively impacting the health and well-being of the people of our county.

Acknowledgements

Funding for the 2022 Oconee County Food System Assessment was provided by the University of South Carolina SNAP-Ed through the Local Food Policy Council Development and Expansion Grant Program, and by Oconee County. The 2022 Spring Community Food Gatherings were made possible through a sponsorship by Molina Healthcare.

Our utmost gratitude goes out to our assessment team members, Oconee Food Council members, and volunteers who contributed to this project. We would also like to thank our community members who provided valuable feedback and insight and our community event organizers who brought all of us to the table.

Most importantly, the team extends their appreciation to friends and family who endured the long hours, late-night work sessions, and borderline obsession with the food system. We are grateful for their love and support (and reminders to eat and sleep) throughout this seemingly never-ending project.

For a complete list of our funders, contributors, team members, and volunteers please refer to page 81.

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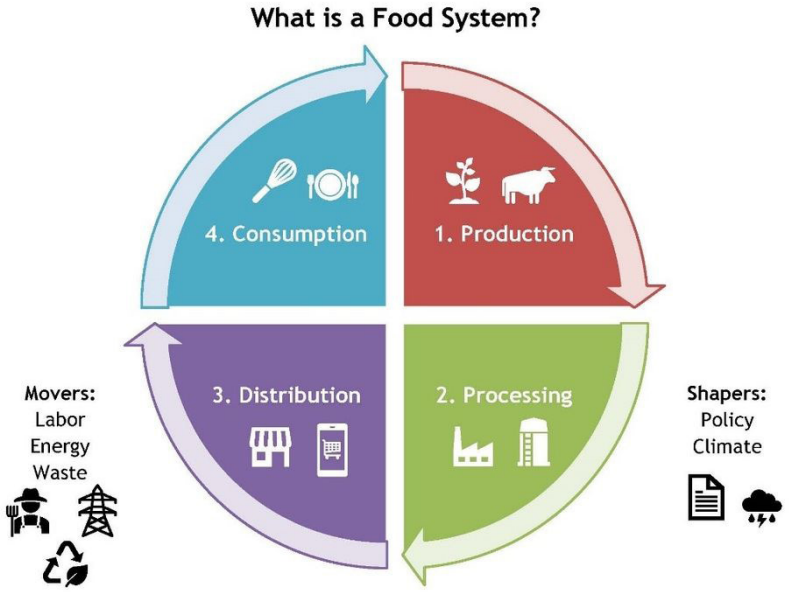
Assessment Introduction

Until recently in human history, food was scarce, limited in variety, and easily perishable. Our dinners were determined not by our preferences, but by what we grew, hunted, harvested, and preserved. Long before European settlers arrived, indigenous peoples of North America cultivated the land to produce crops such as squash, corn, and beans. When the U.S. was founded, agriculture was the primary occupation for both commercial gain and family subsistence. Until the mid-19th century, life for early settlers of present-day Oconee County, South Carolina revolved around growing food and producing basic necessities. Communities centered around mills as a place to grind grain, trade goods, and host public forums. Hagood Mill, built in Pickens County in 1826, serves as a reminder of this heritage.

The food we consume has changed dramatically in the past 150 years. For example, the Homestead Act of 1862 offered 160 acres to any citizen or settler, resulting in millions of acres of new farmland and the introduction of mechanized technology allowed the production of wheat to quadruple in yield from 1837 to 1890. As a result, production far exceeded domestic demand and the surplus was exported to Europe where wheat was needed to feed the growing working class of the Industrial Revolution. In addition, the development of canning and refrigeration meant that meats and other perishable foods could also be exported.

The most dramatic shift in food production occurred after World War II when explosives factories shifted to producing chemical fertilizers. During this "Green Revolution" tractors rendered work animals obsolete, a focus on high yields led to widespread use of pesticides, and monoculture of single crop varieties became the norm. To many of us, a farm conjures thoughts of corn stalks as far as the eye can see. Yet this type of farming is a recent phenomenon that only a few generations ago would be incomprehensible. Today we can drink coffee at breakfast, eat a banana during lunch, and come home to imported cheeses to serve alongside Italian pasta for dinner, all without knowing a thing about the people who grew the beans, picked the fruit, or milled the grains.

Our food system includes all of the people who produce, harvest, store, pack, process, transport, market, consume, and dispose of food. It involves not only farmers, but factory workers, truck drivers, engineers, chefs, food service workers, doctors, sanitation workers, and, by necessity, each of us. It is intertwined and inseparable from the natural environment and human systems such as public health, culture, society, and politics[1]. All of these systems have become increasingly complex as we have transitioned from hunting and gathering to agriculture and finally to industrialization. Human migration, modification of the environment, wars, disease, and technology have resulted in the global food system that we know today.



Although every food system differs in operation due to location, size, and other factors, they all include production, processing, distribution, and consumption. The order of these steps can vary, and some may occur many times throughout the process.

Globalization of the food system has influenced diets and availability of food down to the local level. At the national level, food policy works toward increasing the availability of food, but also accessibility in the form of government programs and standardization of growing, processing, and distribution activities. In the U.S., state governments administer national food policy and programs, often with federal funding, which feed into the local food system by influencing what is available for local consumption and what is accessible through programs such as SNAP, WIC, etc. At the local level, food systems are further influenced by culture and social dynamics, which can affect preferences for certain food items, decisions by farmers on what to produce, and interactions between producers and consumers in a given area.

How do we conduct an assessment of the Oconee County "food system"? The answer is not straightforward. Food systems don't operate strictly at the county level, but at all of these levels simultaneously. This means the ultimate goal is not to assess a single system within county parameters, but to demonstrate how various food system(s) operate and interact. Locally, we have multiple food systems interacting with the regional, state, national, and global food systems. For this reason, an assessment of the food system for Oconee County must take all of these systems into account, which can be simplified by utilizing a basic food system framework. Our team accomplished this by focusing on the county's food system sectors of production, processing, distribution, and consumption of foods for both the local and conventional markets.

The Global Food System & Food Security

Just as a business owner can measure success by looking at revenues and expenses, there are metrics to measure food system success. One key metric is food security, defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as **one's physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.**[2] Food security has four dimensions that must be simultaneously fulfilled:

AVAILABILITY

is the supply of food made available through production and trade.

ACCESS

to food, physically and financially, which may require policy solutions to supplement low incomes or improve market access.

UTILIZATION

is the ability of the body to make use of nutrients in the food.

STABILITY

of the preceding three dimensions for consistent availability, access, and utilization of food.

To those who are food secure, it may seem that our food system is successful. We can buy strawberries in the winter, get chocolate at any gas station, and choose from hundreds of varieties of salad dressing. This is the outcome of modern global food supply chains that transport agricultural products in various states of processing for distribution to communities across the globe.

Yet the food system has issues that affect the majority of people worldwide, in both the developed and developing world, overseas, and in our own communities. Despite the availability of a wide range of foods year-round, food insecurity and malnutrition affect hundreds of millions of people who are financially unable to afford a healthy diet. In 2019, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that **690 million people** in the developing world (1 in 10) and **15 million** in the developed world (roughly 1 in 100) were undernourished, meaning they lacked sufficient consumption of calories required for a normal, active and healthy life. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these numbers in the U.S. and worldwide, resulting in the largest single-year increase in global hunger in several decades in 2020.[3, 4] Empty shelves and long lines at the grocery store served as a sobering reminder that our food does not magically appear out of thin air.

2020

The largest single-year increase in global hunger in several decades.

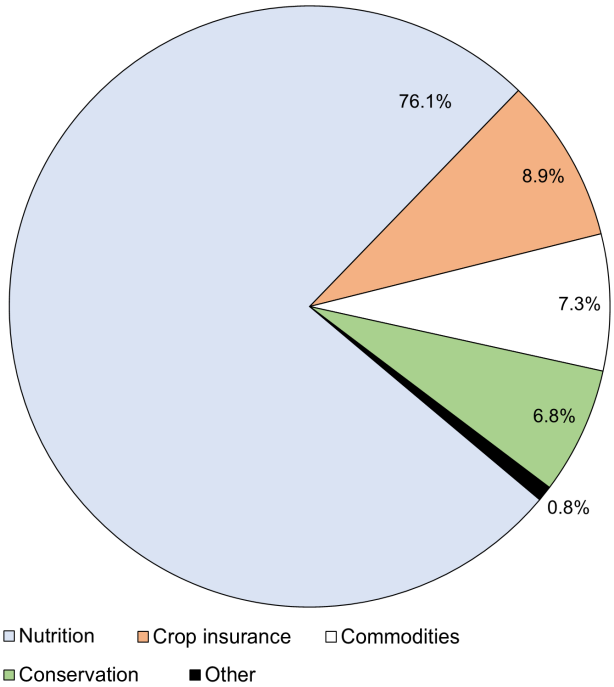
Worldwide, approximately 2 billion adults and 230 million children under age five, are malnourished, which is insufficient consumption of vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) required for healthy tissue and organ function.[5] Foods can also provide calories that lack nutrients, meaning that malnourishment may occur whether someone is undernourished or not. Malnourishment includes those who are underweight, overweight, obese, experiencing diet-related diseases, or otherwise lacking adequate micronutrients. Globally, one in three adults are obese,[6] and this number is growing as diets become more homogenized and include more processed foods that are stripped of nutrients. For most of human history malnourishment was due to lack of food, but today it is the result of overconsumption, human-caused famine, and depletion of soil quality.[7]

Issues with malnourishment are not limited to developing nations but affect the U.S. as well. A 2010 national survey found that roughly **9 in 10 Americans** over age four were deficient in vitamin D, vitamin E, or choline, and virtually all were deficient in potassium. Increasing consumption of nutrient-poor grains is an especially prevalent issue in the US, where consumption is nine times that of India, three times that of China, and twice as much as Europe.[8]

A significant share of the global population experiences food-related issues such as eating too little food, eating too much, or not getting proper nutrients. Understanding our local food system requires some awareness of how we are all inextricably and universally linked through our food. Because the food system is truly global, an improvement anywhere in the system benefits the system as a whole.

The US Food System + Federal Food Policy

Projected outlays under the 2018 Farm Act, 2019–23



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service based on Congressional Budget Office, Direct Spending Effects for the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, December 11, 2018.

National governments all have their own policies related to the production, processing, distribution, and access of food. Federal food policy in the U.S. is intended to secure the food supply, protect the environment, manage food trade relationships, address issues of social welfare and equity, and promote citizen engagement.

Origins of food policy in the U.S. can be traced back to the Homestead Act of 1862, which encouraged settlers to head west and farmland in exchange for ownership. Over 270 million acres of land, much of which was inhabited by indigenous Americans, was granted through the Act to European-descended settlers. Agriculture flourished throughout the early 1900s and U.S. farmers prospered during WWI as they produced record numbers of crops and livestock for export to war-torn countries. By the 1930s, that surplus in agricultural goods had drastically affected the profitability of the crops. This was right around the time of the Great Depression, so the abundance of food and inability of people to buy it was

paradoxical and devastating. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 was passed to cap farm production and stabilize prices with subsidies paid to any farmer who agreed to limit production.[9] Although in 1996 the federal government withdrew its direct involvement in controlling production and stabilizing prices, many of the ideas and practices live on in what became known as the U.S. Farm Bill.

The U.S. Farm Bill is a comprehensive piece of legislation that governs various aspects of agriculture and food policy. Officially known as the Agriculture Improvement Act, it is typically renewed every five years. The Farm Bill contains a wide range of provisions including funding for agricultural research and development, conservation programs, food assistance programs such as SNAP, and crop insurance. It also includes measures related to trade and international food aid, as well as regulations on the labeling and marketing of agricultural products.

Today, the majority of US food policy is implemented by the USDA, which consists of 11 agencies with a variety of regulatory and resourcing roles for U.S. producers and consumers. An overview of these agencies and their primary offerings in terms of programs and services can be found below:

USDA Agency / Acronym	Agency Role / Services	Programs Administered (I/A)
Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)	Provides oversight and supports marketing programs to promote the sale of agricultural products	Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program; Organic Certification Cost Share Program; Specialty Crop Block Grant Program
Agricultural Research Service (ARS)	Conducts scientific research to develop and transfer solutions to agricultural issues	National Agricultural Library (NAL)
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)	Protects agricultural and natural resources from pests and diseases, and enforces laws related to animal welfare	Animal Disease Traceability Program; Plant Protection and Quarantine Program
Economic Research Service (ERS)	Conducts economic research and analysis to inform policy decisions related to agriculture, food, and rural development	Farm Income and Wealth Statistics; Food Environment Atlas
Farm Service Agency (FSA)	Administers farm commodity, credit, and disaster assistance programs to support farmers and ranchers	ARC, LFP, EFRP, CRP, CREP | Agricultural Conservation Easement Program; Farm Loan Program; Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)	Increases food security and reduces hunger in partnership with cooperating organizations by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthy diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence	Child Nutrition Programs (School Lunch, School Breakfast, etc.); SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program); WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)
Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)	Ensures that the nation's meat, poultry and egg products are safe, wholesome, and correctly packaged	Food Safety Education Program; Meat and Poultry Inspection Program

USDA Agency / Acronym	Agency Role / Services	Programs Administered (I/A)
Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)	Promotes U.S. agricultural interests overseas, and works to expand export markets for U.S. agricultural products	Export Credit Guarantee Program; Food for Progress Program; Market Access Program
Forest Service (FS)	Manages and protects national forests and grasslands for multiple uses and benefits, including timber, recreation, and wildlife habitat	Forest Legacy Program; Timber Sale Program
Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)	Regulates the marketing and trading practices of the grain, livestock, and poultry industries, and provides inspection services for grains	Federal Grain Inspection Service; Packers and Stockyards Program; Warehouse Examination Program
National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)	Collects, compiles, and publishes agricultural statistics to provide accurate and timely information on the agricultural sector	Census of Agriculture; Crop Progress and Condition Reports; Livestock Slaughter and Meat Production Reports
National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)	Provides funding and support for research, education, and extension programs to advance agricultural sciences and support rural development	Agriculture and Food Research Initiative; Extension Risk Management Education Program; Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program
National Resources Conservation System (NRCS)	Provides technical assistance and financial incentives to farmers and landowners to conserve soil, water, and other natural resources	EQIP, Conservation Stewardship Program; Wetlands Reserve Program
Risk Management Agency (RMA)	Provides risk management tools and insurance programs to help farmers and ranchers manage their financial risk due to unpredictable weather, market prices, and other factors	Federal Crop Insurance Program ; Livestock Risk Protection Program; Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program

In addition to these agencies, the USDA also has a rural development agency offering assistance programs to improve quality of life, with three additional agencies focusing specifically on utilities, housing, and business cooperatives for rural areas.

A total of fifteen U.S. agencies play a role in trade laws, marketing, and international food aid, but there are a few key agencies involved in domestic food policy and regulation aside from the USDA. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was created in 1906 and is responsible for ensuring the safety and labeling of food products, as well as the regulation of animal feed and medications. In addition, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has been operating since 1946 to protect and promote public health through food safety and nutrition programs and initiatives. Both of the agencies are now housed within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), created in 1953 to focus solely on the protection of health and provision of human services to the American people. Nearly twenty years later, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created and is now responsible for regulating environmental pollutants from agriculture, including the use of pesticides and other chemicals, water and air quality, and processing waste.[10]

South Carolina + The Food System / Food Policy

Government agencies at the state level play a role in promoting agricultural commodities, ensuring food safety and inspections, encouraging soil conservation, and protecting the environment. States handle the implementation and administration of federal programs and policies, but also create their own to regulate and support the production, transportation, processing, and marketing of agricultural products. The specific roles and responsibilities of state agencies in food policy vary from state to state, as each state has its own administrative structure and priorities.

In the state of South Carolina, several departments play roles in food policy and the administration of federal nutrition and agriculture programs.

SCDA

SC DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

promotes and ensures the safety of SC agricultural products; oversees programs related to animal health, plant protection, pesticide use, and agricultural marketing; also responsible for managing The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

SC DHEC

SC DEPT. OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

responsible for protecting public health and the environment through inspections of retail food establishments, regulation of food safety for dairy and manufactured food operations; also administers the WIC program.

SCDOA

SC DEPT. ON AGING

hosts initiatives such as the Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP) to reimburse providers for the costs of congregated and home-delivered meals for seniors.

SCDE

SC DEPT. OF EDUCATION

administers child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

SC DNR

SC DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES

manages and regulates the state's wildlife, fisheries, forests, and other natural resources; oversees conservation and environmental protection programs.

SC DSS

SC DEPT. OF SOCIAL SERVICES

administers nutrition assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP).

HIGHER EDUCATION

South Carolina's two land grant schools, Clemson University and South Carolina State University, provide education, research, and technical assistance and training on agricultural production, plant and animal health, soil management, and marketing. Clemson Public Service and Agriculture (PSA) includes Livestock Poultry Health (LPH), Regulatory Services, the Experimental Forest and SC Botanical Gardens, and Cooperative Extension, which provides research-based information relating to agriculture, environment, food, and health through offices in all 46 counties. Clemson also offers degree programs for agricultural educators and houses the state veterinarian's office, which runs South Carolina's meat and poultry inspection service through LPH.

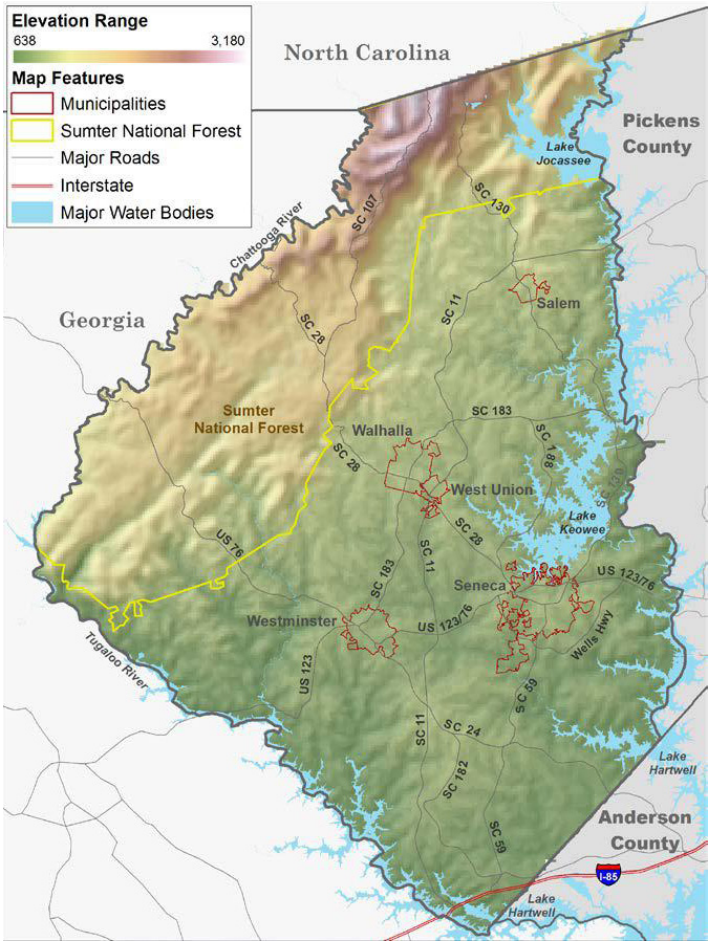
Clemson and the University of South Carolina (UofSC) also provide support for families enrolled in SNAP by facilitating policy, systems, and environmental work in local communities through the SNAP-Ed program. The University of South Carolina does this primarily through the support of local food policy councils and by providing staff support for the SC Food Policy Council.

NGOs

There are multiple NGOs working in South Carolina to support the food system and promote food policy related to agriculture and food access. State associations exist for specific agriculture products such as cattle, sheep, and specialty crop growers to support these producers, while nonprofit organizations such as the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and Palmetto Agribusiness Council focus on specific issues and areas of practice in agriculture, such as organic farming. The SC Association of Farmers Markets and the SC Food Hub Network assist local food systems by strengthening regional food markets. The state also has active chapters of national organizations such as the Farm Bureau and Future Farmers of America, which advocate for policies to support farmers and offer agricultural education opportunities.

The state also has organizations working to improve healthy food access for SC residents, such as FoodShare, a produce box program, and the SC Appleseed Legal Justice Center, which advocates for people and policies dealing with food insecurity. The SC Food Policy Council aims to bring together members across all sectors of the food system to develop and improve food policy in the state.

Oconee County, SC



Oconee County, the only county in South Carolina to border two states, is located in the Blue Ridge and Piedmont geological provinces with elevations ranging from 638 to 3,180 feet above sea level. The two provinces are separated by the Blue Ridge Escarpment, where the mountains rise from the foothills running roughly along the edge of the Sumter National Forest going northeast-southwest across the county. The northern and western parts of the county are mountainous whereas the southern and eastern areas contain rolling ridges and broad, rounded valleys with the county's best agricultural soils.

The county was created in 1868 when the state legislature divided the Pickens District into Pickens and Oconee Counties. In 2021 the population was 78,607.[11] Presently, more than 60% of the residents live in rural Oconee County, although this percentage has been slowly decreasing. In 1990, 75% of the population lived in rural zones. Its five municipalities include Seneca, the largest, with more than 8,000 residents, followed by Walhalla, the county seat, with more than 4,000 residents. Westminster has more than 2,400 residents, and the towns of Salem and West Union have populations of more than 300 and 150, respectively. Each of these municipalities has its own elected council and a mayor.

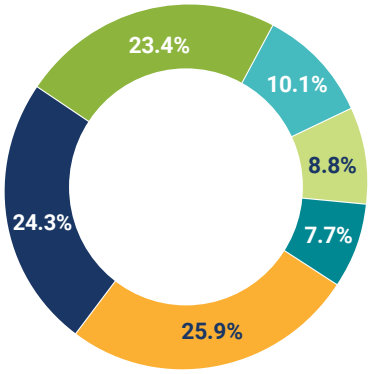
OCONEE COUNTY, SC ACCORDING TO THE US CENSUS[11]

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

53.6% of population age 16+ years in civilian labor force, total, 2017-2021.

Top 5 Industries in Oconee County:

- **24.3%** Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance
- **23.4%** Manufacturing
- **10.1%** Retail Trade
- **8.6%** Construction
- **7.7%** Professional, Scientific, and Management & Administrative and Waste Management Services
- **25.9** Other



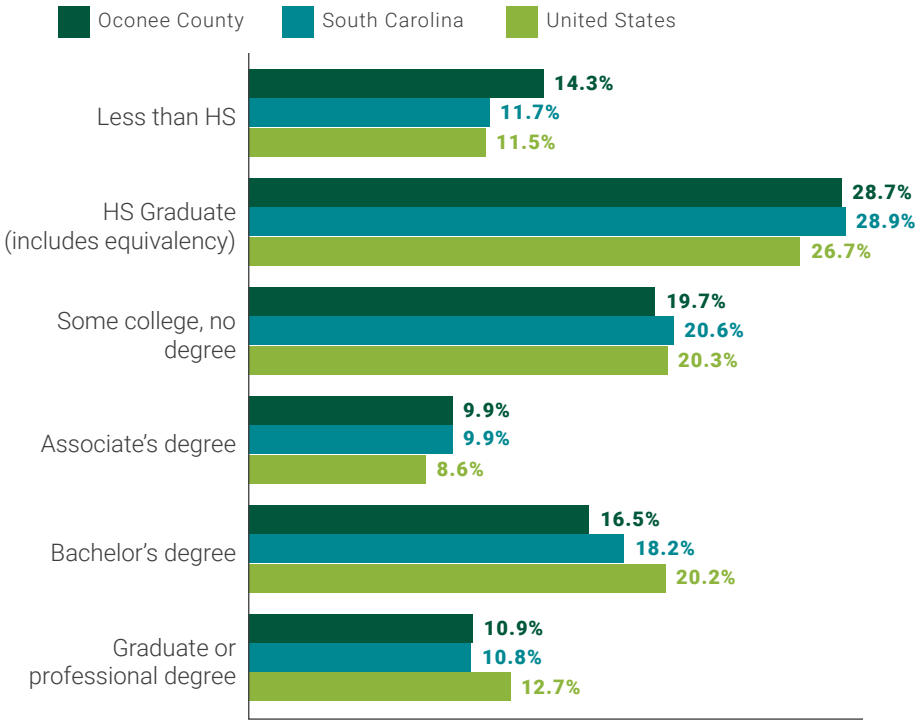
Source: American Community Survey, 2020.
Note: 5-year estimates, among full-time, year-round civilian employed population 16+.

INCOME DATA

$52,842 Median income (2017-2021)

EDUCATION LEVEL

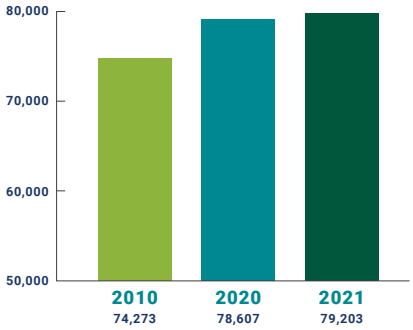
Education Attainment of Population 25 Years and Over:



Source: US Census Bureau: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2020

POPULATION GROWTH

In 2010, the population in Oconee county was 74,273. By 2020, it had increased to 78,607 and in 2021 it increased to 79,203.



DEMOGRAPHICS

Age:

- **19.8%** under 18
- **24.1%** 65+

Race/Ethnicity:

- **89.1%** White / Non-hispanic
- **7.6%** Black / African-American
- **5.9%** Hispanic

Gender:

- **50.6%** Female
- **49.4%** Male

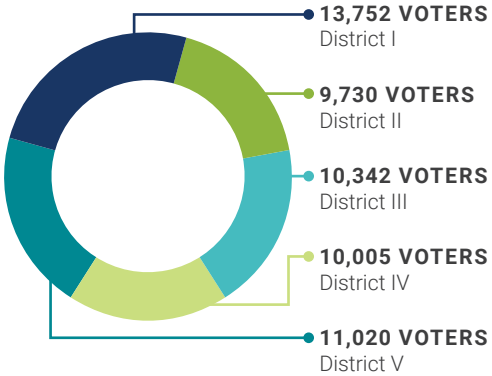
HOUSING STATUS

41,341 Housing units

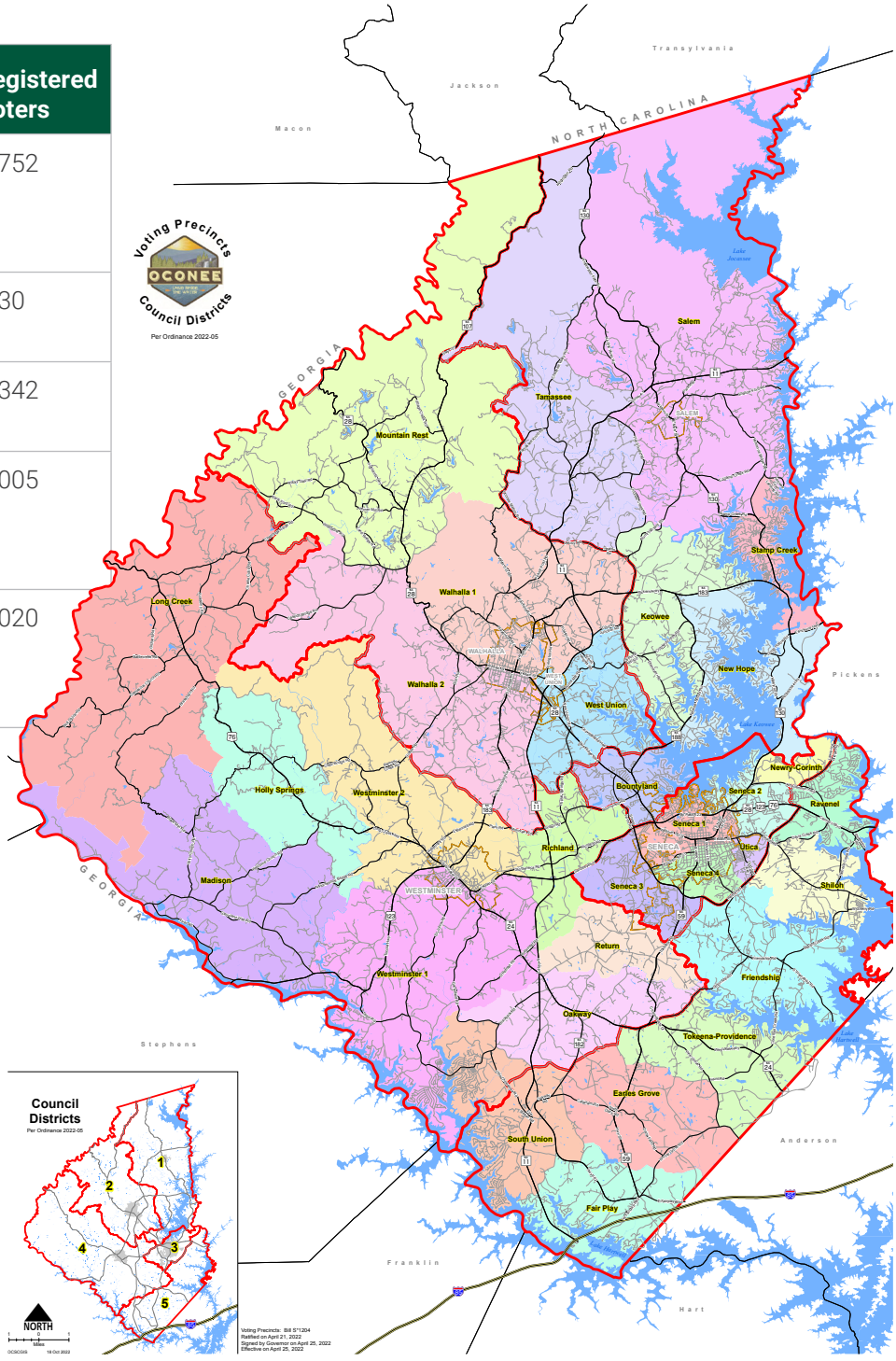
32,440 Households

Oconee County Council has five members elected from five geographical voting districts. The primary roles of the council are to pass a county budget, hire a county administrator, pass local ordinances, and establish boards and commissions. The county administrator serves as the chief supervisor of employees working for departments that provide county services such as planning and zoning, building inspections, emergency services, solid waste, roads and bridges, etc. In 2022, the county had a total 530 employees working across 52 departments.

County District	Cities / Towns / Precincts	Registered Voters
District I	Salem, Bountyland, Keowee, New Hope, Stamp Creek, Tamassee	13,752
District II	Walhalla, Mountain Rest, West Union	9,730
District III	Seneca, Newry-Corinth, Utica	10,342
District IV	Westminster, Holly Springs, Long Creek, Madison, Oakway, Return, Richland	10,005
District V	Fair Play, Earles Grove, Friendship, Ravenel, Shiloh, South Union, Tokenna-Providence	11,020



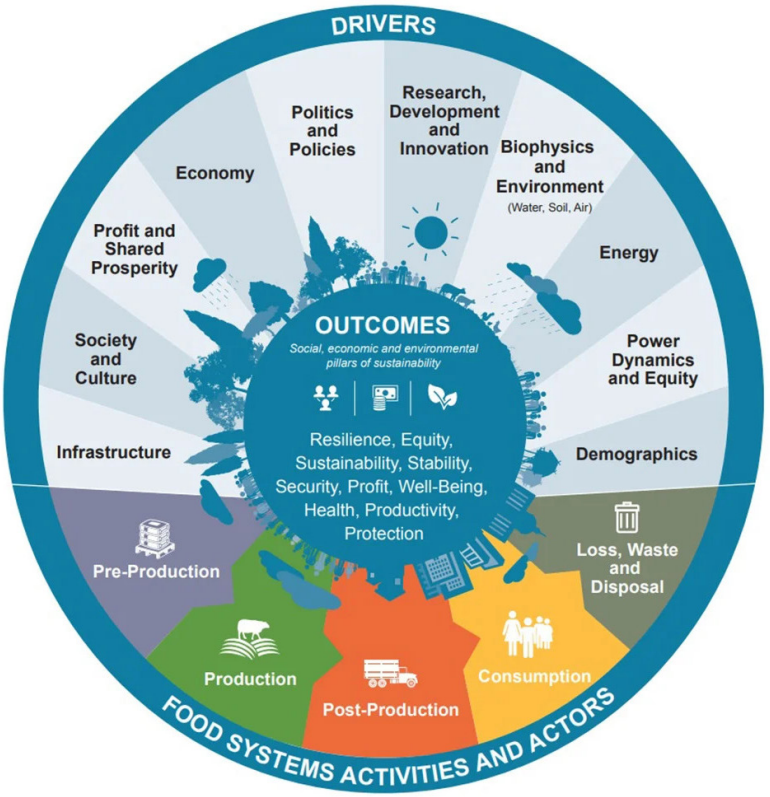
54,849
Total registered voters



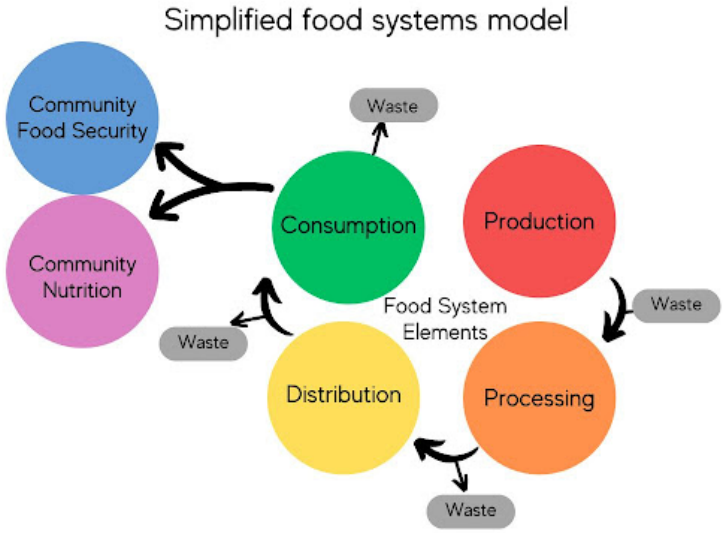
Our Food System Framework

There are various ways of modeling food systems at global, national, or local scales. Many of these present food system activities in light of external influences, or "drivers", such as policy, trade, and climate as well as system outcomes related to the environment, nutrition, and socioeconomic well-being of consumers.[12] As a baseline, most food system models include the key system activities of production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste of food, commonly known as sectors. Traditionally, the food system was represented as a linear set of linkages between supply-demand activities, and the later addition of waste to close the chain into a circle elevated this simple idea to better model links between inputs and outputs. The most recent evolution of these visualizations acknowledge additional nonlinear behavior, in which the food system is more akin to a network than a circular process.[13]

Food System Components, Processes, and Activities



For this assessment, the CFA team modified the simplified food system model, keeping the traditional sectors of production, processing, distribution, and consumption and adding "community food security" and "community nutrition" as outcomes of this food system.



SECTOR DEFINITIONS

Production: Growing, cultivating, and harvesting crops, as well as raising animals for the purpose of producing food

Processing: transforming raw agricultural products into a more desirable form for consumption that is ready for sale

Distribution: moving of food products from the places where they are produced or processed to the locations where they are consumed or purchased

Consumption: the act of eating or drinking food for sustenance and nourishment

In our model, we present waste as a component of each sector and do not provide a separate analysis for two reasons:

1. Limited data on local food waste, and
2. To counter the notion that food waste is primarily an outcome of the consumption sector, as waste comes from all sectors of the food system.

Food waste in these sectors can occur due to over-planting or failure to harvest total crop, inefficient processing practices, overstocking or inappropriate packaging or storage during distribution, and poor consumer knowledge in storage or preparation of foods.[14]

For the purposes of this assessment, we explore two primary outcomes of the food system sector processes:

community food security and **community nutrition**.

Community food security is a comprehensive approach that considers the complex and interrelated factors that affect food availability, accessibility, and utilization. This approach recognizes the importance of community participation, local knowledge, and cultural diversity in achieving food security goals.

Community nutrition refers to the promotion of good health and prevention of chronic diseases through the development and implementation of policies, programs, and solutions that target the food and nutrition needs of a community.

Assessment Methodology

The 2022 OCFSA began in Fall 2021 by a team working to develop a county food policy council with funding from the University of SC SNAP-Ed. The initial focus for this exploratory research was compiling and reviewing secondary data from governmental and non-governmental sources, including the USDA, SC DHEC, and Feeding America, to understand current trends in agriculture, food access, and health. Over time, the focus of the research shifted towards the institutions themselves as the team began systematically identifying federal and state agencies with regulatory and resourcing roles in the food system. Learning the basics about these key institutions in food policy, along with relevant federal, state, and local history, provided a better contextual understanding of community feedback received through the Oconee Food Summit (OFS) events held over 2020-22. These grassroots-organized forums on the local food system set the stage for the initiative to establish a food council with the engagement of 150+ stakeholders and community members. The lead assessors opted to use the voices and perspectives of community members engaged through the events and follow-up work as the foundation of the assessment, and data reviewed included presentations, surveys, and breakout sessions from these earlier events. This was complemented by data collected through a Spring 2022 series of community food gatherings (CFGs) organized by the Oconee Food Council (OFC) with the support of the Oconee Cultivation Project, in which community representatives were invited to share a meal and discuss the challenges and possible solutions for their food system. The following is an overview of the combined events and the primary materials used, with more information to be found on the OFC website:

Event Title, Type, and Date / Location	Description	Materials Used for Assessment
2020 Oconee Food Summit February 28, 2020 Trinity Baptist Church Seneca, SC	Day-long conference with morning presentation and panel organized to discuss local food system issues and potential solutions. Approx. 120 attendees.	• Observational notes from planning meetings • Breakout session results *Cited in text as 2020 OFS*
2021 OFS: Regroup Assembly March 26 & 27, 2021 Virtual Event Zoom	A virtual, two-session assembly to reconvene the 2020 OFS with a focus on the local food system response to COVID and the April 2020 tornado. Attendees identified gaps and needs for a thriving food system Approx. 80 attendees.	• Oconee Food Frontline Report • (OFFR) - presentation • Pre-event questionnaires for OFFR presenters • Notes from virtual breakout session facilitators *Cited in text as 2021 OFS: RA; OFFR Questionnaires; OFFR Presentation*
2021 Oconee Food Sovereignty Convening June 16, 2021 Chattooga Belle Farm Long Creek, SC	Full-day event for food movement leaders to learn local agricultural / food history and review status of current organizing efforts. Attendees collaborated on a farm-to-table breakfast, lunch, and networking happy hour. Approx. 40 attendees.	*No specific materials from this event were referenced in the assessment, but the event laid the foundation for local historical research that informed the assessment process and provided significant insights that contributed to our findings.*
Apple Grower Dinner Jun 27, 2021 Long Creek Community Club Long Creek, SC	Private dinner held for growers of the seven remaining apple orchards in the county to hear their experiences and thoughts about the future of the industry. 14 attendees.	• Notes from group discussion *Cited in text as 2021 Grower Dinner*

Event Title, Type, and Date / Location	Description	Materials Used for Assessment
2021 OFS Holiday Social December 3, 2021 313 Cafe Seneca, SC	Networking event held at 313 Cafe to close out the year and showcase some of Oconee's traditional and culturally diverse holiday fare in partnership with the Oconee History Museum. Approx. 50 attendees.	• Attendee suggestions on priorities for the OFC in 2022 *Cited in text as 2021 OFS Holiday Social*
2022 Oconee (CFGs) March - June 2022	Community events held in six areas of the county to identify the food system needs and assets of local communities. 1. What does your current food system look like in your community? 2. What barriers exist when it comes to accessing food in your community? 3. What solutions do you want to see to improve food access in your community?	• Questionnaires distributed to attendees to investigate current views of the food system • Breakout sessions to discuss food system needs, assets, and concerns *Cited in text as 2022 [Community] CFG; (e.g. 2022 Salem CFG)*
2022 Oconee Food Sovereignty Convening June 8, 2022 Tamassee DAR School Salem, SC	Full-day event for OFC supporters that included morning presentations on local ag / food history, a panel on farmland preservation, and afternoon breakout sessions on local production, processing, and distribution of seven specific food groups (meat, poultry, seasonal produce, fruit, dairy, staple crops, and value-added products (VAPs)) and policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) strategies for health, food access, and food education.	• Pre-event questionnaires for producers and distributors on the seven Local Food Resilience Planning (LFRP) food group areas (to inform breakout discussions) • Breakout session results for LFRP and PSE strategy groups *Cited in text as 2022 OFSC; LFRP Response*

In addition to the data presented from various sources and collected through OFS events, this assessment includes input from local food system stakeholders that were engaged throughout the processes of developing the Oconee Food Council. The assessment team spoke with members of the community who were knowledgeable about both the recent history of the food system and how the county has developed generally, which informed how we approached our research of the food system. Also included is information garnered from the review of public documents, minutes, and recordings from meetings of the Oconee County Council, Oconee County Agricultural Advisory Board, and Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture.

2

Agricultural Production

The story of any food system begins with agriculture, which refers to the art and science of cultivating soil, growing crops, and raising livestock. It is not only responsible for the production of the food we eat, but the clothes we wear, the paper products we use, and many other naturally derived products we use on a daily basis. Food-producing agriculture consists mainly of producers, traditionally known as "farmers", individuals, or entities directly engaged in the production of agricultural products, including forestry products, hydroponics, nursery stock, or aquaculture, in addition to crops and livestock.[15]

Oconee has a long heritage of agriculture and this rural character remains central to the identity of the county. Agriculture continues to lead as a top-performing industry for the county and also for the state. Of the 290,000 acres that comprise the county (excluding Sumter National Forest), 66% are classified as agricultural land.

Hundreds of farms produce food for the local community and for the wider population. This section provides an overview of agricultural food production, taking into account direct experiences and insights from people who are closely tied to the local agriculture system.

These include:

- farmers
- growers
- educators
- suppliers
- researchers
- and others

Key topics include:

- farmland preservation
- meat processing needs
- farm succession
- agricultural education
- public awareness
- consumer education

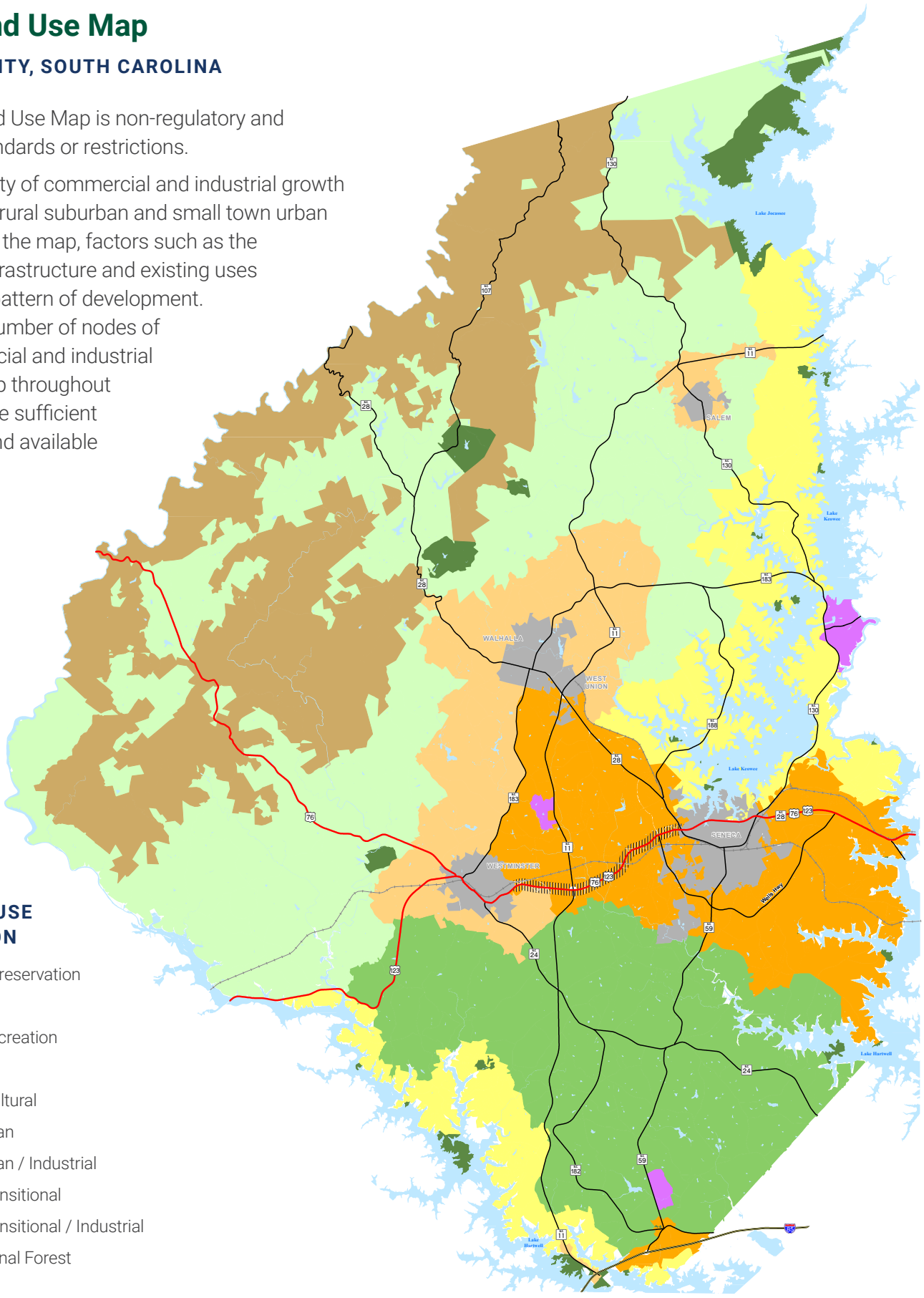
Our findings indicate that farmers in Oconee County are encountering many of the same challenges found across the U.S., but the future of agriculture in the county also faces challenges unique to the local farming community.

Future Land Use Map

OCONEE COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

This Future Land Use Map is non-regulatory and imposes no standards or restrictions.

While the majority of commercial and industrial growth will occur in the rural suburban and small town urban areas shown on the map, factors such as the availability of infrastructure and existing uses will impact the pattern of development. Additionally, a number of nodes of limited commercial and industrial uses will develop throughout the county where sufficient infrastructure and available lands allow.



FUTURE LAND USE CLASSIFICATION

- Agricultural Preservation
- Industrial
- Parks and Recreation
- Residential
- Rural / Agricultural
- Rural Suburban
- Rural Suburban / Industrial
- Suburban Transitional
- Suburban Transitional / Industrial
- Sumter National Forest

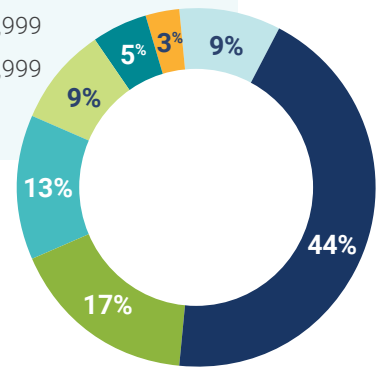
Overview, Trends, and Obstacles

For an introduction to agriculture in Oconee County, a great place to start is with the county's own Comprehensive Plan ("the plan"), which is a state-mandated document updated every ten years to guide planning with long-term goals. South Carolina counties are required to include at least nine elements of the plan on select areas including population, housing, natural resources, and the economy.[16] The current 2020 Oconee County Comprehensive Plan is unique in that it contains an Agricultural Element, the first of its kind in the state. This portion of the comprehensive plan uses data from a variety of sources to provide information on farms and producer demographics, agricultural lands and prime soils, shifts in industry production, and threats to farmland.

Much of the data in the 2020 Agricultural Element comes from the 2017 USDA Agricultural Census ("the census"), which is conducted every five years and serves as an approximate inventory of farms and ranches in the U.S. While producers are required by federal law to participate in the census, it is not enforced and the information provided is self-reported.[17] Therefore, while this federal-level data provides an overview of agriculture at the county level, the figures should be considered estimates. In 2017, the census identified **815** farms and a total of **1,343** producers in Oconee County. "Farms" are identified by the USDA as any property producing and selling $1,000 worth of products over a one-year period.[18] This includes operations such as horse farms, haylage, and Christmas tree farms. Keeping this in mind, the following data provides general farm characteristics and producer information for the county:

FARMS BY VALUE OF SALES

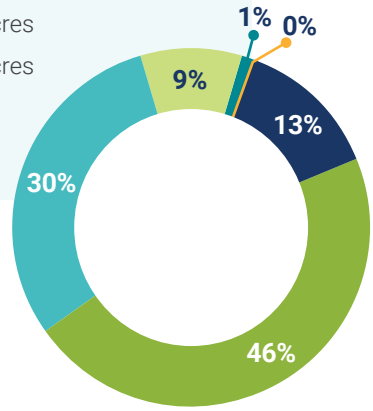
- **361 (44%):** Less than $2,500
- **135 (17%):** $2,500 - $4,999
- **104 (13%):** $5,000 - $9,999
- **73 (9%):** $10,000 - $24,999
- **39 (5%):** $25,000 - $49,999
- **26 (3%):** $50,000 - $99,999
- **77 (9%):** $100,000+



Caption: USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture data[18]

FARMS BY SIZE (ACREAGE)

- **102 (13%):** 1 - 9 acres
- **378 (46%):** 10 - 49 acres
- **248 (30%):** 50 - 179 acres
- **74 (9%):** 180 - 499 acres
- **11 (1%):** 500 - 999 acres
- **2 (0%):** 1,000+ acres



19%
Of farms hiring farm labor

27
Farms in the country operated by a hired manager

650
Farms operated by full owners

143
Farms operated by part owners *(farm on some owned and some leased land)*

22
Farms operated by tenants *(only farm on leased land)*

356
Farms with 1 producer

408
Farms with 2 producers

33
Farms with 3 producers

14
Farms with 4 producers

4
Farms with 5 or more producers

PRODUCER DEMOGRAPHICS

Age:

- **123** under 35
- **821** 35 - 64
- **399** 65+

Race/Ethnicity:

- **1,301** White/Non-hispanic
- **25** Black/African-American
- **6** American Indian/Alaska Native
- **4** Asian
- **1** Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- **6** More than one race

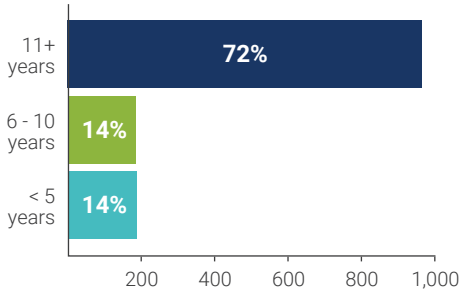
Gender:

- **854** Male
- **489** Female

28%
(377)
New and Beginning Farmers

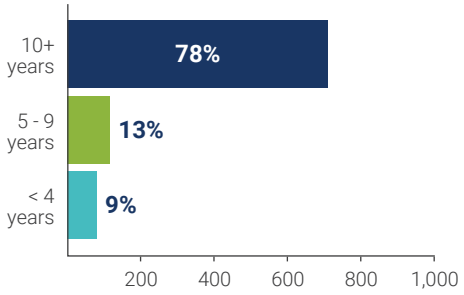
Years operating any farm:
2017

In 2017, there were **966** farms operating for more than 11 years, **187** farms operating for 6-10 years, and **190** farms operating for 5 years or less.



Years operating any farm:
2012

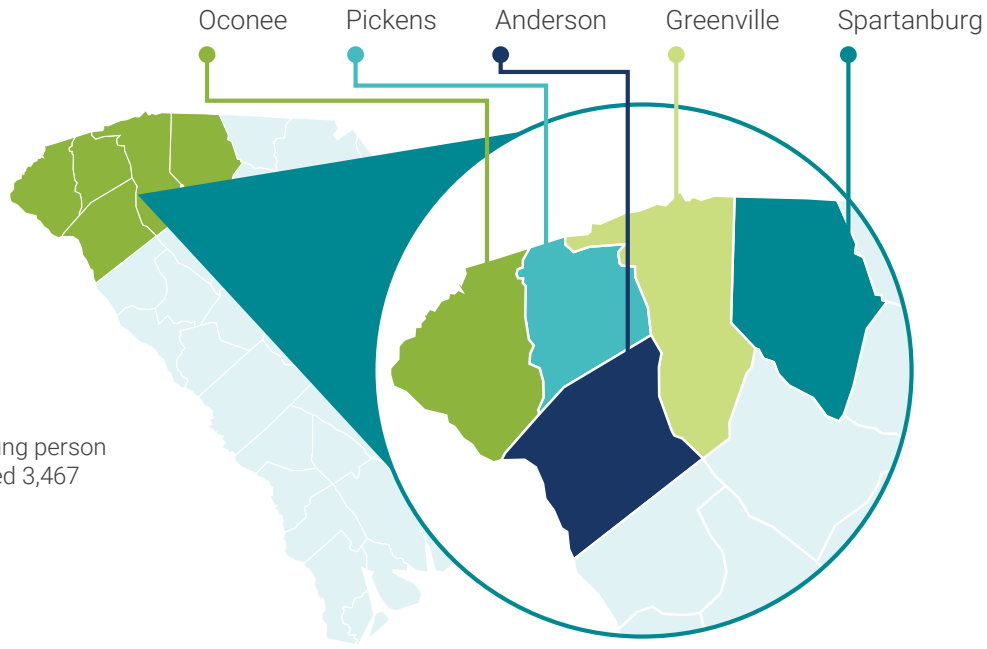
In 2012, there were **689** farms operating for more than 10 years, **114** farms operating for 5-9 years, and **81** farms operating for 4 years or less.



Young Producers:

The Upstate has most of SC's young producers aged 35 and below.

1. Anderson: **227** producers
2. Spartanburg: **211** producers
3. Oconee: **146** producers
4. Greenville: **144** producers
5. Pickens: **126** producers



Young Principal Producers:

87 farms in Oconee County have a young person as a principal producer with a combined 3,467 acres (average 40 acres each).

1. Anderson: **147** producers
2. Spartanburg: **120** producers
3. Greenville: **112** producers
4. Oconee: **107** producers

In terms of food production in Oconee County, some of the most valuable information provided by the census is the reported market value of products sold by industry, which fall within two broad categories: "Crops" and "Livestock, Poultry, and Products". Today, Oconee County's production of animal products such as poultry and cattle far outweighs its crop production, despite it being one of the largest apple-producing areas of the U.S. in the 1960s.

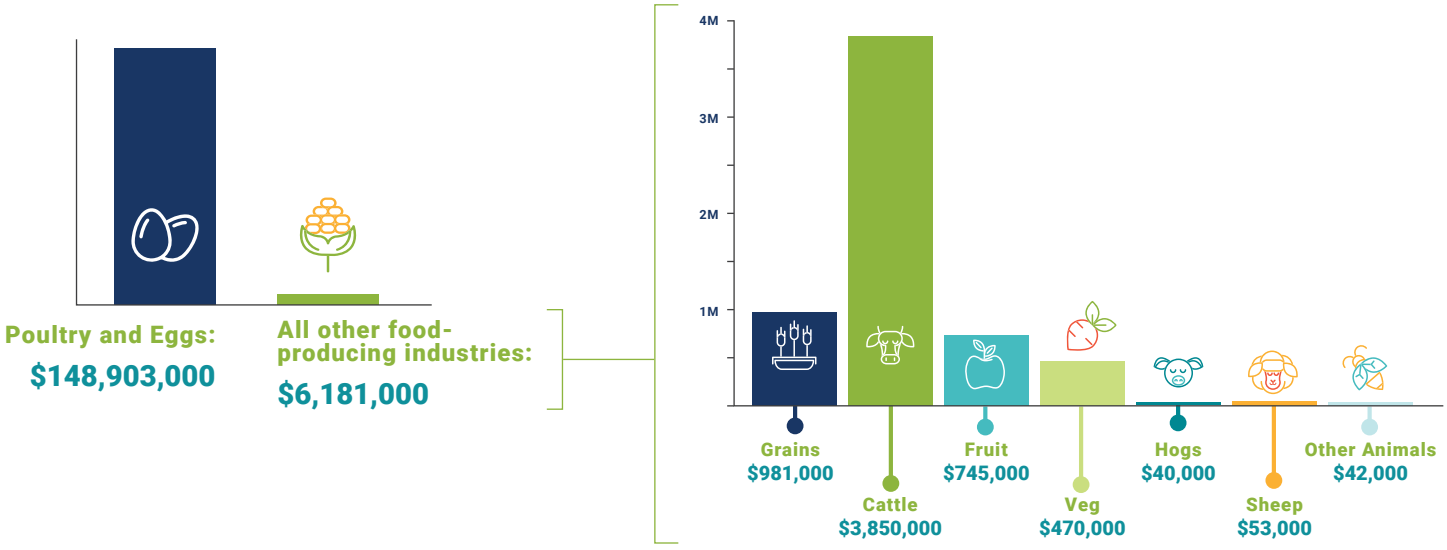
CROP VS. ANIMAL PRODUCTION BY SALES, 1997-2017[18]

Year	Animal & Products	Crops
2007	125,758,000	3,077,000
2012	1.115,305,000	6,081,000
2017	154,840,000	4,582,000

**These figures include totals for animal products and crops, including non-food products such as wool, horses, floriculture, hay, etc.*

In 2017, Oconee County was not only the highest poultry-producing county in the state, but its **$149 million** in sales of poultry alone surpassed the total agricultural sales across all other products. Poultry and eggs made up **93%** of all agricultural product sales, including **95%** of all food sales and **96%** of all animal product sales.[18] Because there were only two farms in the county producing eggs as commodities under production contracts, the sales figures for these operations were not provided. The majority of the county's poultry production is integrated, meaning farmers with poultry operations are generally contracted with a poultry processing company that oversees production and processing of the products. These operations primarily produce broiler chickens, which are selectively bred to produce a high meat yield in a short amount of time. In this arrangement, the poultry company maintains ownership of the birds but delivers them to a producer who is tasked with raising them from hatchlings to their full-grown size at 6-8 weeks. The producer is responsible for the barn and labor to raise the birds, meeting specific requirements of the company they are contracted with.[19] The top poultry companies operating in the county are Fieldale (selling under the brand name Springer Mountain Farms), Columbia, Pilgrim's, and Perdue Farms. Oconee does have some small-scale pastured poultry production, but the majority of these animals are processed on-farm and sold locally.

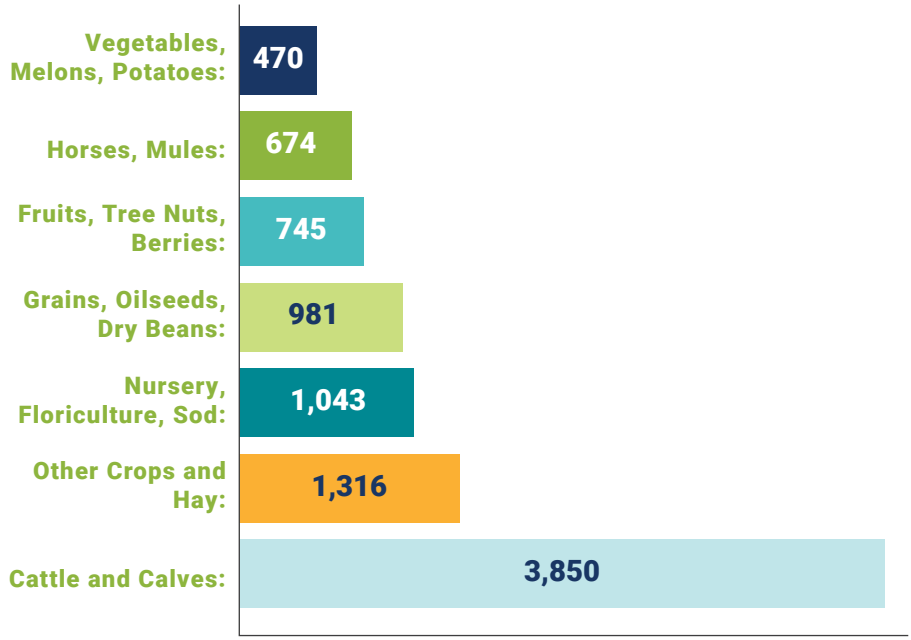
SALES OF POULTRY AND EGGS VS. OTHER FOOD-PRODUCING AGRICULTURE[18]



Footnote: *The food-producing operations excluding poultry and eggs include sheep and goat, which do sell some non-food fiber products. Also, the USDA does not disclose sales for aquaculture operations because of their limited number. Since honey operations and aquaculture sales were otherwise not included, we opted to include "other animals and animal products" despite being too limited in time to deduce the type of operations and determine what portion of these were food vs. non-food producing.*

MAIN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold ($1,000), Excluding Poultry and Eggs, 2017

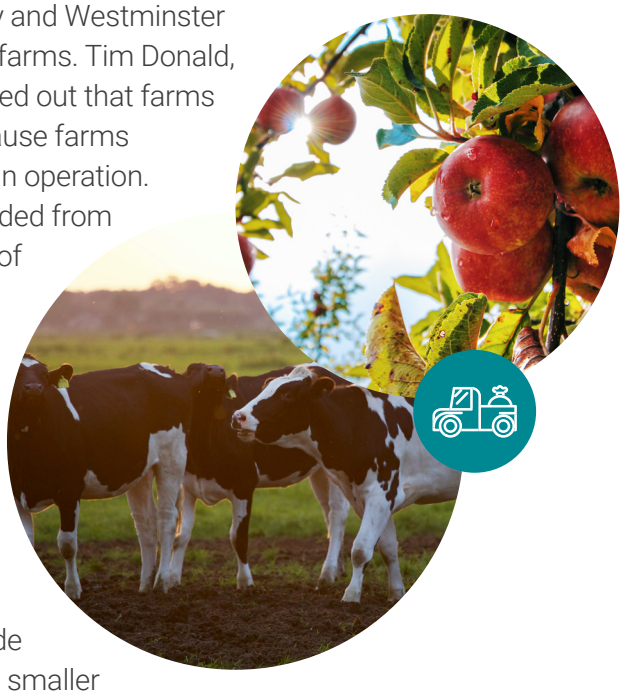


In 2017, the market value of the main agricultural products sold (excluding poultry and eggs) was $470,000 for vegetables, melons and potatoes; $674,000 for horses and mules; $745,000 for fruits, tree nuts and berries; $981,000 for grains, oilseeds and dry beans; $1,043,000 for nursery, floriculture and sod; $1,316,000 for other crops and hay; and $3,850,000 for cattle and calves.

After poultry, cattle and calves were the county's second-largest agricultural industry. Most conventional cattle farms in the county are cow-calf operations, which means they grow calves up to a certain weight and then sell them at a livestock auction to be finished out of state. Cattle farms make up the majority of agricultural operations in the county by far, totaling approximately **300 farms**, although half of the county's 815 farms reported having at least some cattle in 2017.[18]

Oconee's main crop products fall into the USDA groups of "grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dried peas", "fruits, tree nuts, berries", and "vegetables, melons, potatoes". In the first category, the county's primary products by acreage in 2017 were soybeans, wheat, and corn, with smaller amounts of oats, barley, rye, sorghum, and sunflower seed production. Fruit and nut revenue totaled $745,000, representing about **9%** of non-poultry food production from **36** fruit and tree nut (i.e. pecan) farming operations. Although well-known for its apples, Oconee's orchards are rapidly declining in production, with only **133 acres in 2017** compared to **250 acres in 2012**. Lastly, in the vegetable and melon category, Oconee had 58 operations in 2017 producing primarily tomatoes, sweet corn, summer squash, snap beans, watermelons, and okra, all harvested for the "fresh market" and not for further processing. The remaining food-producing farms in the county included approximately 49 sheep and goat farms, 30 pig and hog farms, dairy cow operations, and two aquaculture operations, the latter of which Oconee ranked **2nd in the state** in sales.[18]

Oconee County consists of farms that range in size from less than one acre to 1000 acres. Most of the farming operations of the top agricultural products mentioned above are in commercial production, often from multigenerational family farms that have grown into sizable operations. The majority of these larger farms are located in the southern part of the county in the Fair Play, but Oakway and Westminster are also communities with a significant number of multigenerational farms. Tim Donald, a local farmer and Piedmont District VP of the SC Farm Bureau, pointed out that farms and farming equipment have increased in size over the decades because farms have had to produce greater yields in order to make a profit and stay in operation. While their operations may be modernized, these farmers are descended from the county's original farming communities and make up the majority of members in local chapters of agricultural organizations such as the Farm Bureau and Cattlemen's Association.



While contracted poultry growers and cattle farmers produce the majority of food products that are raised and sold from the county, there are a growing number of small farms offering a diversity of products locally. These farms vary widely in the type and number of products that they produce, such as the first certified organic beef provider in SC (Gibson Farms), and a farm two miles away offering honey, chicken, turkey, blueberries, paw paw, herbs, and a wide selection of bath and body products (Busy Bee Acres). Many of these smaller operations specialize in a handful of products such as pastured pork or poultry, grass-fed beef, seasonal produce, eggs, or value-added products, and the majority sell direct-to-consumer through farm stands, local farmers' markets, or the Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE), an online farmers' market serving communities in Pickens, Anderson, and Oconee counties. Although data on smaller farms in the area is harder to come by, there is evidence that the number of farms aiming to produce for the local community is growing. In an exchange with a member of our team, the local district manager of the Oconee County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) observed that more people aimed to do farming on a smaller scale and said many coming to his office were seeking certification for roadside stands.

Although farms across Oconee County vary in their production practices, products, size, and the issues they face, our assessment found that there are some concerns shared by a majority of producers, despite the diversity of farm characteristics. In June 2021, the Oconee Food Summit organizers hosted a dinner for the growers of the county's remaining apple orchards, which offered a unique opportunity to hear from producers of a single industry that had witnessed many of the changes in agriculture over the decades. These exchanges, compared with feedback from producers of other industries, offered insight into the areas where issues for the local farming community intersect across farm scale and type. Concerns about the viability of agriculture in the county and the difficult situation facing future farmers echoed what was heard from many others in the agricultural community.

Finding and maintaining the appropriate size for a farming operation was a topic raised at the apple grower event and in numerous discussions with local farmers. **"You can deal with controls that hamper you from packing and shipping if you stay small, but if you're going to do all the things you need to do you need to be BIG."** (2021 Grower Dinner) As a farm grows, regulations and requirements across agencies at various levels of government must be met for processing, packing, shipping, and distributing products. Meeting the

demands of institutional and wholesale customers for quantity, consistency, and pricing are difficult for smaller scale producers, as additional certifications are generally required. For example, the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification for fresh vegetables and produce can open up new market opportunities, but requires an application, fees, and multiple USDA audits,[20] which can outweigh the benefits for smaller farms. The challenge of meeting regulations is exacerbated by a lack of access to local infrastructure such as proper cold storage, DHEC certified kitchens, and processing facilities for farmers looking to grow their operation, but lack the capital to do so independently. Some small farms will look to larger operations to gauge a plan for growth based on what others have done, as one produce farmer in Westminster explained: "A lot of how we proceed further is by looking at larger operations and seeing how they do it, asking 'How did they get there?' and 'How do we get from here to there?'".[21] All expanding operations face their own set of problems. One local farmer pointed out that there was demand for his organic products in larger markets, but distributing to them require doubling his production and getting the new parts of his operation certified.[22] In addition, a local dairy producer lamented increased trucking costs that have driven smaller producers out of the market (LFRP Questionnaire, Local Dairy Producer).

> **Small scale production is difficult because of the equipment and costs required [to produce] the desired product by the consumer. For example, the cost of installation of 1 acre of high-density orchard planting is approximately $10,000.**
>
> **— LFRP RESPONSE, CLEMSON EXT. AGENT- KERRIE ROACH**

Whether expanding or maintaining the size of their operation, farmers across the board feel the impacts of inflation and the rising cost of inputs. **"I'm buying seed out 8-12 months in advance. Prices have skyrocketed! Soil, seed, inputs, fuel, labor."** (LFRP Response, Greenfield Organic Farms). In some cases, these costs might force a farm to switch their products entirely. A Fair Play farm, for example, cited the rising cost of chemicals, fuel, and seeds explaining their choice to abandon row cropping for the better profit margin on cattle farming. These financial struggles also apply to finding and affording farm labor. One local grower pointed out the obvious — it's hard work, but paying for quality help is not always in the budget. **"You want to treat them right and fairly but you just can't have a lot [of help] because you're trying to make whatever you can for yourself to run things".**[23]

With rising input costs and additional barriers to entry, including access to financial capital, rising costs of land, knowledge and skills to manage a business, knowledge of regulations, operation infrastructure and costs, etc., many farmers are faced with a balancing act that gives few the opportunity to farm as their sole occupation.[24] Of the 1,343 Oconee producers who participated in the census, 848 (63%) listed their primary occupation as one other than farming and approximately two-thirds of this group work a full-time job (at least 200 days or more in a year).[18] Even among farms with a full-time producer, most farming families in the U.S. today have at least one member hold a job off the farm. In Oconee, many farms have one partner as the primary operator on the farm while their spouse holds a job off the farm to provide a stable income and benefits. As one grower said: **"any farmer doing well in the business likely has a wife that's got a good paying job off the farm"** (2021 Grower Dinner). Others, especially first generation farmers, are "farming nights and weekends" while holding full-time employment to stay afloat, according to OFC member and local farmer, Natalie Arnold.

Many farms today look to diversification to help sustain their operation and meet financial needs. "Diversification" refers to the products they cultivate or raise, or to the farming activities they engage in (such as classes or lessons). One increasingly popular avenue is agritourism, or promoting farms through events, tours, or exhibits of some kind. In 2017, **11 farms** in Oconee County reported a combined income of **$56K** directly from agritourism and other recreational services, up from 5 farms in the 2012 census.[18] Many areas have incentive programs and promotions from local or state governments to promote agritourism, such as South Carolina's Agritourism Passport Program, which encourages the public to visit rural areas and learn about agriculture from participating farms. In the past 5-10 years, organizations such as Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and Clemson Extension have also held regional farm tours that included farms in Oconee County, although none of the tours have become regularly scheduled events.

In addition to increased agritourism offerings, the county has multiple events and attractions highlighting the agricultural industries and heritage of the county. The oldest of these is the South Carolina Apple Festival, which began in 1961 and celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2022 (the festival was not held in 2021 due to COVID). The largest is the SC Foothills Heritage Fair, which debuted in 2009 as a return to the old-time county fair experience organized by a group of young farmers, agricultural educators, and other leaders in the farming community to revive this tradition. Local museums also help to preserve the county's long history and legacy of agriculture, including the Oconee History Museum, the Bart Garrison Agricultural Museum of SC, and the recently opened Foothills Farmstead, a living-history working farm that depicts the lives of homesteaders in the early 1900s.

Despite agritourism, festivals, fairs, and dinners, many farmers feel there remains a lack of awareness among the general public as to where their food comes from, the hard work required to produce that food, and the obstacles local producers face in a rapidly developing county. While speaking with our team, farmers expressed a desire for support from the local community to raise awareness about the importance of agriculture to the county's past and future. One grower said what would be helpful is if citizens in Oconee and surrounding counties were made aware that there were apples here, saying the growers "need friends somewhere" that will educate the community about them (2021 Apple Grower Dinner). Many farms struggle to stay afloat, while those maintaining older farming operations are concerned about the future trajectory of development in the county and how it could affect their way of life. The SWCD manager shared that multigenerational farmers who are invested in the land and lifestyle are seeing the county's prime farmland

and the "sanctity" of their profession being chipped away. "They see it in neighboring counties: Farmland turned into neighborhoods, neighborhoods complaining about the sound and smell, and the complaints begin…" Meanwhile, the farmers in Oconee get good deals on farming equipment from those in surrounding counties that couldn't continue because of the challenges.

Local Support for Agriculture

Another great source of information and support for agriculture is the Oconee County Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB), which was formed by the county council in 2016 to advise the council on supporting and developing the industry. Like many of the county boards and commissions, the AAB consists of representatives from each of the five voting districts who are nominated by their council representative and are then appointed by the council. There are also two at-large seats and an ex-officio, non-voting seat reserved for a Clemson Extension agent, for a total of eight seats.

The AAB is intended to serve as a public forum for agriculture in the county and draws support and advice from various associations, advocacy organizations, and federal and state agencies that provide crucial programs and services to our local farmers. The following graphic provides an overview of a few key agencies and organizations working to support farmers in Oconee County at the federal, state, and local levels:

FARM SERVICE AGENCY (FSA)

USDA Agency

- Offers programs for farm insurance, disaster assistance, conservation, marketing support
- Farmers elect county committee of 5 members to oversee administration of programs

NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

USDA Agency

- Assists farmers and ranchers with planning and financial assistance to develop or enhance farmland conservation practices
- Programs include funding for: on-farm energy, watering facilities, fencing out streams, animal waste management, and conservation easements

CLEMSON EXTENSION

Clemson Public Service Activities (PSA)

- Uses research conducted by Clemson University to inform and educate the public and local producers through programming and workshops
- Includes agents for horticulture, livestock and forages, forestry, rural health and nutrition, 4-H, food systems and safety
- Offers producers assistance with improving production practices as well as General Accounting Practices (certifications, navigating paperwork/ applications), and education on safety requirements

LOCAL CHAPTERS OF FEDERAL / STATE ORGANIZATIONS

FARM BUREAU

- County chapter of the national lobbying group / insurance network with affiliates in all 50 states
- Works closely with state FB to inform state agricultural policy
- Promotes educational opportunities in agriculture for youth in the county through outreach and scholarships

BEEKEEPER'S ASSOCIATION

- Oconee chapter is one of 23 SC Beekeepers Association chapters, established in 1921
- Provides education and information for both aspiring and experienced beekeepers
- Cooperative system for buying/selling beekeeping supplies

FARM CENTER

- Event venue / current fairgrounds with future plans for covered arena, commercial kitchen
- Developing as "Phase III" of Foothills Heritage Fair and Foothills Farmers Market initiatives
- Received support from County Council to secure 57 acres in 2019

CATTLEMAN'S ASSOCIATION

- County association with leadership representation on SC Cattlemen's Association
- 70 members as of 2022 (down from 110+ in 2018)
- Primarily offers educational opportunities to support those in the cattle industry

OCONEE SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

- Prioritizes protection of farmland / prime soils in the county through conservation easements
- Funding from USDA through ACEP / ALE, with non-governmental funding match (usually through SC and Oconee Conservation Banks)
- Holds annual Celebration of Agriculture banquet with awards ceremony for local farmers

Priority issues raised among members of the AAB and by participants in their 2018 Farmer and Rancher Listening Sessions include communication within the agricultural community and coordination of the many groups providing services and resources to local farms. The need for improved communication goes hand-in-hand with agricultural outreach and efforts to raise public awareness of the local farming community, which requires coordination and collaboration with farmers and support organizations. Various proposals to improve communication and boost awareness have been made in the six years since the AAB was formed. These include a website, newsletter, slogan/logo, and road signs to promote the economic impact of agriculture in the county. Unfortunately, few of these initiatives gained traction as a result of the AAB being in a limited advisory role and lacking funding or support from the county council to act. This left the AAB in the challenging position of highlighting issues and putting forth solutions with little support for implementation by the county, which led the AAB to recommend that the county add a staff position to coordinate agricultural communication. The AAB formally proposed

this in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan by having it added as a goal for the Agriculture Element, but as of this publication the position has not been created.

Although the AAB has been limited in its ability to address the communication issues directly, the meetings and farmer listening sessions have served as a valuable public forum for Oconee's farmers and support groups to explore opportunities and raise awareness about problems facing the agricultural community, such as impacts of increased traffic, the need for processing facilities, and the difficulties farmers encounter navigating both regulations and the resources available to them.

During OFS events and open-ended interviews, it has been pointed out by numerous farmers in Oconee that while there are significant funding and informational resources available, it is difficult to locate them without assistance from someone else who knows the lay of the land. Applying for grants, which can provide significant help to local farmers, can also be challenging to those unfamiliar with the process. The local FSA, for example, has worked with a large number of Oconee farmers to help navigate grant applications and other farm services but often requires a trip to the Anderson office. Farmers have also stated that receiving support does not automatically lead to improved outcomes. At our apple grower event, growers discussed the effect of having crop insurance recently when most of the year's apple harvest was lost due to frost. One grower said he could not afford crop insurance, while another said he'd been paying for it seven years in a row and it didn't help at all with that year's loss. (2021 Apple Grower Dinner)

Some farmers also noted that there isn't as much help for smaller farms needing support with processing, marketing, and distributing their products — needs that commodity producers of livestock and crops do not usually have. Without ties to the traditional agricultural community or knowledge passed down through a family farm, new farmers can be overwhelmed by the complexity of regulations, resources, and programs. These farmers will not benefit from the majority of USDA programs and would be better served by programs serving local and regional producers, such as the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) or Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP). However, acquiring such support to improve local food system infrastructure requires a higher degree of coordination and collaboration among local farmers.

Farmland Preservation

The future of farming anywhere is contingent upon two resources: land and farmers. Oconee is experiencing what rural areas all over the US are facing in terms of development and urban sprawl. A recent report from the American Farmland Trust (AFT) rated SC as having the eighth highest "threat score" with over 280,000 acres of farmland in the state lost due to development between 2001 and 2016. At the current rate, the state is estimated to be losing approximately 800 acres of farmland to development daily.[25] While urban sprawl has been a culprit for much of the nation's farmland loss, low-density residential development, in which single units are constructed on stretches of open space, is the more threatening trend identified by AFT as fragmenting agricultural landscapes. This type of development is particularly prominent in Oconee County, where a lack of zoning can be appealing to developers looking for fewer restrictions.

Sustainable land use has been one of the top priorities for the food movement since the 2020 Oconee Food Summit, where it was identified as one of the top three priority issues for attendees after support for the local farmers' markets and forming a food policy council. Concerns about the impact of unsustainable development have grown since the pandemic, which brought many people into the area. During planning for the 2022

Oconee Food Sovereignty Convening, local media coverage announcing multiple new housing developments instigated discussion and growing unease among the agricultural community and advocates. This led the organizers to feature farmland preservation as the topic for the panel, which included representatives from the County's Soil and Water Conservation District, Planning Commission, AAB, Conservation Bank Board, and tourism commission. Insights and observations by the panelists can be found in the graphic below:

"I'm not against progress, but our prime and important soils being taken away from us, our farms being taken away from us... it's disturbing to me. Do I have the answers? I wish I did."

– REX RAMSEY
OC SWCD

"We haven't even talked about Sewer South... right in the middle of farmland. When that sewer gets laid, and it's going to get laid down folks... those values are going to go sky high. So you thought the developers are coming now? They're going to come harder once that's laid."

– SHAWN K. JOHNSON
Weichert Realtors - Shaun & Shari Group

"No land is safe. The more you drive around the more you see construction... it's alarming. Once it goes under it's not going to come back."

– REX BLANTON
OC Ag Advisory Board

"'Control-free' sounds great until things change and things change quickly... then we're reactive instead of proactive."

– PAT WILLIAMS
OC Planning Commission
OC Cattlemen's Association

After sharing that the County's website traffic is up 1000%: "We're realizing that since 2021 more people than ever are coming in and they're asking for roadmaps. They want roadmaps because they want to scout for property and they want to look for houses."

– CHANDA MORRISON
Visit Oconee

Regarding conservation easements for farmland preservation: "It's a slow process, but it does work. Those 552 acres will be farmland."

– EMILY HITCHCOCK
OC Conservation Bank Board

"We're literally losing our hills and hill country to housing, and all that's irreversible. All that topsoil is gone... When those houses inevitably fall down in the future there's no reclaiming that soil, and that strikes me as something that's of major importance to look at. It's not just 'Man, there's a lot of people here' all of a sudden. That's farmland for the first time our history being irrevocably lost. In my mind, there is no getting it back and that's a historic precedent we've never seen."

– LES MCCALL
Lake Hartwell Country

Building concern for farmland loss and agricultural protections led to the creation of a Task Force on Agriculture, appointed by the Oconee County Council in August 2022 that was directed to conduct a study and submit a report with recommendations for preserving viable farmland to the council. The final report, issued in March 2023 and available on the county's website, provides a range of findings and proposed solutions with four key recommendations:[26]

1

IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

Revisit the strategies outlined in the agriculture element of Oconee County's 2020 Comprehensive Plan to identify immediate priorities and approve action steps to implement those priorities

2

FUND LAND PROTECTION

Review and adopt a funding strategy to protect farmland that produces food. A detailed description of options—including a county budget allocation, a portion of the fee-in-lieu from multi-county industrial park agreements, and a ballot initiative—are included in this report

3

CREATE A VOLUNTARY PROGRAM

The Oconee Agricultural Advisory Board is a resource for the County Council to engage to advance the creation of Oconee County Voluntary Agriculture Districts (VAD) for food producers

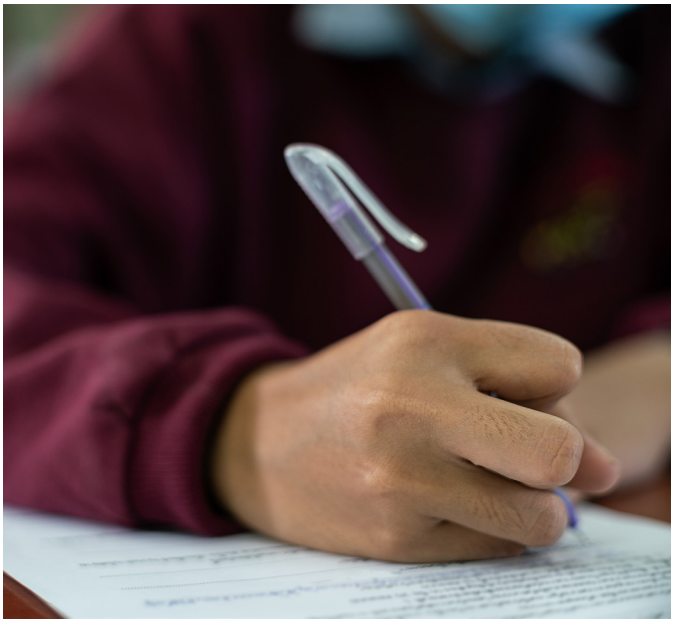
4

INCREASE STAFF CAPACITY

Further the efficacy of the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District and other employees dedicated to agricultural land protection by including funding in the annual budget for an employee dedicated to stewarding existing and future agricultural easements, among other responsibilities

Agricultural Education

An important factor raised by the taskforce was the role of agricultural education in preserving farmland. This refers to a field of education originally intended for aspiring farmers when it emerged from the land grant college system in the 19th century. However, as agricultural practices have changed and modernized over the years, "ag ed" programs have expanded to educate students for a variety of ag-related career paths, such as natural resource management, plant and animal systems, horticulture, and mechanics. The majority of Ag Ed courses today are offered as an elective at the high school level, but the program is also available to middle schools for students with an interest in agriculture, which is one of the 16 career clusters of the South Carolina Department of Education. Clemson University plays a fundamental role in SC agricultural education as the institution prepares future teachers through its bachelor's and master's levels programs, also offering continuing education opportunities for future graduates.



Oconee is one of few counties in SC with Ag Ed offered at all three of its high schools and middle schools. Each school has programs that:

1. Offer in-class instruction,
2. Oversee supervised agricultural experiences (SAE), and
3. Serve as the leader for their school's Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, an intra-curricular association teaching leadership and professional development skills to students pursuing careers in agriculture, agribusiness, or related occupations.

These three components are considered essential for a complete Ag Ed program. In 2018, the School District of Oconee County (SDOC) had approximately **600** total Ag Ed students with **300** participating in FFA.[27] Although there is some variety among the programs based on the preference of the teacher and the availability of school facilities. West-Oak High School, for instance, offers certain classes that are not available at Seneca or Walhalla High Schools but will allow students from those schools to attend.

The US has long faced a shortage of qualified Ag Ed teachers and difficulty retaining experienced teachers, which can impact the quality of a school's Ag Ed program. Since certain activities are expected to occur outside of the school day, Ag Ed teachers are often hired on extended **240-day or 220-day** contracts, as opposed to the standard 190-day teaching year. Currently, not all Ag Ed teachers in SDOC are offered an extended contract, and those on extended contracts were dropped from 240-day contracts to 220-day, limiting their time to facilitate activities such as FFA contests, camps, and conventions. This is a concern for leaders in the agricultural community such as Stanley Gibson, a former Ag Ed teacher and chair of the FARM Center board, who noted the importance of the SAE projects. According to Mr. Gibson, the opportunity for teacher and student to connect outside of the classroom is at the heart of a good agricultural education program, and makes a strong impression when teachers engage with students outside of the classroom: "People can see on a personal level the impact of this teaching when the student has a teacher coming out to work with them at their home," he said, fostering greater appreciation and understanding of agriculture throughout the county.

In addition to challenges that Ag Ed from a teaching perspective, multiple members of the farming community expressed concern that students in the county are being steered toward other occupations, and in some cases, even discouraged from pursuing farming. At the November 2018 AAB meeting, Gwen McPhail, another former Ag Ed teacher and Oconee County agriculture advocate raised this while pointing out the obstacles that young, aspiring farmers in the county face to pursue a career in farming. In addition to a land-linking program that would connect landowners willing to hold land at a cheaper price for future farmers, she said that people *"need to hear from these folks that are making a living off of a small tract of land so when the guidance counselor says 'No, no, no, you want a real job,' they can say 'I've got a real job. If you like fish, come see me, because on my acre and a half I will feed you.'"*[28] Many farmers see investment in Ag Ed programs and the retention of quality Ag Ed teachers who will inspire students with the many career possibilities as a critical need for the future. As a recent historical review of the Ag Ed teacher shortage pointed out: *"Without a sufficient supply of qualified agricultural educators, our nation's populace is likely to become more disconnected from agriculture and the supply of future generations of agriculturists negatively impacted."*[29]

Conclusion

Oconee County remains a true agricultural county with deep roots, a high-performing industry, coveted natural resources, and a growing community of small farms. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture as an industry and as a way of life that defines the heritage of this place. Still, there are many important topics we did not have the opportunity to cover, such as farm succession, the impacts of climatic changes, and prime soils. We believe these subjects invite further assessment, but hope interested readers will take advantage of the resources mentioned here in the meantime. Nor were we able to explore the recent move to install sewer in Fair Play, which raised alarm particularly among the traditional farming community and county residents concerned with agricultural preservation. These developments serve as a reminder that if preserving farmland and agricultural heritage for the county is important, we must prioritize bridging the gap between the varied agricultural communities and supporters to organize a united front to protect the livelihood of our farmers. We will be much more effective if we improve the baseline communication both within the agricultural community and to the wider community looking to support local farmers.

3

Processing

Just as "agriculture" can have numerous meanings for people depending on their experience, terms associated with the processing of food tend to have vastly different meanings for producers as opposed to consumers. Today, the term "processed food" is commonly associated with unhealthy gas station snacks and sugary drinks. However, food processing is simply the conversion of food from one form to another, meaning essentially every human in history has eaten processed food. The USDA defines a processed food as any food that has undergone changes to its natural state.[30] This may be as simple as picking and cracking open a peanut, or as complex as industrially manufacturing a shelf-stable cake using refined oils and chemical additives.

The NOVA classification system is a widely used tool to categorize foods based on the extent and purpose of processing.[31] Foods are divided into four categories: (1) unprocessed or minimally processed, (2) processed culinary ingredients, (3) processed foods, and (4) ultra-processed foods, as explained in Figure 3-1.

GROUP 1

Unprocessed or Minimally Processed Foods

Fresh, dry, or frozen vegetables or fruit, grains, legumes, meat, fish, eggs, nuts and seeds.

Processing includes removal of inedible/unwanted parts. Does not add substances to the original food.

GROUP 2

Processed Culinary Ingredients

Plant oils (e.g., olive oil, coconut oil), animal fats (e.g. cream, butter, lard), maple syrup, sugar, honey, and salt.

Substances derived from Group 1 foods or from nature by processes including pressing, refining, grinding, milling, and drying.

GROUP 3

Processed Foods

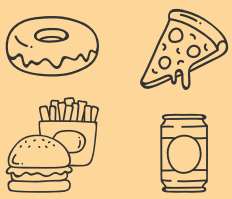
Canned/pickled vegetables, meat, fish, or fruit, artisanal bread, cheese, salted meats, wine, beer, and cider.

Processing of foods from Group 1 or 2 with the addition of oil, salt, or sugar by means of canning, pickling, smoking, curing, or fermentation.

GROUP 4

Ultra-Processed Foods

Sugar sweetened beverages, sweet and savory packaged snacks, reconstituted meat products, pre-prepared frozen dishes, canned/instant soups, chicken nuggets, ice cream.



Formulations made from a series of processes including extraction and chemical modification. Includes very little intact Group 1 foods.

INCREASING LEVEL OF PROCESSING

There are various methods to process foods into each of the NOVA categories ranging from basic removal of inedible / unwanted parts to chemical modification. It is not the act of processing itself, but the degree to which food is processed that influences its nutritional quality. Certain processing techniques even enhance the nutritional quality of food. For example, fermentation can increase the digestibility of foods such as breads, dairy products, and vegetables.[32] Fortifying foods can reduce the risk of illness and health issues, such as adding iron and B vitamins to infant cereals to prevent anemia, and adding iodine to salt to prevent goiter.[30]

Processing of agricultural products in Oconee County primarily involves animal products, such as the conversion of live animals to edible meat and preparation of eggs and honey for sale. Food safety regulations and access to processing facilities influence market entry for small-scale growers to sell their products. Larger commercial farms in the area are generally not impacted by such constraints, since broilers raised under contract are owned by the poultry companies that will collect them for processing at 6-8 weeks. Further, the majority of cattle are sold to a livestock auction to be finished and processed out of state. Most meat and poultry products consumed are legally required to be processed in a federal or state certified facility, but SCDA exemptions for smaller-scale poultry producers allow for on-farm processing of less than 1k birds, with some additional requirements for those processing up to 20k.[33] Eggs can be sold directly from a farm without a license, but require a license and compliance with SCDA standards for washing, refrigerating, and labeling eggs if being sold anywhere other than the farm from which they were harvested.[34] Most of the county's fruit and vegetable products are minimally processed, but some are subject to growing, harvesting, packing, and holding requirements by the FDA under the 2018 Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), which addresses water quality, soil amendments, and farmworker hygiene. Operations selling less than $25,000 or only producing items that are rarely consumed raw (okra, peas, potatoes, etc.) or intended for commercial processing can apply for FSMA exemption from the SCDA.[35] Honey is minimally regulated except in the case of large-scale producers, who must allow SCDA inspections of their honey house(s) and processing in a certified kitchen.

There are two main areas in which producers and consumers have indicated significant barriers exist in processing of local products — meat and value-added products (VAPs).

Meat

Meat processing is subject to the strictest regulations of any food category. For farmers who prefer to distribute locally within the state or county, any beef, pork, or ruminant meat such as lamb or goat sold to another person must be processed by a state- or federally-approved facility. South Carolina is one of 29 states with its own meat inspection program. It is overseen by Clemson University's Livestock Poultry Health division, which provides inspection services to ensure meat and poultry products are safe and accurately labeled.[36] This program only authorizes meat sales within the state, meaning any sales outside South Carolina require compliance with the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS). Both state and federal meat inspection programs dictate daily inspection by an employee of the agency.

Limited access to processing facilities has been a pressing topic at all Oconee Food Summit events, and has also been raised by the county's Agricultural Advisory Board and 2022 Agriculture Taskforce. Oconee County has two state-inspected processors, Snow Creek and Wilson's Processing, which both prioritize processing of in-house products. Wilson's Processing no longer offers private-use processing of livestock or deer to Oconee farmers or residents, instead using its processing facility strictly to process pork for its branded products that are sold at its storefront and through area grocers. Although Snow Creek does process cattle, lamb, goat, hogs, and deer, the majority of processing is also for their branded sausage found at local grocery stores.

Local meat farmers noted challenges in determining the operating status and services provided by Snow Creek, likely as a result of ownership changes in recent years. Processing facilities vary in their equipment and the services they offer, which can make it more challenging for local meat producers to find the right fit. These factors and the limited market options of state-inspected facilities send many Oconee meat producers to one of the five USDA-certified facilities within a 100-mile radius of the county, such as Vaughn Meat Packing Co. of Greer, SC, or Blalock Meat Processor of Rabun Gap, GA. These producers are challenged not only by the distances to transport their animals, which increases labor hours, fuel costs for vehicles, and stress on the livestock, but the limited number of processing slots available to regional producers.

While USDA-inspected facilities typically have higher slaughtering and packaging fees to maintain inspection-level quality and equipment, they also tend to have the capacity to offer farmers more diverse andcustom cuts of their meat. These can be sold in retail settings at a higher price per pound than selling a share of a live animal at wholesale pricing. The latter option is used by some farmers who sell consumers a part of the animal (typically a quarter or half) while it is still alive. The farmer then acts as a caretaker for that animal, and continues raising it on their own farm. When the animal is ready to be processed, the meat (labeled "Not for Re-sale") is passed on to the consumer as the rightful owner.

The need for additional processing options was illustrated and exacerbated during COVID-19 when meat supply chains were disrupted nationwide. At most, processing facilities throughout the country, staff was cut and operating hours were reduced to cope with the economic pressures imposed by the pandemic. Strict federal regulations on workplace safety such as increased distancing between employees, higher personal protective equipment costs, and additional sanitation requirements also dramatically altered the efficiency and overall functioning capacity of processing plants. As large processors across the country were unable to meet demand, conventional meat supplies dropped drastically at local grocery stores. This decrease in regular meat supply presented a market niche that small and local family farms were initially well-placed to meet. However, once consumers identified the availability of local meat, they rushed to fill their empty freezers, and the supply shortages affected local meat markets as well:

> *[Producer on processing issues during COVID-19:]* **Normal booking dates went from 30 to 60 days out to over a year out. All open dates booked quickly. Because it has been difficult to get meat processing dates, along with the increase in price, we have found it difficult to sustain a meat inventory longer than a couple of months. We have also had to increase the prices of our meats, which is another difficult COVID milestone.**
>
> **— OFFR QUESTIONNAIRE, LOUDERBRANCH FARMS**

As demand for processing slots rose rapidly, the backlog of available processing dates left farmers tasked with continued husbandry and care of animals they were unable to process. This unplanned and non-budgeted increased stocking rate of animals affects the entire makeup and functionality of farms as labor hours increase, equipment depreciates, and feed costs remain high.

Because livestock operations make up the majority of Oconee's farms, the impact of limited processing options on their economic viability has made this one of the key threats facing agriculture in the county. The concerns of Oconee cattle producers here align with those of cattle producers across the state and nation. A 2021 Clemson study found that 80% of SC livestock producers found the state's processing capacity to be the main barrier for growth of their operations, even among those who did not have their cattle processed for meat.[37] Unfortunately, there are significant barriers to opening additional meat processing facilities, namely the significant startup costs, lack of qualified labor, and the challenge of navigating requirements for establishing and maintaining USDA-certified facilities. Nationwide demand for improved access to processing has resulted in some movement on the part of the federal government as a result of the supply chain shocks during COVID, which impacted both commodity and small-scale cattle production.[38] These shocks are a result of consolidation in the livestock industry, in which the means of operation along the food supply chain are concentrated in the hands of a few large companies. This phenomenon in processing is linked to the wider consolidation of the farm sector.[39] Nationwide consolidation of large plants led to dramatic concentration in the livestock processing industry for cattle slaughter in particular.[40] Consequences of this shift impact not only small-scale cattle producers, but those who auction their livestock off for processing out of state. Cattle ranchers interviewed as part of this assessment indicated that changes in the industry had lowered the return they get on their cattle. This indicates corporate consolidation of the meat processing industry has negative effects on farmers, regardless of size and target market.

Value-added products (VAPs)

Value-added products (VAPs) are foods that have been modified with added ingredients or processes to increase their value and make them more usable or attractive to consumers.[41] Baked goods, preserves, and fermented foods and beverages (such as krauts and kombucha) are examples of VAPs one may find locally at our farm stands or markets, which are considered "processed foods" (Group 3) in the NOVA classification.The original VAPs in Oconee County were canned goods, which were commonly produced until school-operated canneries began closing throughout the 1950s.

Upton Sinclair's 1906 book "The Jungle" brought public awareness to unsanitary conditions present in industrial food production. In response, federal and state governments passed food inspection laws throughout the 20th century that improved the safety of industrially-produced foods but made it more difficult for traditional small-scale producers to comply. More recently, any prepared food in SC had to be made in DHEC-certified kitchens, and the same regulations applied regardless of the size of the operation. In 2012, the first home-based food production laws, or "cottage laws" established exemptions for certain types of food sold directly to consumers. The laws were revised in 2021 to expand the list of exempted foods and to authorize sales online and at retail stores with proper labeling. Producers selling less than $1,500 per year are exempt from some requirements. The cottage laws establish requirements for production in home kitchens, including supervision, separation from typical household activities, cleanliness, food safety knowledge, refrigeration, and storage. The laws currently allow the production of certain baked goods, sweets, and dried or dehydrated goods. Drinks, meats, fermented products, some baked goods, and most vegetables are not permitted for sale after home processing.[42]

There are many local producers who still view the laws as overly restrictive and suggest the state remove burdensome regulations. "The common person is capable of making decisions based on their food source … and several states have already accomplished this," said one respondent to the LFRP questionnaire. There is strong demand for state-certified commercial kitchens, canneries, and shared production spaces in Oconee County, from both home-based producers looking to grow their businesses and those who wish to sell products beyond those allowed under cottage laws. Rising prices for ingredients and packaging materials puts more pressure on producers who already struggle with access to commercial kitchens or DHEC inspection. Casey Certain, a local value-added producer for the Reid Homestead and Carolina Baurenhaus summarized these challenges:

> **The price of packaging materials needed to be a value-added producer, as well as the cost of growing and caring for the ingredients that go into them, have gone up. This impacts pricing of our goods, and sometimes scares away local consumers who are on a limited income. You have to know how to ask the right questions to identify whether or not you truly need to take a class, and if your product falls into that category. For example, lacto-fermented products are not considered the same as a shelf-stable product, so just because we're jarring pickles doesn't mean we need that class.**
>
> **— LFRP QUESTIONNAIRE**

PROCESSING INPUT FROM COMMUNITY FOOD GATHERINGS

"It is expensive to take the next step (kitchen setup, butchering, processing) to get certification to sell your own products"
– FAIR PLAY

"[Need a] shared kitchen / shared canning place"
– WALHALLA

"Bring back the cannery. It was DHEC certified and a commissary, so very useful"
– FAIR PLAY

"No commercial kitchen, need to have a commercial kitchen"
– LONG CREEK / MT. REST

"[Need an] industrial / community kitchen in Oconee county"
– SENECA

"[Need to] can excess fruits and veggies"
– SENECA

While cottage food laws do allow some exemptions for VAPs, most still require a commercial kitchen or cannery as a requirement to sell to retail locations or food service providers.[42] The Community Food Gatherings revealed wide community support for reopening DHEC-approved canneries and commercial kitchens. Although there is no clear consensus about what specific needs would be met by canneries vs. commercial kitchens, there is overlap in their function. Further research should be conducted to gain a precise understanding of the community's needs for VAP production. The LFRP survey also suggests interest in niche processing such as malting, milling, oil pressing, fruit pasteurizing, and juicing. Federal and state resources exist to support expanding processing infrastructure, but the assessment team found no evidence of any currently being pursued in the county.

Conclusion

Oconee County faces significant challenges in processing local agricultural products which limit market access for local farmers, namely for small farmers looking to distribute products locally or regionally. For meat producers, the issue is primarily a lack of infrastructure for products that require certified processing facilities. Processing bottlenecks can be eased by adjusting food safety regulations - even prior to COVID, there were proposals among South Carolina and neighboring states to allow interstate sales of state-inspected meat, which gained traction during the pandemic but never led to legislative change. Producers of value-added products (VAPs) also struggle with infrastructure, as some of these items must be produced in a DHEC-certified kitchen in order to be vsold. The cottage laws were recently updated to cover more foods and open new marketing outlets, showing the potential of advocacy for policy change. However, current laws and safety regulations are still a roadblock for many producers; in addition, corporate consolidation is also impeding producers in the processing sector. Even for those commodity producers of local meat and poultry who are not dealing directly with processing, current corporate processing in the meat industry requires producers to relinquish control over the pricing of their products. Diversity is key to the resilience of any system, and increased options for processing local agricultural products would make for a more resilient local food system. Change will require high community involvement and a shared vision among all stakeholders, including growers, processors, retailers, and consumers. As one grower stated in a survey response: "Without a vision, you're [just] pushing a program. With a vision it can become a movement."

4

Distribution

Food is moved many times in its journey through the food system. It travels from farm to storage facility, storage to processing center, processing center to another storage location, and so on. Distribution is the process that enables each stage of the food system to connect to the next. Our food system model simplifies distribution as **the movement of food products from where they are produced or processed to where they are purchased for consumption**.

GROWING	HARVESTING	TRANSPORTING	PROCESSING	PACKAGING	WHOLESALING	RETAILING	EATING	DISPOSING
Growers use heavy equipment to prepare soil, and plant and maintain crops on huge farms of single "monocrops."	Farm workers gather the ripened crop from the field using large machinery, harvesting great quantities at once.	Transportation workers move the food by air, truck, train, ship, or barge. Transporting may happen at many steps and for very long hauls.	Food processors use factory equipment to chip, grind, dry, boil, can, or freeze food to preserve it or to make it more convenient. Processed food is often greatly altered from its natural state.	Workers operate machinery to put food into cans, bags, boxes, or other containers for sale. The packaging protects food and helps it sell.	Wholesalers sell and distribute large quantities of foods to stores.	Retailers sell foods to customers, usually in supermarkets, grocery stores, or other stores.	People buy, prepare, and eat the food.	People discard leftover food and packaging. While most is recyclable or compostable, much of it ends up in landfills.
→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	✕

This diagram of the industrial food system illustrates the role distribution plays at various points in the food supply chain. Center for Ecoliteracy, Nourish Curriculum Guide.

Our assessment focuses primarily on distribution to food access points where consumers in Oconee County purchase food for home consumption, the most common of which are large grocery stores and convenience stores. This does not include restaurants, schools, food delivery, or other sources of prepared meals, which typically use at least one large scale delivery company such as Sysco, Performance Foods, or US Foods to order most of their supplies and ingredients from a single source.

Large-scale, national, and international distribution systems aim to provide consistency in quantity and quality, allowing stores to offer large volumes of products that are universally recognizable to consumers. However, these apparent benefits come with health, economic, social, and environmental consequences. For example, grocery stores purchase large volumes of products to attract customers with fully-stocked shelves and overflowing produce displays. However, many of these products perish before they are sold.[43] In 2018, it was estimated that distribution centers and stores in the U.S. had a collective 8 million tons of food waste, accounting for $18 billion in lost value.[44]

To offer consistent taste, appearance, and long shelf life, many foods are processed with preservatives and chemical additives. Processed foods high in sugar and refined oil are especially common at gas stations, convenience stores, pharmacy chains, and discount stores such as Dollar General. For those living far from alternative access points, these stores might be the only viable source of food. One attendee of the Fair Play CFG said: "Dollar General is terrible, but we still go." Some Dollar General stores across Oconee have recently started offering some fresh produce and healthier options in an attempt to increase access to these items, but have not specifically targeted low-income / low-access census tracts with these additions.

Prior to supermarkets and big-box stores, almost all food was purchased from smaller, privately-owned stores like butcher shops, bakeries, and seafood markets, a limited number of which (e.g. Hershberger's Bakery, Pike's Seafood) can still be found today. These independent grocers typically sell less common items distributed in smaller volumes with some locally or regionally-produced goods, such as dairy products at Hochstetler's in Seneca. Two of these stores – Heads Superette and Picket Post Produce Plus – source regional produce from an Asheville farmers' market. Smaller grocery stores play an important role in communities such as Walhalla, which would otherwise lack access to healthy or culturally appropriate food options. The majority of the county's Hispanic community resides in this area, which is home to four tiendas or Hispanic shops (i.e. La Estrella, Tienda Los Amigos, Tienda Mundo Hispano, Tienda El Pasa) offering Latin American foods and ingredients, produce, meat, basic pantry staples, and fresh baked goods. Interestingly, the city of Walhalla is still classified by the USDA as a "food desert" despite having these options.[45]

Distribution of Locally-Produced Foods

While food that is grown and raised for purchase in the local community can be found at some of our independent groceries, most of it is distributed from the farms themselves and the area farmers markets. Demand for locally produced foods throughout the US has increased in recent years, but the meaning of "local" in this context varies widely between regions, businesses, and customers. While there is no agreed-upon definition, the US Congress in the 2008 Farm Act considered a local or regional agricultural product to be "less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it was produced".[46] Oconee County producers and consumers noted cases where promoting products as "local" has been used as a marketing tool for products that are only marginally local.[47]

Many of our county farms sell products directly from the farm, communicating with buyers about pick-up times and availability. These producers often develop relationships with repeat customers who value knowing the source of their food. The assessment team did not identify any community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs currently operating in Oconee but found that most direct-to-consumer distribution takes place through one-time sales and various farm stands / stores throughout the county. Farm stands are located on or near the farm and typically sell produce, honey, or other items not requiring refrigeration. Farm stores, however, are brick-and-mortar structures that may sell products from other local farms in addition to their own, typically including cold storage for refrigerated products. Some of Oconee County's farm stands, farm stores, and produce stands are featured in the SCDA's Certified Roadside Markets program:

TABLE OF OCONEE COUNTY FARM STANDS AND STORES

Name	Products Sold	Location	Operating Hours
3 Oaks Farm Stand	Produce	222 N Seed Farm Rd. Westminster	Monday - Saturday 10am - 1pm
A & M Produce (June - Nov)	Produce	515 Dairy Farm Rd Fair Play	Monday - Friday 12pm - 6pm
Ables Orchard	Peaches and apples	14161 Us Hwy 76 Long Creek	Monday - Thursday 9am-5pm Friday - Sunday 9am-6pm
Bryson's Apple Orchard	Apples, peaches, jellies, Jams, and honey	1011 Chattooga Ridge Rd. Mountain Rest	Monday - Sunday 9am-6pm
Chattooga Belle Farm Roadside Market	Fruit, berries, grapes, jellies, jams, salsas, BBQ sauce	454 Damascus Church Rd. Long Creek	Monday - Saturday 8am-6pm Sunday 12pm-6pm
Field of Dreams Vegetable Farm	Produce	427 Friendship Rd. Seneca	May - November Monday - Sunday 8 am - 7 pm
Hollifield's Orchard	Apples, Peaches, Cider	161 Hollifield Ln. Long Creek	Open 7 Days a week Opens at 1pm on Sundays

Name	Products Sold	Location	Operating Hours
Louderbranch Farms	Beef, chicken, eggs, produce, jams, jellies, pickles, salsa, butter, cheese	244 Windy Hollow Rd. Walhalla	March - October Monday - Saturday 9 am - 6 pm
McLadke Orchard	Fruit, berries, beef, produce, eggs, honey	350 Old Oak Dr. Seneca	June - September Tues-Friday 11:30-6:30 Sat 11:30-8
Rebel B Farms	Fruit, produce, eggs	336 Holly Branch Rd. Westminster	June - November Monday - Friday 12pm - 6pm
Sweetheart Farms	Produce, berries	250 Mountain View Rd. Salem	May - Sept Sat 8am-1pm
Whispering Pines Farm and Dairy	Goat cheese, sheep milk cheese, milk, yogurt kefir, duck, eggs, goat and lamb meat	681 Campbell Bridge Rd. Seneca	Monday - Saturday 9 am - 5 pm
Wright's Produce	Fruit, berries, produce	Beagle Dr. Seneca	Thursday - Saturday 9 am - 5 pm

Farmers markets offer another avenue of direct-to-consumer sales, but at a shared location with a fixed market time when customers can browse products and interact with the producers. There are currently 4 farmers markets in Oconee County: Foothills Heritage Market, Seneca Farmers Market, Walhalla Farmers Market, and the Salem Town Market. Most of our local markets feature both food and craft vendors but prioritize participation of food vendors to ensure the markets are a local food access point for consumers and a distribution outlet for producers. They typically require a vendor application and / or agreement to be submitted, which helps to regulate the variety of products sold at the markets and ensures that they meet the market's standards. The Foothills Heritage Market of the FARM Center, for example, requires that all products sold are grown or raised within 50 miles. In the summer of 2023, both Fair Play and Westminster experimented with launching their own community farmers markets.

Name	Type	Address	Hours	Website
Foothills Heritage Farmers Market (FARM Center)	Nonprofit	2063 Sandifer Blvd, Seneca	Sat 8 - 12 & Tues 4:30	https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=foothills%20heritage%20market
Friends of Salem Town Market	Community	SC-S-37-24, Salem (across from Salem Fire Department)	Sat 8-12	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076575664685&sk=about
Seneca Farmers Market	Municipal -Seneca Planning & Development	Norton Thompson Park 300 Main St., Seneca	Tues/Thur/Sat 7-12	https://agriculture.sc.gov/farmers-markets/seneca-farmers-market/
Walhalla Farmers Market	Municipal - Main Street Walhalla	101 E. North Broad, Walhalla	Fri 8-11	https://www.facebook.com/WalhallaSCFarmersMarket

Farmers' markets emerged as one of the top issues at the 2020 Oconee Food Summit, which included a breakout session on Building Community Support for our Farmers Markets and ended with plans to form an independent taskforce to promote and encourage "cooperation, education, coordination, and investment" among them. While the taskforce did not gain traction as a result of the COVID pandemic, the need for accessible markets with more varied product offerings was raised consistently in OFS events and the 2022 Community Food Gatherings. At the center of the issue has been that markets require some critical mass of vendors in order to be successful, and having multiple markets on the same day/time can pull vendors and consumers in different directions, which limits the offerings at the markets. As one member of the AAB said in May 2018,[48] "Four farmers markets that I know of have popped up in Oconee County, and they're going to be competing with each other for the same time, the same day". This poses a challenge for local small farmers who must choose a single market to attend, if any, on account of having limited staff and resources: "[Farmers] have to pick [produce] one day and go to market the next, and if markets overlap… they have to choose which to attend," said a local grower. Multiple attendees at Long Creek / Mt Rest, Walhalla, and Fair Play CFGs expressed a desire for community farmers' markets, but some advocates for local agriculture have pushed for a single county market, which the Foothills Heritage Market of the FARM Center positioned itself to be. The need for coordination and cooperation among our various markets has been stressed by attendees at various OFS events, as well as during a May 2018 AAB meeting at which Doug Hollifield stated: "One thing about the farmers markets is they need to coordinate with one another".

FARMERS' MARKET INPUT FROM COMMUNITY FOOD GATHERINGS

"It might be time to revisit starting a farmers market, try to get our identity back and initiate agribusiness"
– FAIR PLAY

"[We] need [a] consistent supply of food at [the] farmer's market"
– LONG CREEK / MT. REST

"[We have a] hard time getting growers to the farmer's market"
– WALHALLA

"Transportation and accessibility to markets and fresh food is limited."
– SENECA

"[We should] have a set location for Walhalla Farmer's Market and have local vendors"
– FAIR PLAY

"It would be great to have a farmers' market or food co-op with an education component at the community center."
– LONG CREEK / MT. REST

One service helping to bridge the gap in local market access is the Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE), an online food market established in 2011 to provide the option of ordering from regional farms on a single platform. For an annual membership fee of $20, customers can order online from Friday evening through Monday morning from the inventory that local producers update and post to the CAFE website each week. On Tuesdays, producers drop off their products at a storage facility in Clemson, where volunteers sort items and pack individual orders for distribution to various pick-up locations in Oconee, Anderson, and Pickens Counties. CAFE members go to their regular location to collect their order that day by 7 PM.[49] While it lacks the direct interaction of an in-person farmers' market, CAFE customers appreciate the convenience of being able to purchase products from a multitude of local farms with the ease of having a nearby pick-up location. This shopping model was especially popular during COVID when many avoided more heavily populated shopping

areas. Although CAFE does not formally identify as such, it does perform some of the same functions of a food hub, which is a centrally located facility for aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, or marketing of locally and regionally produced food products.[50] Currently, there are no food hubs in Oconee County but some producers do sell through Greenville's Swamp Rabbit Cafe, which is one of seven registered with the SC Food Hub Network.

In addition to these direct-to-consumer options and regional markets, many farmers in Oconee County work with a variety of retailers and wholesalers across the region to distribute their products. Like the SCDA's Certified Roadside Markets, the Certified SC program was launched in 2007 in cooperation with SC growers, producers, processors, wholesalers, and retailers to promote locally-produced products. Members can display the Certified SC label on their items for marketing and have their contact information included in the member directory on the program's website, making it easy for consumers to search for these products in their area. There are currently 53 Certified SC members in Oconee County, including both farms and processors of VAPs.[51]

While these statewide programs support marketing for direct-to-consumer farms, smaller scale producers still indicate a need for improved market access and marketing assistance. Farmers aiming to market their products within the county expressed concern over the lack of consumer awareness regarding the time, cost, and labor that goes into producing food, resulting in higher prices that not all customers are willing to pay. One producer pointed out that farmers have to know how to talk about their products to customers so they are willing to pay a higher price point than the grocery store and suggested some producers would benefit from an educational program that offers guidance on best business practices. (LFRP Questionnaire). Even farmers who have successfully established a foothold in the local market are faced with challenges as the county's population grows. Apple growers, for example, said that they felt their customer base was changing and expressed the need for support marketing to incoming residents that may be unaware of the county's apple orchards. (2021 Grower Dinner)

7% of farms sold directly to consumers

$493K total market value

Identifying suitable distribution outlets presents challenges for small farmers especially, who may not produce at the rate and volume required for a constant, standardized supply of goods for institutions such as restaurants and schools that desire more predictability in the quantity and variety of food products. Farmers have also noted difficulty getting their products into larger regional markets. In the 2018 Farmer and Rancher Listening Session, a local aquaponics producer requested help getting access to or expanding access to these markets.[28] Figures from the 2017 USDA Agricultural Census suggest that increasing access to wider distribution channels could increase revenue streams and promote farm business growth. According to the census, 7% of Oconee County farms (55 of 815) sold directly to consumers for a total market value of $493K in products, but only 2% of Oconee County farms (15 out of 815) were selling to retail, institutions, or food hubs for locally or regionally branded products for a total market value of $203k in products.[18]

2% of farms sold to retail, institutions, or food hubs

$203K total market value

Within and around the county, producers have indicated that local market opportunities are currently limited. Pushback on higher prices for locally produced foods has led some Oconee producers to take their products to other markets outside the county where they are able to reach a wider customer base that places a higher value on local food. A beef producer selling the majority of their product in the Greenville area stated "one of the biggest drawbacks for the farming community here is the lack of access to the markets".[52] Many local farmers have indicated that they would like to support the county's farmers' markets, but have a hard time doing so due to lack of financial incentive. Farmers feel pressured to price their products lower than their actual value and express concern over the ability to sell products at the markets. Local farm stand operator and AAB member Marlene Willoughby spoke to the issue surrounding farmers markets at their June 2018 meeting,[27] noting how important it was to have a well-trafficked market where you can dependably sell your product as a farmer: "I'm a farmer and I want to make sure I'm gonna sell all my stuff and not have to take it back home and throw it out to the hogs." Willoughby also called for centering farmers when making decisions about markets, saying "We've got to work together for the farmer, where they can get the good prices because I wanna tell you these farmers markets have paid so many of my bills. It's not just a hobby with me, it is serious business. It's paid my farm taxes."

Conclusion

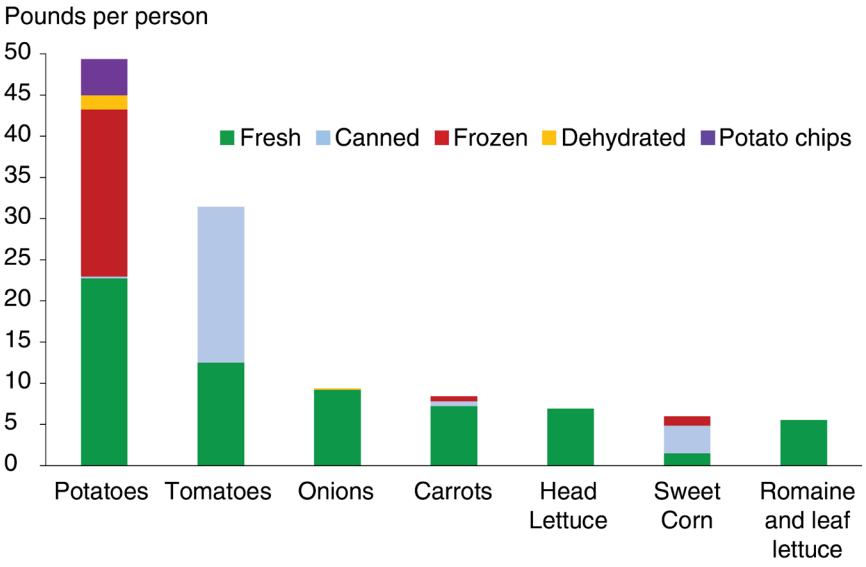
While most foods being distributed through the county are part of the conventional system that limits diversity, we do have some independent food retail in the county that provides valuable options for healthy foods that communities would otherwise lack. There is a higher demand for local food than the current production sector is able to meet, in part as a result of the processing issues with meat that cause a lack of diversity in local food markets. Farmers looking to enter larger markets have noted that they encounter more regulations, which are limiting the potential for growth. These farmers would benefit from expansion of and access to local markets, but currently, some of our markets lack sufficient patronage of customers willing to pay the higher price point for local food. Many of the challenges in local distribution can be seen in the current handling of our farmers markets. Establishing multiple markets in the area without a plan for marketing and coordination leaves us with several small markets across the county, each hosting a portion of local vendors and leaving customers, also, to decide which market to attend. A solution for this could be holding farmers markets on different days, which would require working together to find the best arrangement for each market and our producers. Whether it's coming behind one market or working together to support all of the markets, there is a need for cooperation for the benefit of farmers and consumers to improve local food distribution.

5

Consumption

Whether or not we play a role in growing, raising, butchering, preserving, or delivering food, we are united as eaters. Each person makes choices about when, where, and what to eat based on economic, biological, cultural, and physiological factors.[53] Food consumption in the United States has changed significantly since the beginning of the 20th century. The typical American diet today is high in calories, sugar, saturated fat, and processed meats, and low in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and seafood. Americans also consume more ultra-processed foods than ever before, which has contributed to rising rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other diet-related health problems.[54]

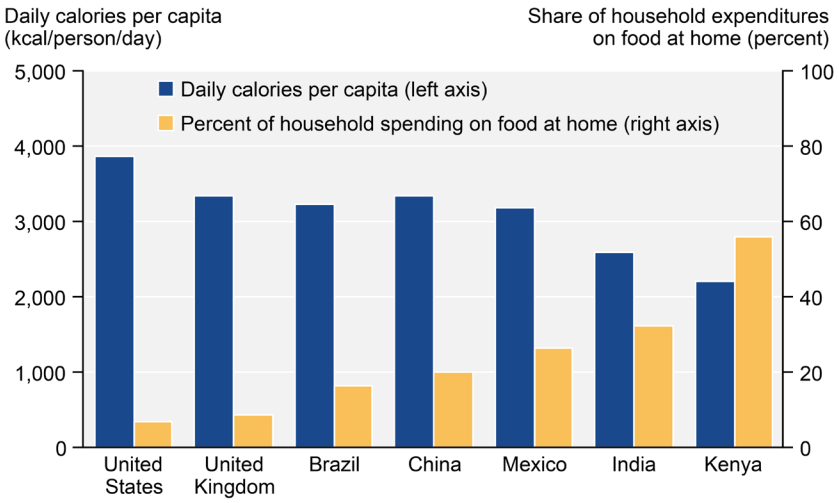
U.S. per capita loss-adjusted vegetable availability, 2019



Note: Loss-adjusted food availability data are proxies for consumption.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Loss-Adjusted Food Availability Data.

Although Americans are consuming more fruits and vegetables than in 1970, the average diet still does not meet the recommended intake and the fruits and vegetables that are being eaten are not coming from high-quality sources. Potatoes are the most commonly consumed vegetable in the US, but less than half are eaten fresh; 41% are frozen – primarily in the form of French fries – and potato chips make up about 5%. Approximately 50% of apples and 75% of oranges consumed come from juices.[55]

Calorie availability and household spending on food at home as a share of consumption expenditures for selected countries, 2021



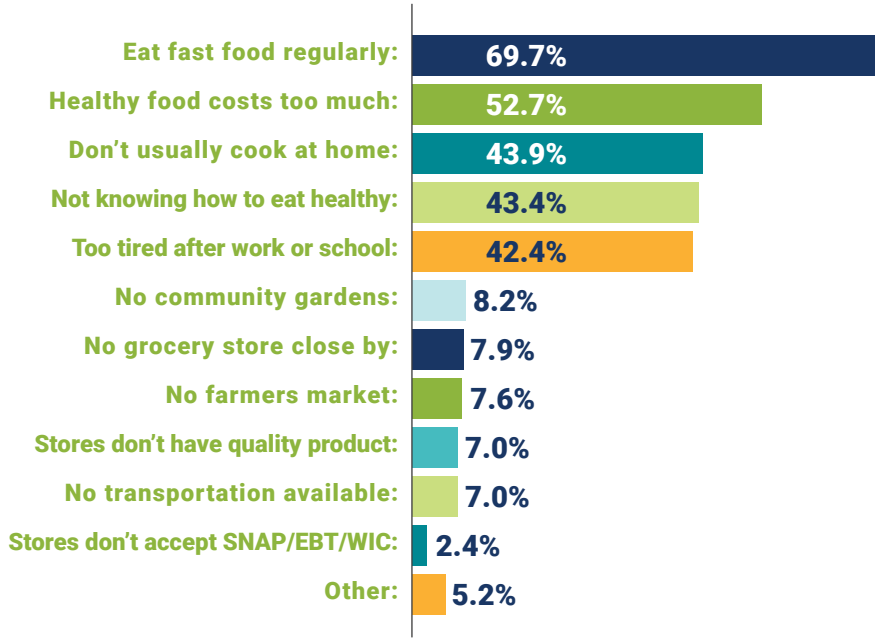
Note: Calorie availability is reported as kcal/person/day for the 3-year average 2019–21.
Sources: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAOSTAT Statistical Database (calories) and Euromonitor International (spending).

As illustrated by Figure 5-2, household expenditures in the United States for food at home are the lowest of the seven nations, while daily caloric intake is disproportionately high compared to that spending. Interpretations of this and other data on consumption patterns in the US conclude that caloric intake (quantity) is in excess proportion to nutritional density (quality). This quantity-over-quality culture does not serve to reduce or eliminate risk factors for diet-related chronic disease, nor does it improve long-term health outcomes.

There are several factors that have influenced these changes. Industrialization and globalization have increased the availability, affordability, and convenience of ultra-processed and fast foods. Marketing and advertising campaigns increasingly promote unhealthy foods on television, the internet, and social media. Children have their preferences shaped by advertising, peer influences, and their school environment, and by adulthood already have a predisposition for certain foods. Consumer behavior has also changed. Due to work-centric lifestyles, busy schedules, and long commutes, we tend to choose food that is quick, easy, and often unhealthy. Since the 1970s, decreasing household size and women's employment outside the home have afforded higher incomes, making convenient prepared foods more attainable to many Americans.[56] One in three meals are eaten at restaurants, and in 2022, eating away from home accounted for 56 percent of food spending.[57]

While we have limited data to know with certainty what people are eating in Oconee County, data on consumption patterns in the US shifting toward eating away from the home paired with results from SC DHEC's 2022 Oconee County Community Health Improvement Survey (CHIS) helps to deduce basic consumption habits in Oconee County. The CHIS survey offers insight as to what prevents healthy eating habits locally, with the top result being frequent fast food consumption.[58]

REASONS THAT PREVENT PEOPLE FROM EATING HEALTHY FOODS



Source: SC DHEC Community Health Improvement Survey

Our assessment team performed an inventory of restaurants via SC DHEC Food Grades information.[59] In this review, we identified approximately 165 restaurants in total, 39 of which were identified as standard fast food restaurants (Burger King, Subway, Bantam Chef, etc.). However, there are some not officially being identified as fast food restaurants, such as gas stations serving quick food options. There is also a growing number of restaurants considered "fast casual", which advertise higher quality foods while still maintaining a casual atmosphere and quick service. Certain restaurants such as Moe's Southwest Grill, Schlotzsky's, and Waffle House fall into this category and were not included in the count of local fast food restaurants. While many of the local fast casual restaurants do offer healthier options, such as Presst, 313 Cafe, and Gather Uptown, the assessment team primarily heard grievances of local residents regarding the lack of healthy food options in Oconee County.

**We are also seeing an increase in food trucks, which are introducing new options into the area, but for this assessment we did not look at these.*

The large number of successful fast food and fast casual restaurants in Oconee County illustrates the pattern of consuming mostly unhealthy foods away from home. While much of this is due to the convenience favored by fast-paced modern lifestyles, it was also noted by many in the county that there is a generational gap in knowledge and skills when it comes to nutrition and food preparation. Helen Rosamond Saunders of Blue Ridge Community Center (BRCC) in Seneca spoke with a member of our assessment team about concerns surrounding this knowledge gap, specifically in terms of the eradication of home economics in our public schools. As a former home economics educator, she felt that the shift from practical, informative instruction, particularly for at-risk students, was a travesty. This is a concern that was echoed by many community members who attended the Community Food Gatherings, with one attendee referencing the lack of training in life skills saying "young adults don't even know how to boil water". There were consistent recommendations for educational opportunities to improve nutritional knowledge and eating habits, with some at the Seneca CFG pointing out that BRCC would be the ideal place to host educational culinary classes and weekly community meal prep gatherings. These voices of the community speak to a visible need for food and nutrition education in order to curb unhealthy consumption patterns. It has also been suggested that food education include opportunities for self-sustenance such as home gardening, canning, hunting, fishing, and foraging, with many Oconee residents expressing a desire for more active community gardens.

INPUT ON LOCAL CONSUMPTION FROM COMMUNITY FOOD GATHERINGS

"Hunting, fishing, and foraging are alternative ways of providing food that are abundant in your area."
– SALEM

"Nutrition, gardening, culinary, and home skills education [are needed] for youth."
– SALEM

"[We] need a home economics (life skills) comeback!"
– WESTMINSTER

"Some checkout persons in stores can't identify vegetables "
– LONG CREEK / MT. REST

"Afterschool and summer programs are a good way to get into schools to start educating [kids] about food."
– WALHALLA

"Limited cooking/ lack of knowledge on how to cook"
– WALHALLA

"[There is a] lack of training in life skills; young adults don't even know how to boil water."
– WALHALLA

While these activities do require a time commitment, they allow more control over personal food consumption, promote healthy, sustainable, and local foods, and overall have a significant positive effect on the local food system. Home food production can be as little as a few potted plants, or a bounty of produce to be cooked, canned, frozen, or fermented. Many of the 2022 CFG attendees expressed an interest in these skills and noted their potential to build relationships within the community. They also acknowledged the community connection that comes with public shared gardens, with many expressing the desire for a community garden in their neighborhood. As of 2018, the Oconee Cultivation Project (OCP) has started two community gardens in Westminster and Walhalla that incorporate food education into the programming in an effort to address the food education needs in Oconee. In 2022, members of the Oakway United Wesleyan observed a need for produce particularly among the elderly members of the community and established an in-ground garden producing more traditional seasonal crops of corn, tomatoes, and peppers. These opportunities illustrate the possibility for community voices to lead to positive shifts in the food environment.

Conclusion

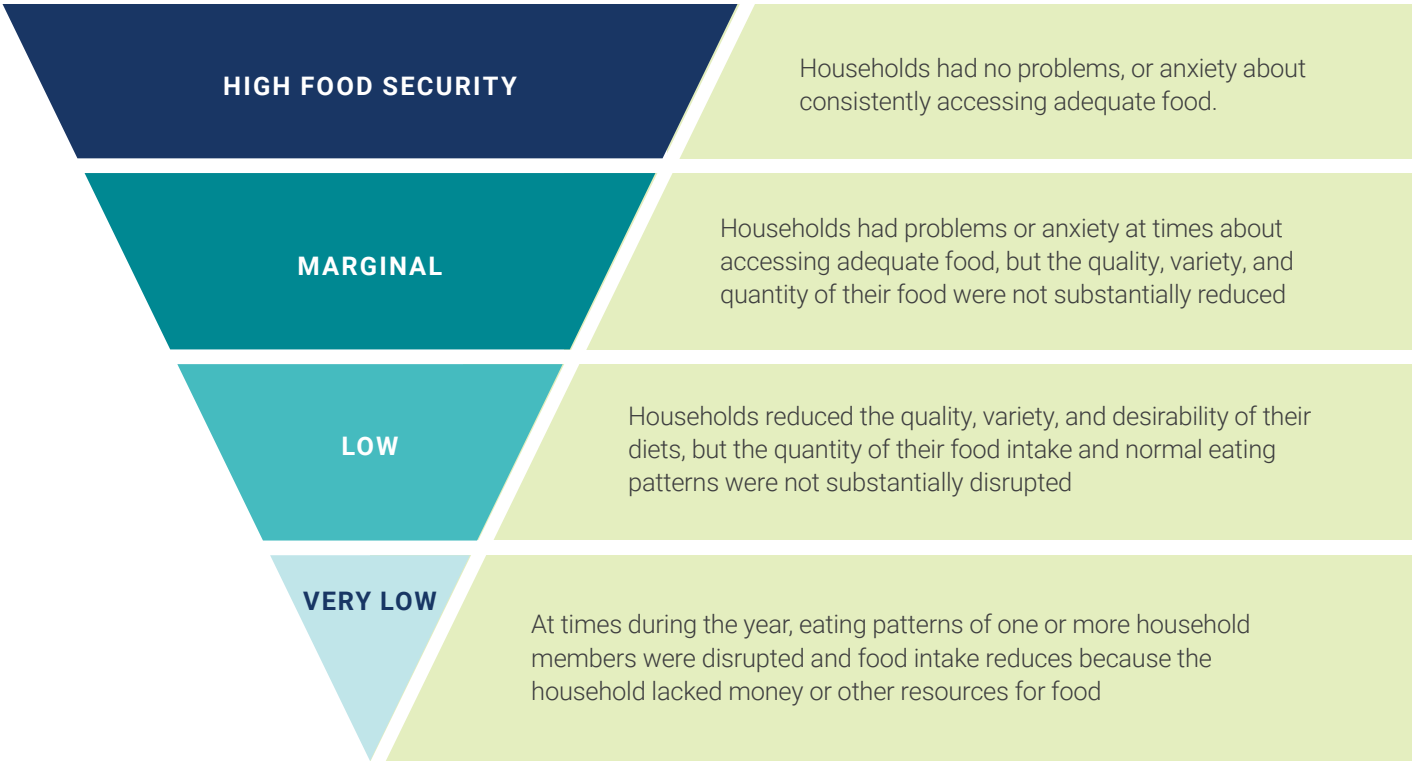
This section demonstrated how myriad socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors interact and shape overall consumption patterns. Reduced freedom of food choices, access, and availability in local communities is driven by the prioritization of profit over health, and economic shifts favoring low nutrition foods. These system dynamics have resulted in a diminished food landscape. In many ways, the failure of dietary education, as illustrated by the loss of home economics programs teaching nutrition and life skills, and our fast-paced lifestyles, which rely on convenience, have led to consumption patterns that result in poor health. Globalization, industrialization, and marketing have taken a toll on food choices and have diminished our understanding of healthy nutrition. Fortunately, we have seen here in Oconee County that many communities are taking the food system into their own hands and implementing positive changes to make healthy consumption habits accessible to all. Awareness of the benefits of proper nutrition and home-cooking are trends that signal growing public interest in healthy food consumption patterns. Ultimately, the greatest potential for meaningful change is through community engagement. Food choices are ultimately not individual-driven behaviors, but rather the outcome of system factors influencing overall societal consumption preferences and habits. Instituting changes that ripple throughout the entire food system requires a holistic approach that prioritizes community dietary health and well-being. Diversifying consumption choices with fresh, local and regional products, educating consumers, and investing in community health and nutrition are pathways forward to creating resilient food systems that benefit us all.

6

Community Food Security

In the United States, the federal government uses essentially the same definition of "food security" as the international definition introduced on p. 7 with a few minor differences (i.e. emphasizing the importance of food availability in socially acceptable ways). To monitor the state of national food security, the US Bureau of the Census conducts an annual survey of households as a supplement to its monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) tracking employment, income, and poverty. The CPS-Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) is a household survey distributed to a representative sample population of approximately 40,000 households each December.[60] Responses to these questions will place households on a continuum with a scale of high to very low food security, as outlined in Figure 6-1.

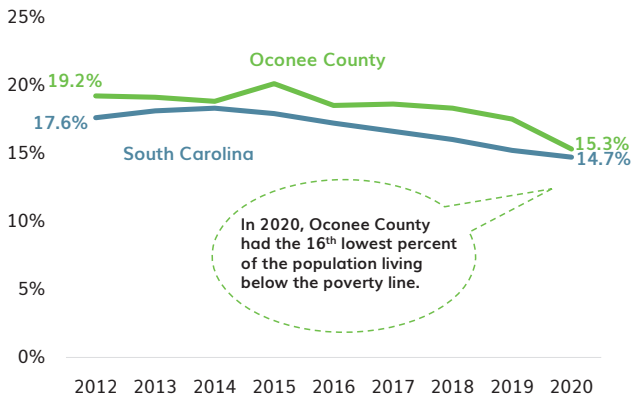
Food Security Pyramid



The USDA distinguishes between households with food insecurity, or the inability to acquire adequate food due to insufficient resources, at two levels. These are low food security, in which food quality is lower but food intake is not disrupted, and very low food security, in which eating patterns are disrupted and food intake is reduced. Prior to 2006, households identified as having very low food security were classified by the USDA as having "food insecurity with hunger", or the uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food. Hunger is an important component of food security that is difficult to measure with accuracy. This is because the experience of hunger is individual and physiological, whereas food security is measured using surveys at the household level. Those living with hunger are most likely to be in households that fall into the category of very low food security, which report higher instances of skipping meals, cutting meal size, and lacking the ability to afford balanced meals. In the U.S., 10.5% of households were estimated to be food-insecure in 2019, and 4.1% had very low food security.[61] In 2021, South Carolina was one of seven US states with a rate of very low food security that exceeded the national average, along with Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississpi, Texas, and West Virginia.[62]

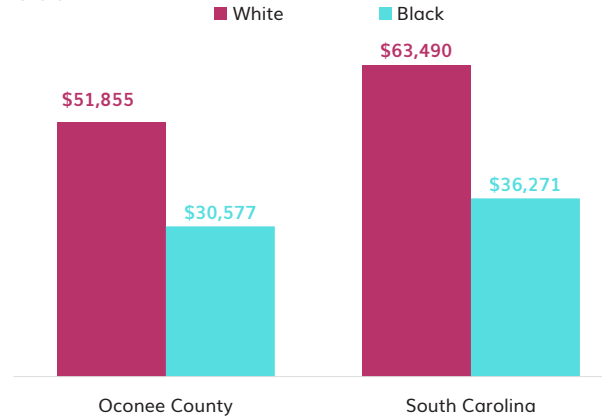
Unfortunately, there is limited data that paints a picture of food security at the local level. Rates of food insecurity, whether calculated by the US Census Bureau, the USDA, or any other agency, are estimates. Data is collected via surveys or calculated based on factors like income, distance from residence to the nearest grocery store, access to transportation, and household size. Most of this data collection is done at the national level and county-specific calculations are rare. This presents some difficulty in getting an accurate picture of the demographic and circumstantial aspects of food-insecure families. Yet, there are local indicators that we can use, in conjunction with community outreach, interviews, and our own experiences, to understand the conditions affecting community food security here in Oconee County. Additionally, some organizations such as Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks, estimate county-level food insecurity using key indicators such as poverty, unemployment, homeownership, and disability prevalence. In the year 2021, they estimated that Oconee County had 8,940 food-insecure residents, 11.3% of the total population.[63] These estimates are based primarily on a comparison of state-level data with county-level indicators, meaning the rates are not consistent using different methods of data analysis.

Population Living Below the Poverty Line
Percent



Source: American Community Survey.
Note: 5-year estimates.

Median Household Income, by Race
Dollars



Source: American Community Survey, 2020.
Note: 5-year estimates.

Food insecurity is commonly associated with lower education, minority populations, single mothers, children, and the US South.[59 / 60] In Oconee County, pantry client participation and SNAP-recipient information suggests the majority of our food-insecure households are single-occupant homes, although there are also larger families

headed by adults with low-wage jobs utilizing the local emergency food assistance network. Although there are many factors that affect food security, income is dominant, especially in Oconee County where the rate of poverty was **16.4%** according to the 2020 US Census.[64] As seen in Figure 6-2, this number is slightly higher than the state average of 14.7 percent. In some instances, households utilizing local emergency food resources are enduring personal challenges such as a divorce or increased expenses from unexpected events, such as a medical condition or housing issues. Racial disparities also play a role as nationally, Black and Hispanic households are at a higher risk for food insecurity.[65] This could be the case in Oconee County, where the median income for Black households is **$30,577**, ~41% lower than for Whites at **$51,855** (Figure 6-3). According to Feeding America, 17% of Black households and 17% of Hispanic households are estimated as experiencing food insecurity, as compared to 10% of White, non-Hispanic households.[63]

Food security also encompasses the dimension of food access, which is the ability to find and procure food within a reasonable distance and at a reasonable cost using reliable methods of transportation. This means food security does not depend only upon financial access to food, but also on physical access to nutritionally adequate food sources, which is more critical in rural areas where the distance to food access points is farther.[66] In Oconee, for instance, there are people who struggle with food access even when they have sufficient financial resources to buy food. Local food pantry volunteers have stated that clients travel from all cities and towns within the county, which indicates that food-insecure households are widely dispersed. Food access is a significant contributor to health disparities and approximately **14 percent** of Oconee residents (1 in 7) have low access to grocery stores.[67]

1 in 7
Oconee residents have low access to grocery stores

The USDA defines community food security as "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice".[68] This definition describes an ideal situation, but one that is nonexistent in reality. Nonetheless, looking at food systems through the lens of community food security provides a more holistic and community-centered approach and helps to remove the personal stigmas associated with food insecurity.

Federal Programs and Resources

The first White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health was held in 1969, with the ambitious goals of ending hunger in America and improving nutritional well-being across the country. The three-day conference resulted in **1,400 nutrition and food assistance programs and recommendations** being implemented or revised, including the Supplemental Feeding Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Food Stamp (SNAP) program, and the School Lunch Program (SLP).[69]

The following table lists the primary federal programs offering various forms of assistance for key populations (low income, age, gender, household size) in order by the year they were enacted.

Program	Target Population	Benefits	Year Created	Available in SC	SC Admin Agency	Available in Oconee
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	Low-income children	Free or reduced-price meals	1946	✓	SCDE	✓
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Low-income individuals and families	Money for use at approved vendors	1964	✓	SC DSS	✓
Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)	Low-income individuals aged 60+	Supplemental foods with key nutrients	1969	✓	SCDA	✗
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5	Money for certain foods at approved vendors, nutrition risk screening, nutrition education, breastfeeding support	1974	✓	SC DHEC	✓
Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP)	Individuals aged 60+, and their caretakers	Funding to states, territories, eligible tribal organizations, exclusively for purchasing food	1974	✓	SCDA	✓
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	Low-income children	Free or reduced-price meals	1975	✓	SCDE	✓
Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	Children 18 and under in areas where 50% or more households have income at or below 185% of federal poverty level	Free meals when school is not in session	1975	✓	SCDE	✓
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Children and adults in licensed and approved day-care settings	Free meals and snacks	1975	✓	SC DSS	✗
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)	Families on Native American reservations, Native Americans in Oklahoma, other eligible Native American families or individuals in eligible areas	Free USDA foods	1977	✓	SCDA	✓
The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)	Households with income at or below 150% of federal poverty level	Free USDA foods through state-approved local agencies (food banks)	1981	✓	SCDA	✓

Program	Target Population	Benefits	Year Created	Available in SC	SC Admin Agency	Available in Oconee
The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)	Low-income, pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5	Coupons for food from approved farms, farmers' markets, and roadside stands	1992	✓	SC DHEC	✓
Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)	60+ age individuals with income at or below 185% of federal poverty level	Local produce through farmers' markets, roadside stands, and CSA programs	2001	✓	SC DSS	✓

The programs in the above table serve different populations in the county and are administered locally through specific state agencies. Many of those for children are offered through the local school district, while others supply food through food pantries or provide consumers with the means to purchase the food from certified vendors. All of the foregoing programs contribute to the public effort to alleviate food insecurity. For low-income households in Oconee County, SNAP is the most universally utilized and highest-impact program because it directly benefits those living below, at, and just above the federal poverty guidelines.

As of July 2023, the federal poverty level for a 1-person household annually is **$14,580**, **$19,720** for a 2-person household, **$24,860** for a 3-person household, and **$30,000** for a 4-person household.[70] SNAP recipients must meet work requirements, which can include participating in work programs. In May of 2023, **4,230 households** were enrolled in Oconee County's SNAP program, up from 3,528 in January 2020.[71] In 2021, **18%** of Oconee County households were below the federal poverty level, but only **13%** of households received SNAP benefits.[72] Households with gross incomes up to 130% of the poverty level are SNAP-eligible. The tables below show the number and size of households receiving assistance through the SNAP program in geographic areas by zip code (2019, 2023):

Geographic Area (indicated by Zip Code)	Estimated Total:	Household received Food Stamps/SNAP in the past 12 months (%):	Household received Food Stamps/SNAP in the past 12 months: Income in the past 12 months below poverty level (%):
South Carolina	1921862	236393	124031
Oconee County	31978	4245 (13.3%)	2455 (7.7%)
Fair Play	993	36 (3.6%)	30 (3.0%
Long Creek	189	34 (18%)	0 (0.0%)
Mountain Rest	805	36 (4.5%)	7 (0.9%)
Salem	2478	162 (6.5%)	69 (2.8%)
Seneca (North)	5400	335 (6.2%)	177 (3.3%)
Seneca (South)	9336	1552 (16.6%)	885 (9.5%)
Tamassee	412	11 (2.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Walhalla	4490	925 (20.6%)	603 (13.4)
Westminster	5856	949 (16.2%)	606 (10.3%)
West Union	1987	177 (8.9%)	71 (3.6%)

SNAP Benefit Range	No. Oconee Households	No. of Household Members	No. Oconee Households
<$10	2	1	2210
$10-$50	1235	2-3	1298
$150-$300	1351	4-5	600
$300-$600	860	6-7	104
$600+	782	7+	18

CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY AND RESOURCES

Feeding America estimates that as many as **1,760** of the county's food insecure population are children between the ages of 0 and 18.[63] However, as of May 2023, there were as many as **3,739** children aged 0-18 in households receiving SNAP benefits.[71] The assessment team spoke with multiple community members such as teachers and nonprofit volunteers who reported observing hunger in Oconee children firsthand. Children who experience food insecurity may experience impaired cognitive development, difficulty concentrating, and lower academic achievement. In turn, this affects job readiness and the ability to effectively join the workforce in the future.[68]

> **It's all connected, poverty and food insecurity… and it's tied into complex developmental trauma.**
>
> — **LORELEI SWANSON**
> **LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST AT CAROLINA FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CENTER**

The majority of programs benefiting school children are administered through the School District of Oconee County (SDOC). These include school breakfast and lunch programs, summer meal programs, and after-school snack programs. For some children, meals provided by the schools are often the only food that they eat in a day if they do not have food at home, which can leave them hungry during weekends and holidays. Backpack programs aim to increase children's access to food during these times and depend on teachers to identify students in need. The SDOC program is currently administered by the Education Foundation of Oconee County, which provided non-perishable snacks and easy-to-prepare foods to **280 to 300** students per week during the 2023-23 school year.[73] In light of the levels of poverty and food insecurity in Oconee, there is concern among community members working with the food insecure families that not all children who need this program are being reached. This could be due to noted challenges with the referral and identification process, the lack of clear information about the program, and / or the difficulty experienced in obtaining information.

Summer meal programs are intended to fill the gap when school is not in session, providing free meals to children 18 and under in specific locations through the USDA FNS Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

The SFSP reimburses community partners (e.g. schools, nonprofits, local government, camps) who provide meals as sponsors of the program, which is administered in SC as the Summer Break Cafe through the Department of Education. As of 2023, Oconee County has no sponsors of the Summer Break Cafe program. Instead, the SDOC utilizes the SFSP Seamless Summer Option (SSO), which is a streamlined version of the SFSP for school districts to provide meals at specific locations. SSO meals are either offered in "closed sites" to specific students enrolled in summer programming or in one of the "open sites" the SDOC has an agreement with. Open

sites are located where they can be accessible to any child in the neighborhood who wants to attend; in Oconee, these sites are most often branches of the Oconee County Public Library (OCPL) system.

During the COVID-19, mandates requiring on-site consumption and limiting students to one meal were waived, and SDOC staff quickly organized to begin delivering meals across the county through emergency use of the SSO beginning in March 2020. That year, there was a significant increase in meals served over the summer months of June - August, suggesting many families who have a need for SSO meals are not utilizing the program. For rural areas especially, transportation and awareness are major barriers to the summer meal program. Stigma also inhibits participation in the program, particularly among teens who may not want to attend if their friends do not.[74] Local data on this subject is needed to determine the main barriers to access for county residents.

Programs targeting childhood hunger such as those administered through the school district faced numerous challenges during the pandemic but ultimately brought a higher level of awareness to those delivering meals. Referring to efforts to feed children during the height of the COVID pandemic, the SDOC food service manager stated:

> **When we were on buses delivering meals to students in their homes, the disparities within our own community became even more apparent. We've always had an understanding that for some children, school meals are the best meals they get. But, the pandemic and emergency feeding efforts truly shined light on the subject of food insecurity. We will not soon forget the food struggles that so many of our children and families face; therefore, we will continue to make all efforts to provide any food support that we can.**
>
> **— OFFR QUESTIONNAIRE**

SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY AND RESOURCES

Low-income seniors are especially vulnerable to food insecurity because they are often isolated, have a diminished ability to care for themselves, and lack social support. Food insecurity is a prominent issue that often goes unnoticed, as noted by those in the community that work with the senior population.

> **They know they are last in line for everything.**
>
> **— JUDY CAYWOOD**
> **WESTMINSTER SENIOR OUTREACH CENTER**

There are programs and organizations in Oconee County working to address the needs of the elderly. Upstate Meals on Wheels is a program offered by Senior Solutions providing meals to qualifying seniors (60+ age) that can be paid for by Medicare, Medicaid, and other programs. Approximately two-hundred seniors in Oconee County were receiving this service in 2020. Golden Corner Food Pantry's Senior Program offers a drive-through program on Mondays for residents ages 60 or older that allows these clients, many of whom have limited mobility, to remain in their vehicles and have their food loaded for them by volunteers.

Additionally, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is a governmental program intended to increase access to fresh produce for seniors by distributing vouchers locally. Eligible participants receive vouchers through the United Way of Oconee County that can be used to purchase food from participating vendors (i.e. producers, farmers) at local farmers markets, farm stands, and farm stores. Unfortunately, there are a limited number of local vendors accepting SFMNP vouchers. The day-long training program in Columbia is often a hurdle for farmers, due to the long

distance to travel to the capital and needing to remain on-farm to manage the farm. Many seniors also struggle with the ability to access farms and farmers markets due to mobility challenges and lack of transportation.

Local Emergency Food Assistance Network

Emergency food assistance networks consist of hunger relief organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens that provide grocery items and meals to community members in need. Most of this goes through food banks, which are warehouses that collect food from local businesses and donors for distribution to local partner agencies in their service area. Feeding America receives donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals and is a primary source of food, funds, and technical assistance for food banks in our area.[75] Another key source of food for the emergency food assistance network is The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a USDA program providing foods such as fruits and vegetables, eggs, meat, dairy, and whole grain products purchased from US producers to state-distributing agencies, primarily food banks.[76] In 2022, TEFAP foods accounted for over 20% of the items distributed through the Feeding America network at 1.24 billion pounds of food.[77] Local emergency food assistance organizations often purchase products at discounted rates from wholesale distributors in addition to receiving donations from a wide range of sources such as grocery stores, churches, local businesses, and school / workplace food drives.

Oconee County is one of 24 counties in SC and NC served by the Second Harvest of Metrolina food bank, which provides food, training, technical assistance, and hunger education for over 950 partner agencies that include pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters, and senior and children's programs.[78] Currently, the food bank supports 26 organizations in Oconee, including Golden Corner Food Pantry, Dot's Kitchen of Westminster, and the College St. Baptist Church and St. Luke Methodist food pantries. The food bank also provides food for 14 backpack programs for students in SDOC.[79] These local partner agencies purchase items such as canned goods, meat, pasta and rice, cereal, and peanut butter at a heavily discounted rate, although some items such as water, bread, and produce can be received at no cost. Second Harvest is also the distributing agency for the county's USDA TEFAP foods, which are available to agencies serving a certain number of clients that meet the facility requirements for cold storage of refrigerated and frozen foods.

Golden Corner Food Pantry's Client-Choice Shopping area

Food pantries serving low-income clients and seniors provide the majority of food distributed through the local emergency food assistance network in Oconee County. Pantries operate in diverse ways, offering food with varying frequency (i.e. weekly, bi-weekly). All of these pantries differ in their eligibility requirements, with some serving only residents within city limits and others requiring income verification. The majority of the county's pantries are run by churches of various denominations, such as Calvary Church of God in Westminster, St. Luke United Methodist and College Street Baptist churches in Walhalla to low-income clients and seniors. Golden Corner Food Pantry is the county's largest pantry, serving approximately 2,000 people each month and approximately 1 million pounds of food annually. As of 2022, Golden Corner offers client-choice shopping for clients to shop

the pantry, enabling them to choose foods that meet their dietary needs and cooking/preparation ability, as well as foods that are culturally appropriate. The pantry operates Monday through Friday to serve the community and is currently the only pantry offering a Saturday pick-up, which is particularly helpful to those who work during the week. St. Luke Methodist also offers a drive-through pantry twice monthly for area residents.

Soup kitchens operate differently than food pantries in that they serve meals on-site at regular intervals (daily, weekly, etc.) to those with an immediate need for a prepared meal. These organizations are especially important for the county's homeless population, as the homeless do not have the physical or financial means to prepare their own meals from items procured at a food pantry, and often do not possess the identification and verifications necessary to apply for food assistance. Our Daily Bread has been operating in Seneca since 1992 and serves approximately 130 meals per day Monday through Friday. Their facility is also used by other groups on weekends to serve the community. Dot's Kitchen of Westminster also serves Monday through Friday, and was noted as an important source of meals for low-income seniors living in the area. Patsy Davis, a founding Oconee Food Council member and resident of the Utica community in Seneca, has been serving her community for years in various capacities, primarily providing meals for the community's highest-needs residents. For over three years, she and her volunteers have been providing meals and takeaway bags with snacks and water by collecting donations and purchasing foods at a discount from local retailers. Some churches also offer weekly meals, such as Ann Hope Methodist in Seneca and Potter's House in Walhalla.

Barriers to Community Food Access

While income significantly affects one's ability to acquire food, other barriers such as transportation, location, awareness of available resources, technology, cultural background, pride, and lack of representation are all important factors impacting food access. In rural areas such as Oconee County, access can pose challenges even for those who have the financial means to purchase food but live far away from food access points. This situation can compound the issues people face when experiencing food insecurity, hindering their ability to access the locations necessary to participate in federal nutrition programs and receive support through the local emergency food assistance network.

Second only to low income, lack of transportation is a significant barrier to food access — either for shopping at grocery stores or markets, or reaching a local food pantry or soup kitchen. In a 2022 client survey conducted by the Golden Corner Food Pantry, one-third of the respondents indicated they knew someone who needed food but wasn't using the pantry, and 42% of those listed transportation as the top reason. These results and other community feedback led the organization to start a mobile food pantry to address this challenge. This mobile pantry currently visits Salem, Mountain Rest, and Long Creek. Other organizations deliver meals or grocery items to seniors and disabled residents, such as the Calvary Church of God and the Community Tree of Westminster, but overall there are limited operations delivering food for those lacking access to transportation. Limited transportation reduces the opportunity to shop for the best prices, meaning their choices may be limited to nearby options that are most often inflated in price. A survey conducted by a Clemson

University Creative Inquiry class in Spring 2022 reviewed the prices for provisions locally and found, for example, that the price of a gallon of milk ranged from $2.45 at the Aldi grocery store to $6.49 at a QT gas station.

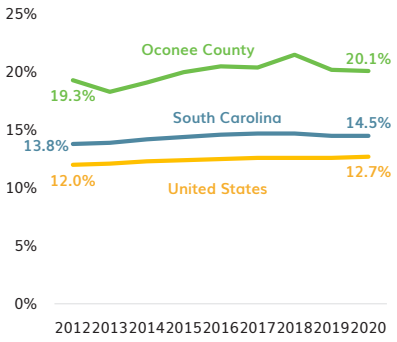
Public transportation options are extremely limited for those in the county without a vehicle. The Clemson Area Transit system (CATBus) provides bus service in Oconee along four routes in the greater Seneca area, however, the bus only runs once per hour and two of the four routes do not operate on weekends. There is little to no signage for bus stop locations, and accessing routes and schedules can be difficult for those without internet access. There is currently no bus access in Walhalla, West Union, Westminster, Fair Play, or rural areas of the county where transportation needs may be highest. Volunteers working in the local emergency food network have noted that clients utilizing the pantries have a difficult time getting their food onto buses due to a limit on the amount of food that can be taken aboard.

The term "disability" encompasses a wide range of limiting conditions, such as vision or hearing impairment, musculoskeletal issues, and mental illness. Those in the disabled community are at a higher risk of food insecurity as a result of difficulties in physically accessing food-access points due to transportation or mobility problems and financial limitations due to lower wages and higher personal and medical expenses.[80] According to SC DHEC, the disability rate in Oconee County is 20.1%, the highest in the Upstate region, with 77.3% aged 65 and older. Of that number, 9.9% of disabled Oconee residents present with an ambulatory disability, meaning a disability that impairs physical movement.[81]

Each form of disability presents different challenges for individuals and their families, with food insecurity being a major contender. Particularly in the rural areas of Oconee County, mobility restrictions can present a significant barrier to food access for many individuals. Not only can ambulatory difficulties decrease one's ability to access food, but this challenge in accessing and preparing nutritious foods can also lead to an increase in other diet-related chronic conditions.[80] These challenges are further exacerbated by the lack of safe and functional access to public transportation. The majority of bus stops throughout Oconee County are not along easily traveled routes with sidewalks or safe crosswalks across busy roadways. Not only is this a safety issue for any pedestrians, but for those using wheelchairs or other mobility-assistance devices, they are inaccessible. Our local bus system is a valuable asset in improving transportation-related access, but its limited service leaves ample opportunity for improvement.

Population with a Disability

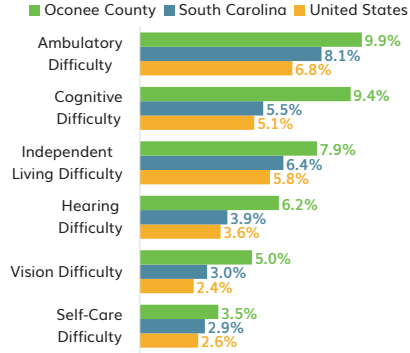
Percent



Source: American Community Survey, 2020
Note: 5-year estimates.

Disability Type

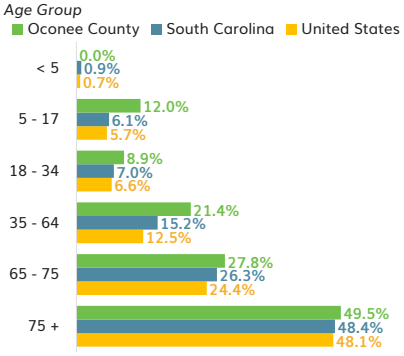
Percent



Source: American Community Survey, 2020
Note: 5-year estimates.

Population with a Disability, by Age

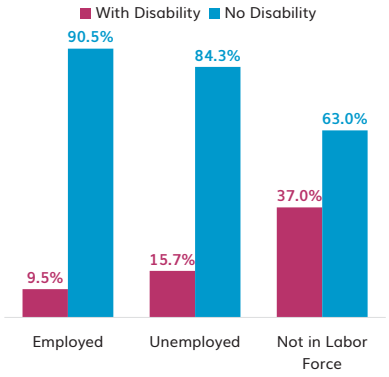
Age Group



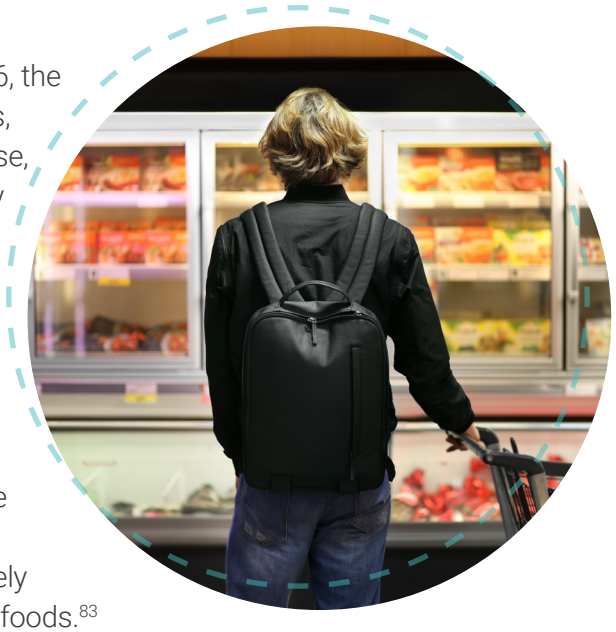
Source: American Community Survey, 2020
Note: 5-year estimates.

Employment Status, by Disability Status

Percent



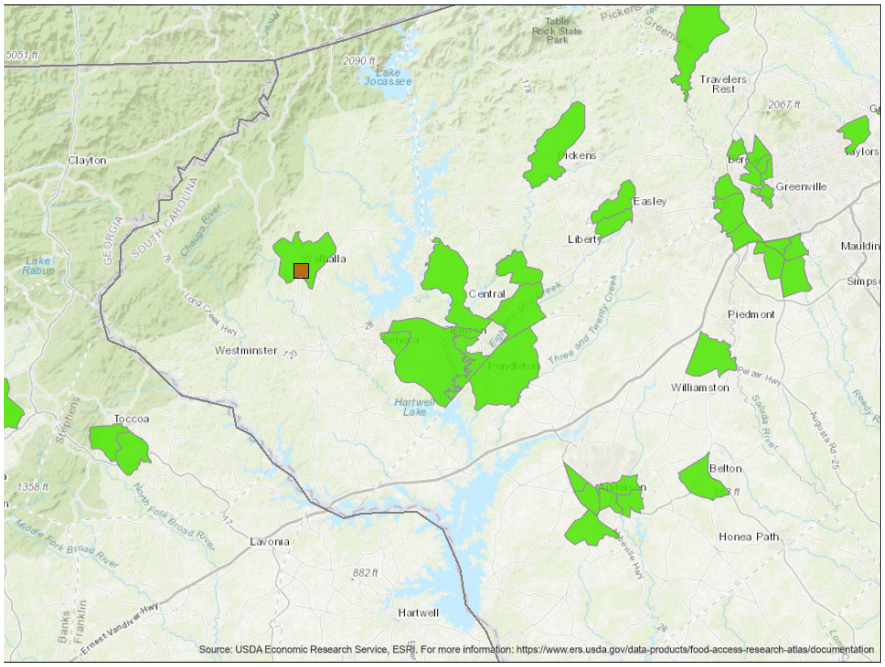
Source: American Community Survey, 2020
Note: 5-year estimates, Civilian noninstitutionalized population 18 to 64 years



As of the most recent USDA Food Environment Research Atlas in 2016, the county had 17 healthy food retailers including supermarkets, groceries, and corner stores offering fresh produce and healthy options.[45] Of these, 13 were SNAP-authorized, and 8 were WIC authorized. Oconee County also has four active farmers markets offering nutritious, local foods, but none are equipped to accept SNAP or WIC payments, which leaves farmers markets out of reach for many residents and creates a barrier to access to high-quality food.

Lack of supermarkets or grocery stores in a given area creates what are commonly known as food deserts, or areas with limited access to fresh produce, lean protein, and other nutritious foods.[82] In 2013, the USDA replaced the term food desert with low-income and low-access (LI/LA) and changed how these areas were identified to more accurately reflect data collected on community access to healthy and affordable foods.[83] The USDA ERS Food Access Research Atlas (FARA) is a tool used to view LI/LA census tracts, with "access" referring to a reasonable distance to healthy food sold at supercenters, supermarkets, and large grocery stores. The data provided by USDA on LI/LA areas is widely used in strategic planning across the nation in relation to food security. The FARA indicates that Oconee has two low-income / low-access areas, one in the city of Walhalla and the second being the Utica community of Seneca. Despite its classification, Walhalla has two tiendas selling fresh produce, meats, dry goods, and pantry staples, one of which (La Estrella) offers freshly baked bread, pastries, and a butcher counter. These tiendas, however, do not meet the USDA's definition of a healthy food retailer as a smaller independent grocer.

Many Oconee residents have used the term "food desert" to describe areas of the county with little to no retail food options, such as Salem, Tamassee, Long Creek, and Mountain Rest, none of which have a grocery store or supermarket within a 10-mile driving distance. (Notably, the distance determining food access is measured by a radius on the map, and does not account for actual travel time.) However, the food desert classification is based not only on location relative to a food-access point but also on income levels in that particular census tract. Therefore these areas of the county that do not have grocery stores within a 10-mile radius are not, by USDA standards, considered "food deserts". It has also been noted that consumers are not likely to always shop at the nearest available location;[84] they may often shop closer to work, or take another route home from work to access a preferred food-access point, whereas others may take a bus that stops where they prefer to shop. Also taken into account in some studies has been time. It could also be argued that current data concerning low-income census tracts, which affect food desert status on the



USDA map, has become skewed due to gentrification in the county. This is not to say that there should be a grocery store every ten miles, as this has not been proven to change dietary behaviors, but that measurements of distance and income do not accurately portray the local food environment, especially for rural communities. There is also no current data to confirm that a majority of households directly within the LI/LA areas are currently experiencing food insecurity, or that large pockets of food-insecure households do not exist outside of these boundaries. Adequate access to nutritional foods is a complex issue, much more than can be conveyed on a map. This data gap emphasizes the importance of community-centered approaches to raise awareness of local food resources for improved community food access where it is needed.

For families and individuals experiencing food insecurity there are programs, services, and organizations available to assist with food access, but additional barriers do limit the use of these resources. The most critical of these is awareness, as navigating and applying for such resources can be overwhelming for some who are unfamiliar with the process. Being aware of what is available, how and where to apply, and how resources are used is a challenge, which according to a key informant is one of our biggest hurdles. It has been suggested that people need more one-on-one help to find and utilize resources, complete applications, and present proper documentation needed for approval.

Even when there is awareness of available resources, additional barriers can be technological ability / access, culture, and / or personal pride. Senior citizens in particular often struggle with lengthy application processes, especially when they are designed for web access. According to Judy Caywood of Westminster Senior Outreach Center, many seniors in Oconee County do not own computers or have internet access, and those who do often lack the skills to navigate online resources and applications. Non-native English speakers face language barriers that limit awareness of programs and complicate the application process but also struggle to access food that meets their cultural preferences. Community members supporting the local Hispanic and Latino families indicated that these families do not benefit equally from resources like the backpack program, which does not provide food that children from these families are accustomed to eating. Another factor affecting the choice of local minority communities to use local food assistance resources is a preference for receiving support from community members who share the same cultural or ethnic background, a point that was made to the assessment team by both Black and Hispanic community members. Naturally, Spanish-speaking community members are less likely to use services that lack a translator to help them navigate the process. In addition, most assistance programs operate within a 9-5 weekday schedule, a major barrier for the Hispanic and Latino communities who are often working longer hours and are unable to access those resources. Of course, what prevents many people from seeking help is personal pride and / or the stigma attached to receiving support through federal programs or from local organizations. Receiving assistance through SNAP, food banks, or soup kitchens can be stressful for those who feel shame and prefer discretion. According to the GCFP feedback survey, not wanting to ask for help was the number two reason stated for those who were in need but chose not to utilize food assistance.

Not wanting to ask for help

#2 reason for choosing not to utilize food assistance

Improving Access - Challenges Understood, Accepted, Unmet

Various individuals and organizations across the county working to increase food security have been inspired to do more after seeing the needs firsthand. This is culminating in new additions to the emergency food assistance network, as well as new ways of meeting the needs. Charles Mulwee, a county sheriff's deputy, observed that the food provided by the school backpack program was still not enough for families while serving as a school resource officer. This inspired him to start the Community Tree, which combats transportation issues by delivering meals to local families in select locations. Additionally, a new food pantry called In the Gap serves families whose income falls between 151%-186% of the poverty guidelines and those with food intolerances, diabetes, arthritis, and autoimmune conditions. Feeding American estimates that of the food insecure, 39% have incomes above the federal poverty guidelines.[63] In the Gap founder Joann Johnson states: "There are so many people whose income falls within this wage gap. For instance; some of our clients are business professionals, plant workers, police officers, and single parents who are working two jobs and cannot make ends meet." She indicates the rising costs of food and living expenses have made it extremely difficult for local families to sustain themselves and said their organization is committed to filling this gap.

Directors of local food pantries and soup kitchens have expressed appreciation for producers such as Sweetheart Farms and McLadke Orchards that donate fresh produce, eggs, and other items to their organizations. One Clemson Extension agent working with local fruit producers feels the ideal outcome for the future of the local agriculture industry would be increased participation in federal and state programs that increase access to local fruits and vegetables for low-income families. Participation in these programs, like the Senior Farmers Market program, often requires more work on the part of the producer. This can include specific training classes to become certified vendors for specific or costly equipment and processing fees to accept EBT payments. Still, many of our local farmers have gone above and beyond to make their products more accessible to the community in their role as producers. The community food security perspective seeks to amplify underrepresented voices by raising awareness and empathy in a unified effort to improve our community, and we acknowledge the positive impact of the local organizations and individuals previously highlighted, as well as farmers in our county who seek to address the needs of our communities in ways.

Conclusion

While those working in the food security sector have expressed concern about a lack of awareness of local food insecurity, people from various backgrounds are coming together and working to improve food access. Even those who are not working directly in food assistance see the importance of addressing hunger issues and how they can affect other areas of life. BRIEF's executive director, Mac Devine noted this in regard to children coming in for their STEM programs: "Why does tech guy care about food? Well it's hard to help people with technology and innovation when they haven't had basic needs met". New solutions such as blessing boxes, which have recently appeared in a few locations around the county, encourage anyone in the area to join the community effort to support those in need with a "take something, leave something" approach. With food costs rising, there is a growing number of people who find themselves in need of help to make ends meet, particularly our elderly residents on fixed incomes. To achieve community food security, we must understand the multitude of diverse factors, including lack of income and transportation, lack of awareness and education, employment, housing, and culture, and understand what resources are presently available and bring together new resources and individuals who are committed to addressing the unmet needs.

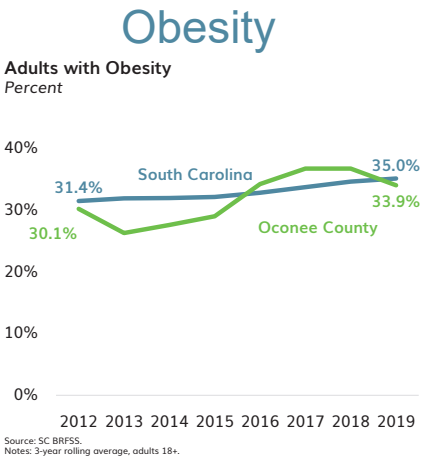
7

Community Nutrition

The 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health "transformed the policy landscape" by putting in place programs that improved food access and provided the primary form of food assistance for families.[85] Today, food access issues may be overshadowed by health issues resulting from overconsumption of unhealthy foods impacting both food-secure and insecure families. Nationally, rates of diet-related diseases have been rising at an alarming rate. Since 1980, the prevalence of obesity in adults has risen from **14% to 40%**[54, 86] and according to the FDA, over one million deaths each year are attributed to preventable, diet-related disease.[87] As stated by one of the nation's top cardiologists working in federal food policy, Dariush Mozaffarian: "Most Americans have one or more diet-related diseases — it's the exception to be healthy."[85]

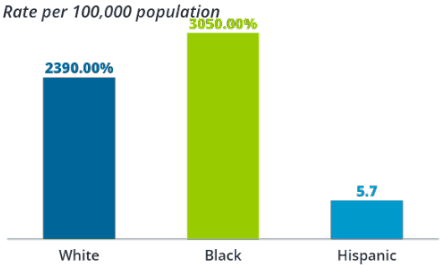
Nutrition, like food security, is a realm of estimates and calculations based on various related factors. Medical information, dietary surveys and studies, and household expenditures may all be used to gauge the nutrition and dietary patterns of a determined area to estimate overall nutrition. By comparing the rates of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other conditions for Oconee residents with those at the state and national level, we can see where Oconee County sits on the scale of health and well-being, including the disparities that exist in overall health outcomes for certain ethnic groups.

Being overweight is a condition in which the body weight is higher than considered normal for height and build, whereas obesity refers to having an excessive accumulation of body fat that presents health risks. National data indicates that two-thirds of US adults and one-third of high school students are overweight or obese, and one-fifth of all adolescents are obese.[88,89] As of 2018, **34.3% of South Carolina adults** were obese and the rate of obesity in Oconee County as of 2020 was **33.9 percent.**[64] In addition to putting one at risk of serious conditions like diabetes and heart disease, obesity can also lead to conditions such as sleep apnea, mental illness, and oral health problems. Regular daily activities can also be impeded by joint and back pain.[90] Adults with obesity face nearly **$1,900** in excess medical costs each year.



Diabetes Hospitalizations, by Race/Ethnicity

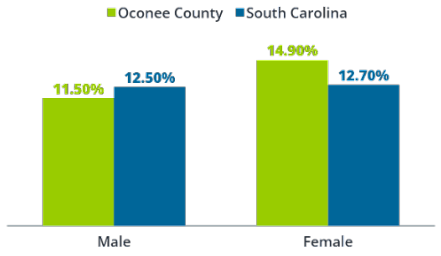
Rate per 100,000 population



Source: SC RFA, 2016-2021.
Note: Primary diagnosis of diabetes.

Adults With Diabetes, by Sex

Percent



Source: SC BRFSS, 2011-2020.
Notes: Adults 18+.

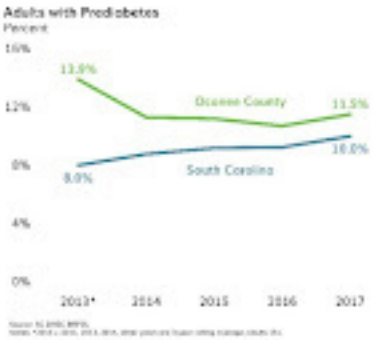
Diabetes now affects 11% of the US population, and another 29% are prediabetic. In the last 20 years, the number of people diagnosed with diabetes has doubled, costing nearly $10,000 per person per year in excess medical costs.[91] Diabetes affects the body's ability to break down food due to not having enough insulin (Type I) or not using insulin effectively (Type II). While genetics influence diabetes risk and there are no known preventative measures for Type I diabetes, diet, and lifestyle choices are major risk factors for Type II diabetes. Type II is significantly more common in the US, making up 90 to 95 percent of cases. Being overweight or obese, having high levels of low-density cholesterol in the blood, and having a sedentary lifestyle all increase the risk of developing Type II diabetes. According to SC DHEC data, Oconee County's rate of diabetes in adults overall was higher than the state of South Carolina totals in 2020, with Black community members experiencing higher rates of diabetes-related hospitalization.[64]

LIVE HEALTHY SOUTH CAROLINA

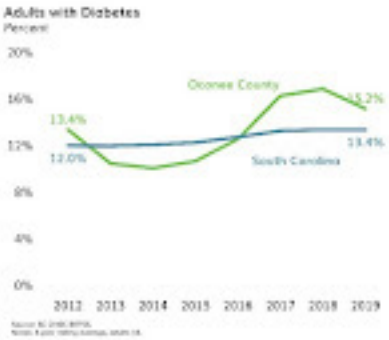
Chronic Disease
Oconee County

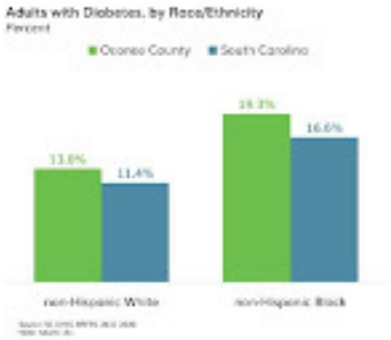
dhec

Prediabetes

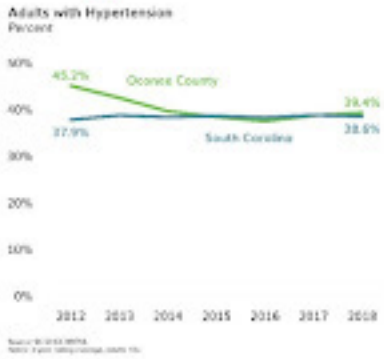


Diabetes

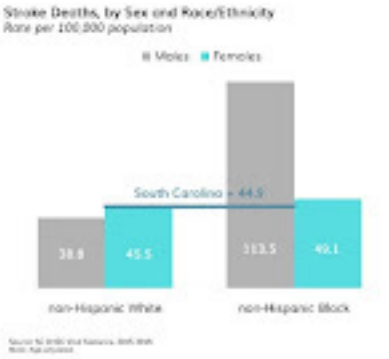




Hypertension



Stroke



Heart Disease

As of 2018, the rate of hypertension in Oconee County was 39.4%, while the rates of heart disease for male and female residents were higher than the overall rates for the state of South Carolina.64 Hypertension is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Genetics plays a major role in the development of hypertension, but other environmental factors such as diet, exercise, and obesity, are just as important. Diets containing high levels of sodium, such as is found in heavily processed convenience foods, can increase the risk, while diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and other whole foods can lower blood pressure.[92]

The quality of food we eat plays a significant role in addressing these and other diet-related health issues. However, it is important to recognize that obesity, diabetes, and other conditions are not solely due to individual diet choices. Food availability, food access, pervasive advertising, access to education, sedentary lifestyles, and social and cultural norms create circumstances that lower the likelihood of making sound decisions about our diets and health. For most of human history, it was almost impossible to develop the diet-related health issues that are prevalent today because food was scarce, perishable, and minimally processed. Industrialization has revolutionized our access to all varieties of food but has also led to negative effects, such as nutrient-poor ingredients, that come with mass production and processing. Processed foods are artificially cheapened by government subsidies, making them more accessible to low-income households. Between 1980 and 2010, prices fell for soft drinks (now sweetened with corn syrup) due in part to subsidies on corn, while prices for fruits and vegetables rose.[93] Processed foods contain a disproportionately high amount of calories compared to their nutrients and overall mass.[94]

We have seen how addressing food security alone fails to account for the quality of food available, with more focus on supplying quantities of food. Nutrition security is an evolution of the food security concept accounting for the need for nutritionally adequate food as part of a healthy, balanced diet. Usage of this term started to rise in the 1990s to address blind spots in the traditional food security approach to overconsumption and its related health issues. The concept of nutrition security measures equitable access at all times to healthy, safe, affordable foods that promote well-being and optimal health.

Programs that simply provide large volumes of food without regard to their quality do not improve health, and in many cases worsen it. The 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health demonstrates a shift toward a more systems-level approach and presented a coordinated effort to address nutrition, physical activity, and the disparities that exist and perpetuate these issues. Following the event, the White House Challenge to End Hunger and Build Healthy Communities was launched in 2023, encouraging collaboration on hunger and nutrition issues throughout the country.[95] This is a promising sign that nutrition may begin to receive the attention it needs.

Local Nutrition Resources and Initiatives

There are programs and initiatives in Oconee County that aim to increase access to nutritious foods, expand nutrition education, and help residents manage diet-related conditions, all with the singular goal of improving health outcomes in our communities. These are offered by a range of community partners that include public health agencies, universities, and local organizations that work collaboratively with state-level agencies and NGOs to provide resources toward health improvement solutions. Two well-known community partners currently working on health and nutrition initiatives are Clemson Extension Rural Health & Nutrition and Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG). Clemson Rural Health & Nutrition provides free programming, while AHG has a different approach involving capacity-building within schools.

CLEMSON EXTENSION RURAL HEALTH & NUTRITION

Clemson Extension Rural Health & Nutrition offers local programs focused on nutrition education, disease prevention, and disease management. Know Diabetes by Heart is a diabetes education program focusing on heart health and heart disease, and the 16-week Health Extension for Diabetes program teaches self-management skills. A monthly cooking class, Stirring up Healthy Recipes, teaches attendees how to prepare quick, healthy meals at home.

ALLIANCE FOR A HEALTHIER GENERATION (AHG)

Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG) works to foster healthy eating and physical activity in school and community environments. AHG, in partnership with HEAL's School Wellness sub-committee, is currently working to connect community health organizations with school and district leaders to build district and school wellness teams, among other initiatives focused on improving overall health in schools and increasing access to relevant resources.

HEALTHY OCONEE COALITION (HOC)

The Healthy Oconee Coalition (HOC) is a coalition of community partners working in spearheading policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies to improve county health. HOC led a county health assessment and health improvement plan to be carried out by four committees: HEAL (Healthy Eating, Active Living), Equitable Access, Mental and Behavioral Health, and Child and Maternal Health.

In 2023, the HOC began work through a grant provided by the SC Office of Rural Health to improve access to healthy foods in the county. The Coalition opted to focus on reducing and preventing the incidence of diabetes in Oconee County through food and nutrition-related initiatives, with a focus on Hispanic and African American communities who have a higher incidence of diabetes in our county. This effort has brought a wide range of community partners around the initiatives. These organizations and entities were already working locally in the realm of health and nutrition, and were all brought together to tackle this problem from multiple angles.

HEAL Grant Workgroup	Initiative(s)	Lead Community Partners
Equitable Access	Prenatal resources, community health workers, and diabetes prevention programs	Clemson Extension Rural Health & Nutrition; Foothills YMCA
School Wellness	Student Obesity Flier, SDOC Wellness Team & Data Sharing	Alliance for a Healthier Generation; SDOC; Clemson SNAP-Ed
Farmers Markets	Increase redemption rates of SFMNP vouchers, increase attendance at farmers markets, encourage physical activity	FARM Center; United Way; Oconee Food Council
FoodShare	Healthy Cooking Classes, Increase Distribution, Establish new sites	Blue Ridge Community Center; Oconee Food Council

One of the state's main offerings to increase healthy food access is through FoodShare SC, which distributes produce boxes at discounted rates to residents in participating counties. In 2012, South Carolina followed the lead of other states to launch the Healthy Bucks program, which incentivizes SNAP purchases of healthier foods by offering bonus "bucks" to buy additional produce at participating locations. This program offsets the costs of FoodShare boxes for SNAP recipients, lowering the box price from $20 to $5.

Oconee County gained its first FoodShare SC distribution site in 2022 at the Blue Ridge Community Center (BRCC) in Seneca. The Oconee program is currently an extension of the Pickens County FoodShare program, which is administered by the Greenville organization Feed & Seed. As of 2023, BRCC is receiving support from a group of county stakeholders called the Healthy Oconee Coalition to increase box distribution and establish another distribution site to improve access to the program. The ultimate goal of a successful county FoodShare program is to establish a FoodShare hub — the facility used for the ordering and receiving of food shipments, and packing of boxes to be sent to distribution sites. One of the many benefits of having a FoodShare SC hub is the opportunity to use funds to purchase produce for boxes from local farms, which not only provides healthy food to recipients but supports local growers. While there is interest in this option for Oconee County, there is consensus that the partner program will require more support before expansion to a full program with an established county hub is possible.

FoodShare also operates Veggie Rx, a produce prescription program that allows doctors to prescribe fresh produce to patients with heart disease, diabetes, and other diet-related conditions. While available at participating healthcare providers statewide, currently the program is only available locally through Clemson Rural Health Clinic at Walhalla. This clinic offers produce prescription boxes, which contain recipes, cooking tips, and admission to monthly on-site nutrition and cooking classes. Clemson University's SNAP-Ed program also offers nutrition education classes such as healthy eating on a budget, kitchen safety, and elementary-aged programming for Oconee County residents.

While Clemson Extension Rural Health and Nutrition offers free public programs focused on disease prevention and management through diet and nutrition, other options for low-income residents are few and far between. YMCA offers some scholarships but is financially out of reach for those most in need of the services, and the prevention and management programs offered through Prisma are financially out of reach to those without insurance. Cost is a barrier for many low- or fixed-income individuals who are most diagnosed with diet-related health problems. Lack of awareness poses another barrier to programs concerning nutrition and diet. Following a diagnosis, one is likely to learn about management programs, but others who have not yet had a serious health concern may be unaware of preventative programs and the benefits they offer. Physical access is also an important factor to consider, as those without personal transportation or with limited mobility may find it difficult to attend such programs.

Conclusion

The story that's been told throughout this assessment including what we produce with agriculture, how we process and distribute food, consumption patterns, and programs and policy focused on food security all come full circle with nutrition. The traditional food policy focus on quantity over quality in food security programs has led to a greater awareness of its importance as national diet-related disease rates skyrocket and food insecurity persists in spite of federal assistance programs. However, despite encouragement by governmental agencies to eat more fruits and vegetables, these agencies continue subsidizing products such as corn and soy, making ultra-processed foods more affordable. Marketing campaigns promote sugary, processed foods, the cost to accept SNAP payments is more than most farmers markets or farm stores can afford without a grant, and schools no longer offer home and kitchen skills in their core curriculums. In spite of these conditions, we do see some positive developments in community efforts to address the root cause of the issue by developing strategies and organizing around initiatives that focus on food and nutrition education. Proper, thorough, and effective nutrition education coupled with food preparation skills is paramount to head off diet-related health problems and chronic diseases. The organizations currently coming together to promote health and nutrition in Oconee County are a bright spot for the future of local residents who are in need of support.

8

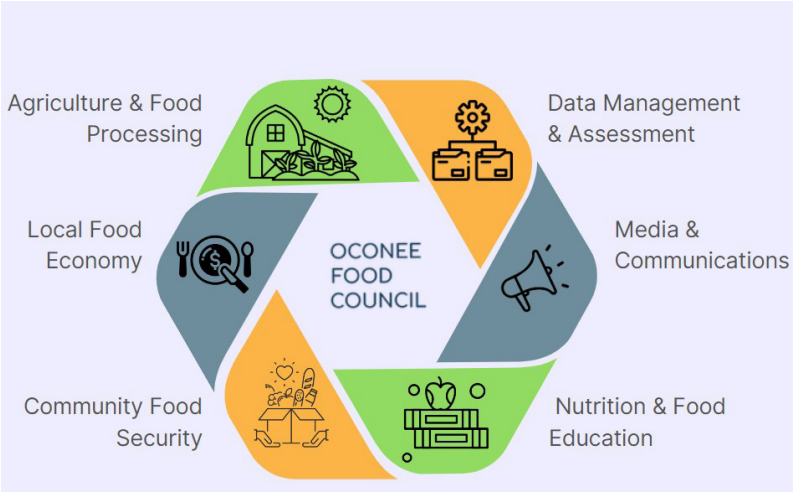
Conclusion

The Oconee Food Council

During planning for the initial 2020 Oconee Food Summit (OFS) event, the organizers were introduced to the approach of forming a "food policy council" bringing together local stakeholders and other organizations to enhance our local food system and influence food policy. This model became the subject of one of ten afternoon breakout sessions and was selected as a top priority by attendees coming out of the summit. Although the COVID-19 pandemic presented many obstacles to continuing organizing after the event, the group received a grant to develop a food policy council from the UofSC SNAP-Ed group in April 2021 and appointed a founding committee to work on developing the council six months later.

Food policy councils, which first emerged in the US in the 1980s, take many forms and introduce a variety of initiatives to increase food access and meet the needs of the individual areas they represent. The first councils were governmental, while many now are nonprofit organizations and/or remain unincorporated, operating at the grassroots level. Some of these groups have dropped the term "policy" and have taken the broader approach of Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) work, widening their scope of action to not only affect policies around food systems but also to affect change in systems (ex: Farm to School programs) and environments (ex: availability of healthy food choices in restaurants or cafeterias). Some councils are hyper-local, focusing on communities or towns while others work across cities, counties, states, or even nationally. Every council will differ on what actions they take and how they engage with the community and government. For these reasons, it can be hard at times to understand what a food council is and how they operate — each council tailors its mission, vision, and actions to the area in which it operates and the needs of the people in those areas.

The Oconee Food Council (OFC) was established in 2021 and has worked toward developing a council structure that would represent identified areas of importance specific to our local food system – food production and processing, local food economy, nutrition and food education, and food access. This diversity of roles and perspectives in the food system was a result of the development process of the council. Since planning the 2020 OFS event and moving through the 2021 Regroup, we have been working with community members and stakeholders from all sectors of the food system. A working committee was gathered to develop the food council, with representatives of the farming communities, those involved in health, nutrition, and education, culinary experts, and consumers invested in the future of their local food system.



The Oconee Food Council is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization operating on the grassroots level. The council has four food system-related committees: Agriculture & Food Processing, Local Food Economy, Community Nutrition & Food Education, and Community Food Security. The council also houses Data Management & Assessment and Media & Communications committees.

The Oconee Food Council was formed with the vision to effect positive change in our local food system. The needs of our county and the many communities within it are diverse, and our intent is to engage with those communities, listen to their needs, and empower and support all with a vested interest in the future of their food system. A council alone, however, cannot accomplish great feats. But with strong leadership and engagement from Oconee County residents and stakeholders, we can work together to fulfill the vision of a local food system that represents our strengths and fulfills our needs.

Moving Forward

In the final months of working on this assessment, one of the lead team members received a call that her father, an owner of a local contracting business, had passed out on a job and was being taken to the ER. After overnight observation and various tests, the hospital determined that he had experienced a minor stroke. The incident had occurred around the time the assessment team was trying to better understand local food consumption and its impact on nutrition in Oconee County, where the man's family had lived for at least five generations.

When they spoke about the incident, our team member asked her dad if he felt his diet played any role in what had happened. Like many, he had a job that kept him busy, so he was often grabbing lunch and other meals out at a local restaurant. While he could have made healthier food choices, they can be hard to come by on the road, and cold, sweet iced tea can make humid workdays in the sun more bearable. The discussion that followed was eye-opening. His doctor had suggested that his diet wasn't a serious issue and that a repeat incident could be avoided with daily medication, but her father had seen health conditions like heart disease and diabetes affect family members and many local friends he had grown up with. He believed that most of it was related to diet and commented that friends and family try to manage conditions like diabetes with medicine, but continue to make poor food choices. One sad observation was seeing numerous people work hard to reach retirement but lose the opportunity to enjoy it because of their health, dying in some cases as they come up on retirement or shortly thereafter.

Our assessment of the food system for Oconee County connects the people and history of a place with the technical, regulatory, and logistical realities of food policy. In some cases, all we may have is a single bullet point capturing a comment someone said at one of our community food gatherings. Others featured here spent hours sharing their experiences, insights, frustrations, and hopes for the future with a member of our team. This account shared above is one of many we've received that paints a concerning picture. We've spoken with farmers

who said they couldn't keep going anymore and aspiring farmers who had little hope of finding the means to do so. We've heard stories of people using their own time and money to feed people in need, and our own team included members of local families who have those needs. This doesn't even address the difficulties of trying to assess a system that is constantly changing. Over the course of working on this project and trying to learn the history in order to better understand the present, we were constantly receiving new information, which made consolidating, processing, and presenting what we learned exceptionally challenging.

Information is highly sought out and many in the county are frustrated by barriers to communication, but we have found that the problem is often a lack of shared experience and language. In discussions with local residents and stakeholders about food and agriculture, different terms are sometimes used to describe the same thing (farm stand, roadside market) and the same term might be applied (correctly or incorrectly) to describe different things, such as food banks and food pantries. Educating oneself is made only more tedious when we are not all communicating in the same way or when we cannot trust that the terminology has the same meaning across the board. Much of the work of this assessment has been time spent identifying the terms, resources, organizations, and agencies that have been unclear in the way they are portrayed, the language they use, and the contexts in which they can be used. Our hope is that we have connected at least some of the puzzle pieces for the residents of Oconee County to better understand how our food system works.

Community Food Systems and Oconee's Food Future

Those of us living and working in Oconee County, South Carolina are not alone in setting out to understand and address issues with the food supply and food access. For decades now across the U.S. there have been people leading efforts in connecting farmers and consumers, establishing community gardens and markets, offering classes, and increasing food access. Many of these efforts focus on increasing the resilience of the local food system, in which everything from personal and commercial food production to processing, marketing, distribution, retailing, and consumption of food products, plus handling food waste are all rooted in a particular place, whether a community, a metropolitan area or a region. A local food system may focus on particular ways of producing food or may develop alternative marketing channels that connect farmers and consumers. Because there is no federally-established definition, the meaning of "local food" can vary substantially between state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector.[96] Some have opted to use the term community food system over local food system,

in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution, and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place.[97]

What does a community food system look like for those of us in Oconee County? The primary character of a community food system is the community itself. So we must ask what does our community look like? Today, our county is made up of three cities and two smaller municipalities, diverse neighborhoods, subdivisions, rural communities, and lake communities — all with different dynamics in how they connect to the land, to each other, and to their food. A century ago, this county was a place with scores of small rural communities dotting the landscape from Tugaloo to Jocassee, Brasstown to Newry. A century before that settlers were adapting and expanding native agricultural land into farming communities based around mills. A lot has changed in a relatively short period of time, and it's important to consider that older generations in Oconee County often have living memories of communities that are lost to us as a result of development and centralization. One of the most important insights the assessment team has gained is that people's sense of identity varies greatly, as does their sense of purpose and place in connection to the community, land, and food.

When asked how the way people eat has changed over time in Oconee County, the man in the story above said he couldn't be too sure because of his upbringing. Growing up on the outskirts of Seneca in the 1970s, closer to the farming communities, he went to school with kids who were mostly "from town". At some point, he realized that they did not have gardens to grow their own food, but purchased most of their food from stores. Up until that point, he assumed everyone had a garden to supply at least some of their own food, as his parents and grandparents had always done. It was difficult work, and often those who recall shucking corn and shelling beans were ready to be done with it at the soonest opportunity. This echoed many things heard from farmers and other older community members who can remember a time when people locally were growing food for their own sustenance: **"We hated it."**

When we think about our future and the place that our traditions should have in it, it is important to consider first that people here have lived with a wide range of experiences, especially today with our population changing so quickly. The people with roots in Oconee County might not have fond memories of agriculture, widely regarded as one of our most challenging and thankless occupations. While there have been efforts to preserve the agricultural heritage of the area, many people in recent history sought to escape it as other employment opportunities arose.

In the present day, we have people promoting agriculture as something to be proud of, but we have also learned that the story of agriculture in Oconee is not straightforward, and it is not always triumphant. It has been hard. It is hard. And it's going to be hard. Our agricultural history here includes not only innovation and cash crops, but also hard truths and sad stories surrounding slavery, sharecropping, and lost family farms. But coming together with a sense of connection to this land, to our communities, and to our food there is also hope for a better future.

We have the resources to produce more of our own food in a way that works best for us, to take ownership and decision-making power over our food production and embrace food sovereignty, which is a food system where the people who produce, distribute, and consume the food also control the mechanisms and policies of the system. Our choice as a county is to work hard, eat well, and enjoy life, or to continue the industrial food system charade — work hard, eat poorly, and mask the symptoms with medications for as long as our bodies can tolerate.

We can't have a viable community food system without a sense of connection to the land and to each other. What the assessment process has shown is that our varying backgrounds, political orientations, and present interests keep us apart while our need for sustenance connects us all. Each of us looks at agriculture in a slightly different way, but the important point is that by educating ourselves about the food system and committing ourselves to open communication, we have an opportunity to improve this incredibly complex global-to-local food system here in our community in a way that sustains the land being worked, the people doing the work, and each of us. This is how we can create a food system that is accessible to all.

Food is what has always brought us together. Families and communities, regardless of how involved they were in growing their own food, used to gather around food. When we think about what brings people together most, it's the connections we form and relationships that grow as we break bread together. And as was poignantly stated by one local community member: "All of our problems can be solved around the dinner table". Our hope is that our readers will take the time to break bread with neighbors and consider how we might come together to pave a better food future for us all.

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