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## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is Arkansas' largest industry, adding **\$21 billion** to the state's economy annually. There's a robust, formalized, and well-resourced support ecosystem for commodity farmers, but little formal coordination and support for small to mid-size producers and specialty crop farmers. Farmer development and training opportunities for small and specialty crop farmers are offered through nonprofits and state and federal agencies to regional audiences, but there is no statewide strategy for small farmer support. While there is a committed, capable, and diverse community of advocates, technical assistance providers, and other food systems leaders, there isn't an inclusive forum for coordinating around systemic and statewide issues such as COVID-19 response, relevant policy opportunities, and supporting new and beginning farmers.

Through conversations in the fall of 2020 including at the Engage AR Forum, it became apparent that those leading these programs see the benefit of coordinating and would participate if there were a forum for doing so. In April, the Wallace Center convened a small group of service providers to conduct a rapid landscape assessment and uncover gaps and immediate opportunities for enhanced coordination across the Arkansas farm support ecosystem. This report shares the insights gleaned through this rapid assessment and suggests short- and medium-term next steps to strengthen support for Arkansas's small to mid-size family farms.

## METHODS

This series was designed to take place over three virtual sessions, which would build from participant introductions to seeking opportunities for shared work. See Figure 1 for an overview of the objectives for the series and flow of each call. The call agendas were shaped by Wallace Center staff with support from Joseph McIntyre of 10 Circles Consulting.

Before sending invitations, we spoke to several organizations offering trainings and services on a state or regional level and asked them to share with whom they would like to improve communication and coordination. This input helped to shape the invitation list for the series. A total of 16 participants were invited and 14 individuals joined one or more calls. See appendix one for a list of participants.

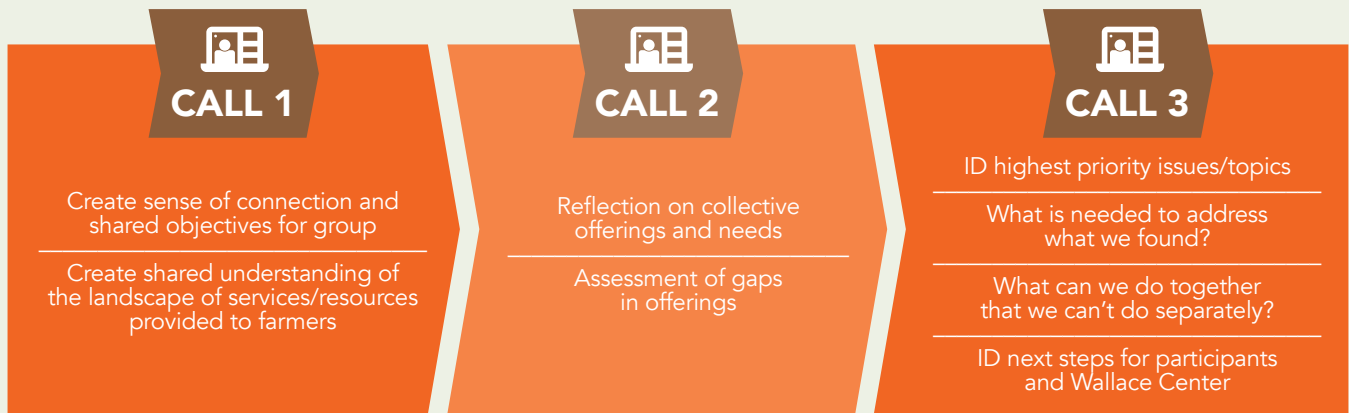
Each call began with a review of the series goals, sharing group agreements to encourage dialogue, and all participants answering a reflective check-in question for participants to get to know one another better and build trust within the group.

During the first call, participants shared their organization's unique role in the farm support ecosystem and their offerings coming up in this year. During the second call, participants discussed trends in food systems that they were following, reflected on the set of shared trainings and services currently being offered by the group, and discussed barriers faced by farmers that are not being addressed by the current

FIGURE 1. OBJECTIVES AND ARC OF CALL SERIES

## OBJECTIVES

- Uncover short- and medium-term opportunities for this group of organizations to be of greater service to farmers across Arkansas
- Establish clear and inclusive communication channels to share resources and opportunities across networks
- Create shared understanding of each organization's work and role in the system
- Understand critical gaps in service for Arkansas farmers
- Create a plan to address gaps and build coordination



offerings. Through this process, participants shared information and existing solutions to address barriers others were facing. As a result of this discussion, four areas emerged as persistent barriers that are not being adequately addressed.

During the third call, participants reflected on where they see momentum and assets in Arkansas food and farming, and prioritized top issues they would like to workshop further. The group then worked through the highest priorities to hear multiple perspectives on each issue, share existing assets and work related to the issue, and identify immediate and short-term next steps.

## SNAPSHOT OF ARKANSAS FARM SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

There is a growing ecosystem of organizations, agencies, and businesses working to support small to mid-size family farmers in Arkansas. This section of the report lists organizations, their role in the ecosystem, the services they provide, the insights they

shared on the current landscape, and their collective assessment of barriers and opportunities for supporting small to mid-sized farms in Arkansas.

It is important to note that the information collected through the virtual sessions and presented below is not comprehensive for the state, but rather is representative of the group participating in this series. Participants shared resources from their own organizations and close collaborators, and shared issues from their own viewpoint. The information below is presented in the order it was discussed during the call series.

There is a wide range of entities that make up the farm support ecosystem in Arkansas, including state and federal public agencies, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and businesses. Their services cover most of the state and touch on a range of issues from land access to production practices to financing. Figure 2 is a snapshot of the farm support organizations, their roles in the ecosystem, and their offerings for 2021.

FIGURE 2. SNAPSHOT OF FARM SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Organization	Location	Role in the Ecosystem	Offerings in 2021
Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts	Statewide	Developing partnerships, locally led conservation	Soil Health Alliance, Private lands partnership
Arkansas Department of Agriculture	Statewide	Services for all farmers statewide	Arkansas Grown and Arkansas Made membership programs, grants for certifications, Farm to School programming and support
Arkansas Young Farmers Coalition	Statewide	Networking, information, and advocacy for young and beginning farmers	
Center for Arkansas Farms and Food	Statewide, focus on Northwest Arkansas	Experiential learning opportunities for beginning farmers	11-month farm school program, beginning farmer classes, coordinating with NW Arkansas Land Trust to connect new and retiring farmers
Communities Unlimited	Mid-South Delta Region	Support for small scale growers in AR, MS, and TN, to improve access to local and fresh produce, improve farm capacity with small scale and minority growers	Lending and technical assistance for small businesses
FORGE Community Loan Fund	Statewide	Small business lending related to agriculture	Lending including microlending, technical assistance, business academy
GSS Group	Statewide	Horticulture consulting firm that provides fresh fruit and vegetable growers with sustainable solutions to increase profitability.	Good Agricultural Practices support, horizontal hydroponic growing systems,
Heifer USA	Statewide, focus on central Arkansas	Access for livestock farmers to profitable markets, producer training, direct agriculture research at Heifer Ranch	Live and recorded video trainings, residential volunteer program
National Center for Appropriate Technology	Statewide	Specialists are available to give presentations/workshops. Expertise in all areas of agriculture. Free publications and resources	Technical assistance, trainings, and online resources
Natural Resources Conservation Service	Statewide	Helping people help the land through conservation	Conservation Innovation Grants, Environmental and Conservation Stewardship grants
TaskONE, LLC	South Central Arkansas	Connecting farmers with USDA resources	Site visit evaluations
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	Focus on Delta region	Serving farmers in the Delta region	Beginning farmers academy 2021
University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture	Statewide	Grants and trainings to improve the ability of agricultural producers to manage the complex risks associated with their agribusinesses effectively	Share Grounds shared kitchens, assistance for farmers going online, expanding value added opportunities
USDA Farm Service Agency	Statewide	Farm loans, conservation, and disaster assistance	Loans and financial calculators
Zenenvirotech	Statewide, focus on Central and Eastern Arkansas	Increasing access to locally grown fresh produce by expanding market opportunities for specialty crop farmers and through school and community garden initiatives.	Emergency food assistance food box programs



## OVERALL TRENDS IMPACTING SMALL FARMERS IN ARKANSAS:

There are some common trends influencing markets and opportunities for small to mid-size producers in Arkansas. These include:

**Increasing demand for local food and online buying during and post COVID-19.**

**Farmers making pivots to new markets as COVID-19 changed consumer buying habits.**

**Tech literacy is a limiting factor in many areas of doing business, including shifting to online markets.**

**Farmers struggling to afford financing for both farmland and housing.**

**New mentorship opportunities to connect beginning and experienced farmers.**

**Interest in creating standardized approaches for small farm food safety certification.**

**Continued gaps in access to transportation for farm products in small communities.**

## BARRIERS FOR SMALL FARMS IN ARKANSAS:

### LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE FOR TRANSPORTATION AND PROCESSING/AGGREGATION:

Small scale farmers in central Arkansas and the Delta lack access to suitable infrastructure including on-farm food storage, specialized processing equipment, refrigerated transportation, and aggregation facilities. These infrastructure needs have a high bar for investment that many individual farms cannot afford on their own. Some promising solutions are underway. For example, in Northwest Arkansas, the Food Conservancy operates a warehouse, aggregates produce within a 200-mile radius, and provides food safety assistance and access to retail and wholesale markets. There are two food hubs in Memphis that could potentially serve central and eastern Arkansas with some coordination. Farmers in other parts of the state do not have access to this infrastructure.

### INSTABILITY AROUND FINANCIAL VIABILITY AND BUSINESS PLANNING DURING THE COVID-19 ERA:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer demand and sales channels changed rapidly, disrupting farmers' access to consistent and profitable markets. These changes in demand and sales channels did not impact all farmers equally. Some were able to pivot to new online and direct market opportunities and did very well. Those that were not able to switch their sales channels were left behind. Farmers in neighboring states have been able to create value-added products such as ready-made or prepped meals and flourished through those new sales channels. Access to capital continues to be a struggle for many farmers, and food and farm businesses struggle to pay fair wages based on the limited margins in this industry.

### LEGAL CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH HEIRS' PROPERTY

**Heirs' property** is family-owned land that has passed from one generation to another without a clear will. When the original owner passes away, the family members who inherit the land, or heirs, can still use the property, but they do not have a clear or marketable title to the property. Without clear title, farmers can't lease the land or access financing and many state and federal grant and service programs. Heirs' property is also vulnerable to being sold through a forced partition or lost to tax default. Heirs' property and the associated challenges are a main contributor to the loss of approximately **13 million acres** of Black owned farmland nationwide since 1910. The 2018 Farm Bill made some progress in reducing barriers, but Arkansas has not yet fully addressed them at the state level.

### LACK OF COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE SYSTEM

Farm support organizations are using separate contact lists to share information about their events and resources. Each organization has its own distribution list for marketing, but no central list or method exists. Many producers are not aware of programs available to them because they are only connected to a subset of support opportunities. To reach farmers effectively, it takes extra effort to connect with them through farm visits, attending field days and hosting in-person workshops, all of which were disrupted by COVID-19. Farm support organizations lack opportunities to coordinate efforts and collaboratively meet the needs of farmers, as many meetings and gatherings of farm support organizations are focused on a narrow topic, program, or grant.



## ASSETS IN PLACE TO SUPPORT SMALL FARMERS



### INCREASING INTEREST IN LOCAL FOODS

The loyalty and pride Arkansans have in locally grown and produced products is a big asset. There's a lot of passion from people in the state to capitalize on. People are becoming increasingly interested in where their food comes from and expanding their engagement beyond farmers markets.



### NATURAL AND BUILT CAPITAL

The Arkansas River Valley and Mississippi Delta have good agricultural land and water, which are assets that can be capitalized on. Statewide there is a great land base and high tunnel and other on-farm technology use has increased.



### HUMAN CAPITAL

There is momentum building around innovation. Farmers are natural innovators, and they'll find a way to get to market and young farmers are moving into the area and contributing to momentum. There are many organizations and people committed to supporting farmers across the board.

## PRIORITY AREAS FOUND FOR COLLABORATIVE WORK

Based on the current landscape, barriers, and assets in the farm support ecosystem, there are four immediate opportunities to improve farmer support. These priorities are outlined below and include recommendations for next steps.

### PRIORITY AREA 1: IMPROVE FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF SMALL FARMS

#### ASSETS

- The **Arkansas Small Business Technology Development Center** helps farmers with business planning and marketing. The statewide network has staff with specific knowledge of food and farm businesses.
- The **Farm Service Agency** offers farm loans and financial calculators.
- **The National Center for Appropriate Technology, Center for Arkansas Farms and Food, and University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff** offer trainings on financial management.
- **Zenenvirotech, Inc** has raised funds to create an emergency food box program to source from local farmers and provide free food to the community.
- **FORGE Community Loan Fund** provides micro-lending and technical assistance.
- **Track Your AG** online tool to help farmers track production and marketing expenses.
- The **Natural Resources Conservation Service's** Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) and CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program) are two grants available through NRCS.
  - Some vendors offer interest free equipment loans for grantees.
- The **Arkansas Local Food Network, Arkansas Grown, Arkansas Made,** and other marketplaces offer opportunities for farmers to sell their products.

#### NEXT STEPS

- Organizations planning financial trainings will meet and coordinate on courses for later this year.
- **FORGE Community Loan Fund** is seeking out farmers to help develop financial assistance resources and provide farmer-to-farmer education.
- A potential AmeriCorps project creating "Community Navigators" hosted at Extension could help farmers navigate these resources.
- Seek support to provide operating grants for farmers.



## PRIORITY AREA 2: ESTABLISH AND COORDINATE PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT MARKET ACCESS FOR FARMERS

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### ASSETS

- **Food Hubs**
  - The **Food Conservancy** is an aggregation facility serving Northwest Arkansas and provides technical assistance to farmers.
  - **New South Memphis** is a food hub in Memphis which is served by a refrigerated truck that runs from Bradford AR to Memphis and could pick up from farmers in the region. Contact [info@new-southmemphis.com](mailto:info@new-southmemphis.com)
  - **Bring it Food Hub** in Memphis aggregates from farmers in the region.
- **Shared Kitchens:**
  - **Delta Cuisine** in West Memphis may have available processing capacity.
  - **Arkansas Food Innovation Center** in Northwest Arkansas. The Center is currently at full capacity and has plans to expand.
  - There is a commercial kitchen at Heifer Ranch in Perryville that is under-utilized while COVID-19 protocols are in place, could be opened for farmers to use for processing.
  - **Share Grounds**- Shared kitchens being developed in Marshall, Rison, and McCrory.
  - **AR Kitchen** in Little Rock is a commercial shared kitchen facility available for rent.
- **Meat Processing:**
  - **Cypress Valley meat Company**- Custom livestock processing
  - **Natural State Processing**- Chicken processing
- **Financial supports**
  - The Farm Service Agency provides loans for farm storage facilities for up to \$500,000, and micro loans for up to \$50,000.

### NEXT STEPS

- Develop a list of services provided by existing shared kitchen spaces with information on renting space, services to help in product development, etc.
- Explore what services farmers would be interested in, especially a service to take raw product and create value added products for them to sell.
- Explore rental options for refrigerated delivery vehicles.
- Explore successful models of shared kitchens: **The Cooks Kitchen** and **Citizen Kitchens** in Nashville TN, and members of the **Network for Incubator and Commissary Kitchens**.
- **Communities Unlimited** is exploring a pilot project to provide transportation for growers this summer.

## PRIORITY AREA 3: STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE SYSTEM

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### ASSETS

- Arkansas Agriculture Department Newsletters: [Sign up form](#)
- National Center for Appropriate Technology sustainable agriculture and regional news. [Sign up form](#)
- Center for Arkansas Farms and Food Newsletter: [Sign up form](#)
- UAPB School of Agriculture, Fisheries and Human Sciences newsletter: [Sign up form](#)
- Extension Local, Regional and Safe Foods Newsletters: [Sign up form](#)
- Arkansas Young Farmers Coalition: <https://www.facebook.com/ARYoungFarmers>
- Arkansas SAWG Listserv: Statewide listserv with 91 members. Email [heatherf@uark.edu](mailto:heatherf@uark.edu) to be added to the listserv.
- The NRCS is hosting a virtual Diversity in Ag Conference on July 22nd.

### NEXT STEPS

- Continue to compile newsletters and listservs available and share through the FSLN Arkansas discussion group.
- Identify shared communication platform for farm service providers.
- Arkansas Department of Agriculture is refreshing [Arkansas Grown](#) membership list.

## PRIORITY AREA 4: ADDRESS HEIRS' PROPERTY

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### ASSETS

- Arkansas Farm Service Agency Office [heirs' property resource](#)
- [UALR Bowen School of law](#) has a pro bono business innovations clinic with resources, workshops and counsel.
- The [National Agricultural Law Center](#) in Fayetteville has resources on heirs' property.

### NEXT STEPS

- FSA is working on regulatory hurdles related to heirs' property
- Explore ways to provide legal support to guide landowners as they resolve heirs' property issues and gain clear title.





## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Over the arc of three calls, the group shared their many offerings available to small and mid-scale farms in Arkansas and established a shared sense of the barriers and challenges that these farms face. For each of the four priority areas identified (Financial viability, physical infrastructure, Heirs' property, and coordinating communications) short term next steps and opportunities for collaboration were named, but time did not allow for establishing long term goals and recommendations. Before going further, several participants recommended that these findings should be discussed with farmers to include their perspective. As strategies are developed, farmers should be included so they can shape the work.

In a post-series survey, participants said they established new peers in their work through this call series. Participants said they would contact these peers to share resources, introduce them to their networks, troubleshoot together, and develop shared programming. Resources shared through this process are being shared through the Wallace Center's interactive online platform, the [Food Systems Leadership Network](#), in an Arkansas specific discussion group. This group allows members to share content, ask questions publicly to the group, and contact one another privately.

Call participants appreciated this space and time to focus on systems wide issues and needs of farmers, as many convenings of farm support organizations in the past have focused on specific topics, programs or grants. Going forward, members suggested that the group begin a strategic plan to address gaps in the local food system in Arkansas. One process suggested was to identify three issues to improve the local food systems in Arkansas and meet monthly to address them.

This series and the findings above could serve as the foundation for increasing coordination and collaboration across the system. There is an appetite for leaders to connect and develop collaborative work, and the Wallace Center is eager to contribute to that process. We will continue to seek opportunities to work with this group and others to co-develop strategies that will address the priority areas for collaborative work named above.

The Wallace Center would like to thank call participants for sharing their time and expertise throughout this process and Engage Arkansas for the financial support of this call series and the groundwork laid through the forums in the fall of 2021.

## APPENDIX I, LIST OF CALL SERIES PARTICIPANTS

NAME	ORGANIZATION	TITLE
<b>Alvin Peer</b>	Natural Resources Conservation Service	State Outreach Coordinator
<b>Brenda Williams</b>	Communities Unlimited	Healthy Foods Coordinator
<b>Charley Williams</b>	TaskONE, LLC	Consultant
<b>Danielle Dozier</b>	GSS Group	Farm Food Safety Consultant
<b>Debbie Moreland</b>	Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts	Program Administrator
<b>Ellen Brown</b>	Heifer International	Deputy Director - Heifer USA
<b>Heather Friedrich, Amy Patton</b>	Center for Arkansas Farms and Food	Program Manager
<b>Karen Reynolds</b>	Arkansas Department of Agriculture	Arkansas Grown and Made Program Manager
<b>Margo Hale</b>	NCAT / ATTRA	Southeast Regional Director
<b>Mark Nelson</b>	Arkansas Department of Agriculture	Farm to School Innovation Lead, AmeriCorps VISTA
<b>Niki Evansingston</b>	Zenenvirotech	Executive Director
<b>Philip Adams</b>	FORGE Community Loan Fund	Executive Director
<b>Rhonda O'Guinn</b>	USDA Farm Service Agency	Outreach and Communications Coordinator
<b>Ron Rainey</b>	University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture	Professor and Center Director

## ABOUT THE WALLACE CENTER

The Wallace Center at Winrock International is a national nonprofit that brings together diverse people and ideas to co-create solutions that build healthy farms, equitable economies, and resilient food systems. Wallace has been a leader in the development of healthy regional food and farming systems for over 35 years, working to scale up the supply and positive environmental, social, and economic benefits of regional, sustainably produced food. We seek to affect systems change to bring benefits to the environment, to communities, and to the farmers and food businesses that are the building blocks of a healthy and equitable food system. One intention of this series was to identify ways the Wallace Center can bring our skills and networks to be of service to the farming and food systems leaders in Arkansas. For more information about the Wallace Center visit [wallacecenter.org](http://wallacecenter.org). To discuss ideas or opportunities in Arkansas, contact Andrew Carberry at [andrew.carberry@winrock.org](mailto:andrew.carberry@winrock.org). To discuss our work nationally, contact Co-Director Susan Lightfoot Schempf, [susan.schempf@winrock.org](mailto:susan.schempf@winrock.org).

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