

Growing the Local Food Economy

IN ASHLAND AND BAYFIELD
COUNTIES OF NORTHERN
WISCONSIN

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Center for Rural Communities
NORTHLAND COLLEGE

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Introduction

This report summarizes and integrates the findings from a four-year research study, spanning from 2017 to 2021, the primary aim of which is to identify strategies and programs that improve access to local food for low-income households while achieving economic sustainability for small farms in Ashland and Bayfield counties. Over the multiple phases of the study, we collected quantitative and qualitative data from consumer households, local food producers, anchor institutions, retailers, and organizations. In the following, we briefly summarize key findings from each phase of the project and integrate these findings into a conceptual model of a local food economy in remote, low-income rural region that may applied to other regions with similar characteristics. We then propose two program designs that follow from our integrative analysis: a Farm-to-Families Fund or Network program that subsidizes Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares for low-income households, and a Chequamegon Bay Area School-Farm Collaborative (SFC) that meets annually to coordinate pricing, production, processing, and distribution across member school districts. Details of each program are offered in this report.

Key Findings

Following are the key findings from each phase of the research study.

Phase I: Survey of household demand for local food

In 2017, we mailed survey questionnaires to 2,000 randomly selected households in Ashland and Bayfield counties. The survey instrument was designed to reveal the predictors and barriers to consumption of local food, values and beliefs about buying local, and the contextual factors that mediate food purchases and food access. We received 712 responses to the mail survey. To ensure a proportionate response from lower-income households, questionnaires were administered on-site at four The BRICK Ministries food shelf locations in Ashland, Cable, Cornucopia, and Mellen, and at the Bay Area WIC office in Ashland. Sixty-nine questionnaires were completed on-site.

Analysis of the results shows that households in Ashland and Bayfield counties support growing the local food economy and making sure that households across the income spectrum are able to participate and benefit from its development.¹

- A large majority of households **share values related to access to healthy food**, a regional culture of small farms, and water quality in Chequamegon Bay.
- 92 percent of households would like **more of the food they purchase** to be produced in Ashland and Bayfield counties.
- A majority of households are **willing to pay more** for food produced locally.
- The most frequently reported barrier to buying more local food is that it is **not available where households usually shop**.

¹ A full report of the findings is available at: https://www.northland.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ashland-Bayfield-Counties-Food-Survey_NC_CRC_Jan2018.pdf

- Over 45 percent of households are **willing to contribute to community programs** that support wider distribution and greater affordability of local food.

Phase II: Household interviews

In 2018, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten food shoppers in Ashland and Bayfield counties to better understand perceptions of availability and knowledge about local food. The interview guide was designed to address key findings in the above survey analysis about the barriers to purchasing more local food, specifically not knowing where to find it. We then performed thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions to identify themes and construct a typology of how households are positioned relative to the local food economy.² We found that:

- Some households are highly engaged with the local food economy, they have **multiple connections with local food locations, producers, and other local food consumers**, and they have a comprehensive mental map for where to find local food in the region.
- A proportion of households have **growing engagement with the local food economy**, they may have been introduced to a CSA through a community program or they may have shopped at the Chequamegon Food Co-op or farmers' market a few times, however they remain tentative, and their social circle is not as integrated with the local food economy as those who are highly engaged.
- Another group of households has **waning connections** with an older generation of farmers, they hold values consistent with a local food economy, however their knowledge of where to find it is not current.
- A fourth type of household is disinterested in engaging with the local food economy, usually because **they have what they need** from their own gardens or from others; they do, however, acknowledge that if their circumstances change, they may become more interested.

Phase III: Producer interviews

In the fall and winter of 2019, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 small-scale farmers in Ashland and Bayfield counties. Farmers were selected to represent a cross-section of foods and production practices. Questions in the interviews covered basic background information such as duration of operation, products harvested and sold, off-farm income, and acres in production. More in-depth and open-ended questions explored challenges in a region remote from urban markets, barriers to expansion, changes and decisions around production and marketing strategies, environmental challenges, motivations and values for farming, and quality of life topics.

² An academic journal article has been published based on these findings: Kemkes, R. J., & Akerman, S. (2019). Meeting people where they are: Instilling familiarity to increase demand in a rural local food market. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 72, 116-124.

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences in responses.³ Key findings include:

- Common reported challenges to expanding the local food economy are a **small, low-income population**, consumers who grow their own food, **distance from consumers and urban markets**, and difficulty entering into retail supply chains whose headquarters are located elsewhere.
- A strong similarity across small farms is an awareness and regard for what others are producing so as not to compete directly, rather **small farms cooperate implicitly and adapt to what others are doing** by capturing different segments of the existing market.
- Exporting outside of Ashland and Bayfield counties often seems necessary for financial stability, however it costs time and, for some, **contradicts values associated with keeping business local**.
- Thus far, school districts do not demand significant amounts from local farmers and connections that do exist rely on cultivating **time-consuming one-on-one relationships**.
- The common challenges make it **difficult to scale-up to take advantage of intermediaries** such as a food hub.
- What farmers produce and where they sell are not simply business decisions, they also reflect values, location, and personal circumstances.
- Small farms generally **feel supported by the community** and by each other.

Phase IV: Interviews with anchor institutions and organizations

Over the summer of 2021, after a hiatus in 2020 due to limitations imposed by the SARS Covid-19 pandemic, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 key community stakeholders at colleges, schools, clinics, retailers, food pantries, and churches in Ashland and Bayfield counties and other locales where leaders are connecting people with local food in innovative ways. A purposive sampling process was employed to select the participants to account for the key anchor institutions and retailers in the two counties and elsewhere. Interviews were analyzed for shared interests across institutions and potential for new programming and strategies to help expand the local food economy.

- **School districts would like to purchase more local food** for health benefits, student learning, and to support the community; most have some flexibility on choice of supplier and price.
- Barriers that inhibit school districts from purchasing more local food have included **availability and predictability of local food**, lack of time to coordinate at the beginning of the school year, menu inflexibility for some school districts, and **varied staff experience** for processing fresh food.
- Small retailers have more flexibility for purchasing from local producers than do larger retailers, and they have **interest in expanding seasonality** through frozen and value-added products.
- Food banks currently have an abundance of fresh produce and have strong relationships with local farms for donations.

³ An academic journal article has been developed based on these findings and is forthcoming.

- A Farm-to-Patient program at a local clinic provides nutritional education and **ties CSA boxes with patient goals**, participation is by prescription and on a sliding fee scale, with a limited number of years of eligibility.
- Northland College Hulings Rice Food Center has a certified kitchen and is a regional **resource for food processing and education**.

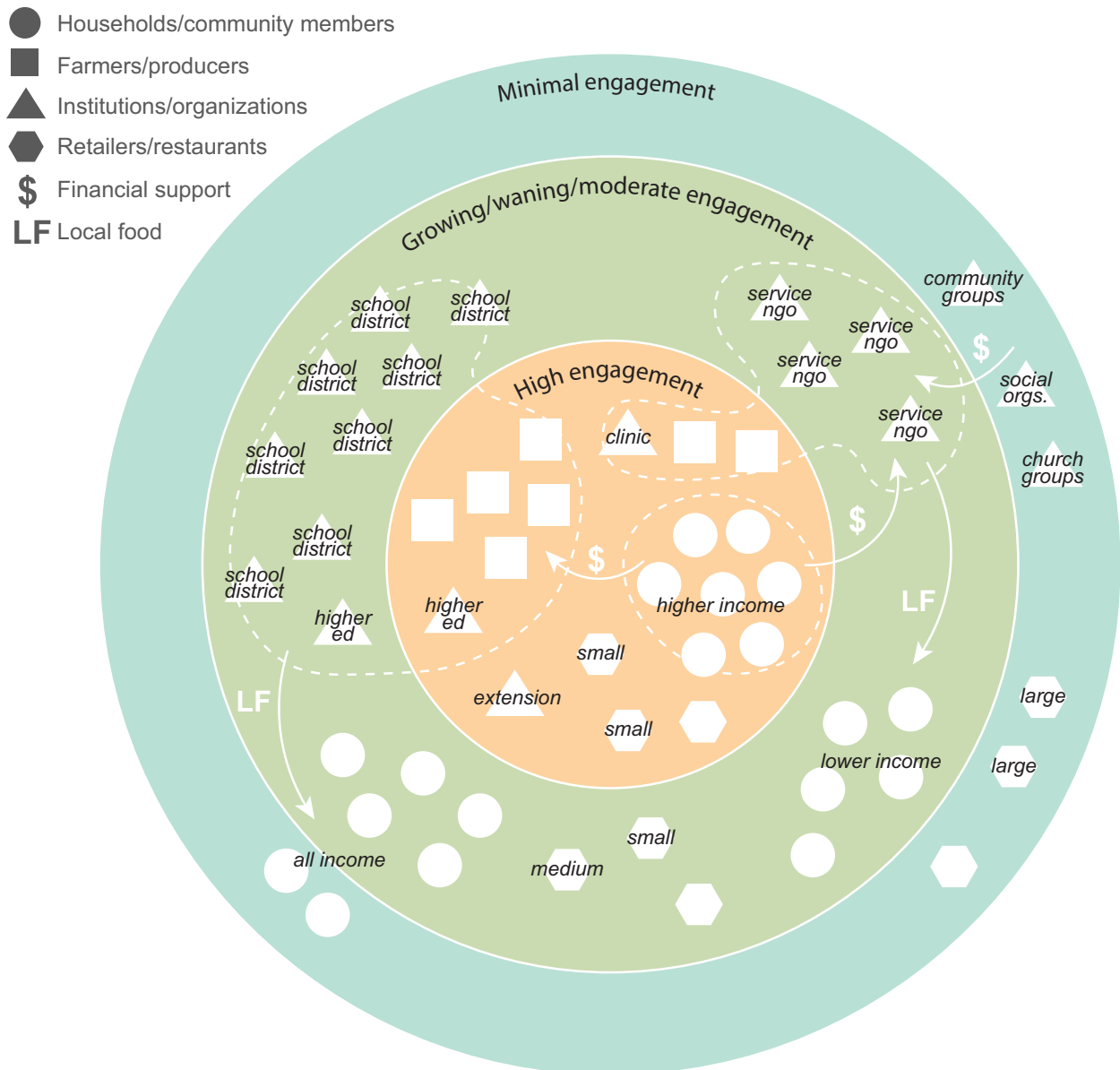
Integrated Findings and Conceptual Model

- An opportunity for expanding the local food economy in the region is to **draw in households with growing engagement**, and potentially those with waning engagement who hold similar values, by introducing it in familiar settings, in places such as churches, clinics, schools, service organizations, and community centers.
- Drawing in households with growing engagement means that **local food values may be infused into their social circles** and their knowledge about the myriad ways of buying local will expand, thus taking a step toward overcoming the barrier of a small, limited consumer market for local food.
- Community members are **willing to contribute financially** to expand access to local food, and some fund-raising mechanisms are already in place. Financial support from highly engaged community members and organizations would help to draw in households with growing engagement who may have financial barriers.
- **Strong interest from school districts** with key leaders currently in place⁴ suggests that collaboration between schools and farmers on production, pricing, processing, and distribution could lead to scaling-up local food production across the region.
- Due to the low population of the two counties, and the relatively small scale of local organizations and programs, scaling up local food demand may require **networks of programs, institutions, and organizations** to benefit from economies of scale, joint fund-raising efforts, and less time spent cultivating and maintaining one-on-one relationships between buyers and producers.
- More household consumers can be reached if local food becomes available where they routinely shop in retail locations; producers therefore would need to adhere to state food sales requirements and certifications to enter into larger retailers and **expand seasonality and coordinate what products are in demand** with smaller retailers (frozen peas, broccoli, and corn are popular items.)

These integrated findings are illustrated in the following conceptual model that may apply to other rural regions with a small local food economy, low population, and lower-income households. A central feature of this model are the networks of actors across levels of engagement working together to draw in more households and anchor institutions into the local food economy.

⁴ The names of interview participants are kept confidential in this report and are available upon request from the author and with approval from each participant.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of a local food economy in a lower-income rural region



Program Recommendations

Taking into account the above findings and conceptual model of a rural local food economy, we propose two program designs to (1) draw in households with growing and waning engagement of local food and (2) to coordinate local food purchases between school districts and farmers. These program descriptions, based on the evidence outlined in this report, are meant to serve as a starting point for pilot programs and to help secure funding for scaling-up programming.

(1) Farm-to-Families Foundation or Network

A Farm-to-Patient program at a local clinic provides a model for how subsidized CSA shares can help families access local food. Building on this concept, a new community foundation – a Farm-to-Families Foundation – with a permanent fund could expand a subsidized CSA share program to the broader community and involve multiple organizations to help fundraise, recruit participants, and distribute CSA shares. Such a fund would not only expand the market for local food, it would also improve health outcomes, keep local food local rather than exporting to urban areas, and provide financial stability for small farms.

Recognizing that the formation of a new community fund takes time and effort from committed members, a shorter-term alternative might be affiliation of such a fund with an established non-profit with similar goals. Yet another interim solution may be the formation of a network of Farm-to-Families programs, each housed within existing local non-profit organizations whose goals align with improving access to healthy food for their clients. For example, emergency housing centers, food shelves, and senior services organizations may choose to form their own in-house Farm-to-Families programs and fundraise to subsidize CSA shares for their clients.

Target population

The target population for the Farm-to Families Foundation/Network is households in Ashland and Bayfield counties who have a financial barrier to fresh fruits and vegetables. Household income at 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) might serve as a loose threshold as eligibility for a fully subsidized CSA share. Under the Network model, eligibility criteria would be determined by each member non-profit.

Objectives and outcomes

Key objectives and outcomes of this program are:

- An increase in the number of lower-income households who have financial access to local food
- Improved food stability and health outcomes for lower-income households
- Strengthening of the local food culture in Ashland and Bayfield counties through a greater number of connections between households and farmers
- Reduction in exportation of local food to urban areas
- Higher demand for CSA shares and expansion of local food production in the two counties

Considerations

A subsidized CSA share program helps to overcome the financial barrier to local food for lower-income households, making it more available, yet other barriers associated with food insecurity remain. For example, access to CSA shares may be complicated by work schedules and lack of transportation for pick up, therefore a Farm-to-Families program will need to support households in this regard by working to coordinate effective distribution. Utilization of CSA shares may be challenged by the novelty of local foods, requiring education about processing and cooking with fresh vegetables. For some households, access to a kitchen may be compromised, so that resources such as a community kitchen may be helpful for making sure they can fully utilize their CSA share.

Program components

- Each Farm-to-Families non-profit member organization can undertake fundraising efforts accordingly given its mission and existing funding network.
- Fundraising should take place in the fall for early winter ordering of the desired number of CSA shares for the following summer season.
- Prior to fundraising, organizations may want to be in communication with local farms offering CSAs who can be found on the FEASTbythebay.org website.
- Each organization should consider the pick-up, storage, processing, and educational needs of its clientele.
- Additional fundraising may be necessary to support the above needs.

Pilot program

A pilot program may start with one non-profit organization whose mission aligns with improving food security for its clients undertaking fundraising and coordinating with one farm to purchase CSA shares. Starting small would enable an organization to learn how best to serve its clientele, whether that be through utilizing local food within existing services (ie, cooking and supplying meals), supplying the CSA share directly to clients, offering training for how to cook with fresh vegetables, or making a kitchen available to clients. Lessons learned could be shared with other interested organizations.

(2) Chequamegon Bay Area School-Farm Collaborative

The Chequamegon Bay Area School-Farm Collaborative (SFC) is proposed to be made up of public school districts and private schools within Ashland and Bayfield counties, along with interested farmers, and institutions of higher education who are in a position to contribute to the group. The purpose of the SFC is to coordinate demand for local produce in a timely effort that both affords farmers the financial assurance to expand production and improves availability of local food for school districts.

Target Population

The target population for this program are students from a range of backgrounds who otherwise may not have access to fresh, healthy local food.

Objectives and outcomes

Key objectives and outcomes of this program are:

- Increased demand for and expanded production of local vegetables
- Extension of seasonality of local vegetables through processing
- Increased capacity for processing and menu planning for school kitchen staff
- Education and awareness amongst students of the health and community benefits of eating local food
- Healthier eating at area school districts
- Financial security for small farms
- Improved availability of local food for school districts

Program components

An annual meeting could take place in October involving representatives from interested public school districts, private schools, interested farmers, and supporting institutions. Pre-orders are made at this meeting for the subsequent school year. The following information and topics may be considered at the meeting:

- School districts arrive prepared with
 - Quantities of vegetables needed for the following school year
 - Budget, ability to pay
 - Processing needs for menu fulfillment (fresh, frozen, preserved)
 - Additional storage requirements
- Farmers arrive prepared with
 - Wholesale prices
 - Capacity for production
 - Harvest times
 - Distribution plan
- Joint decisions should consider
 - Production responsibilities across farmers
 - Timing and mechanism of pre-order financial commitment
 - Processing space required, availability of processing spaces
 - Staff time required for processing
 - Recruitment strategy for seasonal staff needed for processing
 - Staff training for processing, if necessary
 - Distribution plan
 - Storage options
 - Additional funding requirements for processing, training, storage, and distribution
 - Funding strategy for additional requirements (see below)

Resources

Several community strengths and resources are available to support this program.

- Interest from leadership at area school districts⁵
- Price flexibility and storage capacity for local food at school districts
- Certified kitchen and flash-freezing capabilities at the Northland College Hulings Rice Food Center
- Regional higher education culinary and sustainable agriculture programs that may serve as training resources for school district staff or who may be able to contribute to processing efforts directly
- Desire for expansion of vegetable production in the region, either on existing farms or new entries
- Funding programs that could support staff time for processing and distribution

Funding strategy

Additional funding may be necessary beyond the cost of food production to support food processing, training of staff for processing, additional storage, and transportation for distribution. An estimate of additional funding could be established at the annual meeting. Funding sources might include the Chequamegon Food Cooperative 'Round for Partners' program (call for partners takes place in November for inclusion in fundraising for the following year) and the Duluth Superior Area Community Fund which supports education, and community and economic development (school districts are eligible to apply.)

Pilot program

A pilot program might start with three or four highly motivated school districts working with a few interested farms to produce, process, and preserve one or two vegetables that fit into existing school menus. Vegetables and products to consider are frozen green beans, frozen broccoli, fresh romaine or spinach, and tomato sauce. Summer school students or college interns or students may process the vegetables as part of their learning experience.

Conclusion

A network of Farm-to-Families programs and a School-Farm Collaborative are two innovative ways for organizations and institutions to share and pool resources to demand greater quantities of local food from small farms in Ashland and Bayfield counties. These programs achieve the goals of this research study by expanding the demographic reach of local food consumption and reducing inequality in the distribution of local food while strengthening small farm economic viability. These programs also aim to overcome structural barriers to institutional purchasing of local food, a significant source of demand that could enable farms to scale-up production. A strong local food culture means that community members are willing to contribute financially and in-kind to improve access to local food. These programs aim to engage a broader range of households in the local food economy.

⁵ The names of interview participants are kept confidential in this report and are available upon request from the author and with approval from each participant.