

Summer Camps as a Potential Market Channel
for
Locally-grown Food
in
Western North Carolina

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by

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In Western North Carolina (WNC), the region’s natural beauty and mild climate contribute to a high concentration of summer camps, among the highest in the nation.¹ The camp season also coincides almost exactly with the growing season in the region. To explore the potential of summer camps as a market channel for locally-grown food and farm products, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) initiated a survey of summer camps in the Spring of 2006. ASAP is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting farms and farming in WNC through programs and services designed to increase local consumption of locally-grown food and farm products. The goals of the survey were to determine to what extent camps in the region were currently purchasing locally-grown farm products, and to explore the potential of summer camps as a market for farmers wishing to sell farm products locally.

Camp Foodservice

A comprehensive list of overnight summer camps in WNC was obtained by combining lists from the Western North Carolina Camps Association and the website Camppage.com, a national database listing camps in every state. A total of 49 camps were identified and sent a link to an online survey, which was completed by 23 camps for a response rate of 47%. Table 1 identifies characteristics of summer camps completing the survey.

	Range	Average
Number of campers	90-4000	725
Number of meals/day	<100 – 1500	540
Spending on camp food	<\$5,000 - \$110,000	\$48,250

Twelve camps reported that they had purchased locally-grown food for camp meals during the last camp season. Assuming that the 26 camps not completing the survey did not purchased locally-grown food, this means that 24% of all WNC summer camps were local purchasers in 2005. Summer camps that purchased local food reported buying a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. In most cases, camp foodservice directors purchased locally-grown food directly from a farmer, either through a roadside stand or at a farmers’ tailgate market. In a few cases the camps obtained local food through regional distributors, and in two cases the camps reported purchasing local produce directly from a grocery store or supermarket.

Local purchasing rates ranged from very small, at less than 1% of total food purchases, to significant, at just over 15% of total food purchases for one camp. The average percentage of local food purchased by camps completing the survey was 5%. The total dollar amount spent on local food by 12 camps last year was between \$25,000 and

¹ WNC Camps Association.

\$30,000, representing less than 0.1% of the estimated \$2.4 million in food spending by camps in the region.²

Market Potential of Summer Camps

Of summer camps that did purchase local farm products last year, 75% expressed high interest in continuing to purchase local produce and 25% indicated that they expect to purchase more local produce going forward. Moreover, six additional camps expressed high interest in initiating local purchasing. Summer camps are motivated by many reasons to purchase locally-grown food. Table 2 lists the top five reasons rated by camps.

Table 2. Top five motivators for local purchasing by summer camps

1. Higher quality, fresher food
2. Supporting local farmers
3. Health benefits of fresher food
4. Supporting the local economy
5. Lower environmental impacts

In exploring the possibility of expanding local purchasing by camps, survey respondents were asked to rate different barriers or challenges associated with buying locally-grown food. Top barriers rated by the group included coordinating purchase and delivery of locally-grown food, product price, and finding growers with an adequate supply of local products.

Respondents were also asked to choose from a list which types of food they would be interested in purchasing locally. Table 3 shows that camps are interested in many different types of fruits and vegetables as well as meat and dairy products.

Table 3: Foods grown in WNC by interest-level of camps

Top quartile	
75% -100% of survey respondents named these foods as items they might be interested in purchasing from local farmers	apples, beans, blueberries, broccoli, cheese, cucumbers, eggs, lettuce, melons, onions, peppers, potatoes, strawberries, tomatoes
2nd quartile	
50% - 75% of survey respondents named these foods as items they might be interested in purchasing from local farmers	beef, peas, poultry, squash, yogurt
3rd quartile	
25% - 50% of survey respondents named these	asparagus, blackberries, cauliflower,

² \$2.4 million equals the \$48,250 average annual food budget reported by these camps X 49 camps in the region.

foods as items they might be interested in purchasing from local farmers	eggplants, greens, pork, raspberries, spinach
4th quartile	
0% - 25% of survey respondents named these foods as items they might be interested in purchasing from local farmers	beets, cabbages, leeks, pumpkins, radishes, turnips

While summer camps were very interested in purchasing locally-grown farm products, none were familiar with ASAP's *Local Food Guide*, the main way that ASAP has provided information for consumers about where to obtain local food. ASAP needs to examine whether the *Local Food Guide* could be used by institutional buyers to locate local food and farms and, if so, how it could be more effectively distributed to those types of buyers within the region. It may be appropriate to develop new guides aimed at institutional buyers rather than trying to adapt the existing guide.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summer camps in Western North Carolina represent a viable market for small-scale farmers in the region based on high interest from summer camps and the natural fit between the camp season and the growing season in the region. Based on the experience of camps surveyed here, a realistic range of camp spending on local food is between 1% and 15%. With less than 0.1% of total camp food spending currently made up of local food spending, there is considerable room to increase local food purchases by summer camps.

The low current rate of spending on local food by camps also means that despite high interest there is little infrastructure in place making it possible to incorporate locally-grown food into camp foodservice. Camps that are purchasing local farm products have to go out of their way to find them and do not have access to basic information about local growers. Efforts to link farmers with summer camps must address fundamental foodservice issues like the logistics of placing orders and receiving deliveries.