

Food

Community Matters Now



A bi-monthly publication for Iowa leaders from Extension and Outreach Community and Economic Development

PROJECT PILOTS MOBILE PROCESSING UNIT FOR INDEPENDENT GROCERS, LOCAL FOOD PRODUCERS

By Sandra Oberbroeckling | Program Specialist

Fresh, locally sourced foods could become more widely available to Iowans thanks to a unique partnership between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Community and Economic Development (CED) and Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) programs.

With funding from the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center (AgMRC), researchers in CED and on ANR's Food Systems team will be piloting a small-scale, mobile cart that will process fruits and vegetables, with the ultimate goal of developing a full-scale processing unit.

The small-scale processing unit would be compact enough for independent grocers to affordably add value to their fresh produce by chopping, dicing, and slicing fruits and vegetables on site. The full-scale, trailer-sized model would broaden the capacity to accommodate farm-scale processing, making it easier for local growers to get their value-added products to multiple markets.

Through additional funding from AgMRC, CED and Food Systems team specialists are collaborating on multiple projects. This summer and fall, the team will be identifying best practice case studies across the United States and its territories. This study will highlight the best practices of independent grocers working with local food producers to stock their shelves. A full report of these best practices will be available early in 2024. CED and Food Systems team specialists are also conducting a feasibility study that involves surveying local community leaders across the United States to identify communities desiring to implement a brick-and-mortar facility in their local area for producers to utilize for processing efforts.

The idea for mobile food-processing units, case studies, and the feasibility study were conceived in response to the results of an AgMRC-funded study of current conditions for independent grocers to function as points access to locally sourced food products in Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota. The study was conducted by researchers from ISU Extension and Outreach, Kansas State University, and the University of Minnesota in 2021.

The goal of the study was to better understand independent grocers and food producers' needs and sourcing issues, and their capacity and equipment to process food. The research team conducted a survey of independent grocers, followed by interviews with both grocers and food producers.

Of 671 independent grocers identified in Iowa, only 14.2% completed the survey. Although the response rate was low, representation across the state was good, with 60% of the 99 counties represented. The survey asked grocers if they would be willing to take part in interviews. The three states identified 15 grocers from among the responses and 15 producers located within 60 miles of those grocers to interview.

Most of the grocers in Iowa indicated that they would like a statewide network of independent grocers for help with



Local produce display at El Michoacano Tienda y Taqueria, Denison, Iowa.

business, financial issues, networking, and regulations and expressed the need to build relationships among farm and food businesses, grocers, and buyers. The producers interviewed in Iowa are interested in creating best practices for business models and financial-planning practices for diversified farm and food businesses. Producers also want to scale up or add additional value-added products for market diversification.

The results from all three states are published in a report titled *Midwest Independent Grocery Stores: Identifying and Sourcing from Local Producers*, which is available for download from the [AgMRC website](https://www.agmrc.org/food/local-regional-foods) (<https://www.agmrc.org/food/local-regional-foods>).

ONLINE RESOURCES

[COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS + FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE CONFERENCE](#)

[IOWA FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE COALITION](#)

[COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS PROGRAM](#)

[COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS TACTICS VIDEOS](#)

GREETINGS FROM OUR PROGRAM DIRECTOR

When I interviewed for this position last summer, I was asked to discuss “vision” for our Community and Economic Development team. I chose to talk about quality of life in Iowa communities and I shared that my favorite experience with Iowa quality of life is our farmers markets. I have been going to the Court Avenue Farmers Market for my entire adult life. Each spring about this time, I search for the opening date and on lovely spring weekends, think that surely it could start earlier.

When it does open, that farmers market provides nearly six months of abundant fresh produce, chats with the growers, and encounters with friends and acquaintances—that is, entertainment, socialization, and sustenance for families; income for growers and vendors; and tourism for our community. It is a show of the productivity of our people, the richness of the state, our communities’ ability to organize, and our collective need to socialize. It brings together the best of our urban and rural places.

Yet, for all the abundance a farmers market displays, there are challenges with food scarcity and food access throughout Iowa. In a state with an agricultural heritage, some of the world’s best growing conditions, and more pigs than people, it is troubling that approximately 1 in 10 of our state’s children struggle with food insecurity.

Further, regardless of income level, more than two million rural residents in our country confront challenges with food access because they live in a place that is more than 10 miles from a grocery store. These “food deserts” are growing across the rural Midwest because of the disappearance of independent community grocery stores.

Creative, ambitious new solutions are needed to address the many challenges in our food systems and, as you will see in this issue of *Community Matters Now*, CED’s Food Systems team is working on multiple fronts to identify the challenges and work

on the solutions to address food access and food scarcity. The articles in this edition identify ways to engage in improving our food systems and, if you want to dig deeper, check out the Food Systems area of our CED website for more ideas. Through their work and the work of many other entities in Iowa, there are many ways to engage.

If you find yourself in Des Moines on a summer Saturday morning, I encourage you to venture out to the Court Avenue Farmers Market, or look for the farmers market in your community; Iowa boasts more than 200 regularly occurring farmers markets. When you do, consider not only the food, but the community they help create.



Erin Olson-Douglas
Program Director, Iowa State University
Extension and Outreach Community and
Economic Development

VIDEOS HIGHLIGHT LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS EFFORTS

By Bre Miller | Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Specialist

Local and regional food systems have grown in popularity over the past decade as shown by the increasing supply of and demand for local foods. The number of farmers markets has nearly tripled over the last 15 years, and thousands of farm-to-school programs have been initiated across the United States. According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center (AgMRC), local foods have often topped consumer and food professional surveys of food trends.

Funded by the Farm Bill and operated through Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, AgMRC is a national information resource for value-added agriculture, including areas related to commodities and products, business development, food industry, and renewable energy.

In 2022, to highlight local food systems efforts, AgMRC and ISU Extension and

Outreach collaborated with businesses, organizations, farmers, and food producers to create four case-study videos that showcase different businesses across the food systems and include the following topics:

- Incubator Farms or Beginning Farm Programs: Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens; Des Moines, Iowa
- Processing Facilities: Sno Pac Foods; Caledonia, Minnesota
- Food Hubs: The Common Market; Texas
- Food Recovery: MEANS Database

In the videos, owners, staff, and clients share about their challenges, successes, and recommendations for individuals or communities interested in implementing a similar project in their region. Many of the interviewees also shared the value of building relationships with partners

and connecting with members of the community. ISU Extension and Outreach and AgMRC continue to partner with organizations nationwide to create additional videos highlighting the breadth of food systems and importance of local/regional food.

These videos not only promote the individual businesses and organizations, but also increase knowledge of local and regional food projects, programs, and their impacts on community food systems.

The final videos are available to the public on the [AgMRC website](https://www.agmrc.org/food/local-regional-foods) (<https://www.agmrc.org/food/local-regional-foods>), along with research-based information regarding commodity crops, business and benchmarking tools, and market research. To learn more, contact Courtney Long, food systems program manager, at court7@iastate.edu.

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IOWA FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE COALITION CONNECTS YOUTH TO HEALTHY, LOCAL FOOD

By Chelsea Krist | *Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development Extension Specialist*

Many children in Iowa are enjoying access to and learning about local foods through their schools or childcare facilities because of the efforts of dedicated groups of people who make up the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care (F2SEC) Coalition.

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach is one of 24 organizations that make up the coalition, which is the result of the merger in 2020 of the Iowa Food to School and Iowa Farm to Early Care and Education Coalitions.

The endeavor to promote healthy eating among Iowa youth began in 2007, when lawmakers established a program to link schools with local food producers and to provide children with hands-on, healthy learning. That year, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) formed the Iowa Farm to School Coalition. In 2016, realizing the need for the early childcare sector to receive the same support for and benefits of locally sourced food, food education, and on-site gardening, the Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) established the Iowa F2SEC Coalition.

The Iowa Farm to School Coalition and the Iowa Farm to ECE Coalition operated independently from 2016 to 2019. During that time, both groups created professional development opportunities, trainings, collaborative grants, educational resources, and partnerships—but with some duplication of efforts. Leaders and members of both coalitions collectively decided to merge in 2020.

Currently co-chaired by specialists in ISU Extension and Outreach's Farm Food and Enterprise Development (FFED) program, the Iowa F2SEC Coalition supports the efforts of a statewide network of stakeholders such as childcare providers, K–12 teachers, families, food-service staff, farmers, food hubs, and other food system and education partners. Three strategy teams bring the coalition's work to life, organizing opportunities and funding for statewide local food procurement, food education, and network development.

The Iowa F2SEC Coalition is the only stakeholder group in Iowa serving children



Students pose with homemade pizza made with garden-grown produce, Postville Community School District.

from birth through age 18. Working at the intersection of education and food in an increasingly diverse state, coalition members view equity as a core value and are committed to engaging in culturally responsive and reflective practices.

To learn about the Iowa F2SEC Coalition current, grants, training, and events, visit the [website](https://www.iowafarmtoschoolearlycare.org/) (<https://www.iowafarmtoschoolearlycare.org/>). To get involved with the coalition, e-mail iowaF2SEC@gmail.com.

REGISTRATION OPEN FOR COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS + FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE CONFERENCE

By Bre Miller | *Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development Extension Specialist*

The first-ever Community Food Systems + Farm to School and Early Care Conference will be held June 15–17 in Waukee. With the theme “Growing a Culture of Celebration,” this collaborative conference will engage, support, and inspire individuals, organizations, and business in all areas related to food systems and farm-to-school and early-care education.

The conference is hosted by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach's Food Systems team, which is comprised of the Community Food Systems Program and the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition.

The event kicks off with a day focused on community food systems, with local and regional food systems practitioners participating in plenaries, breakout sessions, and vendor exhibits. The second day will celebrate local food through various tours of local farms and food businesses in the Greater Des Moines Area, ending with a reception at a local organic produce farm. Jan Libbey, coordinator of the Iowa Food Systems Coalition, will speak about the Iowa Local

Food Plan. The final day will highlight farm to school and early care and connect local partners through various sessions, interactive activities, and networking.

On June 15 and 17, fruit and vegetable processing using a mobile cart will be demonstrated and a scaled model of a proposed processing truck trailer will be available for attendees to explore the potential types of larger-scale mobile processing on ([see article on page 1](#)).

While this is the first joint conference, each individual event has a rich history. The Community Food Systems Annual Event began in 2015 with the intent of lifting up best practices around the nation in all areas of community food systems. This annual

gathering offered an opportunity for national and statewide partners to promote their work, network, and think collaboratively for creative projects and research. The Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Annual Conference began in 2018 with the goal of supporting and inspiring local partners or individuals interested in implementing farm to school and early care education in their communities and organizations throughout Iowa.

This conference is open to the public and registration is open May 1–June 1. [Registration](https://bit.ly/cfs-f2ec-register) is online (bit.ly/cfs-f2ec-register), along with [details](#) on scholarship, vendor, and sponsor opportunities (bit.ly/cfs-f2ec-conference). For more information, contact Bre Miller at millerb@iastate.edu.

CONGRATULATIONS, DR. LONG!

Courtney Long, food systems program manager, will earn her PhD next month. Courtney focused her research and dissertation on resilient community food systems and the impacts of COVID-19 and natural disasters in five different states, as well as land-grant universities' roles in supporting efforts for resilient food systems.

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