



Starting A Food System Alliance Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Food System Alliance?

A Food System Alliance (FSA) is county-based coalition of people working to create a vibrant local food system. The local food system includes food producers, distributors, and consumers. A vibrant local food system is one where local growers are economically viable, the physical environment and environmental services are maintained, and consumers have access to healthy food.

Who is part of an FSA?

The coalition is based on four primary legs:

- Food production and distribution interests including farmers, ranchers, processors, wholesalers, farm labor, and support organizations such as Farm Bureau.
- Public health and welfare advocates including public health officers, prevention groups, and others concerned about the link between good food and good health.
- Environmentalists including individuals and organizations interested in smart growth, air and water pollution, habitat, and pesticides.
- Independent community leaders who are interested in the problems of agriculture, the environment, and human health such as members of the League of Women's Voters, and chefs, cooks, and other advocates of good food.

Should we have FSA in our county?

Food System Alliances are powerful tools to bring a community together to deal with problems in the local food system. In California these problems are typically the loss of farmland, farmers, and locally grown food, access to local markets, lack of public understanding about agriculture, and the health impacts of commercialized and processed foods. Often these problems polarize communities and create ballot efforts, lawsuits, or other expensive divisions. Where these problems are acute an FSA can be a vehicle to overcome polarization. The FSA process builds understanding and ultimately consensus on how to act between people formerly at odds.

Another scenario where FSAs can be effective is when the community knows it wants to preserve or create a strong food system as part of economic development or community enhancement efforts. In this case the FSA is a perfect way to bring diverse interests together to create informed action.

What do FSAs do?

FSAs are built to take action on the most pressing problems facing the food system. However, unlike some groups that come together to address a single issue and disband or which are geared for action driven by one polar view of a problem, a FSA is designed to become a community institution which is durable, adheres to enduring principles, and acts in the long-run interests of everyone involved in food.

FSAs take on a variety of projects. In Ventura County, California the Alliance has written 7 white papers (through 2009) addressing issues including pesticide use near schools, farm worker housing, land use, and community stewardship. These papers have become the basis for efforts to change public policy and create community action. In the case of the farm worker housing effort, the Alliance's work has resulted in the formation of citizen committees working for farm worker housing in most cities in Ventura County and the construction of new farm worker housing. In Yolo County, the Alliance has addressed county agricultural land loss mitigation programs and has been active in influencing county land use planning. In San Mateo County, the Alliance has been instrumental in farm-to-school and farm-to-institution projects and has called for garden-based education in every elementary school

FSAs identify two to four problem per year to tackle. Using a simple policy development template, they characterize the problem, explain why it matters, and offer solutions. These "citizen" white papers, no longer than four pages, are then released to elected officials and the public as a call to action.

What happens during the first year of a FSA?

The first 10 meetings of a FSA are dedicated to building a very strong level of understanding and communication between FSA members. Members work to identify two sets of principles: how to create successful change in their community and how they can best work together as a group. Based on these principles the group identifies local issues they want to address. This information comes together in the form of a Constitution that guides the FSA and its efforts.

The group will also conduct a basic assessment of the local food system and identify issues to address. They will begin the process of creating their first citizen white paper.

Who is selected to be part of the FSA?

Ag Innovations Network works with local sponsors/conveners to create an initial list of individuals that are invited to a kick-off meeting. The guiding principle in the creation of the initial membership list is to bring together the people that are needed to make the local food system sustainable. We recommend the sponsors seek wide diversity in the membership including people from all corners of the county, all parts of the food system, and all views on how to move forward. The only constraint is that individuals invited must be genuinely willing to engage in a process of collaboration and learning with other FSA members. The inaugural

members of the FSA then develop their own methods for identifying and seating new members to the group.

How is the FSA governed?

Alliances work as ‘roundtables’ where everyone has an equal say. Decisions are made by consensus. Ad Hoc committees form to work on special issues and bring back items and issues for the discussion by the whole roundtable.

What is the role of the facilitator?

The Alliance process is supported by a facilitator who is both knowledgeable about ag, environmental, and public health issues and skilled in working with diverse groups. The facilitator’s job is to help the Alliance achieve its goals. Facilitators are neutral about what principles are established or what projects are undertaken, but are very active in protecting the Alliance process and helping the group move forward.

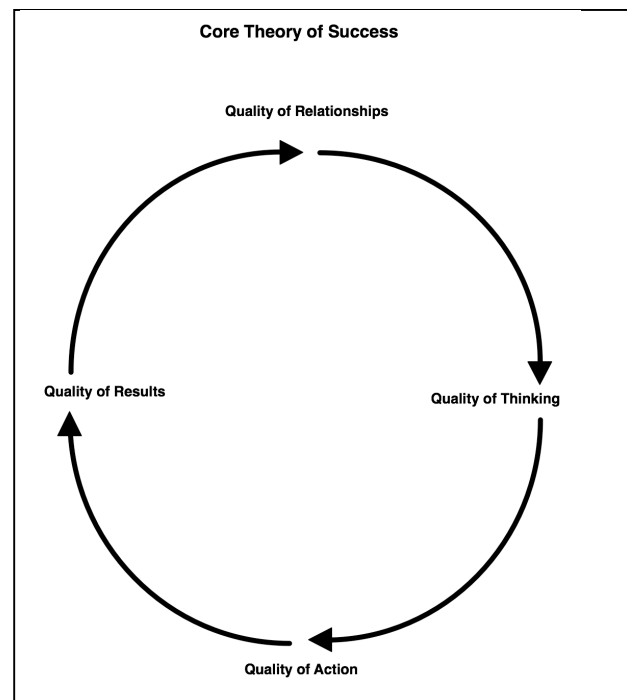
Why do FSAs work?

...Because they create new relationships in the community that spark new thinking. The theory of success FSAs work from is shown in the diagram below. By creating solid relationships between people in the community, we improve our ability to see the whole picture and create new ideas. These high quality ideas lead to effective action. Effective action leads to real results for the community and further cements the relationships between FSA members. Many people find participating in the FSA one of the most rewarding and effective experiences in their lives.

What do I need to do as an FSA member?

All FSA members need to do four things to be a productive member of the roundtable:

- Listen carefully to all views
- Be open to new ideas and changing their own views
- Have respect for the different ‘truths’ that may be expressed
- Speak the truth—say what is on your mind



In the roundtable structure, participants will find themselves playing four very different roles:

- Leading: introducing or advocating new ideas
- Following: agreeing with the ideas of others
- Opposing: bringing up other, contradictory ideas

- Bystanding: neither agreeing nor disagreeing, but providing perspective about what is happening.

It is important for all members to play all roles and not be caught in only one or two comfortable ways of working. This maximizes the effectiveness of the group.

Do I represent my group or myself?

This is an issue that each FSA must grapple with and different approaches may be appropriate for different regions. The Ventura Alliance is structured so that only individuals are seated at the roundtable, not organizations. This means that members are free to speak their minds and not commit their organizations. At other times members are specifically asked to get the endorsement of their organization or even work to change the policy of their organization based on the work of the FSA.

Is it fun?

It can be! You will learn a lot and meet and get to know people in a new way. The Yolo Alliance has a principle that captures the spirit of the FSA effort: "A sense of humor and humility is essential to our success."

How does being part of an Alliance help me personally?

The Alliances are rich opportunities to connect with others in your community who share an interest in food systems. They are rich learning experiences that will expose you to different ways of thinking and give you a look at core problems from a new viewpoint. These new connections and new perspectives often can help you be a more effective leader.

How much does an FSA cost?

Costs vary by Roundtable and the level of service Ag Innovations Network (AIN) provides. Costs include membership in the FSA network that connects the local FSA to the broader coalition of FSAs growing up around the country. You can start your own FSA at no cost or with simple training from us.

How is the FSA funded?

FSAs are funded from local sources such as community foundations, local interest groups, and contributions from participants. Ag Innovations Network may be able to partially subsidize the costs of an FSA during its first years of operation with grant funds it receives. Contact us about this possibility.

What is the history of the Alliances?

The first Alliance was started in Ventura County in 1999. In the years since the Ventura Ag Futures Alliance was founded the group tackled projects including control of pesticide use near schools, land use policy, and community resource stewardship. Its work has resulted in changes to California law (AB 947, which regulates the use of pesticides around schools) and the creation of a countywide coalition for building farmworker housing.

In 2004 the Alliance movement expanded with a new roundtables being founded in Yolo, Merced, and Kern counties. In 2006 San Mateo County Alliance was launched and the Merced and Kern Alliances closed. In 2007, the Santa Barbara County Alliance kicked-off. Our goal is to start at least one new Alliance a year.

What is the difference between a FSA and an Ag Futures Alliance?

The Alliance project was begun in Ventura County as an Ag Futures Alliance. This alliance was based on a four-sided stakeholder group: farmers and ranchers, farm-workers, conservation interests, and civic leaders. As the food systems approach gained hold, the concept of the Alliance was expanded to include representatives from health care, food security, chefs, food activists, and consumers. With this expansion, the project was renamed the Food System Alliance.

Who is Ag Innovations Network?

Ag Innovations Network is a California-based nonprofit organization that works to create a better future for farmers, consumers, and communities. We believe the food system, from production through consumption, is the cornerstone of a healthy ecosystem, economy, and society. Our work includes sponsoring the Ag Futures Alliance project, providing facilitation of dialogues about food system issues, and training others in what we have learned about bringing people together to make positive change. Ag Innovations Network was founded in 2000 and is based in Sonoma County, California.

Your question not here?

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