

# THE CENTRAL VALLEY: RISING LIKE A PHOENIX?

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The poverty of the Central Valley of California and the abundance of the region's agriculture is a conundrum. Even though there has been a decrease in community-based access to healthy food, and a rise in chronic disease in the heartland of the state of California, and the nation, we are beginning to see people and agriculture coming together for the good of both.

The exciting change arising in the Central Valley, honoring our agricultural roots and reinventing our regional economy, has been led by the smart growth investments of [Smart Valley Places](#), with support from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Department of Transportation. These buds of change are blossoming into a new triple-bottom-line Central Valley economy that honors the environment, equity and economics. Environmentalists, supporters of the organic movement, and advocates for social justice, are not the only ones talking the regional food system talk anymore. [The Fresno Business Council](#), the [California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley](#) and regional cities are choosing smart growth and healthy communities and realizing that the Central Valley, a place with the capacity to feed the nation, can also feed our region. Institutions (such as schools, hospitals and city and county governments) are looking at their ability to access healthier, affordable local food, and the ability for local purchasing to drive their economies home.

This new food regionalism has been a long-term process. Organizations like the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program ([CCROPP](#)), the eight County Public Health Departments in the Central Valley, and the statewide food movement organized through [Roots of Change](#), have spearheaded bringing healthy people and healthy farms to the forefront of intentional community policy and systemic changes. Fresno will be the host to the next Urban-Rural Roundtable, resulting in a food policy council. This will ensure that the values are in place to focus on regional food. [The Fresno Food Systems Alliance](#) has been working across the food system for over a year, and has committed to a [Farm to School](#) effort in Fresno County this year.

CCROPP will coordinate with innovative rural school systems to expand the new Central California cooperative of rural school districts that buy local food in Tulare County (Earlimart and Exeter). Farmers markets and produce stands are targeting low-income food deserts, creating the ordinances and zoning options that allow local small farmers to vend today's fresh produce, in communities where people do not have access to healthy food, and struggle to make a living.

None of this is magic, but times have changed. Demand for healthy fresh food is up, and somehow a tipping point has been reached in an area that before could not see itself as a market for its own goods and produce.



This revised self-image of the Central Valley of California as a valuable region in the state has changed the participation of collaborations grounded in "Valley ways," and now the region is taking its place in forging a new state future. Because most of the growth increase in California is projected to be where the food is grown, some rethinking of the food system is natural, and potentially the Central Valley can lead the state in assuring that prime farmland does not become parking lots, that our urban places grow up instead of out, and that investment in our rural communities can assure that the environmental degradation of past agricultural practices will be reversed. In this scenario, the Central Valley becomes the place where the food commons, a regionalization of food and farming, will be piloted with the support of the business world. A new vision for our values and ability to grow healthy food here is emerging, and based in the communities that have historically been left behind by change instigated in urban centers.

In April, at a Fresno City Council meeting, the proposals for the city's future general plan (that included forward thinking transit corridors, infill preferences, and green building rewards) were presented to the city. Over 87 community residents (of 300 in attendance), with interpretations in Spanish and Hmong, spoke to their preference for smart growth and a plan to revitalize the city center. Then, on April 19, the Fresno City Council voted 5-2 to approve this version for infill, not sprawl, leading the region in smart growth planning, and denying expansion of the city's sphere of influence.

Cities are passing [Healthy Eating Active Living Resolutions](#). The state is committed to [Health in All Policies](#), and traditional community-based organizations are looking to whole food systems that will create health and access to good food for all, through policy changes and changes in the built environment.

Our grassroots community leaders are asking their schools to implement healthier meals, sourced more locally. They are demanding access to clean, free water for students all day, and requesting safe neighborhoods in which residents can be active.

CCROPP, in eight counties, graduated another 80 new leaders in April (from a year-long leadership curriculum) and the Smart Valley Places' community leadership institutes are bringing in new members, to 14 separate communities, who care about where their food comes from. These residents also seek ways for their communities to be walkable, bikeable, and have more access to open space and parks. These new leaders from low-income communities of color want community gardens, local produce in their corner stores and the ability to be entrepreneurs in the new food system.

I cannot put my finger on exactly when the economic driver of our region (Agriculture with a Capital A) began to notice that despite a record production of exports, the people here, harvesting that bounty, were hungry. Or, when our elected leadership began to realize that their constituents were consumers, and could be part of an economic stimulus. But for this to occur residents needed access to, and the ability to purchase, local produce. If the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP, formerly called food stamps, and is called [CalFresh](#) in California) were fully utilized by eligible families to buy local food, and if Central Valley institutions could purchase from local farmers rather than purchase local produce that had been shipped away, (then shipped back again and processed) the local economy could benefit. I also do not know when local businesses realized that the Central Valley is predicted to be the highest growth area of the state in the next 20 years, and that there are jobs to be created in value-added foods. But this realization is beginning to emerge.

I would not say that things have to get worse before they get better. I would say though, while we are waiting for future general plans, or an infusion of much needed resources from the federal and state government, we are recognizing what we have, and how we can use what we have, to better the health of our communities. The remaining question is: How can we take existing pilot projects and successful models to scale? Here, where healthy food is grown for the nation, and our residents live in poverty, we want to create a place where access to healthy food is the norm for all our neighbors, especially those who are the experts in growing our food.

The reversal of the current fact of hunger and ill health in the land of plenty is what I am watching for this year.

Tags: [Agriculture](#), [Central Valley](#), [Community Assessment Tools](#), [Food Deserts](#), [Food Systems](#), [Hunger](#), [Poverty](#), [Rural California](#), [Rural Development](#), [Rural Policy](#), [San Joaquin Valley](#), [Small Scale Producers](#), [USDA](#)

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