

A Distributor's Perspective *Don Wellborn of Carolina Produce*



Food distributors can help facilitate Farm to School programs in South Carolina by serving as the middleman between farmers and school, and by linking schools to local produce while helping mitigate risk.

Pricing can be an issue, because farmers are able to get wholesale price when they sell to a distributor, but they get retail price if they sell directly to a school. There is a need for farmers to work together and pool their resources so that they can get volume pricing; this also helps maximize the quantities that they can sell. Distribution can also be split among the farms to lessen the cost.

Don believes that we need to think of “local” as SC grown, rather than region-specific, which can be very difficult to implement since sometimes only one kind of fruit or vegetable suitable to school lunches can be grown in a specific area of the state (this initiative is embodied in the Department of Agriculture’s “Certified SC Grown” campaign. While it would be ideal for schools to use produce that was grown right around the corner from them, sometimes logistically it is better to use a crop that is from elsewhere in the state.



Specific problems and barriers from a distributor's perspective:

1. *Recalls/traceability:* This is not a barrier so much as it is just a very important aspect of Farm to School. If a child gets sick, or something is found in the food (Don used the real-life examples of staples found in an orange and fishing line found in food), everyone involved must have accurate and detailed records so the problem area can be identified and fixed. The distributor is usually the first to hear about any problems. If information on just one step of the process is missing, the entire crop or kind of food would be affected. This is where GAP certification plays an important role.
2. *Allergies/storing:* Schoolchildren can have a wide variety of food allergies and issues. When a distributor is storing different kinds of crops together or even close by, this has to be thought of. Peanuts, strawberries and other allergy-common crops should be stored in separate containers and should never come in contact with another kind of crop, for fear of cross-contamination.
3. *School budgets:* Schools have very little extra funds to spend on buying local, fresh produce. Don pointed out that currently, strawberries from California are half the price of local SC strawberries. Schools must have an incentive and see the value in local food, similarly, farmers must see the advantages of working together and bringing the price down.
4. *Drivers:* School district rules and regulations are very strict in terms of who is allowed to come on campus and make deliveries. Drivers from local distributors need to be very clearly uniformed and easily identifiable if they are going to make deliveries to schools or other institutions. Some schools and districts also require any driver that comes on campus to have a background check.