

STERN PRODUCE: Developing sustainability metrics for “ARIZONA FRESH
TOGETHER” local food program

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This project, in partnership with Stern Produce Co., an Arizona based food distribution company, is set to identify a set of sustainability metrics for Stern’s local food program, the ‘Arizona Fresh Together’ (AFT) program. The project’s objective is to help establish the AFT program as a robust and legitimate stand alone food program in Stern Produce and the local food system in Arizona. The AFT program is intended to serve as a sourcing platform for the local restaurants and retail to procure sustainable food from our valley based local growers. It is fundamentally a local, organic and sustainable food program with an intention to connect local Arizona farmers with retailers and restaurants statewide, supporting our local restaurateurs’ efforts to source responsibly. As a result of which, Stern Produce is likely to increase its market share and profit margin from local, organic produce. Currently, Stern Produce does not locally source most of their produce since out-of-state purchasing, at the moment, tends to be more economical. With the AFT program, this trend is going to alter with more in-state, local purchasing.

Stern Produce is a small scale, family owned business that has been serving our local Arizona community for a 100 years now since 1917. Essentially, it is a food distribution company that conducts wholesale supply of agricultural farm produce, dairy products and meat. Their mission is to supply the freshest fruits, vegetables and specialty food products with a first-class customer delivery experience. They operate from their three warehouse locations in Phoenix, Flagstaff and Tucson, with their 45,000 sq.ft. Phoenix facility as the major hub. Since its inception, Stern Produce is committed to building partnerships with local farms in Arizona to meet the wholesale demand for Arizona grown goods. It has embraced the responsibility to conduct business in a manner that fosters societal resilience, invests in community wellness and environmental health. As of today, Stern is continuing to grow more partnerships within the community in order to diversify its products’ availability portfolio, year round, to maintain consistent supply of products and strengthen the resiliency of the network.

To ensure a sustainable local food system, we need to holistically look at every single aspect of the system that possibly may get affected due to the food supply chains. I decided to strategically

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look at factors that will influence the environment, the economy as well as the society as a result of accelerating business for Stern in the local food system. Hence, I categorized my impacts under the following buckets: Health, Sustainability, Resiliency, Diversity, Fairness, Economic Balance and Transparency. After doing enough relevant research and carefully considering AZ's food system in particular, I zeroed down on four core sustainability metrics chosen based on their significance on the human health, its impact on social, economic and environmental sustainability for local food systems against whom, certain key indicators were identified. Metrics help to assess progress towards a given goal. They can be composed of multiple indicators which can be defined as quantitative or qualitative factors that capture system changes following an intervention in a simple and reliable manner.

There is a huge gap in information and data collection and distribution in the realm of local food systems. These gaps potentially impact the assessment of progress on sustainable agricultural development. Additionally, lesser coordination of activities and data sharing between various stakeholder groups makes this problem even worse. There is a heavy disparity and inconsistency issue with the supply and demand side in the markets for local produce. We need to improve market forecasts, warning systems, updated information on crops, and transparent solutions oriented decisions on the supply side to ensure consistent and close to accurate crop production. On the demand side, policymakers need cross-sectional information that includes comparisons between different social groups, regions, and net producers vs. net consumers; information on long-term trends, seasonal patterns etc. to maintain a systematic, reliable collection of data (metrics) to track progress. However, that being said, we should look beyond typical economic metrics like income and job opportunities to account for more social benefits that are intangible but worthwhile. The AFT program at Stern, ensures building community cohesion. It creates a platform and opportunity for the food producers to insert themselves into the social fabric of the rural communities and simultaneously connect with urban customers. While on one hand, consumers gain a better appreciation for the value of local farms to their communities, they also develop a sense of trust and resiliency knowing who is growing their food they eat and how they grow it. These factors account as social capital in addition to the economic capital that are the key benefits of local food systems.