



Season 1 Episode 10 – Keeping Food Local

November 17, 2022

Announcer:

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller:

All right, welcome back. It's Olivia Fuller and Jacob Kelley, and we've got Jesse Teel here with us today. He is a graduate research assistant for Hunger Solutions here at Auburn University and we're going to talk about all kinds of good stuff, but mostly local food. So I know that that's important to our listeners who are probably farmers in Alabama and keeping that food local is probably their top priority, also the consumers. So thank you for joining us today.

Jesse Teel:

Hey guys, thanks for having me.

Olivia Fuller:

What are you doing with your research right now? What's the big topic that you're studying?

Jesse Teel:

So HSI is an institution within Auburn University that was created in I think 2013, and it's mission is to solve hunger both locally in our state and nationwide and globally. And so it has a number of different efforts that work towards that. My research falls under partnership with ACCBN. There's tons of acronyms and so ACCBN is the Alabama Campus Coalition for Basic Needs and so HSI looks at hunger, working with ACCBN we focus on hunger. And so yeah, my research is looking at two year institutions, student hunger needs and essentially what do they have currently. So I work with them on a survey tool that helps them assess their current state of meeting student hunger needs and help them plan next steps to meet those needs.

Olivia Fuller:

Oh, that's great because I mean we see hunger in Alabama sTeel and that's so sad because we have a lot of farmers and it's keeping that food local, getting it to the right people.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

You hate to see a farmer live right next to somebody that's hungry. And I see farmers themselves that are hungry and we've got to fix this because there's plenty of land here. Land access doesn't seem to be a big issue, so it's about taking advantage of that land and knowing how to grow food and getting it to the people.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

So thank you for that good work that you're doing with them. That's a great thing to learn about that's happening here at the university.

Jacob Kelley:

That'll have a big impact as you move forward. I mean, there's hungry college students all over. I know when I was in community college and people in trade school and stuff like that, I definitely didn't eat lunch at the school because it was either not provided or it was your ballpark food and stuff and not always the best quality or not affordable. And so this is almost like a food desert, like going to the corner store. You don't have that many options available to you. And I feel like your path, the path you're on is going to help provide some of those needed resources to these community colleges, to your schools, things like that so that they can supply the students with what they need so that they can be successful in the classroom.

Olivia Fuller:

And local food and hunger really do go hand in hand. Can you talk about the ties you see with that, how you've helped keep food local?

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, so student hunger is one of those things that goes largely unseen. We hear about food pantries and food banks. And Alabama has a lot of really great organizations that meet hunger needs and work with universities and institutions to help them meet student needs. I know many of those banks act as a storage place for overflow food. A lot of farmers will donate to food banks, which is a great program. There's some different groups that have gleaning programs.

Olivia Fuller:

Which is really great for us and our research plot. Sometimes we don't have the labor to get all of that food that we just need a few to weigh and do certain research components too. And then the rest we can't harvest. So that gleaning aspect is great and I'm glad to see that as a state, we've got a few organizations to come.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, exactly. I mean for me, I know working in the horticulture department during harvest season, we definitely have opportunities to pick up free food. Sometimes a truckload of sweet corn will come in literally just a truck bed and they send out an email and it's like, please come and take as much corn as you want. In my research with the HSI, a lot of institutions maybe have opportunities like that to have extra food, but it's things like storage facilities, coolers and pickup spots. The stigma around taking free food is sometimes not great at a campus. You might have a food pantry, but students feel unable to access it. Sometimes they don't know about it.

So my research really focuses on helping them bridge those gaps, look at best practices, find out what they're currently doing, and then help me to ... and yeah, personally, I mean I hope that that becomes an integral part of helping food waste and then also to stimulate local food economies because there is funding out there, but it's often difficult to access. Real quick, I'll talk about student funding. A lot of students that are hungry have received some sort of funding to go to school, so they're on a scholarship. And what we've seen is that most all students can find food when they need it, but there will be these gaps in the year. There's Christmas time or whatever, or they get to campus, but classes don't start for a few weeks. And a lot of the on campus food places are not open. And so they maybe have funding to get food on campus, but they can't buy groceries. And so figuring out where those gaps are and working with local farmers to fulfill those needs is something that I would like to see more of.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah, and I think the farmers would too. I know a lot of them have excess food and they're not always sure what to do with it, where to take it, who to call. And if you can even call your extension agent, we can connect you with some of the associations we've talked about, some of the societies that go around and glean it if need be, or just come pick it up and meet those, because it comes down to transportation usually. So it can be great to

find those, just somebody that's got a truck, a refrigerated truck and a lot of these societies do and we're happy to connect you with them if you're a farmer that has extra food because it is...

That's why you and I were connected was because I was so passionate about hunger. I came from an area that a lot of my peers were hungry. And then to see when I started this position, some of the farmers that were hungry and that was I think how we were connected because I wanted to not only do the horticulture research and IPM and get them the right fungicide treatments, but I also wanted to help keep that food local and think big picture as well. So thank you for that work that you're doing. I think it's having a big impact. How do you see the local food movement? Which direction do you see it going?

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. Well, in my past I've worked with food hubs and I think that they're going to be an integral part of creating local food systems and regional food systems. It's something that I think that there's a lot of different ways it could go. I think more people are getting turned onto the idea of local food. I think the greatest success comes when we have a variety of options. A lot of my local food thought is in hyper local. And to have a successful local food economy, I think you need hyper local environments where people are aware of what's available in their area, their immediate area. They're well connected with the other farmers in their immediate area and of places that they can take their food and sell their food.

I personally, being the age I am, I see technology helping with that. I think in the future we can be better integrated with technology and honestly, I hope Extension is there to help usher that in. We've got to be aware of where people are and not thinking of what we want there to be, but what are the needs of the moment? What tools are available in that moment that's going to influence whatever model takes shape. So I mean see a lot of opportunity and possibilities.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. That was something that came out of 2020 that was great. You can look at a map prior to that and see how many markets there were and then post and it just exploded.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

There's so many markets now and that's really exciting to see because it's a win-win for the farmers. And I think the stigma around shopping at your farmer's market is a privilege and it takes a lot of money to do that. And if you look at the grocery store prices, it's now very comparable and it puts the money back in the hands of the farmers and the local economy, so that it seems to be a win-win right now, the way things are moving that I can see.

Speaker 5:

AFVGA is a proud sponsor of the Farming Basics podcast. From generations past through the years to come, the Alabama Fruit and Vegetable Growers produce an abundance we all enjoy. Join Alabama Farmers at the annual conference and trade show in Gulf Shores, Alabama, February 9th and 10th, 2023. Visit afvga.org to learn more. Alabama produce, it just tastes better.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, and I think that it is going to be competitive in the future. Local food will be competitive and every step we can take towards making it more efficient, more integrated with the system, that'll bring the prices down and make it more available to more people. And a lot of my work has focused on institutions largely because I think that that institutions become anchor points and communities allowing some farmers to have a consistent seller or buyer rather.

Olivia Fuller:

It does, it helps a lot. I'm grateful for the farmer's market authority working and helping get farmers connected to schools.

Jesse Teel:

Right.

Olivia Fuller:

And the schools are now ... because I mean, I was in high school and we were being fed state lunches, it was terrible and it was so bad for you and it was not helping the local farmers in any way. And to now be able to eat food and know where it came from and that's ... I mean, it sounds so simple, but it really changes a lot of things for the economy.

Jesse Teel:

It does. Yeah, and Auburn University is opening up its new culinary building and program, and yeah, I definitely have hopes. I think that there are culinary programs around the country that are focusing on more innovative ways of using food efficiently, like seasonal cooking. That's something that's often not taught or regional cooking based on a region's cuisine or what can be grown there.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. I just gave a presentation, everybody wanted to know how to grow herbs, but I'm like, don't grow herbs if you don't know how to cook them. So let's take this and focus on the ways you're going to utilize them. And I mean, I'm not a chef by any means. I'm pretty bad. I don't follow a recipe, I just throw it in. But it happens and it's sTeel local food and I figure out something to do with it. But I think that's been a missing component of horticulture for so long, tying that in with how do I use this? And we're teaching farmers, Jacob and I, how to

grow really beautiful fruit and all these things, but if people don't know how to use it or exciting ways to cook with it, they're not going to buy it.

Jesse Teel:

Right. Yeah. Yeah. I'm very interested in closing the loop in all aspects. I think that our institutions do a great job of researching better methods on how to grow more efficiently, yeah, how to maximize production. But I would like to also see us working towards maximizing usage and maximizing our local economy as well and maximizing or minimizing rather food waste or at least figuring out a way to make that food waste become productive as a resource.

Olivia Fuller:

When I closed that loop in my mind, that was what got me back into horticulture.

Jesse Teel:

Right.

Olivia Fuller:

And we had Dr. Deslane on an earlier episode and he talked about the new culinary science department and building and the partnership with the horticulture department. And I just love that because that was a missing piece that made me lose interest years ago in horticulture because it was so hyper focused on one aspect. And now they're like, oh, let's tie this in with other departments, with other things going on and bringing in a lot more people, solving a lot more problems when you look at it big picture.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. Yeah. Dr. Deslane's been a great proponent of many different projects and he's extremely collaborative. And yeah, I think Auburn University has really lucked out with him and then he's moving the program forward. He's very forward thinking and has a great expertise, I guess, as well in that area.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah, I can't wait to see what comes of that.

Jacob Kelley:

Did you know that Jesse is Auburn famous in his past life at Auburn? Jesse, do you want to let the world know, or at least our subscribers know what you did at Jordan Harris Stadium on Saturdays in the fall?

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, two years of my undergrad were spent cheering for Auburn University. I was the mic man.

Jacob Kelley:

Famous.

Olivia Fuller:

You're perfect for this then.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, well, give me a script and I can be loud. Yeah.

Jacob Kelley:

That's all it takes? Yeah.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

I love that fun fact about you.

Jacob Kelley:

You got to have the voice. Yeah. Yeah. t's my favorite fact about this and there's a lot of good things, but that's my favorite.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, yeah. Actually, the horticulture department's had a number of cheerleaders go through a surprising ... I thought it was somewhat surprising. One of the other cheerleaders that cheered with me was a horticulture crowd as well.

Jacob Kelley:

No kidding.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. So HSI, Hunger Solutions Institute, we look at hunger all across the country as far as in colleges and universities. The Hope Center is a group that puts out a lot of reports and they report the average across the nation is that 39% of students at two year institutions have been affected by food insecurity, 29% at four year institutions. And then if you want to bring that back home, the Hunger Solutions Institute finished its project

with four year institutions and looking at food insecurity. And so in Alabama, about a quarter of responding students indicated the highest level of food insecurity.

Jacob Kelley:

Wow.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

Oh no, because I was doing a talk about food waste and I wanted to highlight ... you talk about hunger and you usually end up talking about international problems. And I wanted to highlight that, no, this is a domestic issue, this is happening here. And I found out that one in seven people in Alabama are on some kind of SNAP program, some kind of supplemental funding source to buy food.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Olivia Fuller:

And we've talked about a few of the solutions to that, keeping the food local. So thank you for the work that y'all are doing. But yeah, continue with your statistics that you wanted to mention too.

Jesse Teel:

Right. I mean, I just wanted to bring it home a little bit because sometimes it's easy to think that these nationwide statistics aren't really accurate in where we are because we don't see it, but it is there. 63% indicated that they are food secure. So we sTeel have a majority, but there's a chunk of students that at some point during the year are going hungry. And so yeah, it's definitely work that needs to be done right here in Alabama. And I hope that we can create a culture of collaborative working with producers, with suppliers, with institutions and communities to help solve hunger.

Olivia Fuller:

Yeah. That's what fills my love of fruits and vegetables because it's food. You can talk about farming in other capacities and sometimes it's utilized in other ways, but fruits and vegetables, that calories and that's important.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. I mean, our farmers grow a lot of really great food and so I think it's a very solvable problem. Hunger, it doesn't have to exist in Alabama. And so yeah, I hope that we can-

Jacob Kelley:

Especially with only, what, 67%, 63% of students being secure?

Jesse Teel:

Right, year round.

Jacob Kelley:

Year round. I mean, that's bad. We need to do better.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah.

Jacob Kelley:

We shouldn't have hungry students at all.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah. I think we can do better.

Jacob Kelley:

And we will. Thank you, Jesse.

Jesse Teel:

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Jacob Kelley:

Yeah. I really appreciate you coming on the show and opening our minds and twisting us around and teaching us about the food programs that you've been working on.

Announcer:

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.