Governments, businesses, organizations and citizens around the world are increasingly seeking information about where exactly their food comes from. While we can assume that much of it originates at a farm, that’s often all that is known because once product leaves a farm, it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the exact journey it takes before it ends up on an individual’s plate. Whether it’s to ensure our food is free of food-borne illness, or for economic development purposes, it’s becoming more and more important for stakeholders across the board that food be traceable.

With funding from the National Science Foundation Early-Concept Grant for Exploratory Research, a CTG team is working to explore and better understand this issue, in particular the unique characteristics of small farmers as food producers. With a special focus on the “farm to institution” perspective in the NY Capital Region, CTG and research partner Professor of Biology Gary Kleppel of the Kleppel Lab for Agricultural Ecology and Sustainable Food Production at the University at Albany are analyzing the dynamics among small local farms, food distributors, institutional buyers, and other key government and non-government actors, and are also identifying the enablers and barriers for small farmers to participate in a whole-chain food traceability system.

The project will conclude with a preliminary data and technology architecture including data specifications, policies and governance that are responsive to interests to promote food supply chain integrity, including food source traceability, potentially applicable to small farms with less resources than their larger counterparts. The analysis results will provide new perspectives on data standardization as a different approach to traceability linking small farms to institutions. The case analysis will also help present improved methods for applying the concepts of traceability and product integrity to the risky, but highly significant, domain of small farms.