



On Edible Food Recovery: Integration of Local Agriculture into Santa Clara County Food Recovery Networks

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Introduction

California leads the nation in specialty crop agriculture, but wasted 11.3 million tons of food in 2024, nearly 60% generated from farms (ReFed 2025). Over 90% of surplus produce was never harvested, contributing to climate change with the release of methane during decomposition. Simultaneously, the food system fails to feed everyone; as one in five Californians experience food insecurity daily (CalRecycle, 2021). This capstone project aimed to identify opportunities for recovering food from Santa Clara County farmers. Partnered with Joint Venture Silicon Valley, we assessed the greatest challenges and motivations for small farmers to participate in donating recovered food to three developing food hubs in the county.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the key obstacles that farmers and food operators face in diverting food loss into food recovery networks?
- 2) What conditions would enable Santa Clara County farmers to become more involved in the current food recovery system?
- 3) Where is the most significant opportunity for recovering food from farms in Santa Clara County?

Methods

Using a participatory mixed methods approach, our research was conducted following best practices, guided by information collected from relevant stakeholders, and developed to best serve their needs.

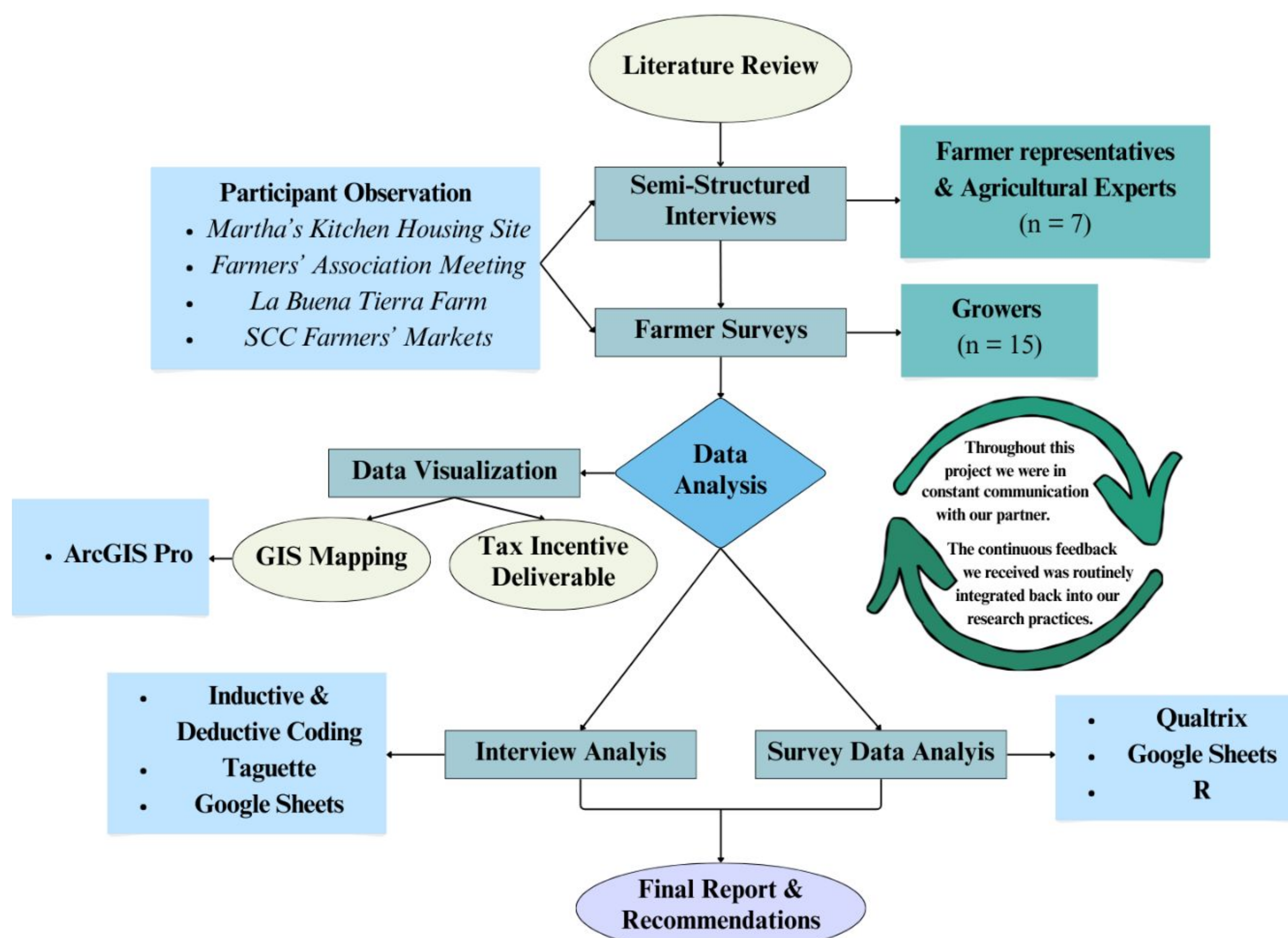


Figure 1. Chart visualizing the methods that were utilized in our research process.

Acknowledgements

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Farmer Survey Findings

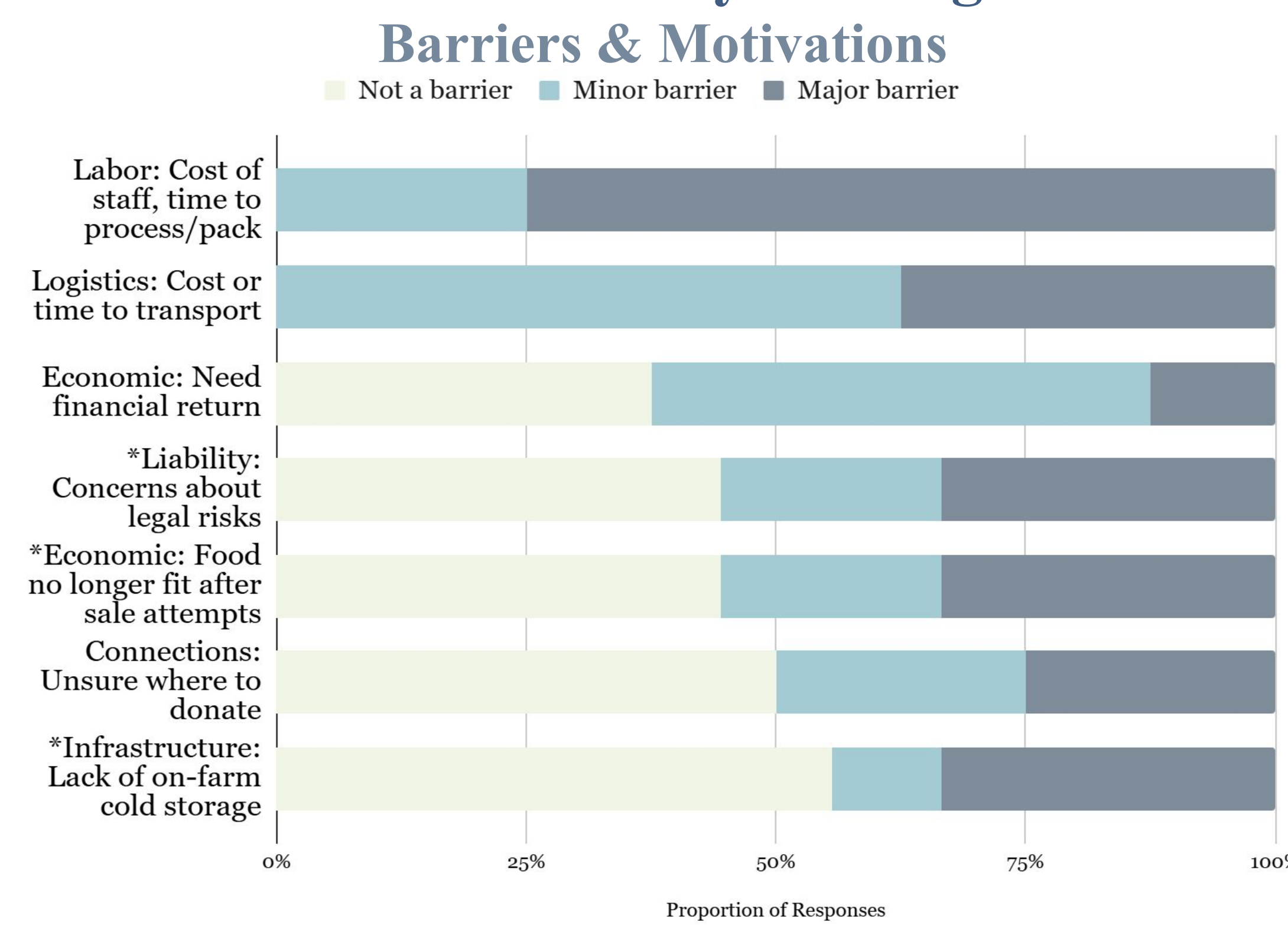


Figure 2. Distribution of farmers' responses regarding barriers to donating surplus crops. (N=8, *N=9) (Farmer Survey 2026)

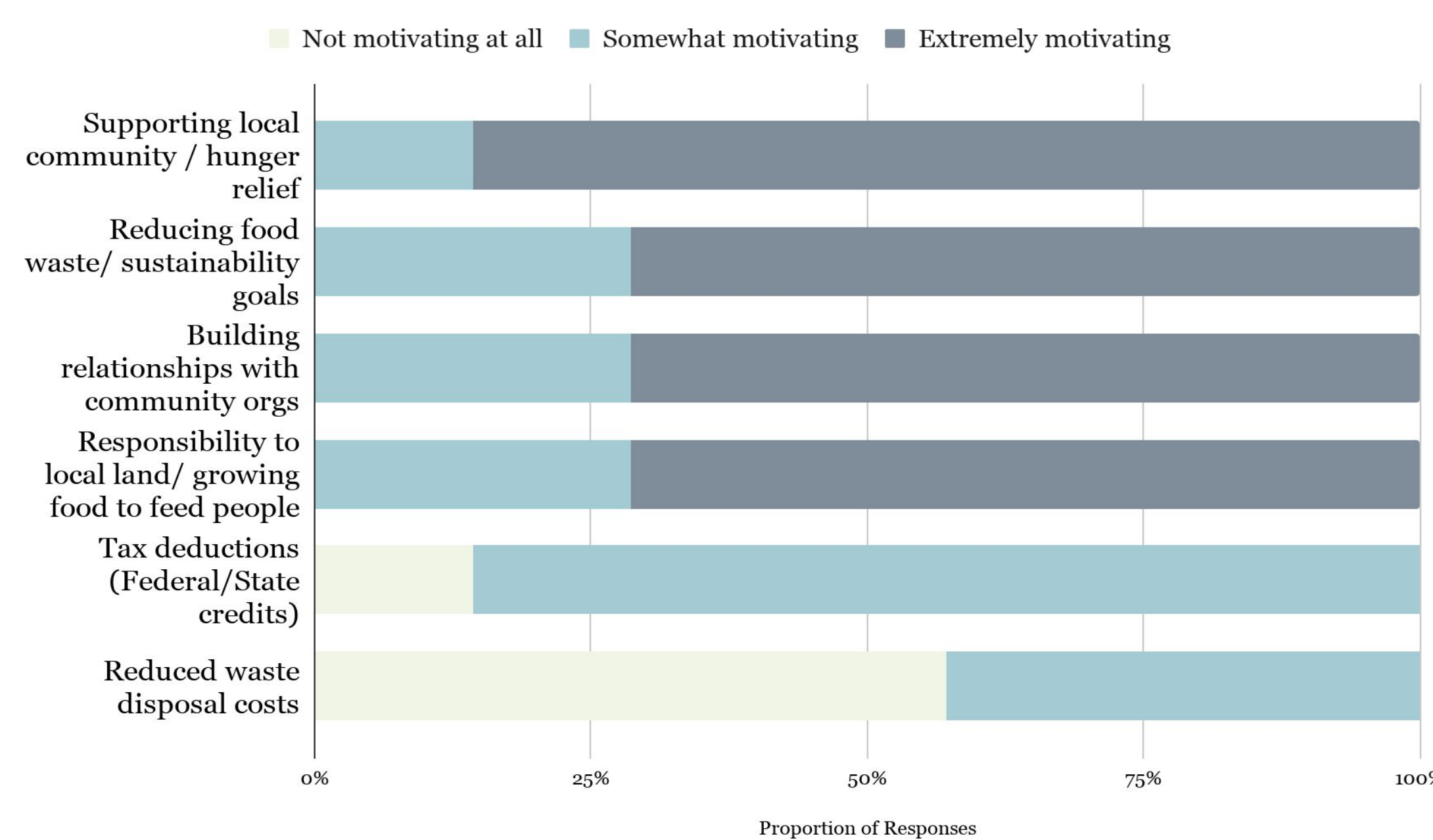


Figure 3. Distribution of farmers' responses regarding motivations for surplus crops. (N=7) (Farmer Survey 2026)

- **Farmers identified that the biggest barrier for donating food is labor**, 71% of produce farmers were interested in gleaning teams if they are well managed.
- **Only one farmer responded that they have claimed a tax incentive from donating food**; 66% of the respondents were unfamiliar with current tax incentives, a potential reason tax incentives are not more motivating to farmers.

Semi-Structured Interview Findings Agricultural Representatives

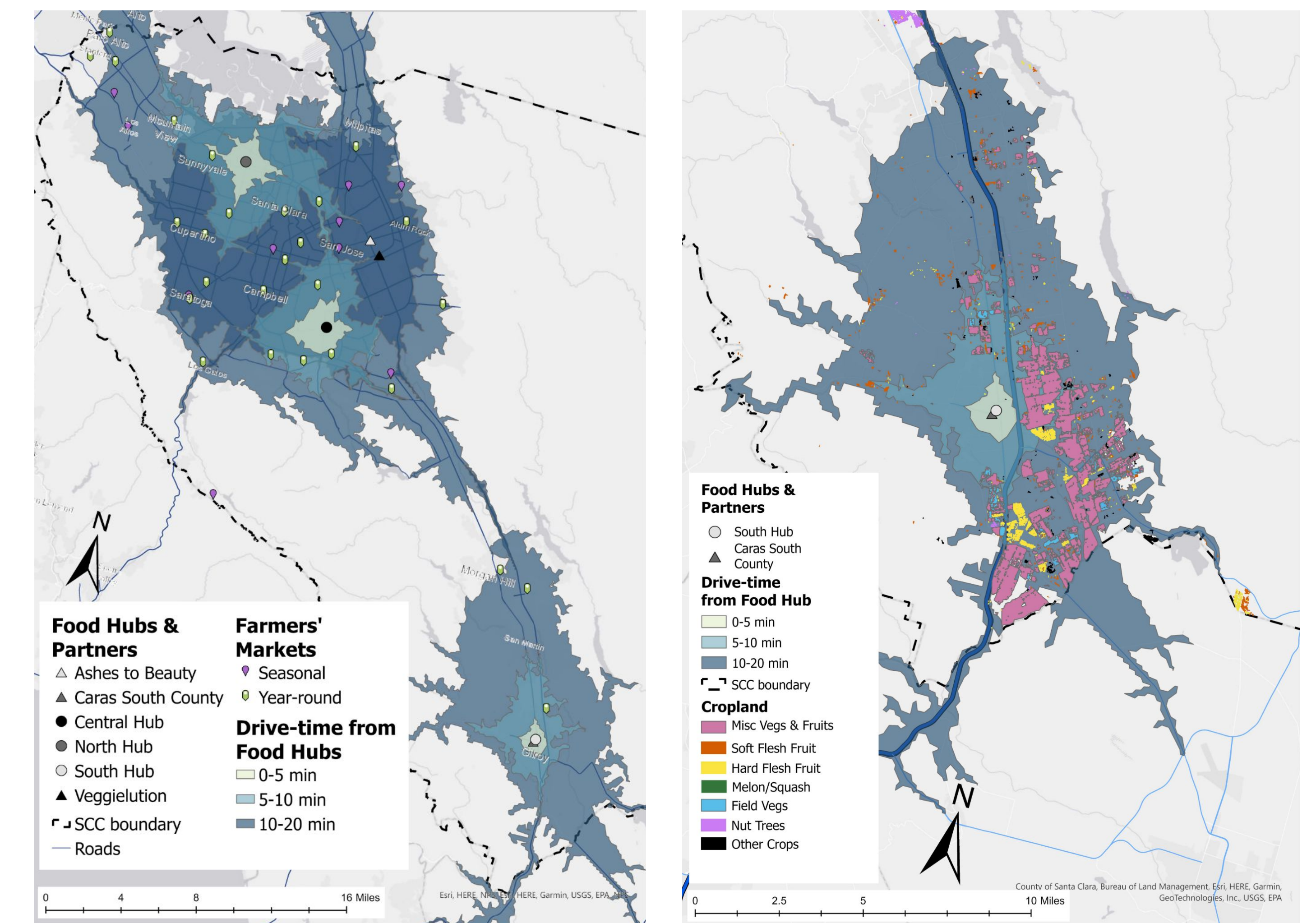
- "If the **labor** didn't cost as much to go and harvest it... then I think it would be much easier for us to donate..." Farmers are more willing to donate food if they have additional support for labor and transportation.
- "Access to a **processing** facility would be probably more valuable to them than the tax write-off." Processing facilities can extend the shelf life and add value to products.

Small Farmer

- **Unexpected Finding:** "It costs more for the box than it does for somebody to harvest what goes into the box."

GIS Spatial Analysis

Food Hub Opportunities for Produce Recovery



Map 1. Santa Clara County Recovered food hubs' driving proximity to farmers' markets

Map 2. Santa Clara South County South Hub driving proximity to cropland

- **South Hub has the greatest opportunity for on-farm food recovery (pick-up, gleaning).** Proximity to farmers' markets and cropland reduces time and transportation costs for donation drop off and on farm pickup.

Conclusions

- Labor costs and transportation time/logistics are the biggest barriers keeping farmers from donating surplus produce.
- Programs that organize volunteer labor during harvests and provide pick up and transportation would save farmers time and resources, making participation more feasible for farmers.
- The biggest opportunity for urban recovery is at farmers' markets, which are concentrated spots for local produce that goes unsold. The South Hub's proximity to cropland provides an opportunity for farm-level food recovery.

Recommendations

- **Gleaning and Transportation:** Joint Venture's South Hub should coordinate some glean teams with proper liability coverage, training, and supervision, along with direct farm pickup operations for donated foods.
- **Farmers' market donation stands:** Farmers have said there is unsold product at markets. If stands can be set up for the food to be given to - these can be directly taken to hubs.
- **Accessible Tax Incentive Information:** Ensure that farmers are aware of current tax incentives they can collect by donating food and making this process as easy as possible.

References

- ReFed. (2025). Estimates of food waste and insecurity in the United States.
CalRecycle. (2021). Food recovery in California (SB 1383) and edible food recovery FAQs. California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery.
GIS: CropSmart (2024) SCC, & Division of Agriculture, County of Santa Clara (2025) List of Farmers Markets, Martin, R, personal communication, Feb, 11, 2026.