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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Initiative Launched to Increase Farmers Market Sales and Local Food Access

Two of North Carolina's leading local food and farmer advocacy organizations have joined forces on a major new initiative to increase farmer direct sales and expand local food access. ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project) and RAFI-USA (Rural Advancement Foundation International) have partnered on the project, Connect2Direct. The goal for the collaboration is to support and build equitable community-based local food economies through the development of direct markets for farmers in North Carolina. ASAP has nearly two decades of local food systems development experience and RAFI is a national leader in farmer-led policy and market reforms.

Demand for locally grown food continues to grow and direct farm sales are an important connector between farmers and the community. North Carolina is home to a variety of direct markets including on-farm stores, roadside stands, community supported agriculture programs (CSAs), and according to the USDA's Farmers Market Directory, nearly 250 farmers markets. Despite this, according to the USDA Census of Agriculture the combined sales of these outlets increased only slightly from 2007 to 2012 to \$31.8 million.

"There are tremendous opportunities for farmers to increase direct sales" said ASAP Executive Director Charlie Jackson. "We've just scratched the surface of potential for North Carolina farms and communities and efforts to expand access through outreach and food assistance programs are good for our farms, our health, and our local economies" notes Jackson.

Over the past few years efforts in North Carolina to increase access to fresh farm products through supplemental nutrition assistance programs such as SNAP/EBT and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program have grown. From 2010 to 2013, the number of NC farmers markets authorized to accept SNAP/EBT increased 175%, from 24 to 66 markets. "Ensuring that all North Carolinians have access to health foods, particularly direct from the farmer, is central to the Connect2Direct mission and good for communities" said Scott Marlow, Executive Director for RAFI-USA.

Connect2Direct aims to dramatically increase farm to consumer direct sales and the usage of EBT/SNAP at farmers markets in NC - by over 100% within two years - by providing training and technical assistance to markets and market vendors, creating effective marketing and outreach campaigns, facilitating the transactional process for EBT/SNAP, and building statewide capacity and efficiency to sustainably ensure that all North Carolinians have access to fresh foods grown by local farmers. A Farmers Market and Direct Sales Conference is planned for November 2015. Find out more about the initiative at www.connect2direct.org.

Funding partners include the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Southern Risk Management Education Center, USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program, and Wholesome Wave. Additional partners include UNC's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, NC Department of Health and Human Services, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, and select farmers markets across the state.

For upcoming workshops and announcements, please visit: www.connect2direct.org

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About ASAP: ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food. To learn more about ASAP's work, visit asapconnections.org, or call (828) 236-1282.

About RAFI: RAFI's mission is to cultivate markets, policies, and communities that sustain thriving, socially just, and environmentally sound family farms. To learn more about RAFI's work, visit rafiusa.org. or call (919) 542-1396.