

ASHEVILLE NC, USA

LIFTING UP COMMUNITY-DRIVEN FOOD RESILIENCY

This food policy snapshot is based on interviews with Kiera Bulan, City of Asheville Sustainability Coordinator; Hannah Randall, CEO of MANNA Foodbank; and George Ivey, Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation North Carolina Development Director.

GLASGOW FOOD AND CLIMATE DECLARATION

Asheville, North Carolina, is a mid-sized, left-leaning city within the more conservative and rural Buncombe County. BETWEEN 17% AND 22% OF BUNCOMBE COUNTY IS FARMLAND, but the local agricultural economy is shrinking. The region has struggled to ensure food security for all community members, particularly those outside of the city limits. The city's geography, surrounded by mountains, renders it vulnerable to climate-related disruption of its food supply. Despite these challenges, community advocacy for integrated food policies has driven progress toward a just and resilient food system in Asheville and Buncombe County.

ENABLERS

GROWING ASHEVILLE'S FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENCY THROUGH NONPROFIT PARTNERS

As a way to increase the city's food self-sufficiency, Asheville has supported the work of the nonprofit Bountiful Cities to manage the Asheville Edibles program. BOUNTIFUL CITIES assists with planting and maintenance of edibles on public property and conducts workshops and trainings to support food production in the city. Bountiful Cities also manages the Community Garden Network which consists of 16 gardens on public and private property across the region. The nonprofit Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, or ASAP, aims to strengthen the local food economy and build food self-sufficiency in the area by linking farmers to markets, local schools, and research centers. ASAP connects consumers to producers at all levels, but it specializes in direct-to-consumer relationships with farmers. ASAP also stewards a program that authorizes the use of food stamps at farmer's markets, fighting food insecurity while also increasing accessibility of local food.

REDUCING FOOD WASTE TO FIGHT FOOD INSECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Food waste reduction has been a key goal for Asheville in recent years to prevent economic losses from wasted food, bolster food security, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from organic waste. The city's shared work with the NATIONAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL (NRDC) through its Food Matters program increased access to composting and aims to reduce food waste. Community efforts to reduce food waste and increase sustainability, through nonprofits such as WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA FOOD WASTE SOLUTIONS, ASHEVILLE GREENWORKS, FOOD CONNECTION, and MANNA Foodbank, have bolstered the city's momentum to address climate change. MANNA FOODBANK (Mountain Area Nutritional Needs Alliance), a nonprofit aiming to eradicate hunger and build food resiliency, works with over 200 nonprofit stakeholders to distribute over 9,500 metric tons of food per year to Western North Carolina's sixteen counties, simultaneously fighting food insecurity and food waste. MANNA works with grocery stores in the Asheville area to send leftover food products to private, community run reclaim centers that salvage unsold produce for other uses in an effort to lower the quantity of wasted food. In its partnership with the Ingles grocery store alone, MANNA prevents over 3,000,000 kg¹ of CO2 emissions each year by diverting organic waste from the landfill.

BUILDING A RESILIENT FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE

In 2018, the City of Asheville published a CLIMATE RESILIENCE ASSESSMENT, which analyzed the city's vulnerability to climate shocks, particularly flooding, wildfire, and landslides. Food infrastructure was an explicit part of the assessment's scope. The report identified food distribution centers and food locations vulnerable to flooding, and it noted the intersection of these vulnerable food locations and areas with high participation of residents in the federally funded food assistance program SNAP. In the event of an extreme flooding event, the assessment noted that residents would be particularly at risk from food insecurity in areas with combined high vulnerability and risk to flooding. These assessed vulnerabilities are relevant today for food producers and distributors - MANNA foodbank, for example, is currently RELOCATING ONE OF ITS FACILITIES from a 100-year floodplain that has repeatedly flooded in recent years.

Asheville's 2020 RESOLUTION DECLARING A CLIMATE EMERGENCY called for the creation of a climate action plan inspiring the launch of the city's CLIMATE JUSTICE INITIATIVE to address the inequitable effects of climate change on communities of color. The initiative spans the city departments and encourages them to think holistically and consciously as the city moves forward with its climate mitigation efforts such as the Food Policy Action Plan. The initiative includes ongoing listening and learning sessions with communities of color, the development of a CLIMATE JUSTICE MAP, and the design of a climate justice screening tool. Asheville views its food system as part of its overall climate adaptation strategy and as an accessible way for people to relate to and understand the effects of climate change on their day-to-day lives.

BARRIERS

LIMITED RESOURCES THROUGH THE OFFICE OF SUSTAINABILITY

With limited staff time and funding dedicated to food policy, the Office of Sustainability is constrained in its capacity to stay connected to regional conversations about food systems, develop metrics, and determine its own role in Asheville's food system. The city started to collect data on the LOCATION OF EDIBLE PLANTS in the city in 2019, and it plans to work with community partners to expand its data collection to include metrics on food produced in the city, food waste composted, and greenhouse gas emissions avoided by composting. It is grappling with how to develop useful impact metrics that can be collected with limited time and resources. The overlapping and often ambiguous responsibilities for food policy across different city departments, including the Office of Sustainability, emergency services, parks and recreation, public works, and sanitation, also present challenges to food policy goals and to the determination of the appropriate scope and role of the Office of Sustainability in the food system.

The City of Asheville has demonstrated how foresight and climate emergency planning can help build a just and resilient food system. The city's planning documents account for climate change's ability to exacerbate existing inequalities in the food system, and this intentionality is rarely found among similarly sized municipalities and is worth celebrating. It continues a partnership-led approach with local non-profits to address food self-sufficiency, reduce food waste, and build resilient food infrastructure.

FOOD POLICY FACT BOX

- The Asheville Buncombe Food Policy Council (ABFPC), a community based coalition of volunteers, was founded in 2011 to advocate for policy changes to the food system.
- The updated Food Policy Action Plan, drafted in partnership between the ABFPC and the City of Asheville, was approved by City Council in 2017. The plan outlines strategies for building a resilient, self-sufficient food system, including strategies to support local agriculture and climate-emergency preparedness for the food system.
- Asheville City Council adopted a RESOLUTION DECLARING A CLIMATE EMERGENCY in January 2020. This resolution called for the creation of a Climate Justice Plan that will be incorporated into the city's comprehensive plan, LIVING ASHEVILLE.

“ One thing that we know and continue to reiterate is that we're not sharing strategies for resilience with the community that they aren't already aware of. In most instances, especially in the least served communities, emergency preparedness safety net exists, and we at the city level need to better understand and support them.”



Photo: ASAP



Photo: Bountiful Cities

¹CO2 equivalent emissions calculated from the FAO FOOD WASTAGE FOOTPRINT SUMMARY REPORT'S determined ratio of 1 kg organic waste: 2.53846 kg CO2 equivalent emissions.