



FARM TO INSTITUTION IN MICHIGAN: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING BY INSTITUTIONS

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Since 2004, the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) has conducted six surveys to understand the landscape of Farm to Institution efforts in Michigan. This synthesis brings together this research to summarize what is currently understood about local food purchasing by institutions and about the producers who sell to them, what is still unknown and what next steps are being taken in the research.

WHAT IS KNOWN

Local food purchasing at K–12 schools has been the most extensively studied, more than at other types of institutions. Research to date has shown the following in regard to K–12 schools and districts:

- The number of schools and districts purchasing local food (directly or through a distributor) has been growing, and more than half of school food service directors now purchase local food.
- The majority of food service directors (about 90%) is either purchasing local foods or interested in doing so.
- Fresh and whole produce foods are of greatest interest, compared to meat, dairy, grain and bean items.
- Local foods are most commonly purchased through broadline distributors, rather than from farmers, farmer cooperatives or specialty distributors.

According to the results of three surveys since 2004, supporting the local economy and/or helping Michigan farms and businesses have consistently been the top motivators for purchasing local food. Access to fresher food and access to higher quality food have been other strong motivators. The concerns that have topped the list of barriers to Farm to School are limited seasonal availability, food safety concerns and budget constraints.

Preliminary research indicates that, compared to schools, fewer early childcare sites (approximately one quarter of respondents) are purchasing local foods. Their interest in doing so, however, is nearly as high as that of schools, and their motivations and preferences for fresh and whole produce items are similar. Like schools, their concerns with the cost of local food and food safety also rose to the top of the list of barriers.

We know that many of the hospitals in Michigan are making efforts to purchase local food. As of December 2012, 114 of Michigan's nearly 150 hospitals had committed to locally source 20% of their food by 2020 through the Michigan Health & Hospital Association's Healthy Food Hospitals initiative.

Mirroring institutions' concern with the cost of local food, a survey of Michigan vegetable farmers showed that fair pricing was the farmers' top motivator in selecting markets of any kind. Very few farmers responding were currently selling to institutions (7%), and three-quarters of these reported total institutional sales of less than \$5,000 in 2011. However, roughly half of those who were not selling to institutions were interested in doing so, and the majority (approximately 85%) indicated that it would be helpful to have lists of institutions in their area that are interested in purchasing local food.

In summary, local food purchasing appears to be a practice that will continue to expand and increase among K–12 schools, early childcare and education programs, and hospitals. While relatively few farmers appear to be selling directly to institutions, a large number are interested in exploring the opportunities to sell to K–12 schools (47%), hospitals (41%) and colleges or universities (40%).



WHAT IS STILL UNKNOWN

There is still much that we do not know about local food purchasing in Michigan. The following list of questions summarizes areas that have been inadequately captured by research to date or have not yet been researched.

- What quantities of local food are purchased? What percentage of total food purchases is represented by local food?
- What is the extent of local purchasing among other types of institutions (e.g., colleges and universities, correctional facilities, long-term care facilities)?
- Does serving local foods impact consumption or sales to customers?
- How many distributors are buying from Michigan farmers, and how much are they buying locally? What are the distributors' top motivations and concerns with selling local foods to institutions?
- What factors and selection of markets impact farmers' ability to profitably sell to institutions?

NEXT STEPS FOR FARM TO INSTITUTION

The Michigan Good Food Charter calls for institutions to purchase 20% of their food products from Michigan growers, producers, and processors by 2020. In order to track progress toward that goal, it is crucial to develop mechanisms to track not just how many institutions are purchasing local foods but also the percent of their food budgets spent on local foods.

The Institutional Food Purchasing work group at CRFS is developing a campaign to engage institutions in committing to purchase 20% of their food from within Michigan. The campaign will also help the institutions track their progress in a way that enables this data to be summarized and averaged across the state. Local groups can encourage the institutions in their community to use the tracking tools developed for the campaign and, in turn, will be able to monitor local purchasing in a region of interest. While this campaign will initially target schools, hospitals, and universities, it will eventually be expanded to include institutions of all types and possibly even households.

In order for Farm to Institution to continue to grow, farmers must be able to profitably sell to institutions. The second research priority in the area of Farm to Institution, therefore, is monitoring the profitability of Michigan farmers, particularly those selling to institutions. Research should also investigate the circumstances and mix of market channels through which farmers can sell to institutions at prices that provide reasonable profits. CRFS staff are exploring partnerships, data sources and funding opportunities needed to conduct this research.

In partnership with the Michigan Department of Education, CRFS staff expect to continue to monitor the participation in Farm to School, the motivations and barriers, and the types of products purchased through annual surveys of K–12 school food service directors. Staff at the Ecology Center are working to assist hospitals in tracking their local food purchases as part of the Healthy Food Hospitals initiative of the Michigan Health & Hospital Association.

Other partnerships are needed to extend this type of monitoring to other institutions. Relationships with distributors are needed, in order to develop mechanisms through which the distributors can track the quantities of local food they are purchasing wholesale and inform their institutional clients of the local products they have available. Community groups can also work with individual institutions to help them establish and expand local food purchasing programs.

As research progresses, tracking mechanisms improve and outreach continues, the hope is that Michigan institutions will move closer and closer to the goal of sourcing 20% of their food from within the state.

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