Our land. Our tables.

The River Farm, Wells County, Indiana

Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment

Conducted for:

Northeast Indiana Local Food Network

2025

Our land.
Our tables.

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Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessent, 2025

Executive Summary

The Northeast Indiana Local Food Network has dedicated countless hours of staff and volunteer time to a thoughtful, data-driven, year-long effort aimed at fostering a shared understanding of the needs within Northeast Indiana's Local Food System. This initiative sought to enhance awareness, understanding, and appreciation throughout the region through engagement with **over 500 residents**. Additionally, the planning process has enabled local stakeholders to identify ways to strengthen capacity and resilience within the local food system, promote inclusivity, and support vulnerable and marginalized communities. The research conducted for this report offers valuable insights that can guide strategy development and resource investment to advance local food system efforts.

Within the State of Indiana, in the heart of America's Breadbasket, it is paradoxical that **90% of all food and 98% of produce consumed by residents is sourced from outside the state**. Despite growing consumer demand for healthier, locally grown food, small to medium farmers continue to face significant systemic challenges. These include limited access to land due to **soaring acreage costs, which have surpassed $25,000 per acre** in parts of the region, a shortage of food processors and distributors of locally produced foods creating bottlenecks and inefficiencies in bringing products to market, and underdeveloped market channels that force producers to compete for the same buyers.

Adding to these challenges, **the aging farming population—currently averaging 56 years old**—raises concerns about the future of local agriculture, as many younger family members show little interest in farming. This issue is further intensified by development pressures that have led to the **loss of 46,000 acres of farmland in Northeast Indiana** in recent years. Moreover, **food insecurity remains a persistent issue, affecting over 100,000 residents** (12.6%) in Northeast Indiana—a problem that has remained especially relevant since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building a robust local food system presents a promising path forward, offering farmers the means to sustain their livelihoods while directly addressing regional food security. Positioned in the middle of multiple U.S. population centers, Northeast Indiana sits within overlapping foodsheds, geographic areas where food flows from regional farms to tables in homes, schools, and restaurants, presenting unique local food production growth opportunities. By prioritizing local access, Northeast Indiana can maximize the economic and health benefits of its agricultural assets. This is a chance to keep the value of local food circulating close to home, where it can make the greatest impact.

The Northeast Indiana Local Food Network has the potential to be a key catalyst for local food system transformation. While the organization continues to build its capacity, achieving meaningful change will require a collective effort from the entire region. **This is a call to action** for community organizations, local governments, funders, and residents to align their efforts and resources to create a resilient local food system that benefits everyone.

By working together, Northeast Indiana can cultivate a vibrant and sustainable local food economy—one that enhances public health, supports local agriculture, and forges lasting community connections. **Together, we can strengthen the health and economic vitality of our region through a thriving local food system.**

Introduction

Northeast Indiana Local Food Network Needs Assessment Stakeholder Meeting, February 2025

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of the Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment is to increase awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the local food system in Northeast Indiana. The planning process will also help Northeast Indiana stakeholders determine how to build capacity and resilience within the local food system, increase inclusivity, and serve vulnerable and/or marginalized populations. Research conducted as part of this report can be used to develop strategies as well as align investment of resources by the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network and associated local food stakeholders across the region.

Foundational Research

Hoosier Farmer? Emergent Food Systems in Indiana.

In 2012, the State of Indiana hired Crossroads Resource Center from Minneapolis, MN to conduct a study titled, *Hoosier Farmer? Emergent Food Systems in Indiana*.[1] According to this study, Indiana's food industry is undergoing significant transformation, driven by a consumer movement toward healthier, locally sourced foods. Originating in Bloomington 50 years ago, this shift has expanded statewide, with residents increasingly seeking connections with farmers and their production methods. Direct sales through farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) memberships, and home gardening have increased, fostering economic and social benefits. In addition, high-end outlets, vertically integrated farms, food delivery services, and produce auctions have enhanced accessibility.

However, challenges persist, including market failures impacting commodity farmers. Net cash income from farming in 2009 was $1.1 billion less than 1969 (inflation adjusted), despite the doubling of farm productivity during this time period. Some Hoosier farmers are significantly increasing corn production using genetically modified crops and intensive techniques to address global food demands. However, Indiana still imports 90% of its food and 98% of its produce, with Hoosier consumers spending billions annually on out-of-state products.

Food insecurity is an additional challenge that affects a large segment of Indiana residents, prompting innovative initiatives to help feed low-income populations. Young farmers are shifting away from traditional farming toward sustainable methods, but rising costs and the need for thousands of new farmers presents challenges. Institutions such as the Farm Bureau and Purdue Extension offer vital support in navigating these complex dynamics and sustaining Indiana's evolving food economy.

The study explored the question, "What is emergent in the Indiana food industry that most defines a new future for food?" Key findings highlight Indiana's historical focus on distant commodity markets rather than local food production—a legacy from pioneer days when farmers prioritized cash crops to repay debts. Early Hoosiers produced their own food, leaving little market demand for locally grown products. Today, however, the landscape has shifted. Few residents, including farm families, grow their own food, and personal income is at record levels. Despite this, Indiana's farms and marketing infrastructure remain geared toward long-distance trade, with minimal support for local food distribution. This presents a unique opportunity to develop knowledge as well as lasting infrastructure, such as warehouses, and transportation networks, to promote and sustain a robust local food trade for the first time in the state's history.

***Northeast Indiana Local Food Network Strategic Plan* (2016), Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership**

In 2016, the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership (a regional economic development entity) began exploration of the creation of a Northeast Indiana Local Food Network. Manheim Solutions, Inc. teamed with Crossroads Resource Center to develop a strategic plan to strengthen local food networks and promote efficient, profitable, and inclusive local food trade. According to the Phase I[2] report, informal local food networks in the region were built over decades by pioneering farmers with a focus on producing high value, differentiated food items, and fostering new social and economic connections among farmers, businesspeople, and consumers. These initiatives emphasize innovative farming and marketing practices, supported by collaborative infrastructure, to stabilize agriculture and local food systems. However, their efforts have often been overlooked in regional economic development studies. The Phase I report examined the formation of these networks, analyzing their strengths, limitations, and alignment with the region's vision. It also reviewed Northeast Indiana's farm and food economy and assessed the competitive strengths and weaknesses of local food business clusters. The Phase II report provided an action plan for the region which included the following goals:

GOAL 1: Create a strong regional network with strong leadership.

GOAL 2: Create a centerpiece of visible success, such as a local food hub serving all eleven counties around which infrastructure can be developed.

1 Crossroads Resource Center. (2012). https://www.crcworks.org/infood.pdf
2 Manheim Solutions and Crossroads Research Center. (2016). https://www.crcworks.org/innetworks16.pdf

GOAL 3: Spawn greater understanding among stakeholders on the purpose of a local food network as an economic engine creating prosperity for the entire region.

GOAL 4: Achieve greater understanding of the compatibility and mutually beneficial nature of supporting both local producers/processors and large employers/producers.

GOAL 5: Identify additional opportunities and low hanging fruit to build out the already formed, but undeveloped, Northeast Indiana Local Food Network identified in the Phase I report.

***All In Allen Comprehensive Plan*, Allen County/Fort Wayne, Indiana**

In 2023, Allen County (the metropolitan center of Northeast Indiana) completed the *All in Allen Comprehensive Plan*.[3] The Agriculture and Food Section of the plan includes the following goals and strategies that focus on enhancing agricultural sustainability, equity, and economic development:

Goal 1: Preserve Agricultural Land

- Establish Agricultural Preservation Tools: Introduce land trusts, heritage programs, and incentives to maintain productive farmland and small farms.
- Promote Sustainable Practices: Encourage environmentally friendly farming to mitigate water quality impacts, adapt to climate change, and protect against pests and diseases.
- Utilize Federal Programs: Assist landowners in accessing federal conservation funds.

Goal 2: Support Rural and Urban Agriculture

- Regulatory Updates for Rural Agriculture: Revise regulations to support farming businesses and limit environmental impacts of industrial farming.
- Support Urban Agriculture: Update city regulations to facilitate urban farming and community gardens.

Goal 3: Promote Agricultural Innovation

- Encourage Innovation: Host roundtables and events to foster agricultural research and technology.
- Support Local Agriculture: Increase farmers markets, partnerships with businesses, and publicize urban farming best practices.

Goal 4: Expand Agritourism

- Collaborate with Farmers: Provide toolkits and community grants to enhance agritourism, boosting local economies.
- Support Agritourism Regulations: Update policies to encourage urban and rural tourism-related farming activities.

Goal 5: Attract Agribusiness

- Incentivize Agribusiness: Create incentives and update regulations to attract small and large agricultural businesses.
- Promote Skilled Workforce: Partner with educational institutions to build agricultural workforce capacity.

Goal 6: Improve Food Access

- Increase Fresh Food Markets: Identify locations in areas with low healthy food access for fresh produce markets and partner with food co-ops.
- Enhance Food Programs: Expand initiatives like Double Up Indiana and integrate fresh produce into schools, hospitals, and food banks.
- Support Local Cooperatives: Train farmers in cooperative models and assist low-income residents in accessing CSA memberships.
- Improve Food Transportation: Develop better transportation options to distribute fresh produce in underserved areas.

This comprehensive approach combines preservation, innovation, education, and community engagement to support sustainable agricultural growth. It also sets a precedent for how other counties across the region may consider the local food system in their planning and policy implementation.

3 Allen County and Fort Wayne, Indiana. (2023), http://allinallen.org/

Northeast Indiana Local Food Network Background

A committee of economic development leaders and local food stakeholders created the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network (NEILFN) in 2018. The NEILFN formed under fiscal sponsorship by Wells County Revitalization, and received their nonprofit, tax-exempt status in 2022. The mission of the organization was established at that time to "support the growth of a vibrant local food marketplace across Northeast Indiana, by increasing the visibility and economic opportunities for our region's local food producers and businesses, so they can expand their sales both locally and beyond."

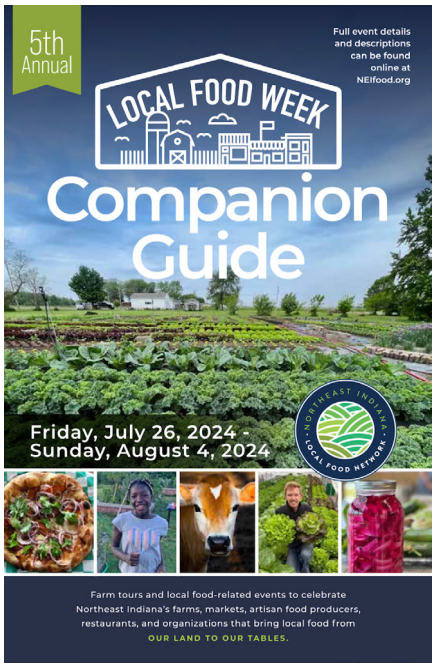
The NEILFN currently has an 12-member board, a volunteer Founding Director, a full-time Executive Director and a part-time independent contractor that provides local food outreach. NEILFN's existing programs have been created to serve the needs of local food farmers, businesses, and consumers, and to build relationships between a variety of stakeholder interests throughout the region. Current and recent initiatives and programs include:

Double Up Administration: Double Up Indiana is a nutrition incentive program that doubles the purchasing power of SNAP benefits for fresh fruits and vegetables at participating locations in Indiana, including farmers markets and some grocery stores. Launched in 2021 in Allen County with the help of the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation and a USDA grant, the program is supported by the Indiana Department of Health for statewide expansion. In December of 2024, the NEILFN was contracted with to administer the program for the region.

Local Food Marketing/Communications: NEILFN has published a monthly E-newsletter since 2021 with nearly 1,500 subscribers and close to a 50% open rate. NEILFN also manages active social media accounts on both Facebook and Instagram.

Local Food Guide: A searchable, online resource has been developed in order to connect residents with local food farms & businesses.

Local Food Networking: Each winter, NEILFN hosts a Local Food Networking event where nearly 100 farmers, growers, producers, buyers, sellers, and supporters of local food from across Northeast Indiana connect with the suppliers, buyers, and collaborators they need to help their businesses and projects thrive.



Local Food Week: An annual region-wide 10-day event offering free tours and events hosted by 40 farms/businesses/organizations with over 2,000 participants in 2024.

Northeast Indiana Farm to School Team: Through collaboration with Parkview Health, and with early support from a USDA Farm to School grant, NEILFN develops relationships and facilitates local food procurement between farmers and schools. In 2024, once a month for the entirety of the school year between 2,500 to 6,000, PreK-12 students in over 20 school districts across Northeast Indiana enjoyed locally grown fruits and vegetables through the Harvest of the Month taste test program.

USDA Regional Food Systems Partnership: In 2022, the NEILFN and a partnership of local food organizations across Indiana were awarded a USDA Regional Food System Partnerships Grant to strengthen local food collaboration. This grant, along with additional funds from the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation, have enabled the development of this ***Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment,*** as well as the development of a Five-Year Strategic Plan for the NEILFN—which includes board expansion and a re-evaluation of the organization's values, vision, mission, and goals.

Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment Process

*The **Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment*** kicked off in April of 2024 through the formation of a Core Planning Team comprised of the NEILFN Founding Director, three board members, the Executive Director, the Local Food Outreach Coordinator, and sustainable community planning consultants, Kristi Sturtz with Sturtz Public Management Group and Katherine Vellucci. The Core Planning Team met throughout the planning process, providing input, guidance, and support to the initiative.

Public input and engagement were an important part of this needs assessment, with a reach to approximately 500 individuals throughout the summer and fall of 2024. In June, four public engagement sessions were held across the region to hear directly from community members interested in, and impacted by, local food. Local leaders, food system stakeholders, and resident consumers were invited to participate through direct email invitations, NEILFN social media posts, and press releases distributed via news outlets throughout the Northeast Indiana region. Sessions were held at public centers in Kendallville, Fort Wayne, Columbia City, and Bluffton. Sessions included: a Food Systems 101 primer, a review of regional demographic data, a panel discussion with Northeast Indiana local food stakeholders, and facilitated tabletop discussions. A total of 83 participants provided input on Local Food System Awareness and Function, Access and Nutrition, Security and Resilience, and the Local Food Economy.

As a follow up to the broader engagement, 10 focus group sessions that included 94 participants were held both in-person and online throughout the month of September 2024. Sessions included groups with a focus on: LaGrange County, Wabash County, Southeast Fort Wayne, Farm to School, Food Insecurity and Nutrition, Local Community & Economic Development, and General Topics.

Kendallville Engagement Session

NEILFN Strategy Session

Between July and January, 40 interviews were conducted with regional and state stakeholders. In addition, 280 individuals filled out surveys that focused on: Producers, Consumers, Local Food Pantries, Chefs, and Farm to School interests.

This input, along with demographic data and other research was used to identify key issues and opportunities pertaining to the Local Food System in Northeast Indiana. Benchmarking research was subsequently conducted to determine how other relatable organizations across the Midwest and U.S. are organizing and implementing actions in relation to similar issues and opportunities. The Needs Assessment draft was presented to key stakeholders and the NEILFN Board in early 2025. At this time, NEILFN considered the research presented and used this to re-evaluate their mission and organizational strategies in relation to the needs of the region. Other key stakeholders were also encouraged to use this information to help develop complementary and collaborative endeavors.

Note: At the time of this study, a coinciding ***Indiana State Food Vision Study*** was launched to explore the ground truth experience, perceptions, and industry activity across the state. The state's findings are anticipated to be released in the late spring/summer of 2025. In addition, the Indiana Farm to School Team has conducted statewide listening sessions. Recommendations will be detailed in the Farm to School section of this document.

A Local Food Systems Overview

Cordes Berry Farm, Wabash County, Indiana

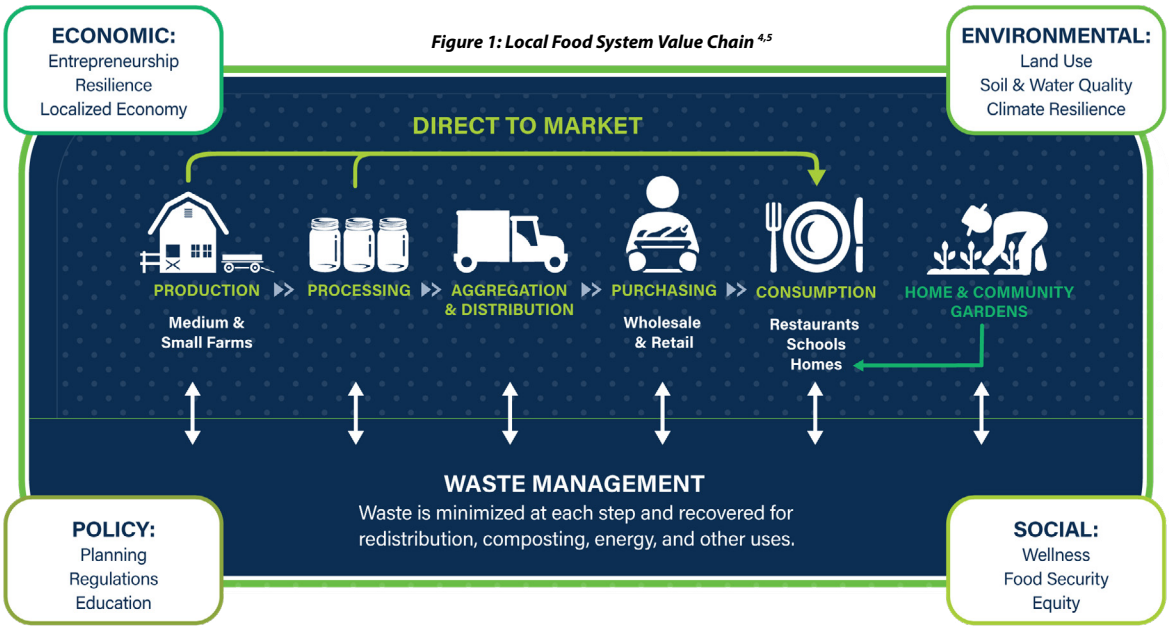
A LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM OVERVIEW

What is a Local Food System?

A local food system involves various, interconnected processes involved within place-specific clusters of agricultural producers – including small and medium farms – in addition to entities and institutions engaged in processing, aggregation, distribution, and purchasing (including wholesale and retail markets) that all lead to consumption (i.e. at homes, restaurants and schools). See Figure 1.

Because of the inherent values in a local food supply chain, professionals regard the stewardship of its benefit to people, communities, and environment as a "Local Food System Value Chain". Part of that stewardship involves waste management, where waste is minimized at each step of the value chain and recovered for redistribution, composting energy, and other uses.

Figure 1: Local Food System Value Chain [4,5]



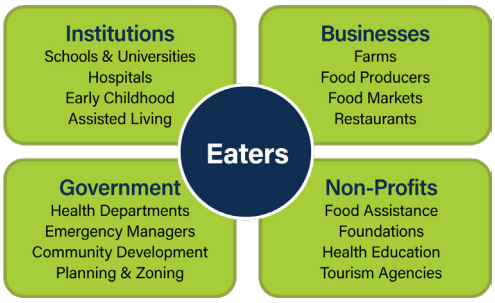
There is no shortage of entry points for getting engaged in the local food system. Some local food system efforts include smaller-scale gardening on city land in community cooperative garden operations, school gardens, church gardens, or home gardens. This can provide fresh, nutritionally dense food directly to community members and families within mere miles or steps to a plate.

As dedicated local food system professionals work throughout the value chain to elevate quality, education, and accessibility to nutritious foods for their local community in the name of health and resiliency, they understand that the dynamic system they operate within is influenced by priority sways in place and time ranging from Economic, Environmental, Social, and Political driven changes. This speaks to the importance of the anchoring values of the local food system that bring communities together.

Local food systems are the story of what we eat; How we eat; And all that it takes to get that food to land on our plates, or in our hands, to eat. These stories are unique to, and celebratory of, their respective region and community.

Who are the Stakeholders in a Local Food System?

Figure 2:



Involved in this dynamic systems work are people from various sectors, from Institutions, Businesses, Non-Profits, and Government Agencies (See Figure 2). It is important to acknowledge that each individual, every eater, has a stake, a voice, and a choice, in personal food purchases and engagement in their local food system. Many people are activated for personal reasons that range from nourishment to service, and even injustice. Whether stakeholders are engaged because they believe in community wellness and resilient economic development, whether their family has suffered from illness, or whether their land and/ or access to resources has been limited, there is a seat at the table for different voices to work together and strengthen the health and wealth of our local communities.

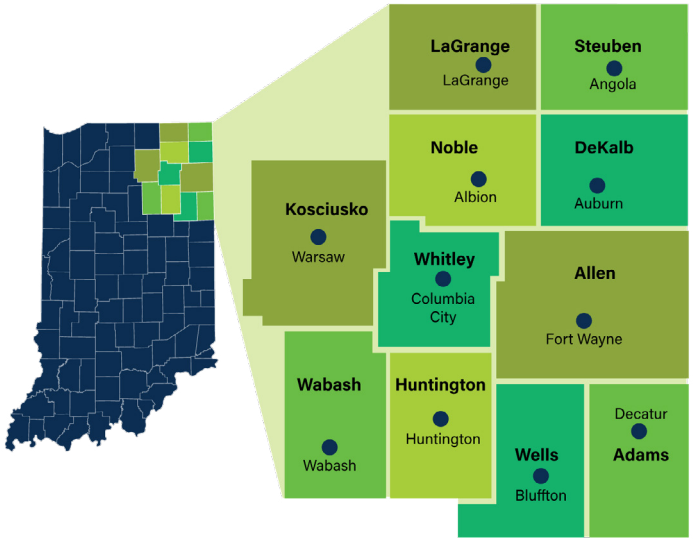
Communities determine what the reach is of their local or regional food system and ensures that this reach is focused on harvests and food production for its people to consume. The stewardship involves healthy, nourished eaters, families, and neighbors supporting each other and a vibrant environment for a thriving, local living economy. This is Northeast Indiana's Local Food System. And this is the work of the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network.

4 Crase, L. & Grubinger, V.P. (2014) , Food, Farms and Community: Exploring Food Systems
5 Southwest British Columbia Bio-Region Food System Design Project

Where is Local?

This needs assessment has defined the local food system as an 11-county region in the northeast corner of the State of Indiana (See Figure 3). This is an interconnection of rural, suburban, and urban areas as well as the unique resources that these places contribute to the region.

Figure 3: Where is the coverage of Northeast Indiana's Local Food System?



Why are Local Food Systems Important Now?

Local food system work is critically important now due to its significant role in addressing pressing global and community challenges. Environmental degradation, including soil erosion and declining water quality, threatens the long-term sustainability of agricultural practices. Shifts in temperatures and unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change are further destabilizing food production and endangering global food security. Many communities, especially marginalized ones, face inadequate access to fresh, healthy food, thus perpetuating cycles of hunger and malnutrition. This issue is compounded by high rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, which are exacerbated by over-reliance on processed and unhealthy food options. Additionally, natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, and wildfires, along with public health crises like pandemics, further strain centralized food systems, exposing their vulnerabilities. Strengthening local food systems can promote sustainable farming, enhance resilience to climate impacts and natural disasters, improve access to nutritious food, and foster healthier communities that are more self-reliant communities during times of crisis.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Highlights the Need for Food System Resilience

The global COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in early 2020 significantly impacted food systems across the United States, including the Northeast Indiana food system. This event highlighted the fragility of our existing food systems that are dependent on out-of-state sources and the need to increase the resilience of our local communities to short-term shocks and long-term stressors.

The pandemic led to a significant increase in food insecurity in Northeast Indiana in the short-term, with the number of food-insecure individuals rising from 79,900 to 112,000.[6] This highlighted the pressing issue of ensuring access to food for all community members during times of crisis. In 2020, Community Harvest Food Bank in Fort Wayne saw a 46% increase in food distributions.[7] Compounding issues such as inflationary effects of the conflict in Russia and Ukraine have contributed to sustained food insecurity for 13% of the Northeast Indiana region.

The pandemic revealed weaknesses and lack of adaptability in the food system, causing severe disruptions to standard food supply chains. The agri-food sector experienced difficulties obtaining adequate labor due to travel restrictions and health concerns. The government mandates forced restaurants to close or shift to takeout or delivery orders only. This near-total temporary loss of the foodservice distribution channel exposed greater vulnerabilities not just for the public in sourcing meals, but also for the service workers, chefs, food suppliers and producers who relied on restaurant sales.[8]

In response to disruptions, some smaller, independently owned and community-committed producers flexibly pivoted to provide for their local food system. Some local farmers experienced economic difficulties due to market closures and disruptions in their usual sales channels.[9] Local farmers, food producers, and marketers in the region sprung to support, adapting to meet the demand. Local food producers faced challenges but also saw opportunities to expand their sales both locally and beyond.[10] Farmers had to quickly adapt to digital and other alternative purchasing methods, as consumers rapidly adopted grocery pickup and delivery services. As a result, the pandemic increased consumer interest in knowing more about where their food comes from and how it is produced. Out of necessity at this time, 88% of people cooked more meals at home, with 49% cooking from scratch, potentially using more local ingredients.[11] These effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and exposure to new home cooking and local food sourcing behaviors, have led to increased efforts to strengthen and promote the local food system in Northeast Indiana, including initiatives to educate consumers about local food options and support local food entrepreneurship. The long-term impact on local food producers and markets remains to be seen as consumer habits continue to evolve post-pandemic. However, our outreach consistently showed a genuine energy of excitement and momentum across public engagement sessions, interviews, and focus groups, highlighting a need and a want for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network's growth in work.

6 Input Fort Wayne. (2021). https://www.inputfortwayne.com/features/covidsolutionsseries-food.aspx
7 Ibid.
8 Purdue University. (2020). https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/archive/releases/2020/Q1/a-guide-for-local-producers-to-navigate-the-covid-19-outbreak.html
9 Indiana State Department of Agriculture. (2022). https://www.in.gov/isda/files/Indiana-Grown-Econmic-Impact-Study-2022.pdf
10 Ibid.
11 Food Manufacturing.com. (2020). https://www.foodmanufacturing.com/consumer-trends/blog/21133823/how-covid19-has-impacted-consumer-food-habits

Regional Demographics

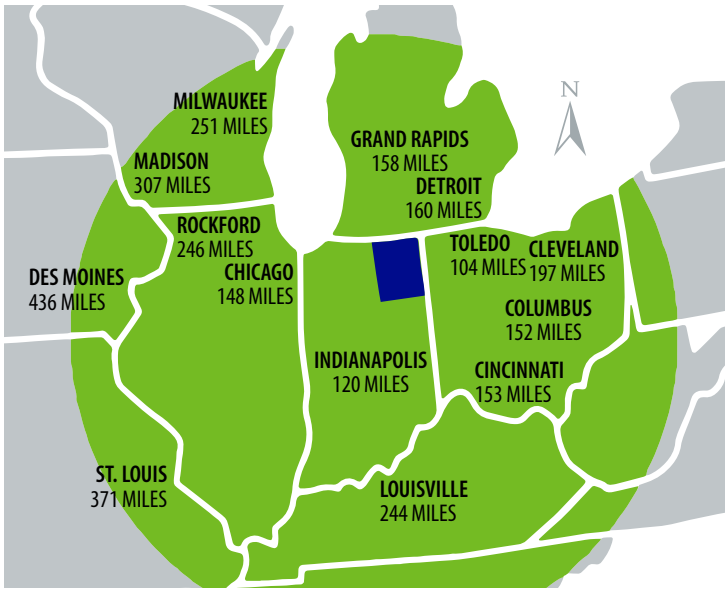
YLNI Farmers Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana

REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Population

Northeast Indiana is adjacent to the states of Michigan and Ohio in the Midwest region of the United States. The region is also near several large U.S. population centers, including Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Columbus, and Indianapolis. The region is comprised of 11 counties: Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Wells and Whitley. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the estimated 2022 population of the region, as shown in Table 1, is 805,656, 11.8% of the State of Indiana, with a population of 6,833,037. Population growth for Northeast Indiana from 2010 to 2022 stands at 6.1%, which is similar to the State of Indiana at 6.2%, and slightly lower than that of the United States at 7.9%. Individual county growth varied with Allen County/Fort Wayne (the urban hub of the region and representative of 49% of the regional population) growing by 10.1%. LaGrange County, known as being part of the third largest Amish settlement in the United States, also grew by just over 10%. Six counties increased their population by 1.5 – 5.0% (Adams, DeKalb, Kosciusko, Steuben, Wells, Whitley) while three counties realized small decreases (Huntington, Noble, Wabash).

Figure 4: Nearby Population Centers



Race, Ethnicity and Language Spoken at Home

Throughout the Northeast Indiana region, the racial/ethnic mix is 80.3% White alone, 7.4% Hispanic or Latino, 6.3% Black, 3.1% Asian, .5% Native American, .1% Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander, and 2.4% Two of More Races.[13] Of the 11 counties, Allen County (Fort Wayne) is the most diverse. This diversity has been increasing over the last decade. A comparison of the 2010 to 2020 Census provided in Table 2 shows that within the City of Fort Wayne, the Multi-Race population increased by 132%, Asian population by 83%, Some Other Race by 55%, Hispanic or Latino by 38% and American Indian/Alaska Native by 38%.

Table 1: **Population Estimates for Northeast Indiana Counties[12 13]**

County	2022 Population Estimate	2010 – 2022 Percentage Change
United States	333,287,557	7.9%
Indiana	6,833,037	6.2%
Adams	36,068	4.9%
Allen	391,449	10.2%
DeKalb	43,731	3.6%
Huntington	36,834	-.01%
Kosciusko	80,826	4.5%
LaGrange	40,886	10.1%
Noble	47,367	-.01%
Steuben	34,725	1.6%
Wabash	30,828	-.06%
Wells	28,335	2.5%
Whitley	34,627	4.0%
Northeast Indiana	**805,656**	**6.1%**

Table 2: **City of Fort Wayne Population Change by Race/Ethnicity, 2010-20[14]**

Race/Ethnicity	Population (2010)	Population (2020)	Percentage Change
Multi-Race	8,930	20,688	132%
Asian	8,379	15,312	83%
Some Other Race	9,441	14,721	55%
Hispanic	20,200	27,896	38%
American Indian & Alaska Native	939	1,300	38%
Black	39,085	40,311	3%
White (non-Hispanic)	166,563	143,537	-8%
Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	154	121	-21%

12 U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census and 2022 Population Estimates
13 U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 Population Estimates
14 U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2020 Census

Kosciusko (City of Warsaw) and Noble County both have notable Latino populations that are 9.9% and 11.6% of their total populations, respectively. All the remaining counties are predominantly White (non-Hispanic) ranging from 92% to 94% of their total populations.

The language spoken at home is primarily English throughout the region.[15] Spanish also prevalent in Allen (5.6%) and Noble Counties (8.3%) — Kosciusko County data was not available in 2022 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates. A total of 3.9% of the Allen County population speaks an Asian/Pacific Islander language which is, in part, a reflection of approximately 25,000 Burmese residents that resettled to the City of Fort Wayne and surrounding area as refugees over the past few decades.[16] Other Indo-European languages are largely spoken at home where there are concentrations of Amish populations, particularly in LaGrange (42.1%) and Adams (14.9%) counties.

Poverty

The United States measures poverty through a comparison of an individual's or family's income to a threshold determined to be needed to cover basic needs. If income falls below this threshold, these individuals are poor. The official poverty measure (OPM) of the Census Bureau compares cash income (pre-tax) to a threshold that is three times the cost of a minimum food diet and adjusted for family size. As shown in Table 3, there are 81,544 individuals in the Northeast Indiana region that fall below the poverty threshold. Of those individuals, 33.4% are children under the age of 18 and 15.7% are 60 years and older.

Vulnerable population segments have been identified to include older adults, children, individuals with a disability, and female headed households. Table 4 gives a summary of the percentage of each of these vulnerable population segments by county.

Table 3: **Poverty Status by Age[17]**

County	All	Under 18 Years	18 – 59 Years	60+ Years
Adams	4,040	1,647	1,728	665
Allen	45,562	16,200	23,448	5,914
DeKalb	4,274	1,540	2,126	608
Huntington	3,923	1,028	2,037	858
Kosciusko	7,023	2,083	3,421	1,519
LaGrange	2,261	518	1,253	490
Noble	3,366	925	2,637	634
Steuben	3,063	802	1,701	560
Wabash	3,194	963	1,639	592
Wells	1,748	434	949	365
Whitley	3,090	1,071	1,428	591
Total	**81,544**	**27,211 (33.4 %)**	**41,537 (50.9%)**	**12,796 (15.7%)**

Table 4: **Vulnerable Populations in Northeast Indiana Counties[18]**

County	65+ Years Old	Under 18 Years Old	Individuals with a Disability	Female-Headed Household
Adams	15.6%	31.2%	11.3%	18.9%
Allen	15.7%	25.2%	11.5%	26.7%
DeKalb	16.6%	24.2%	13.1%	20.2%
Huntington	17.8%	21.5%	14.4%	23.4%
Kosciusko	18.4%	23.2%	13.2%	21.0%
LaGrange	13.9%	32.1%	10.9%	18.7%
Noble	16.4%	24.2%	13.9%	20.6%
Steuben	21.0%	19.9%	14.0%	20.3%
Wabash	21.2%	20.9%	15.2%	23.8%
Wells	18.2%	24.5%	12.5%	22.1%
Whitley	18.2%	23.1%	13.7%	20.5%

15 2022 American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates
16 Gerber, B. (2022). Refugee Health Collaborative. Input Fort Wayne. https://www.inputfortwayne.com/features/RefugeeHealthCollaborative.aspx
17 2022 American Community Survey 5-Yr. Estimates
18 2022 American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates

Farmers/Producers

Within Northeast Indiana, there are 19,742 members of the regional population (2.5% of the total) that are farmers/producers (See Table 5). Of these, 67% are male and 33% are female with an average age of 56 years old. This gender breakdown and average age is like that of the State of Indiana.

Table 5: **Producer Demographic Information**[19]

County	Number of Producers (Total)	Male Producers	Female Producers	Average Age
Indiana	94,282	63,321	30,961	56.0
Adams	2,276	1,559	717	50.0
Allen	2,546	1,753	793	56.5
DeKalb	1,405	994	411	56.1
Huntington	1,117	790	327	57.3
Kosciusko	1,938	1,319	619	54.5
LaGrange	4,663	2,813	1,850	43.6
Noble	1,871	1,218	653	53.2
Steuben	811	547	264	57.3
Wabash	1,101	754	347	58.3
Wells	949	689	260	56.1
Whitley	1,065	733	332	56.5
NEI Total	**19,742**	**13,169**	**6,573**	

The race and ethnicity of producers in the region is primarily White (99.2%). Even in the more diverse urban areas, a lack of diversity exists among producers. Within the region, 7.4% of the population is Hispanic or Latino while only .4% of the producers are Hispanic or Latino, 6% of the population is Black, while only .02% of the producers are Black, and 3.1% of the population is Asian while only .05% of producers are Asian (See Table 6).

Table 6: **Producer Race & Ethnicity in Northeast Indiana *(2022)***

White	White: Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	Black	Native American or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian of Other Pacific Islander	More than one race
99.20%	0.40%	0.02%	0.20%	0.05%	0.01%	0.20%

Hunger Relief Farm, Fort Wayne, Indiana


Country Garden & Farm Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana


The Olde Farmhouse, Pierceton, Indiana

Tree Frog Farm, Avilla, Indiana

19 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture

Food Production

BroxonBerry, Wells County, Indiana

FOOD PRODUCTION

Local food production plays a pivotal role in shaping a community's food system by ensuring access to fresh, nutritious, and sustainably grown food. This needs assessment focuses on understanding the capacity and challenges of Northeast Indiana farms, farmers, and urban agriculture initiatives as well as regenerative agriculture practices to meet the food demands of local communities and neighborhoods.

Northeast Indiana farms contribute to the variety and volume of food available in the region. Local farms often sell a range of products, from fresh produce to meat, dairy, and specialty crops, with many focusing on direct-to-consumer sales through farmers' markets, farm stands, or community supported agriculture (CSA) programs. In addition to direct sales, local farmers are increasingly incorporating value-added products, such as preserves and cheeses, which provide farmers with opportunities to diversify income streams and extend the shelf life of seasonal produce. Organic sales and the market for regionally branded products also contribute to the economic viability of local farms, with consumers increasingly interested in supporting sustainable and ethically produced food. The value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs further strengthens local economies, ensuring that locally grown food reaches schools, hospitals, and other community-based institutions.

Urban agriculture and community gardening have gained momentum as well, offering opportunities for food production in cities and neighborhoods, where access to fresh produce can often be limited. At the heart of these local food production activities is a commitment to regenerative agriculture practices, which prioritize soil health, biodiversity, and sustainable farming methods.

Many farmers face significant challenges, including limited access to affordable land, capital, and resources to scale operations or transition to more sustainable practices. Understanding the specific needs of local farmers is essential for strengthening food systems and ensuring their resilience. By addressing these needs, the Northeast Indiana local food system can continue to grow, creating a sustainable food future for communities while supporting economic growth and environmental stewardship.

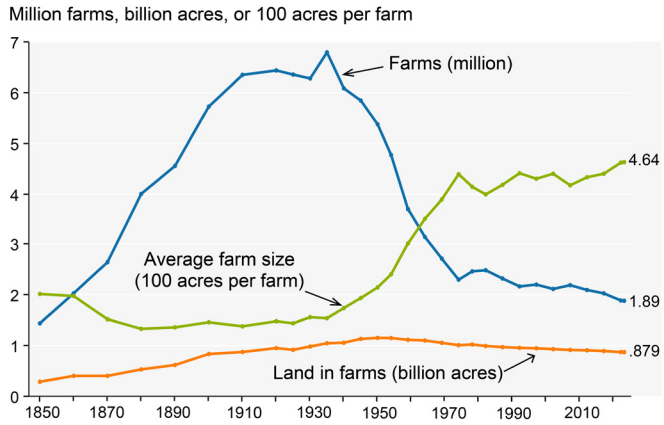
Farms and Land

According to the US Census of Agriculture, as shown in Table 7, there were 53,599 farms in Indiana in 2022. This decreased by 3,050 farms since 2017. Over the same time, farm acreage decreased from 14.97M acres to 14.60M acres, a loss of 370,000 acres in total. Similarly, according to the ***Inventory of Lost Farmland Report, 2023***[22] by the Indiana Department of Agriculture, a decrease of 345,000 acres was reported between 2010 and 2022.

Sources conflict, however, within the 11-county Northeast Indiana region. According to the US Census of Agriculture, there were 11,153 farms in Northeast Indiana in 2022, an increase of 99 farms since 2017 and acreage was also reported to increase from a total of 2.13M in 2017 to 2.26M in 2022. The average farm acreage also increased slightly from 259 to 262. However, according to the *Inventory of Lost Farmland Report*, there was a loss of approximately 46,000 acres of farmland in Northeast Indiana between 2010 and 2022. See Table 26 on page 55.

Figure 5:[21]

Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850–2023



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture (through 2022) and *Farms and Land in Farms: 2023 Summary* (February 2024).

When reviewing individual county numbers in the U.S. Census of Agriculture data in Table 7, Huntington and Wells Counties had the highest 2022 average farm acreages at 323 and 382 respectively, representative of industrial agriculture production including corn and soybeans that are significantly present across the region. Conversely, LaGrange County in the northern part of the region reported having the most farms in 2022 at 2,474, but also the lowest average farm acreage size at 78. Trends of an increasing number of farms, with decreasing average and median farm acreage reflects the pressures that population increases have on fixed acreage availability and the ability to preserve the Amish farm lifestyle in LaGrange. In an interview with Clearspring Produce Auction Manager, David Schrock, the auction was established in 2000 in order to help small farmers (mostly Amish) to be able to make a living as land prices increased and acreage per farm decreased.[23] According to Schrock, "There is only so much land. As the Amish population grows, children have smaller parcels to work with." Over 80 Amish and Non-Amish farms within a 15-mile radius of the auction now supply the auction and the produce is largely purchased for local consumption. The Adams County Produce Auction also exists in the southern part of the region, receiving produce from a mix of 55 Amish and Non-Amish farms, with buyers in Fort Wayne down to Indianapolis and Cincinnati.[24]

21 USDA, Economic Research Service. (2022). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=104133
22 Indiana Department of Agriculture. (2024). https://www.in.gov/isda/files/Inventory-of-Lost-Farmland-FULL-REPORT-Corrected-Map-7.8.24.pdf
23 Shrock, D. (2024). Interview by Kristi Sturtz, Sturtz Public Management.
24 Hilty, W. (2024). Interview by Kristi Sturtz, Sturtz Public Management.

Table 7: **Number of Farms and Land Acreage**[25]

County	Number of Farms 2022	Number of Farms 2017	Farm Acreage 2022	Farm Acreage 2017	Average Farm Acreage 2022	Average Farm Acreage 2017	Median Farm Acreage 2022	Median Farm Acreage 2017
U.S.A.	1,900,487	2,042,220	880,100,848	900,217,576	463	441	na	na
Indiana	53,599	56,649	14,602,240	14,969,996	272	264	56	59
Adams	1,305	1,450	214,734	212,963	165	147	32	30
Allen	1,497	1,548	329,722	281,635	220	182	47	35
DeKalb	818	771	191,601	158,931	234	206	54	51
Huntington	643	611	219,609	197,236	342	323	76	72
Kosciusko	1,079	1,042	289,904	261,674	277	251	40	40
LaGrange	2,474	2,144	193,616	195,370	78	91	21	30
Noble	1,067	1,015	174,349	199,996	163	197	44	45
Steuben	461	472	96,550	120,324	209	255	58	74
Wabash	635	724	186,071	211,239	293	292	69	70
Wells	527	581	201,538	225,047	382	387	87	130
Whitley	647	696	162,338	176,255	251	253	54	52
NEI Total	**11,153**	**11,054**	**2,260,032**	**2,132,670**	**262**	**259**		

Local food production is typically practiced on a much smaller scale than industrial production for global distribution. Both approaches exist in Northeast Indiana and data does not often represent a division between the two. The U.S. Census of Agriculture breaks down the number of farms in the Northeast Indiana region by size. In 2022, 9,047 farms were 179 acres or less, which represented 81% of all farms in Northeast Indiana (See Table 8).[26] This smaller segment of farms increased from 8,846 since 2017.[27] The most farms in the 1–9-acre, range were in Adams, Allen, and LaGrange Counties where the most significant Amish populations are present in Northeast Indiana.

Table 8: **Farms by Size (2022)**[28]

County	1-9 Acres	10-49 Acres	50-179 Acres	180-499 Acres	500-999 Acres	1,000+ Acres
Adams	227	591	269	102	64	52
Allen	159	608	414	157	76	83
DeKalb	86	297	245	99	26	65
Huntington	67	180	194	90	51	61
Kosciusko	193	414	244	116	47	65
LaGrange	403	1,298	665	57	23	28
Noble	134	429	304	115	49	36
Steuben	31	189	157	42	25	17
Wabash	74	196	177	99	45	44
Wells	69	134	107	100	64	53
Whitley	68	242	182	76	31	48
NEI Total	**1,511**	**4,578**	**2,958**	**1,053**	**501**	**552**

25 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_008_008.pdf
26 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_008_008.pdf
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

Products Sold

The total market value of all agricultural products sold in the United States in 2022 was $543B, and 80% of that value was produced on 6% of the farms.[29] Within the State of Indiana, the market value of all agricultural products sold was $18B, landing the state as one of the top producers nationwide. Nationally, Indiana ranks[30] :

- #1 Producer of popcorn, gourds, and duck
- #2 Producer of pumpkins
- #3 Producer of spearmint and turkeys
- #4 Producer of peppermint and soybeans
- #5 Producer of corn and hogs
- #6 Producer of eggs and watermelons
- #10 Producer of maple syrup and hemp for floral (CBD and other cannabinoid usage)

Indiana also ranked #7 in the nation for agricultural exports.[31] Leading exports included soybeans, corn, feed and feed grains, soybean meal, pork, and vegetable oils. As shown in Table 9, within the Northeast Indiana region, the total value of products sold in 2022 was at $3.25B, representing 18% of the state's value, and an increase of 64% of the value since 2017. LaGrange, Kosciusko, and Wabash Counties led the region in value of products sold, with Steuben County notably trailing the region in value of sales.

Table 9: **Market Value of Products Sold[32]**

Location	2022 Total Sales ($1,000s)	2017 Total Sales ($1,000s)	Regional Ranking (2022)
U.S.A.	$543,100,000	$388,500,000	-
Indiana	$18,029,033	$11,107,336	-
Adams	$366,138	$283,136	4
Allen	$310,503	$175,823	6
DeKalb	$166,606	$93,772	10
Huntington	$303,036	$160,153	7
Kosciusko	$428,903	$298,032	2
LaGrange	$494,017	$275,581	1
Noble	$199,872	$158,499	8
Steuben	$82,622	$64,037	11
Wabash	$394,401	$161,209	3
Wells	$313,500	$192,141	5
Whitley	$187,697	$120,948	9
NEI Total	**$3,247,295**	**$1,983,331**	

Tariffs enacted in 2025 are impacting Indiana's agricultural sector, particularly affecting soybean and corn farmers, as well as livestock producers. Substantial losses in exports have been realized due to retaliatory tariffs, especially from China. Indiana farmers have expressed concern over the prolonged trade tensions and their livelihoods. While some support the broader goals of fair trade, many are calling for immediate relief measures and clearer long-term strategies to mitigate the adverse effects on the agricultural sector.

Table 10: **Vegetables, Melons, Potatoes & Sweet Potatoes (Farm and Market Value)[33]**

County	2022 Farms	2022 Market Value
Indiana	1,465	$216,967,000
Adams	34	$373,000
Allen	23	$978,000
DeKalb	10	$96,000
Huntington	5	$132,000
Kosciusko	32	$2,186,000
LaGrange	72	$12,041,000
Noble	11	$185,000
Steuben	14	$666,000
Wabash	8	$69,000
Wells	5	$88,000
Whitley	7	$64,000
NEI Total	**221**	**$16,878,000**

Table 11: **Fruits, Tree Nuts, and Berries (Farm and Market Value)[34]**

County	2022 Farms	2022 Market Value
Indiana	953	$25,335,000
Adams	10	$70,000
Allen	12	-D-
DeKalb	34	$287,000
Huntington	3	$39,000
Kosciusko	25	$332,000
LaGrange	50	$638,000
Noble	15	$781,000
Steuben	5	-D-
Wabash	4	$113,000
Wells	3	-D-
Whitley	6	-D-
NEI Total	**167**	**Incomplete**

Tables 10 through 12 provide information on the number of farms and market value of select agricultural products often sold locally, including vegetables, fruits, and meats. Please note, however, that these numbers represent food grown for consumption, regardless of whether local or global.

29 Farmlandinfo.org. (2024). https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/census-of-ag-fact-sheet-2022.pdf
30 Indiana Department of Agriculture (2024). https://events.in.gov/event/indiana_remains_a_top_agricultural_state_according_to_new_census
31 USDA Economic Research Service. (2022). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-agricultural-trade-data/annual-state-agricultural-exports/
32 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf
33 US Census of Agriculture. (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf
34 Ibid.

Table 12: **Livestock, Poultry, and their Products (Farm and Market Value)[35]**

County	2022 Farms	2022 Market Value
Indiana	19,506	$6,238,659,000
Adams	566	$192,823,000
Allen	341	$55,600,000
DeKalb	206	$40,811,000
Huntington	160	$110,523,000
Kosciusko	410	$191,655,000
LaGrange	1,729	$391,417,000
Noble	380	$81,412,000
Steuben	114	$15,903,000
Wabash	164	$237,319,000
Wells	119	$127,198,000
Whitley	212	$58,303,000
NEI Total	**4,401**	**$1,502,964,000**

The value of food sold directly to consumers is a more direct way to get a better understanding of local food production. This includes sales at on-farm stores or stands, farmers markets, pick-your-own fields and orchards, online markets, and community supported agriculture (CSA). According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture as shown in Table 13, there were 2,735 farms that sold directly to consumers in the State of Indiana in 2022, which was down by 15% since 2017. However, the financial value of direct-to-consumer sales was $45M in 2022 compared to $36M in 2017 (a 25% increase).

Similarly, in Northeast Indiana, there were 517 farms (4.6% of total) with direct-to-consumer sales in 2022 compared to 576 in 2017 (a 10% reduction). However, the total value of food sold directly to consumers was $8.7M in 2022 compared to $3.8M in 2017 (showing a significant 129% increase). Northeast Indiana's value of food sold directly to consumers in 2022 was 19% of the State of Indiana total. At the county level, LaGrange County had the most farms and Kosciusko County had the largest direct to-consumer sales value in 2022 while Huntington and Steuben Counties had the least.

An additional indication of local food production is the value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs for regionally branded products. Table 14 details this value in terms of farms and dollars. Within Indiana, there are 1,017 farms as of 2022 that participate in this type of local sales, which almost doubled since 2017, and the financial value nearly quadrupled from $80M to $305M. In Northeast Indiana, there were 221 farms with this type of sales in 2022, also double the amount since 2017. Notably, the financial value has increased by 465% from $2.9M to $13.6M over the 2017 – 2022 five-year period. LaGrange County is showing 88% of the region's 2022 value. Kosciusko County's 2022 financial value was not available but is anticipated to also be of significant value to the region given what was reported in 2017.

Table 13: **Value of Food Sold Directly to Conumers[36]**

County	2022 Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers (Farms)	Percent of Farms Selling Directly to Consumers	2017 Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers (Farms)	2022 Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers ($1,000s)	2017 Value of Food Sold Directly to Consumers ($1,000s)
U.S.A.	116,617	6.1%	130,056	$3,300,000	$2,800,000
Indiana	2,735	5.1%	3,235	$45,160	$35,948
Adams	38	2.9%	66	$684	$397
Allen	66	4.4%	90	$2,098	$599
DeKalb	62	7.6%	31	$562	$127
Huntington	14	2.2%	30	$37	$137
Kosciusko	59	5.5%	62	$3,079	$379
LaGrange	137	5.5%	130	$989	$1,126
Noble	42	3.9%	53	$502	$354
Steuben	22	4.8%	17	$65	(D)
Wabash	29	4.6%	45	$342	$340
Wells	15	2.8%	12	$148	$51
Whitley	33	5.1%	40	$170	$271
NEI Total	**517**	**4.6%**	**576**	**$8,676**	**$3,781**

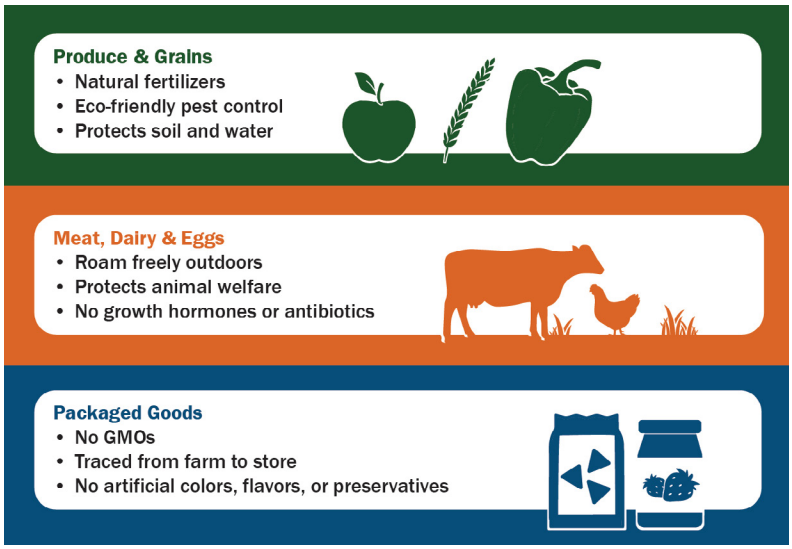
Table 14: **Value of Food Sold Directly to Retail Markets, Institutions, and Food Hubs for Regionally Branded Products[37]**

County	2022 Value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs for local or regionally branded products (Farms)	2017 Value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs for local or regionally branded products (Farms)	2022 Value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs for local or regionally branded products ($1,000s)	2017 Value of food sold directly to retail markets, institutions, and food hubs for local or regionally branded products ($1,000s)
Indiana	1,017	528	$305,128	$80,365
Adams	19	12	D	D
Allen	29	16	$1,072	$799
DeKalb	27	1	$53	D
Huntington	7	5	$54	D
Kosciusko	22	13	D	$1,277
LaGrange	85	35	$12,029	$738
Noble	14	8	$340	$34
Steuben	1	3	D	$2
Wabash	6	7	D	$81
Wells	1	7	D	D
Whitley	10	-	$91	$1
NEI Total	**221**	**107**	**$13,638**	**$2,932**

35 Ibid.
36 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf
37 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf

Value added foods are foods with an increased value due to further processing. Some examples include soybean meals, oil, and frozen vegetables. The State of Indiana has seen an increase in sixty-seven new farms that sell processed and value-added foods and a 62% increase in the financial value of these products sold between 2017 and 2022. Within Northeast Indiana, the growth in the number of farms selling value added products has been nominal overall, yet the financial value has increased from $1,054,000 in 2017 to $9,642,000 in 2022 (814%) with LaGrange and Allen Counties leading this increase. (See Table 15).

Figure 6: What is allowed in Organic Production per the USDA[39]



USDA organic agricultural products are grown and processed according to strict standards to ensure they are produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Organic farming practices focus on sustainability, soil health, and the protection of biodiversity, utilizing crop rotations, natural fertilizers, and integrated pest management. Products certified as USDA Organic must meet these criteria and undergo regular inspections by accredited certifying agents to ensure compliance. The organic label offers consumers assurance that the products meet these rigorous environmental and health standards. Figure 6 provides an overview of what is allowed in the organic production of produce and grains, meat, dairy and eggs, and packaged goods.

Table 16 provides a breakdown of organic farms and sales in the USA, Indiana, and Northeast Indiana Counties. Nationally, the number of organic farms has decreased from 2017 to 2022 while overall sales increased. Within the State of Indiana, there has been an increase in 164 organic farms between 2017 and 2022 and sales have increased to $167M from $75M as well. Northeast Indiana has contributed significantly to this increase by adding 120 farms and providing $94M in organic sales in 2022. LaGrange County is the main contributor to this increase. In fact, LaGrange County's sales comprised 48% of all organics sold in the entire state.

***Table 15:* Value of Processed or Value-Added Agricultural Products Sold[38]**

County	2022 Value of processed or value-added agricultural products sold (Farms)	2017 Value of processed or value-added agricultural products sold (Farms)	2022 Value of processed or value-added agricultural products sold ($1,000s)	2017 Value of processed or value-added agricultural products sold ($1,000s)
Indiana	832	765	$25,477	$15,754
Adams	10	9	$139	$110
Allen	25	26	$2,682	$69
DeKalb	14	7	$249	$28
Huntington	-	4	-	D
Kosciusko	11	14	$18	$114
LaGrange	29	26	$6,219	$512
Noble	13	12	$86	$151
Steuben	3	6	$17	D
Wabash	11	16	$86	$18
Wells	3	3	$11	D
Whitley	12	6	$135	$52
NEI Total	**131**	**129**	**$9,642**	**$1,054**

***Table 16:* Organic Farms and Farm Sales[40]**

County	2022 Organic Farms	2017 Organic Farms	2022 Organic Sales ($1,000s)	2017 Organic Sales ($1,000s)
U.S.A.	17,321	18,166	$9,585,089	$7,277,350
Indiana	739	575	$166,931	$75,506
Adams	9	15	$162	$2,136
Allen	3	0	$10	$0
DeKalb	2	0	(D)	$0
Huntington	0	0	$0	$0
Kosciusko	11	7	$8,134	(D)
LaGrange	334	233	$80,324	$27,948
Noble	35	27	$4,750	$3,884
Steuben	0	0	$0	$0
Wabash	6	2	$301	(D)
Wells	4	2	(D)	(D)
Whitley	2	0	(D)	$0
NEI Total	**406**	**286**	**$93,681**	**$63,664**

38 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022). https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf
39 USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service. https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/NOP_Graphic_7_OnlineSocialMediaTable.png
40 U.S. Census of Agriculture. (2017) (2022).https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_2_County_Level/Indiana/st18_2_002_002.pdf

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Urban agriculture refers to the practice of growing food in urban areas, such as on rooftops, vacant lots, or through community gardens. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including crop cultivation, livestock raising, and aquaponics, all designed to produce food within city environments. Community gardens are a key aspect of urban agriculture, where residents come together to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs on shared plots of land. These spaces not only provide access to fresh, healthy produce but also foster community engagement, social cohesion, and a sense of ownership among participants.

Urban agriculture is important because it helps address food insecurity by providing urban populations with more sustainable and locally grown food options. It also reduces the carbon footprint associated with food transportation, supports biodiversity, and creates green spaces in otherwise built-up areas. Additionally, community gardens promote environmental awareness, offer educational opportunities, and encourage healthier lifestyles by reconnecting people with the process of food production. As cities continue to grow, urban agriculture offers a promising solution to ensure food systems are more resilient and sustainable. Within the City of Fort Wayne, there are a few urban agriculture initiatives and organizations that have emerged over the last several years, including the development of Johnnie Mae Farm, Rose Avenue Farm, and the Human Agricultural Cooperative. Interest in individual and community gardening also appears to be increasing.

Johnnie Mae Farm[41] provides fresh, affordable vegetables to residents of Renaissance Pointe and nearby neighborhoods on Fort Wayne's southeast side. The farm features a state-of-the-art teaching kitchen and three-quarters of an acre of land where produce is grown using organic practices and a responsible land ethic. A partnership between the City of Fort Wayne's Office of Housing & Neighborhood Services and Purdue Extension - Allen County supports the farm, which offers twenty-eight types of produce. Products are available for purchase at the Pontiac Street Market where EBT/SNAP and WIC vouchers are accepted. Johnnie Mae Farm also offers educational classes around nutrition, canning, and agriculture focused on families and youth, including the recently awarded Plant, Pick and Plate program.

Johnnie Mae Farm, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Rose Avenue Education Farm:[42] Throughout the summer and fall, a farmers' market at the Fort Wayne League for the Blind and Disabled becomes a busy hub for Burmese immigrants, refugees, and even out-of-state visitors. The market is unique because it sells food grown primarily by Burmese farmers in Northeast Indiana, featuring culturally relevant crops like sour leaf, an herb essential in Burmese cuisine. This market is part of a broader initiative led by Jain Young through the Refugee Incubator Farm at the Rose Avenue Education Farm, which helps refugees from Myanmar reconnect with their agricultural roots.

Rose Avenue Education Farm is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, with additional support from community partners. The farm provides refugees with farming plots and access to translators and expert instructors to help them succeed in local agriculture. The program also focuses on fair wages and self-sufficiency, counteracting the exploitative labor practices often found in the U.S. food industry. With support from Double Up Indiana, which doubles the buying power of low-income families for fruits and vegetables, the farm's produce is made affordable for all, benefiting both farmers and consumers. The project's success is seen in the growing sales and the positive impact on the local food system, including greater food security and economic resilience within the community.

Rose Avenue Education Farm, New Haven, Indiana

Human Agriculture Cooperative:[43] The Human Agricultural Cooperative, founded by Ty Simmons and Condra Ridley in 2017, tackles food insecurity in Northeast Indiana through a comprehensive approach. This nonprofit collaborates with various stakeholders to provide immediate food relief, long-term solutions like youth farming programs, and sustainable community infrastructure such as educational programs and year-round greenhouses. Their efforts have expanded across seventeen counties, distributing food, and supporting socially disadvantaged farmers. Ty Simmons, recognized with the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award, emphasizes the need for systemic change, focusing on education and self-sufficiency in food production.

Human Agriculture Cooperative, Fort Wayne, Indiana

41 NEILFN Local Food Guide. https://www.neifood.org/shop-local/johnnie-mae-farm
42 INPUT Fort Wayne. (2021). https://www.inputfortwayne.com/features/roseavenue-educationfarm.aspx
43 WBOI News. Cultivating Food Freedom. (2024). https://www.wboi.org/health-science/2024-08-28/cultivating-food-freedom-an-interview-with-ty-simmons

Community Gardens

As the cost of living has risen, residents are turning to community gardens to supplement their meals and foster connections. Neighborhood organizations have embraced using community spaces to combat rising food prices and limited access to healthy, affordable food.

The Community Learning Center (CLC)[44] in Kendallville is an example of a vibrant garden offering fresh produce to the community. Created through a collaboration between the Master Gardeners of Noble County, CLC staff, and local volunteers, the garden features a wide variety of vegetables and flowers. The produce supports CLC's culinary classes, like the Heart Healthy Chicken Salad Class, and is available for harvesting by the public. The community is encouraged to participate in the garden's care.

While a comprehensive list of community gardens does not exist for Northeast Indiana, the Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District[45] has identified twelve community gardens within Fort Wayne/Allen County. Fort Wayne's Bloomingdale Gardens,[46] for example, provides free food, educational opportunities, and a space for residents to engage in conservation practices. The garden also serves as a resource for local schools, where students learn about gardening and sustainability.

Urban gardens are often supported by local volunteers and can occur at a variety of community gathering places such as housing developments, community centers, schools, churches (faith gardens), and at places of employment (corporate gardens). These gardens often grow food as well as promote environmental stewardship, creating sustainable spaces for learning and community-building. The efforts of residents, students, and local businesses highlight the transformative power of community-driven projects in addressing social and environmental challenges.

Residential Gardens and Homesteading

Residential gardening and homesteading are practices centered around self-sufficiency and sustainable living, often undertaken in urban, suburban, or rural settings. Residential gardening involves cultivating plants, vegetables, fruits, and ornamental flora in personal spaces like backyards and balconies. Homesteading expands on this concept, encompassing a broader range of activities such as raising livestock, preserving food, making homemade goods, and utilizing renewable energy. These practices emphasize resourcefulness, environmental consciousness, and a return to traditional skills, offering a fulfilling way to connect with nature while fostering a sense of independence and resilience.

Home gardens and homesteading practices have historically been a part of life in Northeast Indiana that has since declined in the modern age, although a resurgence of interest is occurring. For example, Plant Happiness, LLC has a one-third-acre residential lot within the City of Fort Wayne where annual and perennial fruits, vegetables, and flowers are grown.[47] They have transformed a neighborhood lot into a growing operation. The space has been certified by the National Wildlife Federation and Grow Indiana Natives Program. In addition, Purdue University offered the Rooted in Resilience Homesteading Conference in November 2024, held in Kendallville (Noble County), Indiana.[48]

REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Regenerative agriculture addresses the dual challenges of mitigating climate change and building resilience within food systems. Within Northeast Indiana, threats due to climate change include an increase in extreme heat events, as well as a rise in both extreme precipitation events and drought. The number of extreme heat events in the area are projected to increase significantly, tripling by 2050.[49] In addition, the USDA Plant Hardiness Map was modified in 2023 to reflect changes in the average annual minimum extreme temperature between 1990–2020.[50] The Northeast Indiana region shifted from the 2012 version of the map being in a 5b zone (-15 to -10) to a 6a zone (-10 to -5) in the 2023 version.

According to the Fifth Annual Climate Assessment (2023), climate change threats are expected to impact agriculture throughout the region.[51] "Changes in precipitation extremes, timing of snowmelt, and early-spring rainfall are expected to pose greater challenges for crop and animal agriculture, including increased pest and disease transmission, muddier pastures, and further degradation of water quality. Climate-smart agriculture and other adaptation techniques provide a potential path toward environmental and economic sustainability."

While rising temperatures and extreme weather events such as floods and droughts increasingly impact local food production in Northeast Indiana, regenerative practices focus on restoring ecosystems and capturing carbon, offering natural climate solutions that can benefit both farmland and local communities. A core aspect of regenerative agriculture is improving soil health. Soil is one of Earth's most significant carbon sinks, capable of storing vast amounts of atmospheric carbon through photosynthesis and microbial activity. Healthy soils can absorb

44 KPC News. (2023). https://www.kpcnews.com/features/article_039982fe-021d-5c5a-bff3-6740c64b0cf3.html
45 Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District. (2024). https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=41.129085726389285%2C-85.14314972993162&z=12&mid=16iDOlaUEumgCESKs0aCw39Xr6G8os4A
46 The Local. (2023). https://www.thelocalfw.com/community-gardens/
47 NEILFN. https://www.neifood.org/shop-local/plant-happiness
48 Purdue Extension. (2024). https://extension.purdue.edu/county/noble/rooted-and-resilient-homesteading-conference.html
49 Environmental Resilience Institute, Indiana University. https://eri.iu.edu/who-we-work-with/local-governments/beat-the-heat.html
50 USDA/Gardening Know How. (2023). https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/planting-zones/indiana-planting-zones.htm
51 National Climate Assessment. (2023). https://nca2023.globalchange.gov/chapter/24/

greenhouse gases equivalent to 250 million metric tons of carbon dioxide annually in the U.S. alone.[52] These practices also enhance resilience, enabling farmland to better absorb water during floods, maintain water security during droughts, and support ecosystem stability.

Reducing agriculture's reliance on fossil fuel-based fertilizers and pesticides is another key priority. These chemicals not only contribute to greenhouse gas emissions but also pose health risks to farm workers and their communities. Regenerative farming practices, such as no-till farming, cover cropping, and rotational grazing, can reduce emissions, while improving land productivity and environmental outcomes.

Regenerative agriculture is crucial for preserving farmland and increasing sustainable food production, particularly as global population growth intensifies demand. Practices that boost yields, enhance crop diversity, and integrate livestock help farms remain economically viable while reducing the risk of agricultural land being converted to urban development. Protecting farmland ensures the availability of arable land for future generations.

Other actions involve protecting and restoring natural ecosystems. Regenerative practices prevent the conversion of forests and grasslands into farmland, preserving vital carbon sinks and biodiversity. Abandoned or degraded lands can also be reforested or restored, reducing soil erosion, and enhancing ecosystem health.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has an office in each county in Indiana that supports agricultural producers by providing financial and technical assistance to address natural resource concerns that focus on soil health, water and air quality, wildlife habitat, and climate-smart agriculture practices.[53] Indiana initiatives relevant to the Northeast Indiana region include the High Tunnel Initiative, Grassland Conservation Initiative, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative, National Water Quality Incentive, Source Water Protection, and the Western Lake Erie Basin Initiative. Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) are also in place in each of Indiana's counties with the purpose of advancing water quality and natural resource stewardship at the local level through collaboration.[54]

Support for regenerative agriculture extends beyond farming practices. Policies and incentives, such as California's Healthy Soils Initiative and Iowa's "good farmer discount," are beginning to encourage widespread adoption.[55] Public engagement is also vital—individuals can support the movement by learning about soil stewardship, connecting with local farmers, composting, or growing food using regenerative techniques.

REGIONAL INSIGHTS

Producer Interview SWOT Analysis

Interviews were conducted throughout the ***Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment*** process, including interviews with fifteen local food producers from the Northeast Indiana region. The following analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) of Northeast Indiana's Local Food System is based on responses specifically by producers.

STRENGTHS — The strengths section of a SWOT analysis for producers in the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network highlights the following:

1. **Networking/Connections:** Strong relationships and collaborations among local producers, businesses, and consumers create a supportive ecosystem for local food initiatives.
2. **Local Food Guide:** The guide is an established resource that effectively connects consumers to local food producers, markets, and events, enhancing visibility and accessibility for local food options.
3. **Local Food Week:** Local Food Week is a dedicated event celebrating local food, which raises awareness, engages the community, and promotes the value of supporting local producers.

These strengths position the Network as a vital resource for fostering regional collaboration and growing the local food economy.

WEAKNESSES — The Weaknesses section of the SWOT analysis for producers in the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network identifies the following challenges:

1. **Access to Land:** Limited land access is identified as the top issue, posing a significant barrier to expanding local food production.
2. **Food Allocation:** A sizable portion of the region's crops is used for feeding animals and producing biofuels rather than nourishing residents.
3. **Processing Infrastructure:** A shortage of food processors creates bottlenecks in bringing products to the market.

52 Negative Emissions Technologies and Reliable Sequestration: A Research Agenda. (2019). https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25259/chapter/5#89
53 USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/indiana/indiana-special-initiatives
54 Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. https://iaswcd.org/districts/
55 USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. (2021). https://www.nrdc.org/stories/regenerative-agriculture-101

4. **Market Competition:** Farmers often compete for the same markets, limiting collaboration and growth opportunities.
5. **Labor Challenges:** Labor shortages, high turnover, and seasonal fluctuations impact both skilled and unskilled workforce availability.
6. **Leadership Turnover:** Changes in the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network Board have disrupted momentum and slowed progress.

These weaknesses highlight structural and resource-based challenges that need to be addressed to strengthen the local food system.

OPPORTUNITIES — The opportunities section of the SWOT analysis for Northeast Indiana producers highlights numerous avenues to strengthen the local food system:

1. **Distribution & Supply Chain Coordination:** Establishing a Supply Chain Coordinator role is the top opportunity, streamlining logistics and creating better market access for producers.
2. **Food Hub Development:** Starting a small-scale food hub was also frequently mentioned with initiatives like Farm to School programs, flash freezing, and bumper crop utilization that can help producers find sustainable outlets, address distribution challenges, and create written agreements for quality control and bulk ordering. Champions and catalysts are needed to drive this forward.
3. **Enhanced Collaboration:** Moving beyond informal producer meetings to structured partnerships can maximize resources and build a stronger network, particularly as smaller farm sizes and rising land prices increase interest in local food production.
4. **Consumer Education & Community Engagement:** Educating consumers and engaging communities are key opportunities to build demand for local food.
5. **Locally Owned Markets:** Expanding local food markets, especially in underserved areas, provides increased outlets for producers.
6. **Producer Training & Support:** Training new producers to prevent burnout, offering mentorship, and providing GAP Certification assistance to access institutional markets are crucial steps.
7. **Infrastructure & Innovation:** Opportunities include promoting hoop/greenhouses for year-round farming, exploring shared health insurance, and utilizing farm-to-food bank connections to build demand.
8. **Building Capacity & Credibility:** Strengthening the NEILFN's grant-writing abilities, exploring for-profit status, and creating regional credibility through efforts like Michelin-starred restaurants, published books, or mentorship programs.
9. **Resources & Accessibility:** Developing online tools like a repository website for food and agricultural resources or a CSA handbook/video can support both producers and consumers.

These opportunities highlight the need for strategic action, innovative collaboration, and infrastructure development to grow the local food network in Northeast Indiana.

THREATS — he threats section of the SWOT analysis for producers in the Northeast Indiana Local Food Needs Assessment highlights critical challenges:

1. **Aging Farmer Population:** The retirement of current farmers, coupled with a lack of interest from younger family members in continuing farming, poses a risk to the long-term viability of the local food system.
2. **Power Consolidation Risks:** Centralized control within the local food network could lead to mistrust or corruption, emphasizing the need for distributed power to build and maintain trust.
3. **Policy Advocacy:** A lack of active advocacy for critical policies, such as the new Farm Bill, threatens the ability to address systemic challenges and support the local food economy effectively.

These threats stress the importance of addressing generational succession, fostering trust through decentralized governance, and prioritizing policy advocacy to ensure sustainability.

Local Food Producer Surveys

A Local Food Producer Survey was administered to Northeast Indiana farmers as part of the Local Food System Needs Assessment process. Twenty surveys were received from throughout the region. Of those that responded, there was a broad range of experience and age of producers as well as a range of circumstances in terms of growing seasons, locations, acreage, and crop/product variety.

Survey responses highlight a diverse group of producers with unique agricultural practices. One operates as a nonprofit, providing organic food to the homeless without selling products, while others focus on grass-fed and finished meats, non-GMO, pastured eggs, and antibiotic-free livestock. Several producers emphasize sustainability, with practices like no-till farming, rotational grazing, and cover cropping, alongside

Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) methods. Others grow local, hydroponic crops and focus on field-to-table models. Some offer specialty items like raw cider, preserves, honey, and bees, while one farm supports tribal cultural practices by growing products for community programs. Additionally, there are farms offering A2A2 milk. These responses reflect a commitment to local, sustainable, and regenerative practices in a variety of agricultural niches.

Producers were asked who they hold a membership with or interact with from a list of agricultural related entities. A total of 80% interact with the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network and 35% interact with the Purdue Extension Office, County Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and Indiana Grown. Twenty percent also interact with Plowshares/Heartland Communities, the Indiana Farm Bureau, and the Northeast Indiana Farm to School Team. Producers stated that the services they are receiving from these organizations include training in on-farm best practices, connecting to new market channels, soil health/water quality/environmental assistance, and local food awareness building (33.3% each). Marketing and food safety/labeling was selected by 22.2%. Top additional services identified to be needed by producers not currently being addressed includes grant writing/administration (29.4%), local food awareness building (29.4%), and marketing (23.53%).

Eighty percent of the producers want to increase their operations. A variety of things were identified that limit their expansion including connections to new markets, buyers and channels (36.84%), as well as farm help, access to capital, farm infrastructure, and marketing. When asked what market channels the producers sold through, 73.68% selected direct to consumer sales through a farm stand or store and 52.63% selected a farmers' market. Additional responses varied. The greatest interest in new market channels was through a direct-to-consumer online store.

The survey responses highlight significant opportunities for strengthening the Northeast Indiana local food system and fostering sustainable practices. The producer's vision for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network emphasizes creating a centralized resource, such as a website, where consumers can easily find and connect with local producers, along with information on how to purchase products and access services like CSA programs or market share sites. The idea extends beyond just an initiative or brand, aiming to make the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network the primary avenue for sourcing food.

There is also a push for financial support to help small and mid-sized growers, who often miss larger government programs, so they can compete with cheaper, lower-quality imported goods. A clearinghouse model is suggested where farmers can easily share surplus goods or adapt to changing consumer demand, ensuring that an abundance of locally grown food is accessible. While fostering such a system, there is a strong desire for self-sustainability within small businesses to reduce reliance on government involvement. The broader goal is to create a thriving, independent local food economy that benefits both producers and consumers while supporting better land practices domestically. Local restaurants and grocery stores could have better access to fresh produce and farm goods, while farmers are offered support to ensure that food is moved efficiently within the community without waste.

The survey responses suggest several ways the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network (NEILFN) can help achieve its vision of fostering a sustainable and thriving local food system. Key strategies include:

- Further focusing on consumer education to highlight the benefits and ease of buying local, especially through initiatives that target children to build long-term awareness,
- Increasing marketing efforts, such as more frequent events and promotions, to engage a wider audience and encourage consistent public involvement,
- Establishing a food hub to provide a common space for networking and collaboration among producers and consumers,
- Focusing on promoting actual producers and expanding their reach, while also helping them thrive without market saturation or cannibalizing one another,
- Providing outreach and marketing via various channels, including newsletters and event updates, which would improve access to valuable resources and opportunities,
- Increasing access to local grocery stores like Kroger and Meijer, and improving vendor selection and fair pricing at farmers' markets, to ensure greater visibility for local producers,
- Fostering an environment where the goal is to educate, not dictate to consumers, and
- Ensuring access to resources like affordable health insurance.

Food Processing, Aggregation & Distribution

The Process, Huntertown, Indiana

FOOD PROCESSING, AGGREGATION AND DISTRIBUTION

According to the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, Northeast Indiana's regional convener of economic development, "seventy-eight percent of the total land area in Northeast Indiana is made up of rich farmland, making it a prime location for food and agriculture processing and distribution companies".[56] Large operations like Miller Poultry, Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream and Kraft Heinz all have a presence in the area, contributing in part to the more than 14,000 food and agriculture jobs (8% above the national average) in the region. This sector is an important employer, and to speak to the scale of these large processing operations, they are representative of the entire food-delivery chain, contributing $31.2 billion to Indiana's annual gross domestic product (GDP).[57]

While these large supply chains may serve as a model for such scale, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as public engagement sessions, interviews, and research, has revealed that our value chains are fragile, and Northeast Indiana is in need of concerted support for the small-midsize producer in order for their local agricultural sector to thrive. In response to food supply chain disruptions, the USDA Food Systems Transformation effort, known as Build Back Better, invested billions of dollars toward the production, processing, aggregation, and distribution of food. Additionally, this investment strengthened the accessibility to local food options. Indiana producers and players have been among the many awardees benefiting from the investments.

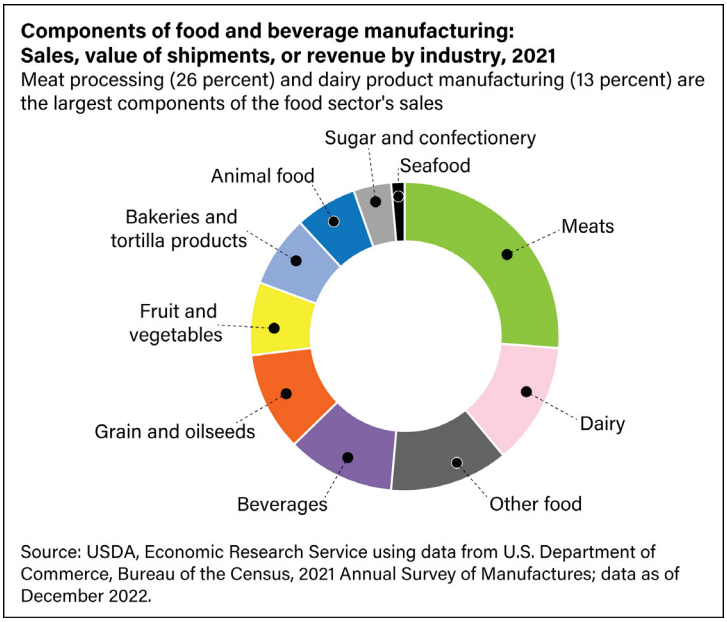
Meanwhile, interviews among Northeast stakeholders revealed a clear-eyed voice that redirecting some of the state and region's welcoming focus from larger operations to small-midsize aggregation, processing, and distribution businesses would significantly help local communities and economies. Bolstering these locally owned enterprises would help feed regional communities with local food, increase community health and wellness, and improve small business viability along with farm and food producer success. Infrastructure such as food hubs, processors, and commercial kitchens are key interconnected components of a modern food system, each playing a distinct role in local food production, preparation, and distribution. Northeast Indiana is ripe for this continued investment and innovation.

Food Processing

Food processors are businesses or facilities that transform raw agricultural products into value-added food items. They play a crucial role in the food supply chain by converting ingredients into marketable products. From artisanal producers to large-scale manufacturers, processing operations produce a wide range of consumables including canned goods, frozen foods, baked products, and more. Josh's Jungle/The Process is an example of a small batch canning business in Huntertown, IN (Allen County) that has emerged over the last ten years out of a need to use the leftover food from local Farmers Markets.[58]

Figure 7 provides the components of the food and beverage manufacturing in the United States per the U.S. Census 2021 Annual Survey of Manufacturers. Meat processing comprises the largest portion of food sector sales (26%), followed by dairy (13%).

***Figure 7:* Components of Food and Beverage Manufacturing[59]**



Meats

Within the State of Indiana, meat and poultry raised for human consumption must be slaughtered and processed in an establishment inspected by the Indiana State Board of Animal Health (BOAH) or the United States Department of Agriculture-Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS); the three types of inspection offered by BOAH include: official inspection, custom exempt, and cooperative interstate shipping. Ninety percent of state inspected establishments are in towns with 5,000 or fewer residents; sales of freezer meat contribute $25.5 million to Indiana's economy.[60]

As of March 2024, there were fifteen inspected processing locations by BOAH within Northeast Indiana, eight custom exempt locations, and no locations with cooperative interstate shipping (See Table 17, page 30). Most of the processors have specifically stated online that they obtain meat for sale from local sources or advertise that they process meat for hunters and other individual local sources for private use.

56 Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. https://neindiana.com/industries/food-agriculture/
57 Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. https://neindiana.com/industries/
58 Josh's Jungle/The Process. https://www.joshsjunglefw.com/our-story
59 USDA Economic Research Service. (2023). https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-markets-prices/processing-marketing/food-and-beverage-manufacturing/
60 Indiana State Board of Animal Health. (2022). https://www.in.gov/boah/files/M-and-P-Buyers-Guide-2022-FINAL.pdf

Table 17: **Northeast Indiana Meat and Poultry Processors Inspected by the Indiana State Board of Animal Health[61]**

County	City	Processor	Permit
Adams	Decatur	Manley Meats, Inc.	Official Inspection
Allen	New Haven	Custom Quality Meats	Official Inspection
Allen	Grabill	E&L Farms and Processing	Custom Exempt
Allen	Huntertown	Feder's Meats	Custom Exempt
Allen	Harlan	Gustin's Custom Slaughterhouse	Custom Exempt
Allen	Fort Wayne	Tim Didier Meats & Catering, Inc	Official Inspection
DeKalb	Corunna	D&D Meat Processing	Official Inspection
DeKalb	Butler	Pettisville Meats, Inc.	Custom Exempt
Huntington	Roanoke	Vining Slaughter Haus	Official Inspection
Huntington	Andrews	W&W Locker	Official Inspection
Kosciusko	Syracuse	Jerky Jerks	Official Inspection
Kosciusko	Syracuse	Syracuse Meats	Official Inspection
LaGrange	Shipshewana	Beechy Custom Meats	Official Inspection
LaGrange	LaGrange	Butcher Bob's, Inc.	Official Inspection
LaGrange	Wolcottville	Hallmark Custom Meats, LLC	Custom Exempt
LaGrange	Howe	Long's Custom Butchery, LLC	Custom Exempt
LaGrange	Shipshewana	Michiana Meats, LLC	Custom Exempt
LaGrange	Howe	Pigeon River Poultry	Custom Exempt
Noble	LaOtto	Cedar Creek Meats	Official Inspection
Wabash	N. Manchester	JL Hawkins Family Farm	Limited Poultry Permit
Whitley	Churubusco	Integrity Meats	Official Inspection
Whitley	Churubusco	Rowdy Rooster Artisan Meats	Official Inspection
Whitley	S. Whitley	Schwartz Processing	Custom Exempt

Wood Farms Premium Meats, Columbia City, Indiana


Hoffman Certified Organics, Huntertown, Indiana

The USDA-FSIS regulates meat, poultry and egg products at establishments that are larger and can justify undergoing the inspection process. There are fourteen of these establishments located in Northeast Indiana as listed in Table 18.

Table 18: **Northeast Indiana Establishments in the USDA-FSIS Meat, Poultry and Egg Production Directory[62]**

County	City	Processor	Permit
Adams	Decatur	The Country Butcher	Certification – Export, Meat Processing, Meat Slaughter
Allen	Grabill	Grabill Canning Co.	Meat Processing, Poultry Processing
Allen	Fort Wayne	Interstate Cold Storage, Inc. (2 Locations)	Certification-Export, Identification-Meat, Identification-Poultry, Off-Premises Freezing-Meat, Off-Premises Freezing-Poultry
Allen	Woodburn	North American Cold Storage	Certification-Export, Identification-Meat, Identification-Poultry, Off-Premises Freezing-Meat, Off-Premises Freezing-Poultry, Off-Premises Freezing-Eggs
Huntington	Huntington	Echo Lake Foods	Egg Product
Kosciusko	Warsaw	Pasou Foods, Inc.	Meat Processing, Poultry Processing
Kosciusko	Milford	Maple Leaf Farms, Inc.	Poultry Processing, Poultry Slaughter
Kosciusko	Warsaw	Crystal Lake LP	Certification – Export, Egg Product, Voluntary Egg Product, Inspection/Processing
LaGrange	LaGrange	Indiana Meat and Poultry Processors, Inc.	Meat Processing, Meat Slaughter, Poultry Processing, Poultry Slaughter
LaGrange	LaGrange	Brushy Prairie Packing, Inc.	Meat Processing, Meat Slaughter, Poultry Processing, Poultry Slaughter, Voluntary Processing – Poultry, Voluntary Processing – Rabbit, Voluntary Slaughter – Poultry, Voluntary Slaughter - Rabbit
LaGrange	Shipshewana	Yoder Meats, Inc.	Meat Processing, Poultry Processing, Voluntary Processing - Meat
Steuben	Orland	Pine Manor, Inc.	Poultry Processing, Poultry Slaughter
Wells	Ossian	Ossian Packing Company, Inc.	Meat Processing, Poultry Processing

61 Indiana State Board of Animal Health. https://www.in.gov/boah/files/2024-MPI-Establishments.pdf
62 USDA-FSIS. https://www.fsis.usda.gov/inspection/establishments/meat-poultry-and-egg-product-inspection-directory

Dairy

Dairy represents the second largest proportion of food and beverage sales in the U.S. According to the Indiana Dairy Strategy 2.0, "Indiana is a nationally recognized agriculture and business friendly state with a strong track record of success in expanding modern, efficient and sustainable milk production and processing.[63] This study recommends educating potential new milk processors on the business climate in Indiana to recruit expanded dairy processing capacity by positioning the State as the most desirable location for sustainable milk production, through policy development, industry support, and advocacy/promotion of Indiana's dairy industry." The study also identifies four key trends of the Dairy Industry since 2015, including:

- Overall domestic dairy consumption has increased to an all-time high, although not across all categories (fluid milk and ice cream decreased while cheese and butter increased).
- Dairy exports have been unstable, due to both market conditions and export market disruptions.
- Production increases have outpaced demand, which has resulted in a bearish price environment for most of the period.
- Milk production efficiency and economic pressures have led to increased dairy farm concentration.

Approximately two-thirds of Indiana's dairy production occurs in Northern Indiana; out of 92 counties in the state, Northeast Indiana counties ranked as follows in terms of top dairy production: LaGrange (#3), Adams (#4), Noble (#7), Kosciusko (#9), Huntington (tied for #11), Wells (tied for #11), Wabash (#15), Steuben (#16), and Allen (#17).[64] Three of the nine dairy pool distributing plants within the State of Indiana are located in the Northeast Indiana region, including Walmart, Prairie Farms Dairy, and Schenkel's All Star Dairy. LaGrange County has several small dairy producers that sell through cooperatives like Organic Dairy and Horizon Dairy.

Production has supported key investments into large scale dairy processing in Northeast Indiana in recent years, including Walmart opening a new milk bottling plant in Fort Wayne and Dreyer's/Edy's Grand Ice Cream's expansion of their ice cream production facility also in Fort Wayne.[65] These products are consumed both within and outside of the region. There has also been some disinvestment with the closing of Dairy Farmers of America (previously Dean Foods) Decatur facility.[66]

Most of Indiana's dairy farms are small. Indiana's Dairy Strategy outlines ways to support small to medium producers, including to:

- Provide policy and producer education support for on-farm processing, direct to consumer marketing, and local food system networks.
- Search for opportunities to facilitate direct dedicated supply of milk from smaller farms to smaller and medium sized processors; this could include organic milk.
- Fully integrate appropriate small and medium dairy operations into the State's Agritourism and Culinary Tourism Strategic Plan.

Kuehnert Dairy Farm is an example of how a small dairy farm in Northeast Indiana is capitalizing on agritourism opportunities and adding to the quality of life of the region.[67] For over 125 years, this family dairy farm has been in operation. They open the farm to neighbors through the Fall Festival and the use of The Homestead, an event barn on the farm available for rentals year-round. They have also opened Kuehnert Milk House, their own on-farm retail and bottling location where they sell milk, butter, ice cream, and cheese curds. They also sell to eighteen local stores across the region and plan to add home delivery as an option in the future.

63 Indiana State Department of Agriculture. https://www.in.gov/isda/files/Indiana-Dairy-Strategy-2.0.pdf
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 WANE 15. (2021). Dairy Farmers of America closing Decatur plant | WANE 15
67 Kuehnert Dairy. https://www.kuehnertdairy.com/

Vegetables, Fruits, and Grains

Vegetables, fruits, and grains can be processed into a vast array of value-added products. Larger processing locations in Northeast Indiana include Red Gold and Kraft Heinz, both involved in processing tomatoes, Bunge's oilseed processing, and Sechler's Fine Pickles. Below is a snapshot of some of the smaller processors of vegetables, fruits, and grains in Northeast Indiana.

- Amish canned goods (though some not made with local ingredients)
- Cordes Berry Farm - blackberry products
- Fruited Plain Seeds - seed cleaning
- Lunar Infusions Kombucha - uses some local fruit
- Orchard Hill Farms - apple cider, apple butter, and other apple products
- Wineries using local fruit
- Cook's Orchard - apple cider
- DeCamp Gardens - flours, canned goods, beans
- Josh's Jungle/ The Process -small batch canning
- Moo Over - plant-based ice cream - uses some local fruit
- True Kimchi - kimchi
- Yoder Popcorn - popcorn

Commercial and Commissary Kitchens

Commercial and commissary kitchens are professional-grade spaces designed to prepare food on a large scale. They can be found in various formats such as restaurant kitchens, catering kitchens, and shared-use or incubator kitchens, equipped to handle high-volume food production efficiently and safely (unlike domestic kitchens).[68] [69] These spaces are supplied with industrial-grade appliances and equipment and designed to optimize workflow and safety with designated areas for food preparation, cooking, storage, and dishwashing. These kitchens involve regular inspections to ensure the space adheres to strict health and safety standards, allowing the legal production of food for service and sale. Entrepreneurs and culinary professionals use commercial and commissary kitchens to prepare food for customers in restaurants, cafeterias, hotels, food trucks, catering businesses, and other food service establishments. For anyone looking to start a value-added product business, from hot sauces to baked goods, prepared foods, and more, the benefit of accessible commercial and commissary kitchens enables the entrepreneurial professional space to create and focus on their business without the worry of potentially prohibitive overhead costs or compliance concerns. These spaces often grow community among chefs, caterers, and like-minded culinary entrepreneurs through camaraderie, networking, and mentorship. Usually, these shared kitchens involve a membership fee or hourly rate to rent out the cooking space, as well as access to cold storage and cleaning supplies.

Below is a list of commercial and commissary kitchens throughout Northeast Indiana.

- CookSpring Shared Kitchen: Located at 1025 W. Rudisill Blvd Door N., Fort Wayne
- Beyond Able Commissary Kitchen: Situated at 6722 E. State Blvd, Fort Wayne
- A and J (Shared) Kitchen: 2700 Lower Huntington Road, Fort Wayne
- Teaching Kitchen at Union Street Market, Electric Works
- Plowshares Kitchen at Union Street Market, Electric Works
- Beyond the Kitchen, Columbia City

Food entrepreneurs have identified a need to increase access to shared use facilities in the region. The Community Harvest Food Bank recently closed the shared-use operations of their commercial kitchen due to space limitations. Schools, churches and community centers are existing facilities throughout the region that might be able to participate in offering up their kitchens for shared use.

Plowshares Kitchen at Union Street Market

68 CookSpring. https://cookspringfw.com
69 CT Design and Equipment, Co. http://www.c-tdesign.com

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a model where consumers and farmers form a partnership to directly support local agriculture. Members of a CSA purchase shares or subscriptions in a farm's harvest at the beginning of the growing season, providing the farmer with upfront capital and sharing the risks and rewards of farming. In return, members receive regular deliveries or pickups of fresh, seasonal produce, and sometimes other farm products like eggs, dairy, or meat. Hawkins Family Farm in Wabash County and Hungry Dog Farm in Fort Wayne are two farms that operate their own CSAs in Northeast Indiana.

Hungry Dog Farm, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Food Hubs

A food hub aggregates, distributes, and markets local food products from a collection of local and regional farms and food producers. They serve as intermediaries between farmers and consumers, often focusing on supporting small to mid-sized producers, coordinating opportunities to access retail, wholesale and institutional markets that producers may not have the capacity to do on their own. A food hub also offers food buyers the opportunity to consolidate their local food orders and deliveries from one source. This coordination effectively strengthens local food systems and improves access to fresh, locally sourced products by offering one-stop services such as storage, packaging, and transportation of food products, as well as marketing, which helps connect small producers to larger markets such as institutions and retail outlets. This coordination can also alleviate the pressure that farmers and food producers feel to "be all the departments" of their business, enabling them to focus on what they do best, growing delicious and nutritious food.

PlowShares is a small food hub cooperative that is working to make healthier, higher-quality local foods more accessible at the Union Street Market by aggregating and selling directly to consumers at the Union Street Market at Electric Works. There are also other entities that provide differing levels of aggregation and distribution services including:

Clearspring Produce Auction, LaGrange County, Indiana

- Adams County Produce Auction (An auction with 55 producers, many Amish).
- Clearspring Produce Auction in LaGrange County (An Amish co-op auction with 80 producers).
- Hawkins Family Farm (A membership-based local food club offering products from an expanding network of over 20 farms).
- Market Wagon (Family-owned aggregation and distribution business based out of Indianapolis serving neighboring states).
- Piazza Produce (Based out of Indianapolis, distribution reaches to neighboring states with a variety of foods, including a focused local market of those sources from a 250-mile radius of dairy farmers, fruit farmers, meat purveyors, vegetable farmers, and specialty artisans).
- Small Batch Distributor (Family-owned co-packer and distributor of locally-produced, value-added food and beverage products).
- Wood Farms (Stepped up during COVID to provide coordinated food boxes with a local bakery for food service workers employed by the restaurants that they sell to).

In the context of the food system, food processors, commercial and commissary kitchens, and food hubs often work together. A food hub might partner with local processors to create value-added products from locally sourced ingredients, which are then prepared in commercial kitchens for end consumers. This interconnected system supports local food economies by creating entrepreneurship opportunities and enabling food producers to focus on what they do best, it promotes sustainability and innovation by providing opportunity for collaboration as well as the reduction of waste and inefficiencies and helps to meet the growing demand for locally sourced, high-quality food products that support the health and well-being of our communities. Serving the small and midsized food producer in Northeast Indiana through state, regional, and local investment in this innovative system would continue the transformation of the national food supply chain and further bolster local living health and resiliency by championing Indiana's agricultural history and pride. The local food system stakeholders of Northeast Indiana are eagerly ready for this direction, and action.

Food Consumption and Access

Summer supper all sourced from Northeast Indiana farms

CONSUMPTION: ACCESS

Consumption and access refers to the availability of food and the ability of populations to obtain and consume it. Studying this is critical because access to nutritious and sufficient food is a fundamental aspect of food security and public health. Unequal access to food often leads to disparities in health outcomes, with disadvantaged populations more likely to suffer from malnutrition or diet-related diseases. Understanding food access helps policymakers identify barriers, such as economic inequality, geographic location, or food deserts, which prevent certain communities from obtaining healthy food. By studying food consumption and access, policymakers can implement targeted interventions to promote connection to nutritious food, reduce health disparities, and address broader issues related to poverty, and sustainable development.

Food Sources

There are a variety of sources where residents gain access to food for consumption, which include grocery channels such as supercenters and warehouse stores, independent grocers and co-operatives, convenience stores, farmers markets and farm stands. Non-grocery channels include restaurants, food trucks, food pantries, community meal programs, and institutional food services such as schools, universities, hospitals, and nursing homes. Food is also sourced from home and community gardens as well as hunting and foraging.

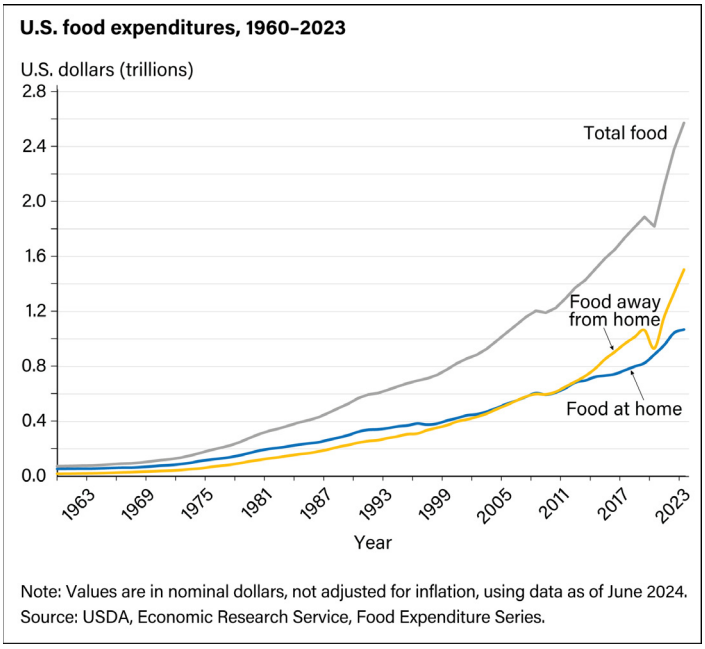
As shown in Figure 8, U.S. food spending has trended upward since the late 1960's with a greater increase in the amount of food purchased away from home, such as at restaurants, than food consumed at home purchased at supermarkets, etc. over the last decade. Total food spending in the U.S. reached $2.6 trillion in 2023, with 58% of that spending on food away from home.

Spending

The cost of food has risen dramatically in the U.S. over the last few years. The all-food Consumer Price Index rose by 25% between 2019 to 2023, as shown in Figure 9.[71] This was less than that of transportation (27.1%), but a higher rate than all other categories including housing and medical care. During this period, there were several disruptive factors including consumption changes and supply chain issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. In 2022, there was also an avian influenza outbreak that impacted egg and poultry prices, and the Ukraine-Russia war which bolstered overall inflation.[72] As of this writing, avian influenza is again impacting egg and poultry prices.

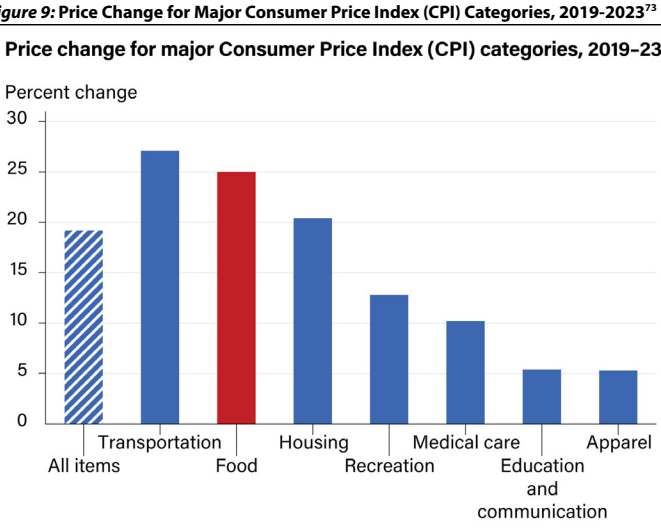
Higher food prices disproportionately impact low-income households. On average, 11% of disposable income was spent on food as of 2023 in the United States.[74] As incomes rise, the amount spent of food increases, but the percentage of disposable income spent on food decreases as shown in the Figure 10.[75] Those that were in the lowest quartile spent a little more than $5,000 on food in 2022 representing over 30% of overall income. Meanwhile, those that were in the highest quartile spent over $15,000, which represented approximately 8% of income.

***Figure 8:* U.S. Food Expenditures, 1960-2023[70]**



Note: Values are in nominal dollars, not adjusted for inflation, using data as of June 2024.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Expenditure Series.

***Figure 9:* Price Change for Major Consumer Price Index (CPI) Categories, 2019-2023[73]**



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index data.

70 *USDA Economic Research Service. (2024).* https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail?chartId=54613
71 *USDA Economic Research Service using US Department of Labor Consumer Price Index Data. (2024).* https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=58350
72 *Ibid.*
73 *Ibid.*
74 *USDA Economic Research Service, Food Expenditure Series* USDA ERS - Chart Detail
75 *USDA Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Consumer Expenditure Survey. (2022).* https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=58372

In 2023, a total of 54% of food consumed at home in the USA was purchased at the grocery store, followed by 23% purchased at warehouse clubs, 9% from both mail order and other stores/food services, followed by 2% at convenience stores as well as other food stores, and 1% from direct sales by farmers, wholesalers, and retailers.[77] A negligible amount was identified to be grown at home.

Food consumption expenditures outside of the home were at limited service (fast food) restaurants (35%) or full-service restaurants (31%), see Figure 11. Retail stores and vending comprised 10% of expenditure followed by schools and colleges at 8% and donated food at 4%. Other marginal sources included hotels and motels, drinking places, recreational places.

Limited Access Areas

Limited access to retail outlets that sell healthy and affordable food impacts both food security and health factors in communities. Distance, lack of transportation, and other resource limitations impact choice, time, cost, volume, and frequency of purchases.

The USDA Food Access Research Atlas (FARA) provides a spatial overview of food access indicators at the census tract level. The term "Food Desert" has been used to refer to low-income, low access areas. FARA can help communities identify where more targeted programming is needed in low access areas in consideration of diet, store locations and gaps, and racial equity. Low-income, low-access areas are defined in one of four ways. The first definition is:

1. A low-income tract with at least 500 people or 33 percent of the population, living more than one mile (urban areas) or more than 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store. See Table 19 for Northeast Indiana Census Tracts and Figre 11 for a map of City of Fort Wayne Census Tracts that meet this criterion per 2019 data.

Figure 10: **Food Spending and Share of After-Tax Income Spent on Food Across U.S. Households, 2023[76]**

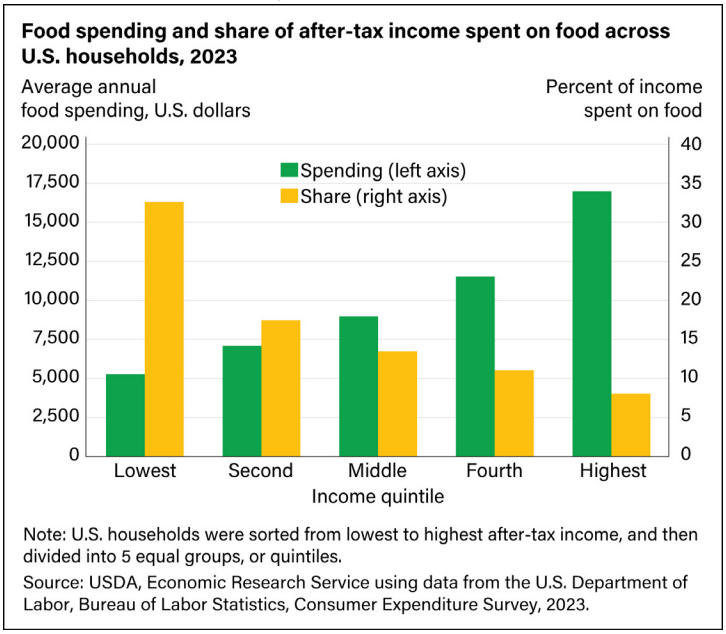


Figure 11: **Share of U.S. Food Away from Home Spending by Outlet Type[78]**

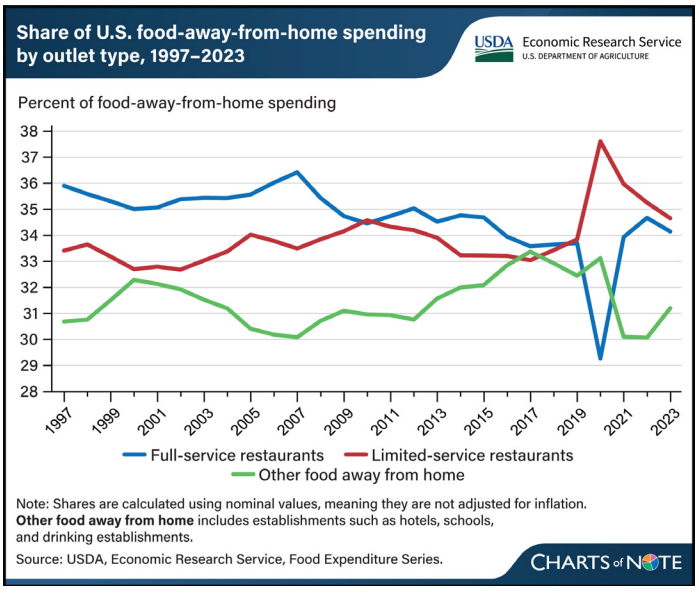
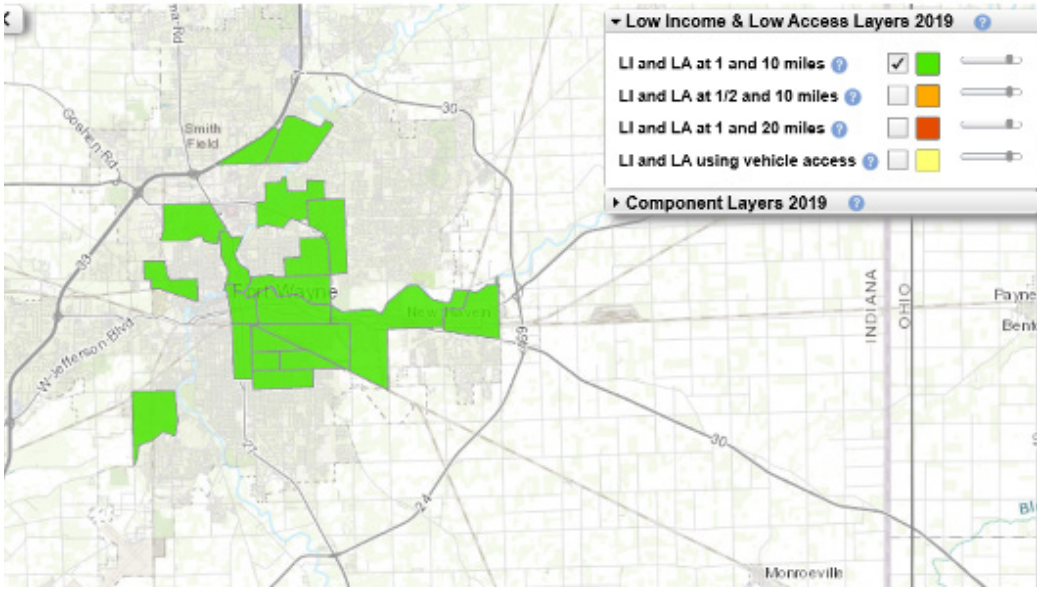


Table 19: **Low-Income, Low-Access Census Tracts at 1-mile (urban) and 10-miles (rural)-2019[79]**

County	Census Tract	General Location
Adams	18001030200	West Decatur
Allen	18003000400	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003000704	North Fort Wayne
Allen	18003000500	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003000900	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003001300	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003001600	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003001700	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003002800	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003002900	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003003000	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003003301	North Fort Wayne
Allen	18003003500	North Fort Wayne
Allen	18003003700	Southwest Fort Wayne
Allen	18003004101	North Fort Wayne
Allen	18003004400	Central Fort Wayne
Allen	18003010821	North Fort Wayne
Allen	18003011100	West New Haven
Allen	18003011201	East Fort Wayne
Allen	18003980001	North Fort Wayne
DeKalb	18033020500	West Auburn
DeKalb	18033020601	West Garrett
Huntington	18069961600	Northeast Huntington
Noble	18113971900	West Kendallville
Wabash	18169102800	Southwest Wabash
Wells	18179040600	Southwest Bluffton

76 Ibid.
77 USDA Economic Research Service, Food Expenditure Series. (2024). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditure-series/interactive-charts-food-expenditures#national
78 USDA Economic Research Service, Food Expenditure Series. (2024). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=109994
79 USDA Economic Research Service, Food Access Research Atlas. https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/

Figure 11: **City of Fort Wayne, USDA Economic Research Service, Food Access Research Atlas[80]**
Low-Income, Low-Access Census Tracts at 1-mile (urban) and 10-miles (rural) - 2019



Additional definitions are as follows. More details for each can be found on the USDA Food Access Research Atlas website.

2. A low-income tract with at least 500 people, or 33 percent of the population, living more than one-half mile (urban areas) or more than 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store.
3. A low-income tract with at least 500 people, or 33 percent of the population, living more than one mile (urban areas) or more than 20 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store.
4. A low-income tract where at least one of the following is true: at least 100 households are located more than one-half mile from the nearest supermarket and have no vehicle access; or at least 500 people, or 33 percent of the population, live more than 20 miles from the nearest supermarket, regardless of vehicle availability.

While urban food access disparities often receive significant attention as justified in the Figure 11 map, rural areas face similar challenges, with 20% of rural counties nationwide classified as food deserts where residents live 10 miles or more from the nearest supermarket.[81] Rural areas also tend to have lower spatial accessibility, isolated populations, fewer food retail options, and higher poverty rates, particularly among children. The rise of supercenters in these areas often undermines local independent food retailers. Despite these challenges, rural families benefit from higher car ownership, space for food cultivation, and storage options like freezers. However, the costs of food, gasoline, and tight household budgets often negate these advantages, creating significant barriers to accessing healthy and affordable food.[82]

Food Outlet Specifics

Retail Food Stores

Retail establishments are places including grocery stores/supermarkets, dollar stores, and neighborhood markets that sell a wide variety of food and household items to meet the everyday needs of consumers. Grocery stores typically offer fresh produce, meat, dairy products, canned goods, snacks, beverages, and pantry staples like grains and spices along with non-food items such as cleaning supplies, toiletries, and personal care products. Modern supermarkets may include specialty sections for organic, international, or gourmet foods, as well as bakeries, delis, or prepared food counters. Some local food may be available for purchase at these locations, although most of the food is not local.

Supermarkets are central to urban and suburban life, providing a one-stop location for convenient shopping. Urban planning and zoning have enabled sprawling suburban developments to prioritize big-box stores and malls over smaller, community-based retail spaces.

Dollar stores are now the fastest-growing food retailers in the contiguous United States, particularly in rural areas, where their market share has doubled in recent years.[83] According to Tufts University researchers, lower-income households and those headed by people of color are more likely to rely on dollar stores for food purchases. The study, published in the American Journal of Public Health, highlights that these stores stock low-nutrient, high-calorie items, with limited availability of fresh produce or meats. This trend raises significant concerns about nutrition, especially where obesity and food insecurity rates are already high. The research, based on data from 50,000 households between 2008 and 2020, found that rural and low-income households allocate a sizable portion of their food budget, up to 11.6%, to dollar stores. While these stores

80 Ibid.
81 American Planning Association. (2012). https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/publication/download_pdf/Planning-for-Food-Access-and-Community-Based-Food-Systems.pdf
82 Ibid.
83 Tufts University School of Medicine. (2023). https://medicine.tufts.edu/news-events/news/dollar-stores-are-growing-food-retailers-us

provide much-needed access to food in underserved areas, their expansion could displace local grocers, leaving communities with fewer healthy options. Researchers emphasize the dual role of dollar stores, acknowledging their importance in filling food access gaps while highlighting the need for food-policy interventions to address their impact on nutrition and community health.

Neighborhood markets are small retail outlets that provide walkable access to consumers, which is particularly important for low-income communities with individuals that lack transportation. Neighborhood markets have declined over the last few decades, impacting food access. This is due to the rise of larger retail chains, supermarkets, and e-commerce platforms, which offer a wider variety of products at lower prices due to economies of scale. These larger retailers often outcompete smaller neighborhood stores, making it difficult for them to stay in business. Additionally, changes in consumer behavior, such as the preference for one-stop shopping and online convenience, have reduced foot traffic to local stores.

The Pontiac Street Market[84] , located at 918 E. Pontiac Street in Fort Wayne, is a neighborhood-scale, full-service grocery store that opened in 2023 to address a critical need for fresh, healthy, and affordable food in a historically underserved area. This initiative is led by the City of Fort Wayne, Parkview Health, and a number of other community partners. The initiative highlights the power of collaborative, community-driven solutions to combat food deserts and uplift underprivileged neighborhoods. Johnnie Mae Farm is a partner with the Pontiac Street Market, providing fresh produce grown at their site in Southeast Fort Wayne. Other local products are sourced at the market as well.

Additional neighborhood markets exist across Northeast Indiana that are varied in size, approach, and history. Three Rivers Food Co-op Natural Grocery and Deli is a well-known market in Fort Wayne. With origins in the 1970's along Broadway Street and now Sherman Boulevard, the market is "a full line natural foods grocery store with an emphasis on wholesome and delicious food, including local and organic".[85]

Farm Stands and Farmers Markets

By purchasing from farmers markets and farm stands, consumers contribute to the local economy while enjoying high-quality, fresh products. Farm stands are small, often roadside markets where farmers sell their fresh, seasonal produce and other farm-grown products, and sometimes baked or other handmade goods directly to consumers. Farmers markets involve the organization of several farmers and other vendors at a public location that offer seasonal produce along with a variety of goods such as baked items, meats, dairy products, flowers, and handmade crafts. Farmers markets provide a space for community engagement, education about healthy eating, and direct interaction between consumers and producers. Both farmers markets and farm stands connect communities with local farmers, and food producers. These markets foster sustainability by reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance food transportation and supporting small-scale, local agriculture.

Farm stands are common sites throughout the countryside of rural Northeast Indiana and interest is also growing in farmers markets. The Northeast Indiana Local Food Guide identified 32 farmers markets being held throughout the region, with at least one market per county (See Table 20, page 39).[86]

Hardy's Farm Market's Farm Stand

YLNI Farmers Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana

84 Pontiac Street Market. https://www.pontiacstreetmarket.com/community-resources
85 Three Rivers Food Co-op Natural Grocery and Deli. https://3riversfood.coop/about-us/
86 NEIRP. https://www.neifood.org/ne-indiana-farmers-markets

Table 20: **Northeast Indiana Farmers Markets**

County	Market Name	Market Location
Adams	Das Marit Farmers and Artisan Market	Intersection of US 27 and 218, Berne
Adams	Decatur Farmer's Market	Intersection of 1st Street and Monroe Street, Decatur
Allen	Allen County Marketplace	1010 Carroll Road, Fort Wayne
Allen	Ft. Wayne's Farmers Market	Electric Works, 1622 Broadway Street, Fort Wayne
Allen	HEAL Farm Markets	Locations TBD
Allen	Harlan Farmers Market	Harlan Community Park, 17611 2nd Street, Harlan
Allen	Leo-Cedarville Farmers Market	15011 State Road 1, Leo-Cedarville,
Allen	New Haven's Music, Market & Munchies	Schnelker Park, 956 Park Avenue, New Haven
Allen	Monroeville Farmers Market	Monroeville Park, 110 Main Street, Monroeville
Allen	Salomon Farmers Market	Salomon Farm Park, 817 W. DuPont Road, Fort Wayne
Allen	Historic Southside Farmers Market	3300 Warsaw Street, Fort Wayne
Allen	YLNI Farmers Market	1501 E. Berry Street, Fort Wayne
DeKalb	Auburn Farmers Market	9th Street (Courthouse), 7th & Union Streets, Auburn
DeKalb	Garrett Farmers Market	1850 S. Randolph Street, Garrett
DeKalb	Family Farm & Home Market	930 N. Grandstaff Dr., Auburn
Huntington	Huntington Farmer's Market	EUM Church, 1000 Flaxmill Road, Huntington
Huntington	Roanoke Farmer's Market	Main Street, Roanoke
Kosciusko	Kosciusko County Fairgrounds Farmers Market	1400 E. Smith Road, Warsaw
Kosciusko	Kosciusko County Farmer's and Artisans Market	100 Center Street by Courthouse, Warsaw
Kosciusko	Mentone Community Farmer's Market	Corner of 201 E. Main & 101 N. Morgan streets, Mentone, IN
Kosciusko	Syracuse Artisans & Farmers Market	Veteran's Memorial Park at Crosson Mill, Syracuse
Kosciusko	The Farmer's Market at Winona	705 Park Avenue, Winona Lake
LaGrange	LaGrange Farmer's Market	Spring Street in Courthouse Square, LaGrange
Noble	Kendallville Farmers Market	Community Learning Center, 401 E. Diamond Street, Kendallville
Noble	Ligonier Farmers Market	Pettit Park, 100 N. Calvin Street, Ligonier
Steuben	Steuben County Farmers Market	317 S. Wayne Street, Angola
Wabash	North Manchester Farmers Market	Ogan's Landing on South Mill Street, North Manchester
Wabash	Downtown Wabash Farmers Market	275 W. Market Street, Wabash
Wells	Bluffton Farmers Market	990 N. Main Street, Bluffton
Whitley	Whitley County Farmers Market	Whitley County Courthouse Square, 112 Chauncey St., Columbia City

Institutions

Institutions play a critical role in providing nutrition to residents throughout Northeast Indiana, including preschoolers, K-12 students, university students, hospital patients, incarcerated individuals, and elderly and disabled in care facilities. Many individuals rely on these institutions for most or all their nutrition. Procurement of local food can help build resilience in institutional services and holds more power to benefit farmers than any other local food market. Public and private institutions spend billions of dollars on food purchases each year to provide meals. This represents an opportunity for U.S. farmers to gain access to large markets, which can impact their income and livelihood. However, local farmers face significant challenges in meeting the high-volume demands of these institutions and often struggle to establish the necessary relationships with distributors and food service directors. This gap makes it difficult for institutions and farmers to bridge the divide, hindering the integration of local food into large-scale food service systems.

Researchers at Indiana University Food and Agrarian Systems[87] surveyed two hundred institutions across the State of Indiana to determine local food purchasing patterns, barriers, and steps that should be taken to support Indiana farms. Key takeaways outlined in this research are:

- Seventy-eight percent of surveyed institutions are purchasing local food including fruits, vegetables, and dairy.
- Half of buyers define local as food grown in Indiana.
- Buyers are interested in purchasing from food hubs and farmers, but lack the time, connection, and support to make it happen.
- Institutional buyers need support from value chain professionals to build relationships and trust with farmers and employ strategies to procure local foods.
- Distributors must improve the information they share with buyers on regionally available foods for purchase.
- Fiscal incentives could increase the amount of local food purchased and enable food service directors to hire and train staff on scratch prep and cooking.

Addressing these challenges would require stronger partnerships, improved communication, and potential financial incentives to encourage institutions to prioritize locally grown food.

87 Smith, J, O'Neill, M, Ahmed, A, Leatherman, K, Allen, M, Babb, A. (2023). What's For Lunch? Local Food Purchasing by Indiana Institutions. Indiana University Food and Agrarian Systems. https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/items/8d098d01-7a62-4e35-8c69-9af2fee389a

Consumer Surveys

The Northeast Indiana Local Food Network administered consumer surveys throughout the summer and fall of 2024 to get a better understanding of consumer's local food access needs. Surveys were made available on the Network's website, distributed at public engagement and focus group events, and conducted at farmers markets throughout the region. The Pontiac Street Market also partnered in soliciting participation by their patrons where a $5 store coupon incentive was offered. English and Spanish surveys were offered. A total of 219 surveys were received. Of the respondents, 48% of households were below the low to moderate income threshold.

The first question on the survey inquired about the top three locations where consumers buy or receive the food they eat (all food). The top locations selected were 1). Large Grocery Stores (92%), 2). Farmers Markets (36%), My Garden/Farm (29%), and Restaurants (28%).

Consumers then gave an indication of how often they eat local food, meaning food that is grown, raised, or harvested in the 11-county region of Northeast Indiana. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents only eat local food in the summer. Additional frequency included: Every day (15%), Every Week (25%), Every Month (16%), Rarely (16%), My family does not eat food from local farms (1%).

When consumers were asked to select all locations that they buy or receive their local food from, food stores that sell products from local farms (57%) and farmers markets (56%) were the two most popular locations. Additionally, they obtain local food from roadside farm stands (27%), food banks/pantries (12%), and from family members or friends (26%).

Consumers were then asked to select all applicable ways that they would be motivated to buy local food at farmers markets, farm stands, or local stores more often. Having a location close to home (74%), more affordable food options (46%), and longer market hours (39%) were the top reasons.

The survey asked about what foods from local farms is eaten regularly by their families. Results include the following in ranked order: vegetables (91%), fruits (74%), eggs (60%), meats (44%), honey/maple syrup (47%), dairy/cheese (27%), prepared foods (27%), grain/flour (9%), my family does not eat food from local farms (2%).

Thirty-one percent of consumers stated that they spend $100+ on local food in a week. Other purchase amounts per week are $51-$100 (27%), $26-$50 (20%), $1-$25 (18%), We do not buy local food (4%). Eleven percent of consumers have used SNAP/EBT or WIC/Senior voucher benefits to buy local food while 7% didn't know that farmers markets accept SNAP/EBT or WIC/Senior benefits, and 1% indicated that these benefits are not accepted where they buy food. Eighty-one percent of respondents are not eligible for benefits.

Pontiac Street Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Ft. Wayne's Farmers Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Food Security & Nutrition

E&S Sales Bulk Foods, Shipshewana, Indiana

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

Food security is a concept that addresses an individual's or family's ability to obtain sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. Its dimensions encompass economic and physical access, food utilization, and stable, consistent access to food without disruptions. Lack of appropriate food access, or food insecurity, can lead to hunger and health issues, as well as child development issues and poor academic performance due to cognitive impairment and behavioral disruptions.

Many people can face food insecurity at any moment of their lives due to a variety of individual and household instabilities. These situations range from employment layoffs, disability, aging, healthcare issues, accidents, sudden caretaking responsibilities that stress income reach, the impacts of sudden natural disasters, and more. Resilience efforts to address the onset, and potential persistence, of these insecurity issues involve enhancing safety nets, implementing community gardens and grow at-home initiatives, increasing access to healthy local food at farmers markets and food retail locations, nutrition incentives, and nutrition education programs. Prioritizing food security is essential for improving public health, economic health, and overall community well-being by ensuring consistent access to nutritious food for all.

Table 21: **Northeast Indiana Food Insecurity (2022)**[89]

County	Food Insecure Population	Food Insecure Rates
Adams	4,480	12.5%
Allen	49,920	13.0%
DeKalb	5,510	12.7%
Huntington	5,050	13.8%
Kosciusko	10,190	12.7%
LaGrange	4,270	10.6%
Noble	5,790	12.2%
Steuben	4,290	12.4%
Wabash	4,210	13.6%
Wells	3,230	11.5%
Whitley	4,266	12.4%
NEI Total	**101,200**	

According to Feeding America,[88] 13.9% of Indiana residents are considered food insecure. In Northeast Indiana, 101,200 residents were identified as food insecure with county percentages ranging from 10.6% to 13.8%. Allen County had the largest population and Allen, Huntington, and Wabash Counties had the highest rates (See Table 21).

There are several food service programs offered throughout Northeast Indiana that collectively work to ensure residents have adequate food and nutrition. Following is a list of these programs.

Supplementary and Emergency Food Services Programs

USDA Food and Nutrition Services: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)[90]

Sixteen domestic food and nutrition assistance programs are administered by the USDA. This is roughly two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. In response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, USDA launched additional temporary programs and implemented numerous policy changes that expanded the scope and coverage of existing programs. Together, these programs contributed to $166.4 billion in spending on food and nutrition assistance programs in fiscal year (FY) 2023 (October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023).

USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, contributes funds to the grocery budgets of low-income individuals and households according to thresholds set by the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP).[91] [92] Administered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, SNAP aims to provide monthly benefits through an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card known in Indiana as the Indiana Hoosier Works Card. With strict eligibility criteria, including income, asset limits and work requirements, SNAP benefitted 41.7 million people and 22.2 million households in the U.S. in 2024.[93]

Food stamp use and associated federal costs have fluctuated, yet steadily grown over the years.[94] The Food Stamp Act was passed in 1964 and expanded its reach in 1974 when states were required to extend benefits to all jurisdictions in their boundaries. Between 1980 and 2008, the percentage of U.S. household participation fluctuated between 7% and 11%. During the Great Recession following the 2008 housing crisis, participation rose rapidly, peaking at 18.8% of households in 2013. After recovery, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an additional surge of participation to 13% in 2020. Ongoing inflation since that time has maintained elevated needs with participation at 12% in 2024. According to the American Community Survey (2019 – 2023), 618,000 Indiana households received benefits from the SNAP program, including 24,311 households in Northeast Indiana (See Table 22 on page 43 for a county breakdown). According to the State of Indiana Family and Social Services data, the December 2024 total was 26,621 households.

88 Feeding America. (2022). https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/indiana
89 Ibid.
90 USDA Economic Research Service. (2024). https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=109313
91 USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program
92 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2024). https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits
93 USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-4fymonthly-12.pdf
94 Ibid.

Recipients of SNAP benefits are incentivized to use their EBT card to purchase healthy and fresh food at participating, approved locations including grocers, farmers markets, farm stands, convenience stores, dollar stores, etc. The program prohibits buying prepared foods, alcohol, tobacco, pet food, and non-food. It is important that SNAP retailer locations be accessible to participants. The current number of SNAP locations per county in Northeast Indiana as of December 2024 is also provided on Table 22 along with an analysis of SNAP locations per household receiving SNAP. Huntington, Steuben, Wabash, and Whitley Counties were identified as having the greatest gap in SNAP locations available. Specific retail locations can be found on USDA's SNAP Retailer Locator Map.[95] Work to expand the number of farmers and farmers markets that accept SNAP has been identified as a need for Northeast Indiana through the public engagement process. The Indiana Farmers Market Community of Practice has a toolkit and materials in available in English, Spanish, and Burmese to help assist farmers markets with signing up to accept SNAP benefits.[96]

Table 22: **SNAP Participation in Northeast Indiana Counties [97] [98]**

Location	Households Receiving SNAP Benefits	Percent of all Households	Percent of Households Receiving SNAP with Children Under 18	Number of Participating SNAP Retail Locations	SNAP Locations per Households Receiving SNAP
Adams County	751	6.1%	49.7%	17	.023
Allen County	13,706	8.9%	53.8%	327	.024
DeKalb County	1,016	6.0%	59.8%	34	.033
Huntington County	1,696	11.1%	42.0%	27	.015
Kosciusko County	1,877	5.9%	62.0%	67	.035
LaGrange County	553	4.3%	57.5%	14	.025
Noble County	1,116	6.2%	55.2%	41	.036
Steuben County	818	5.9%	47.2%	16	.020
Wabash County	1,221	9.7%	52.8%	26	.021
Wells County	641	5.6%	60.5%	17	.027
Whitley County	916	6.6%	55.9%	18	.020

The SNAP program is reauthorized by the Farm Bill every five years. The last Farm Bill was passed in 2018 and in December 2024 received an extension through September of 2025. The future level of funding of the program is uncertain and will be a topic of consideration for the next Farm Bill projected in 2025.

USDA Food and Nutrition Services: Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program (WIC)[99]

WIC is a nutrition program, nationally recognized as an effective means for improving access to nutritious foods and promoting healthier eating and lifestyles. The Indiana WIC Program serves an average of 145,000 women, caregivers, infants, and children up to age five each month through a statewide network of 140 WIC clinics. Services WIC provides includes nutrition and health screening and assessment, nutrition education and counseling, breastfeeding education and support, referrals to other Indiana health, family, and social services, and supplemental, healthy foods designed to meet special nutrition needs. EBT cards are also used for WIC nutrition benefits.

Feeding America, Feeding Indiana's Hungry, and Regional Food Banks [100] [101]

Feeding America is a national nonprofit that works with communities to find novel solutions to ending hunger. They are a network of food banks, food pantries, and local meal programs with the common goal of helping people receive the nutritious food and resources they need to thrive. Feeding Indiana's Hungry is the state association of Feeding America that serves the 11 regional food banks across the state.

Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana (CHFB) is a regional food bank located at two sites in Fort Wayne and serves nine Northeast Indiana counties, Adams, Allen, Dekalb, Huntington, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wells, and Whitley. Established in 1983 in response to the closure of the International Harvester plant that led to the unemployment of tens of thousands of area residents, CHFB works to "alleviate hunger through the full use of donated food and other resources". CHFB distributes food to approximately 280 member agencies across Northeast Indiana in addition to offering several of their own programs. These include Community Cupboard, Kids Café, Kids Backpack, and Farm Wagon. They also offer crisis assistance food support for those that have suffered human-caused and natural disasters. The Food Bank of Northern Indiana and Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Indiana serve the remaining two counties, Kosciusko and Wabash, respectively.

95 USDA SNAP Retailer Locator Map. https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=15e1c457b56c4a729861d015cd626a23
96 Indiana Farmers Market Community of Practice. https://infmcp.org/food-access/snap-ebt/
97 U.S. Census. SNAP Questions
98 USDA SNAP Retailer Locator Map. https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=15e1c457b56c4a729861d015cd626a23
99 Indiana Department of Health. https://www.in.gov/health/wic/
100 Feeding Indiana's Hungry. https://feedingindianashungry.org
101 Community Harvest of Northeast Indiana. https://www.communityharvest.org/about-us/

Indiana 211 [102]

In times of emergency, Indiana 211 is a go-to resource to locate a wealth of information and services including food related assistance such as Baby Food/ Formula, Community Gardening, Congregate Meals for Seniors, Emergency Food, Food Outlets/ Markets, Food Pantries Fresh Food, Food Vouchers, Home Delivered Meals, Meals, and Soup Kitchens.

Healthy Food Programs and Initiatives

There are a number of healthy food initiatives that encourage nutrient-dense diets, and subsequently support local food producers, that either piggy-back on federal feeding assistance programs, operate as part of a nation-wide network of community chapters, or are stand-alone independent initiatives that acutely meet the needs of communities experiencing gaps of critical support, whether located in rural or systemically underinvested areas. These programs are evidence-backed and grow in participation and enthusiasm among the many benefiting stakeholders in local economies beyond the beneficiaries to food producers, schools, local businesses, employers, healthcare professionals and institutions, churches and faith-based gathering spaces, state health, education, and agriculture departments and more as implementations roll out.

Double Up [103] [104] [105]

Double Up Indiana is a nutrition incentive program that doubles the purchasing power of SNAP benefits for fresh fruits and vegetables. The piggy-back program matches SNAP dollars spent on these foods at participating locations in Indiana, including farmers markets and some grocery stores. Launched in 2021 in Allen County with the help of the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation and a USDA grant, the program is supported by the Indiana Department of Health for statewide expansion. It aims to address food insecurity, promote healthy eating habits, and support local farmers and communities. SNAP recipients can participate at various locations, with 53 sites in 2024, including 11 in Fort Wayne. The program benefits include increased access to healthy foods, economic benefits for local communities, and promotion of healthier eating habits. At farmers markets, recipients swipe their EBT card to receive tokens for fruits and vegetables, while grocery stores offer immediate discounts or future purchase benefits for these items.

Food Is Medicine/ Food As Medicine [106]

The Food Is Medicine program integrates food and nutrition into healthcare to prevent and treat health conditions, emphasizing the vital role of nutrition in health outcomes and cost reduction. The program targets food insecurity and those suffering from chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes with such initiatives as tailored meals, produce prescriptions, and nutrition counseling to improve access to healthy food. This comprehensive approach aims to enhance patient outcomes, reduce costs, address disparities, and support local food systems. Healthcare providers are adopting these programs, like Kaiser Permanente's Food Is Medicine Center of Excellence. Ongoing research is exploring the effectiveness of these interventions, with initiatives like the American Heart Association's Health Care by Food project. By viewing food as medicine, providers are embracing a holistic approach to patient care. In Indiana, this program is administered by the Indiana Department of Health and partners with Purdue Extension and the Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement (IUCRE).

Veggie Rx [107] [108] [109]

VeggieRx is a fruit and vegetable prescription program that aims to improve health outcomes, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, address food insecurity, and promote healthier eating habits for patients that are part of the Parkview Health system. The program works by screening patients for food insecurity and diet-related health conditions, enrolling eligible patients in the program, and allowing them to redeem their prescriptions for free produce at participating locations. Participants typically receive vouchers worth $50 per month for fresh produce, and the program typically runs for six months. Benefits of program participation are shown to increase daily fruit and vegetable consumption, improve food security, reduce BMI, enhance knowledge about nutrition and food preparation, and support for local farmers and the economy. VeggieRx is implemented in various locations across the United States through partnerships between healthcare providers, community organizations, and local food systems. In Northeast Indiana the program is available to Allen, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, and Wabash Counties.

HEAL Markets [110] [111] [112]

Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Markets in Allen County provide a unique opportunity to double the value of WIC/Senior Produce Vouchers and SNAP purchases, making fresh fruits and vegetables more accessible to low-income families. Various payment options are accepted,

102 Indiana 211. https://in211.communityos.org
103 Double Up Indiana. https://doubleupindiana.org/how/
104 Input Fort Wayne. https://www.inputfortwayne.com/features/DoubleUpIndiana.aspx
105 Ball State Daily. (2024). https://www.ballstatedaily.com/article/2024/09/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-launches-double-up-indiana
106 Food as Medicine in Indiana. https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c11bd761042d47c2a5da5baf543c3dc7
107 Building Indiana Business. (2023). https://buildingindiana.com/stories/veggierx-program-growing-in-size-and-impact-for-2023,2408
108 Parkview Health. https://www.parkview.com/health-resources/veggierx
109 Parkview Health. https://www.parkview.com/news/results/parkview-health-veggierx-program-growing-in-size-and-impact-for-2023-cohort
110 The St. Joseph Community Health Foundation. https://sjchf.org/heal-markets-help-families/
111 Parkview Health. (2024). https://www.parkview.com/blog/seasonal-shopping-at-heal-farm-markets
112 NEILFN. https://www.neifood.org/shop-local/heal-farm-market-parkview-greenhouse

including cash, credit, debit, VeggieRx dollars, SNAP/EBT and the "Double Up" feature for SNAP/EBT purchases. Sponsored by The St. Joseph Community Health Foundation and Parkview Health, HEAL Farm Markets aim to support local communities by offering reasonably priced produce in food deserts.

Community Harvest – Community [Food] Farmacy Program [113]

Community Farmacy is a 12-week program by Community Harvest Food Bank in partnership with the nonprofit, Matthew 25 Health and Care, aimed at improving health outcomes for the underserved population. The program aims to increase fresh vegetable and fruit consumption, reduce barriers to access, build awareness of Community Harvest and Matthew 25 Clinic's role in reducing medication reliance, and improve patient quality of life. Participants learn to make healthy lifestyle choices and receive medical, dietician, and food support. Benefits include improved diabetes, weight reduction, increased understanding of diabetes, free whole foods, and prizes for completing various levels of the program.

Produce for Better Health [114]

Indiana's 15 Area Agencies on Aging are implementing the "Produce for Better Health" program to address the health concerns of low-income older and disabled adults. Northeast Indiana agencies include Aging and In-Home Services of Northeast Indiana (9 Counties), Real Services, Inc. (Kosciusko), and Area 5 Agency on Aging and Community Services (Wabash). The program provides bi-weekly boxes of fresh produce to participants at meal sites, aiming to alleviate hunger and improve overall health. Participants are required to track and report health statistics, including weight and blood pressure, to determine the impact of adding fresh produce to their diet. The program aims to improve clinical outcomes for food-insecure individuals with chronic conditions and increase access to nutritious food by increasing affordable, healthy food options for food-insecure populations.

Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) + Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) [115]

The Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) aims to assist low-income seniors by providing them with access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs. The program also seeks to boost the consumption of agricultural products through farmers' markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agricultural initiatives, while promoting the development of new markets and stands. The SFMNP also offers seniors the opportunity to engage directly with farmers at markets and stands in their local communities.

Eligible participants are typically individuals over 60 years old with household incomes not exceeding 185% of the federal poverty guidelines, however the number of SFMNP and WIC vouchers are limited and often run out before eligible families can participate. In Indiana, the SFMNP and WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) are overseen by the Department of Health under a consolidated state plan. The program is funded through grants from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services.

School Food Programs

Schools are institutions that consistently interact with a large, often vulnerable, segment of the community – children and young families. Schools therefore can be quite impactful in influencing communities' relationships with fresh, healthy food and local producers by improving food access and transforming food purchasing and educational practices at schools and early care centers.

Community Eligibility Provision Program

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is USDA's participation name for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) meals service option available to low-income area schools to offer enrolled students no-cost meals, without the need for households to fill out applications.[116] Schools are reimbursed based on the percentage of students eligible for free meals through means-tested programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).[117] A new rule, effective in 2023, lowered the minimum identified student percentage from 40% to 25%, giving states and schools increased ability and flexibility to provide free meals to students, regardless of need.[118] [119] A reversal of this expansion with even further cuts are a possibility under current Congressional leadership.[120]

Note: The USDA's Special Milk Program is also offered to schools and childcare centers where other federal meal service programs are offered.[121]

113 Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana. https://www.communityharvest.org/get-help/community-farmacy/
114 The Tribune. https://tribtown.com/2023/11/07/connecting-older-hoosiers-to-free-fresh-produce-to-improve-health-outcomes/
*115 Indiana Department of Health. https://www.in.gov/health/wic/farmers-marketsstands-information/#tab-686413-4-Senior_Farmers__Market_Nutrition_Program__SFMNP_*
116 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep/factsheet
117 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep
118 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-092623
119 NPR. (2022). https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/09/07/1101550783/free-school-meals-kids-hunger
120 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2025). https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/state-by-state-fact-sheets-community-eligibility-provision
121 USDA Food and Nutrition Service. https://www.fns.usda.gov/smp/special-milk-program

Universal School Meals – Trending Momentum

In response to the hunger and economic challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government offered free school meals to all public-school students in 2020. This initiative, meant to be temporary, led to advocacy for permanently providing free meals to all students. Research indicated numerous benefits of free school meals, including improved academic and physical health. Many hoped the free meals would continue through the pandemic, however, waivers allowing for this extension were not granted. As a sign of acknowledgement of the research and trending interest, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's rule change regarding threshold coverage reductions to 25% was made to the Community Eligibility Program as explained above. As of the beginning of 2024, eight states have passed laws to provide universal free school meals since the COVID-19 pandemic and all, but fifteen state legislatures have considered some type of this legislation.[122] Indiana's legislature had not yet considered this, as of 2025.

Blessings in a Backpack [123] [124]

Blessings in a Backpack is a national nonprofit organization that aims to provide food for school-aged children who may go hungry on weekends when they do not have access to school meals programs. With a focus on ending childhood hunger, the organization works to ensure all children have access to nourishment, emphasizing the importance of nutrition for learning and growth. Founded in 2007, the Fort Wayne chapter of Blessings in a Backpack started with a one-school partnership feeding 300 students every weekend. The program has expanded to seven schools in the Fort Wayne community, feeding 3,000 students a weekend and 5,400 youth through the summer months, totaling over 114,000 bags distributed in a school year. The Fort Wayne chapter of Blessings in a Backpack aims to expand the program throughout every school in the Fort Wayne Community Schools district, and beyond.

REGIONAL INSIGHTS

Food Insecurity and Nutrition Outreach Public Engagement Sessions

The regional public engagement session input on food security and resilience in Northeast Indiana highlights several root causes of food insecurity in the region. These include a lack of transportation access, food deserts, and difficulty finding fresh food. Limited resources and skills, particularly in culinary education and food preparation, exacerbate the issue. Additionally, cultural and language barriers, high housing costs, and the isolation of retirees on fixed incomes contribute to food insecurity. Within the urban area of Fort Wayne, over-development, leading to the loss of natural spaces for gardening, and the prevalence of fast food, also play a significant role.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the volatility of the food supply became apparent, with disruptions in availability and access to fresh food. Suggestions for mitigating future food supply challenges include better marketing and communication about local food resources, such as farmers markets and farm stands. Investments in infrastructure like food hubs, shared kitchens, and community gardens are seen as essential for building resilience. Engaging children in gardening and educating them on the benefits of fresh, local food is also recommended to foster a stronger connection to local food systems early on. The pandemic underscored the need for better government preparedness, particularly for vulnerable populations.

There are several underutilized resources in the community that could strengthen local food security and resilience. Suggestions include donating unused seeds and starts, creating a seed library, and revisiting zoning and development policies to support urban gardening. Cold storage facilities, shared kitchen spaces, and transportation solutions are also identified as potential ways to increase food availability and stability. Additionally, increased outreach from extension offices and the development of a printed local food guide could help residents access information and resources more effectively. Access to preventative health care and education on wholesome foods would empower communities and contribute to overall food security.

Opportunities like home gardens, community gardens, and nutrition incentive programs can significantly enhance individual food security. Programs like SNAP Double Up and Veggie RX have been successful. There is a need to expand and divert more incentives to local farmers.

Improving access to irrigation knowledge, cooperative resource purchasing, and training on growing food would help individuals and communities become more self-sufficient. Getting children involved in gardening and nutrition programs would also promote positive physical and mental health while building lifelong skills.

To further develop the capacity, inclusivity, and resilience of Northeast Indiana's local food system, participants recommended focusing on marketing the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network, improving transportation options, and establishing cooperative land trusts. Shared land spaces, processing and storage facilities, and mobile markets would help support local growers and increase access to fresh food. Education through hands-on experiences and empowerment initiatives were also identified as key strategies for building a stronger local food system. Prioritizing soil health and water access would contribute to the sustainability and resilience of local agriculture in the long term.

122 New York City Food Policy Center. https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/states-with-universal-free-school-meals-so-far-update/
123 Blessings in a Backpack. https://www.blessingsinabackpack.org/how-it-works/
124 Fort Wayne, Indiana Blessings in a Backpack. https://www.blessingsindiana.org/about_us

Food Insecurity and Nutrition Network Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held with representatives from the Food Insecurity and Nutrition Network as part of this needs assessment. The groups highlighted several key successes in Northeast Indiana's local food system. Participants noted that there is greater attention than previously has been on the intersection of food, health, and food insecurity. Programs like SNAP Double Up, Produce for Better Health, Food Farmacy, and VeggieRx, where healthy food along with education is provided to food insecure individuals, are yielding positive health outcomes. The community is also engaging in more conversations about the power of nutritious foods, as seen in efforts like the Food Insecurity and Nutrition Network. The appointment of a Director of Food As Medicine at the Indiana State Board of Health further underscores the growing recognition of food's role in improving health outcomes. Additionally, awareness and interest in local food have increased, supported by incentive programs like Double Up, which encourage consumers to seek out fresh, locally produced goods.

However, significant barriers remain in expanding access to local food resources. Food banks are seeing more demand but are receiving less food due to reductions in waste from grocery stores and food producers. Participants emphasized the need to involve food pantries in conversation with retailers earlier in order to ensure a more consistent supply. Transportation remains a major barrier, particularly in Fort Wayne, where public transit is lacking, and carrying groceries on buses is burdensome. Farmers markets also pose challenges, including an intimidation factor for low-income shoppers, who may find the prices of certain foods prohibitive. The group suggested that educating consumers in a positive and familiar way, such as using modified recipes, could help bridge the gap and encourage people to try new local foods.

Another pressing issue is the need for a more integrated approach to improving food security. While initiatives like home gardens and community gardens are positive steps, they do not generate enough food to meet the growing demand. There was a call for greater collaboration and large-scale initiatives to address the deep-rooted issues of food insecurity. The group highlighted the need for younger farmers to get involved, as many current farmers are aging or stepping away from farming. Without new champions for local farming, key sources of fresh food could dwindle.

A potential solution to increase local food access was the development of a Food Hub, where local farmers could provide produce and the hub could manage distribution, thus creating more accessible and direct links between farmers and consumers. The group also discussed incentivizing urban farming by increasing land and water access as well as boosting the availability of local food by engaging with small stores and markets that already exist in the community.

Food banks and pantries face additional challenges in offering fresh, local food due to limited storage and cold food chain infrastructure. Many pantries are not equipped to handle perishable items, which makes it difficult to provide healthy options for those in need. Participants stressed the need to receive financial commitments upfront to incentivize them to grow more local produce. Without this commitment, farmers are less likely to take on the risks of producing for local markets. The idea of a collaborative, community-driven space, with a vision of a neutral, publicly owned market was raised to bring together various stakeholders and provide more structured support for local food distribution.

When discussing the potential for local food to address health issues such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, participants pointed to programs like Veggie Rx, which have proven effective in helping people manage chronic conditions through nutrition. However, they noted that more consistency in nutrition incentive programs is needed, especially for those using SNAP or WIC at farmers markets. Streamlining these processes would help reduce barriers and encourage more people to take advantage of local food options. Expanding access to CSA programs and leveraging new initiatives, such as the Pontiac Street Market's citywide food delivery service, were also discussed as strategies for improving food access and health outcomes.

Looking forward, the group identified several key priorities for building a more accessible and resilient local food system in Northeast Indiana. Education and connection were central themes, with a focus on empowering individuals to take control of their health through better food choices. Teaching people how to cook with local ingredients, read labels, and reduce unhealthy ingredients was seen as essential for those who are ready to make changes. Leadership in nutrition incentive programs and more coordination with local farmers were also highlighted as critical areas for growth. The group emphasized the importance of relationship-building, collaboration, and community empowerment as the foundation for a thriving local food system.

Food Pantry Survey

With the assistance of the Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana, a food bank survey was distributed in the fall of 2024 throughout the Northeast Indiana region to gauge current practices and needs regarding providing local food to the individuals and families that they serve. A total of 23 pantries located in eight counties responded to the survey. The territories they cover include nine of the region's 11 counties (not including Wabash and Whitley).

Of those that responded, most serve a minimum of 50 or less families per week with 30% serving up to 50 families, 22% serving up to 25, and 22% serving up to 10. Over 70% of the respondents serve a maximum of up to 75 families. Three pantries serve 150 or more families per week.

The top sources that the pantries obtain their food from include Community Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Indiana (95% of respondents), Individuals and Organizations (74%), Churches/Religious Organizations (65%), Local Grocery Stores (61%), and Food Drives (48%).

A total of 73% of the pantries offer locally grown / produced food - whole foods or produced foods with ingredients sourced within the 11-counties in Northeast Indiana. Locally grown food provided by the pantries includes vegetables (95% of pantries providing local food), fruits (69%), meats (38%), eggs (19%), honey (13%), dairy (6%), grains (6%), value-added products (6%).

Local food is primarily sourced at the pantries by: Individual Gardeners/Hunters (78%), Community Harvest Food Bank (72%), and Donated by Farmers, Food Producers, Meat Processors (67%).

More specific survey responses showed that pantries in Northeast Indiana source local food through a diverse network of community partnerships and donations, including:

- **Donations from Individuals and Churches:** One respondent's church member donates pork, and individuals often provide homegrown produce, including tomatoes, peppers, pears, and green beans.
- **Local Farmers and Producers:** Eggs are sourced from local farms like EggInnovations in Cromwell and other community farmers. Meat products, including deer, chicken, turkey, and pork, are sourced from places like Miller Poultry, Gunthorp Farms, and Manley Meats.
- **Community Gardening:** Vegetables are grown in parking lot containers, pantry gardens (e.g., a 50x50 garden), and by Purdue Extension Master Gardeners or church gardeners.
- **Educational and Correctional Contributions:** The IU School of Education Urban Garden and the Chain of Lakes Correctional Facility provide produce.
- **Orchards and Markets:** Apples and other produce are picked up or donated from local orchards (e.g., Stroh Orchard) and gift/fruit markets. Bakers Market also regularly donates vegetables.
- **Regional and Local Produce:** Potatoes are supplied biweekly from a Michigan plant and local farmers. Seasonal fruits and vegetables are donated by individuals and local markets.
- **Community Programs:** Initiatives like "Hoosiers Feeding the Hungry" further support sourcing efforts.

Many of the pantries indicated that the frequency in which locally grown/produced food is offered occurs sporadically based on seasonality and when it is received (41%). The remaining pantries indicated a mixed response and one stated that it depends on what it is. Local food was not indicated to be wasted.

Pantries were asked what their needs were to provide local food. The top answers were: Consistent source of quality produce (50%), More staff to pick up donations (39%), Refrigerators (28%), Shelving (22%), Educational materials/recipes to build demand (22%).

The final comments from the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network Food Pantry Survey highlight key needs, aspirations, and current efforts of food pantries:

Needs and Aspirations:

- Improved Supply: A more consistent and varied supply of quality products, including milk, butter, cheese, flour, and sugar, aligned with clients' needs.
- Infrastructure and Equipment: Interest in acquiring land for gardens, walk-in freezers, refrigerators, and facilities for food education, preservation, and meal preparation.
- Innovative Solutions: Exploring options like vertical farming to increase fresh food availability.
- Education Initiatives: Desire to teach classes on healthier eating with less reliance on preservatives.

Current Efforts:

- Community Partnerships: Food is sourced from Community Harvest Food Bank, and through other partnerships including Milford Food Bank, E&S in Shipshewana, and Chain of Lakes Correctional Facility, which supplies large quantities of fresh vegetables.
- Client Engagement: Some pantries deliver groceries and support clients in growing, canning, or freezing their own vegetables.
- Seasonal Fresh Food: Fresh vegetables are made available during summer, while most fruits and vegetables provided year-round come from canned products.

These comments reflect a strong emphasis on improving food quality, enhancing infrastructure, fostering education, and leveraging community partnerships to better serve pantry clients.

Local Food Community and Economic Development

Ft. Wayne's Farmers Market, Fort Wayne, Indiana

LOCAL FOOD COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Building a local food economy within the Northeast Indiana region is key to revitalizing traditional agricultural communities and invigorating urban, suburban, and rural areas. Supporting the local food economy involves establishing, sustaining, expanding, and attracting farms and food-related businesses at the town/city, county, and regional level. This approach positively impacts various industries, including production, processing, storage, transportation, distribution, and retail. Moreover, fostering local food economies is a powerful way to preserve farmland, protect natural resources, and enhance the well-being of communities.

Community Planning

In the past, local food systems have not been at the forefront of community planning. According to the American Planning Association, a reason for this is that issues with the food system value chain indirectly touch on the built environment, which is the concern of a land use planner, and that there is often a sense that food systems are operating well on their own, so why interfere?[125]

Given recent human and natural disruptive events, communities are realizing the need to plan for more resilient food systems. Communities are facing increasing threats from a variety of potential crises, including increasing weather events brought on by climate change, environmental emergencies, and public health outbreaks. In addition, political instability can disrupt supply chains, farming, and food security, often exacerbating existing inequities based on race, geography, and socioeconomic status.[126] The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities of food supply chains and social systems in the United States, resulting in food shortages, unemployment, and heightened food insecurity. Nonprofit food assistance programs were stretched thin, prompting federal, state, and local governments to step in and coordinate responses. The experience underscored the need for local communities to prepare food systems for future disruptions. Local communities are uniquely positioned to lead these frontline efforts because they influence local food environments through policies like zoning laws, coordinate emergency food response, provide meals via agencies like school districts, and are often more responsive to immediate community needs than federal entities.[127]

The field of planning is expanding into food system work due to planners' skills and capacity to understand the interdisciplinary needs of communities and how to apply policies and strategies. There are several benefits to integrating food systems into local community comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, hazard mitigation plans, and economic development strategies, including:[128]

- Increasing food access;
- Addressing requests for farmer support;
- Activating downtown areas and other public places with farmers markets and food businesses;
- Putting vacant land back into use;
- Increasing public health through access to healthy food;
- Managing development demands through farmland protection;
- Improving air, water, and land quality through protection practices;
- Increasing economic benefits through increased markets for products;
- Building water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure in addition to cold storage and distribution facilities; and
- Supporting overall development associated in consideration of the environment, society, and economy with long-term strategies for community success.

Allen County and the City of Fort Wayne have shown leadership in Northeast Indiana through the development of the 2023 All In Allen Comprehensive Plan which includes an Agriculture and Food Section as detailed in the Introduction of this report. The All In Allen plan exemplifies how food systems can be integrated into local government planning and includes goals and strategies that focus on enhancing agricultural sustainability, equity, and economic development. This plan won the 2024 Hoosier Planning Award for Comprehensive Planning by the Indiana Chapter of the American Planning Association.[129]

125 American Planning Association. (2007).https://www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/food.htm
126 John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. https://clf.jhsph.edu/sites/default/files/2022-12/the-resilience-planning-guide.pdf
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 City of Fort Wayne and Allen County, Indiana. (2023). https://www.cityoffortwayne.org/latest-news/5663-fort-wayne-allen-county-all-in-allen-comprehensive-plan-receives-award-from-the-indiana-chapter-of-the-american-planning-association.html

Economic Development

Local food agricultural enterprises and food entrepreneurship offer significant benefits to local economies by creating jobs, retaining wealth within communities, and supporting rural, suburban, and urban populations. Community and economic development entities such as local economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, main street organizations, and tourism bureaus in coordination with regional entities like the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network, Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, and Northeast Indiana Regional Chamber can foster this sector's growth. This can be accomplished through targeted initiatives which strengthen community ties and improve quality of life.

The 2024 ***Feeding the Economy***[130] report highlights the crucial role of the U.S. food and agriculture sector (including food grown for both local and non-local use), which has grown by over a trillion dollars since 2023. This sector contributes more than $9.6 trillion to the U.S. economy, representing 20% of total U.S. output, and supports nearly twenty-four million jobs (15% of U.S. employment). From farms and ranches to logistics companies to food manufacturing, processing, and storage facilities to restaurants and food service locations, millions of workers keep food supply chains robust. The economic benefits extend beyond production as workers spend their income on supporting local and rural economies.[131] County-level data provided by Feeding the Economy shows that in 2023, the food and agriculture sector added $29.3 billion to the Northeast Indiana economy, including $6.8 billion in wages, and 122,278 jobs (See Table 23).

Table 23: 2023 Economic Impact of the Food and Agriculture Sector in Northeast Indiana [132]

Economic Impact	Jobs	Wages	Output
Direct	58,308	$2,261,693,300	$12,950,968,600
Supplier	33,938	$2,562,604,600	$9,596,715, 300
Induced (Direct/ Supplier Incomes Spent on other Goods and Services)	30,032	$2,004,866,600	$6,783,109,500
Total	**122,278**	**$6,829,164,500**	**$29,330,793,400**

HEAL Market at Parkview Greenhouse, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Economic development support for the local food economy in Northeast Indiana is growing, yet according to public outreach there is much more work to be done. The Production, Processing and Consumption Sections of this report outline some of the key local food economic activities in the Northeast Indiana region. Several other economic development strategies that have been requested for implementation or expansion across the region through the public input process include:

- Farmer's Business Supports: business planning, training, resources, mentorship, marketing
- Farmers markets, including year-round markets
- Recruitment of locally-sourced food restaurants and retail spaces
- Micro-grants and loans for business start-ups and expansion
- Main Street grants for signage and other façade improvements for retail spaces
- Downtown and neighborhood walkability improvements and other placemaking enhancements near retail and restaurants
- Connections between farmers, food entrepreneurs, and support services
- Awareness campaigns for local food businesses and urban farming opportunities
- County/neighborhood collaboration meetings to drive community-based solutions
- Incentivizing the expansion of local food system infrastructure (storage, processing, distribution, commercial/shared kitchens)
- Food hubs, value chain coordination, and connection to bigger markets

Emerging Place-Based Community and Economic Development Trends

Agrihoods

An emerging trend in local food system development is the creation of "agrihoods," residential communities designed around agricultural spaces like farms and gardens rather than traditional amenities like golf courses or swimming pools. These developments appeal to buyers seeking open spaces while offering developers advantages such as lower capital investment and access to tax credits and conservation easements. Agrihoods vary in structure, with some employing professionals to manage farming and deliver weekly produce boxes to residents, while others provide individual plots for homeowners to cultivate their own gardens.

130 Feeding the Economy. (2024). https://goodstone.guerrillaeconomics.net/reports/3bd01e1b-9ec4-4608-a828-6761ee170dfc
131 Ibid.
132 Feeding the Economy. (2023). https://feedingtheeconomy.com/county-level-data/

According to a 2018 Urban Land Institute Report,[133] agrihoods offer significant financial, health, and environmental benefits to stakeholders, surrounding communities, and the planet. These developments provide a competitive edge, with 73% of U.S. residents prioritizing access to fresh, healthy food when choosing where to live. They are often more cost-effective to build and maintain compared to amenities like golf courses and can boost property values by 15–30% by providing adjacent undeveloped space. Additionally, agrihoods promote health and social interaction by fostering community ties through shared farming spaces and educational programs, while providing residents with fresh produce for improved health outcomes. The popularity of agrihoods has been steadily rising, with projects identified in 27 U.S. states and various Canadian provinces as of 2018. Agrihoods range from luxury developments in natural environments to affordable housing in urban areas.

Agritourism

Agritourism encompasses agriculture-based commercial activities designed to entertain, educate, and engage visitors. In Indiana, 70 cents of every dollar spent on tourism benefits local economies.[134] Agritourism destinations spark interest in farming and provide insights into food production through activities like farm tours, hayrides, livestock interactions, U-Pick produce, corn mazes, farm work experiences, tastings, and overnight farm stays. These attractions promote a deeper connection to agriculture while offering recreational and educational opportunities.

Regarding agritourism spots in Northeast Indiana that feature local food, several sources were reviewed including the NEILFN Northeast Indiana Local Food Guide, Indiana Grown and the Indiana Destination Development Map. Indiana Grown is an initiative of the State Department of Agriculture to "promote products that are grown or made by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers" through the use of their branding, online listing, and events.[135] In addition, the Indiana Destination Development Corporation promotes agritourism businesses through the online Indiana Destination Map[136] which identifies agritourism opportunities. Between these listings, 46 agritourism businesses with a focus on local food have been identified in Northeast Indiana as listed in Table 24.

Maple Acres, Noble County, Indiana

Table 24: **Agritourism Business in Northeast Indiana**

County	Business
Adams	Steele Farms Corn Maze & Pumpkin Patch
Allen	J&L Pickin' Patch
Allen	Ambrosia Orchard Cidery & Meadery
Allen	Cook's Orchard
Allen	Cedar Creek Produce
Allen	Fresh Living Farms
Allen	Hardy's Farm Market
Allen	Hilger Family Farm
Allen	Johnnie Mae Farm
Allen	Kuehnert Dairy Farm
Allen	Kurtz Produce
Allen	May Family Urban Homestead
Allen	Schmuckers Produce Farm
Allen	Seven Sons Farms
DeKalb	Acres Away Winery
DeKalb	Cupka Meadery
DeKalb	Country Heritage Winery & Vineyard
DeKalb	Grown Well Farms
Huntington	Barnyard Berries
Huntington	Garwood Farms
Huntington	Joseph Decuis Wagyu Farm
Kosciusko	Blue Barn Berry Farm
Kosciusko	Hill N Dale Farm
Kosciusko	Irish Mudd, LLC
LaGrange	Backroad Berry Patch
LaGrange	Circle Q Acres Farm Market
LaGrange	Cook's Bison Ranch
LaGrange	Countryside Produce
Noble	Benders Orchard
Noble	Blossom Hill Orchard
Noble	DeCamp Gardens
Noble	Fashion Farm, Inc.
Noble	Maple Acres
Noble	Orchard Hill Farms
Noble	Roberts Farms
Steuben	G.W. Stroh Orchard
Steuben	Satek Winery
Wabash	Berry Hill Farm
Wabash	Cordes Berry Farm
Wabash	David Doud's Countyline Orchard
Wabash	J.L. Hawkins Family Farm
Wells	The River Farm
Whitley	Bee Great Honey
Whitley	Kreider Sweet Kreations
Whitley	E Brewing Company
Whitley	Eel River Bison Ranch

133 *Urban Land Institute. (2018). https://americas.uli.org/wp-content/uploads/ULI-Documents/Agrihoods-Final.pdf*
134 *Indiana State Department of Agriculture. https://www.in.gov/isda/programs-and-initiatives/agritourism/*
135 *Indiana Grown. https://indianagrown.org/about-us/*
136 *Indiana Destination Development Corporation. https://www.visitindiana.com/move-in/destination-map/*

The Northeast Indiana Local Food Network's annual Local Food Week has proven to be a successful agritourism initiative that gives residents the opportunity to learn more about the region's local food system by participating in various tours and events across the region over a 10 day period.[137] Local Food Week began in 2020 with 18 farms and businesses and 300 participants. By 2024, this event grew to include 40 farms and businesses with over 2,000 participants.

Culinary Tourism

Culinary tourism focuses on exploring distinctive food and beverage experiences. By blending travel with unique dining opportunities, culinary tourism gives visitors and residents an authentic taste of a specific locale or region, celebrating its cultural and geographic identity. There are ways that communities can be considered culinary destinations, including chef and restaurant awards from the James Beard Foundation and Michelin Star designations. In Northeast Indiana, Joseph Decuis in Roanoke (Huntington County) has earned the "Best of Award of Excellence" by Wine Spectator, AAA's Four Diamond Award, and has received the designation as Indiana's #1 Restaurant by Open Table diners.[138]

A comprehensive list of restaurants that source local ingredients for their menu is not available at this time, as many local ingredients are only featured on seasonal menus. Many of the local tourism agencies across the region promote establishments where a variety of locally sourced ingredients are on their menu. For example, several of the Fort Wayne restaurants listed in Table 25 are highlighted by Visit Fort Wayne. Restaurant Row in LaGrange County, the Steuben County Craft Beer Trail, the Fort Wayne Apple Trail, Indiana Foodways, and the Indiana Destination Development Map are all initiatives that highlight establishments that often source local ingredients.[140] [141]

Joseph Decuis, Roanoke, Indiana

Table 25: **Allen County Food Establishments that Feature Local Ingredients** [139] [140]

Establishment
800 Degrees Wood Fired Pizza
Ambrosia Orchard
Amoré
Bistro Nota
Bravas
Chance Bar
Charlie's Place
Conjure Coffee
Copper Spoon
Davey's Delicious Bagels
The Deli at The Process
The Deli at Three Rivers Food Co-Op Natural Grocery & Deli
The Deli at the Health Food Shoppe
Ducky's at the Pearl
Firefly Coffee House
Joseph Decuis
Mercado
Papi's Pizza
Penny Drip
Rune
Spoke + Ivy
Tolon
True Kimchi Korean Cafe
Vineland Reserve Winery

137 NEILFN. https://www.neifood.org/news/host-tours-events-for-2024-local-food-week
138 Joseph Decuis. https://josephdecuis.com/about-us
139 Visit Fort Wayne. (2024). https://www.visitfortwayne.com/blog/stories/post/locally-sourced-dining-in-fort-wayne/
140 Indiana Foodways Alliance. https://www.indianafoodways.com/trails/
141 Indiana Destination Map. https://www.visitindiana.com/move-in/destination-map/

Many of the local tourism agencies across the region promote establishments where a variety of locally sourced ingredients are on their menu. For example, Visit Fort Wayne highlights locally sourced dining in Fort Wayne.[141] Restaurant Row in LaGrange, the Steuben County Craft Beer Trail, and the Fort Wayne Apple Trail are all more local initiatives that highlight establishments that often source local food.

The various agritourism and local food culinary listings are not complete and buried within listings that may or may not source local food. Collectively, they provide a disjointed understanding of the local food establishment opportunities in the Northeast Indiana region.

Tolon Restaurant, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Community Orchards & Food Forests

Community orchards are shared spaces where fruit trees and plants are collectively managed to provide fresh, locally grown produce while promoting sustainability and biodiversity. These orchards foster community engagement, serve as educational hubs for workshops on tree care and sustainable agriculture, and create green spaces for recreation and social interaction. They enhance well-being, beautify urban areas, and reconnect people with nature and food production, strengthening community bonds and encouraging healthier lifestyles.

An early U.S. initiative dates to the 1998 founding of the Dr. George Washington Carver Edible Park in Asheville, NC, the first urban community food forest in the U.S.[142] Since then, the trend has grown. Kansas City Community Gardens, for example, has a robust Giving Grove initiative with multiple sites.[143] North American projects have primarily developed new orchards in diverse contexts, including parks, schoolyards, church properties, and vacant urban lands. These orchards, driven by grassroots groups, NGOs, and local governments, aim to address food security, education, biodiversity conservation, and community development. Additional examples include the Baltimore Orchard Project, the Philadelphia Orchard Project, and the Portland Fruit Tree Project.[144] The City of South Bend, Indiana is currently implementing the Unity Grove program as part of the Giving Grove national network through a $200,000 grant.[145]

A growing trend in community orchards is the shift toward multi-layered food forests, inspired by permaculture principles.[146] With the added benefit of mitigating and adapting to climate change, these food forests integrate trees, shrubs, and perennials to enhance biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and system resilience. The Orchard Project in the United Kingdom, Philadelphia Orchard Project, Rosewood Public Orchard in South Carolina, Eggleston Park Food Forest in Illinois, Seattle Beacon Food Forest, and Atlanta's Urban Food Forest at Brown's Mill all demonstrate the growing appeal of this model.[147]

Faith Based Food Initiatives

Faith-based initiatives have played a significant role in advancing local food community, and economic development in the U.S. by leveraging the resources, networks, and missions of local churches to address food insecurity, support local agriculture, and strengthen community ties. Many faith organizations have transformed church-owned properties and vacant land into community gardens, orchards, and urban farms creating access to fresh produce in underserved areas.

Additionally, faith-based groups often collaborate with local farmers, businesses, and nonprofits to support sustainable agriculture and economic growth. By hosting farm stands and markets, operating food pantries, providing shared kitchen facilities, and offering educational programs on nutrition and gardening, they create platforms for local producers to sell their goods and residents to learn about healthy, locally sourced food. Faith-based initiatives also address systemic barriers that limit access to healthy food in marginalized communities and promote broader economic development by supporting local food systems.

The Black Church Security Network is a national entity formed in 2015 to "help black churches use their assets to establish gardens on their land, host miniature farmers markets, and buy wholesale from black farmers". [148] There are also several federal centers for engagement with faith-based entities and neighborhoods, including the USDA.[149]

141 Visit Fort Wayne. (2024). https://www.visitfortwayne.com/blog/stories/post/locally-sourced-dining-in-fort-wayne/
142 The City of Asheville. (2023). https://www.ashevillenc.gov/news/park-views-dr-george-washington-carver-edible-park/
143 Kansas City Community Gardens. https://kccg.org/find-a-garden-near-you/
144 Lovell et al., Forests. (2021). https://doi.org/10.3390/f12111533
145 The Giving Grove. https://www.givinggrove.org/south-bend
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Black Church Security Network. https://blackchurchfoodsecurity.net/about-us#our-story
149 USDA. https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/general-information/staff-offices/office-congressional-relations/office-external-and-intergovernmental-affairs/center-faith-based-and-neighborhood-partnerships/contact-center

Farm Stops

A farm stop is a retail space that serves as a year-round market where local farmers and producers can sell their products directly to consumers. It combines the convenience of a grocery store with the direct sourcing and community focus of a farmers' market. Farmers stock and manage their products on consignment at the farm stop, and sales are handled centrally by the market staff, allowing producers to focus on farming while ensuring customers have access to fresh, locally sourced food. The proceeds are typically shared between the producers and the market, which can be for profit or not-for-profit. The Argus Farm Stop in Ann Arbor, Michigan is a model farm stop.[150]

Farmland Conservation

The conservation of farmland is important as land is a finite resource. The Indiana State Legislature commissioned a study in 2023 to understand farmland conversion across the state from 2010 to 2022. According to the *Inventory of Lost Farmland Report* by the Indiana Department of Agriculture, "there was a decrease in total agricultural land use, as defined by parcel Property Tax Codes, across the State of Indiana from 2010 to 2022. The decrease was about 345,000 acres or 1.89 percent of the roughly 18 million acres that are classified for agricultural use. The main type of land use change was the transfer from agriculture land to residential land, and this was most prevalent around edges of populated areas like cities."[151] The report also indicates that conversions have occurred from agriculture to forest wetlands, which was more prevalent in the northern counties, including Steuben, LaGrange, and Noble – likely influenced by the significant presence of wetlands, waterways, and lakes. This report also included acreage changes by county as shown in Table 26.

American Farmland Trust published the report, *Farms Under Threat,* which outlines that measures policymakers can make in Indiana to preserve farmland includes encouraging dense development, instituting voluntary conservation easements, and forging a path to success for the new generation of farmers.[152] Wood-Land-Lakes is a land trust for farmers interested in placing conservation easements on Farmland, Wetlands, and Woodlands in Indiana.

Collaboration

The drive to create a more dynamic local food system can arise from various community stakeholders. New and established farmers often aim to increase direct sales to restaurants, grocery stores, and consumers, while chefs seek access to fresh, sustainably sourced produce and meats. Public health offices advocate for greater consumption of locally grown foods to improve residents' health, and tourism and economic development professionals view local foods as a tool for revitalizing rural areas. Building successful local food economies often involves collaboration among diverse, sometimes nontraditional, partners, making collaboration a cornerstone of food system development.

Table 26: **Changes in Indiana's Farmland Acreage, 2010 - 2022**

County	Change in Acres of Farmland
Adams	+2,940
Allen	-11,698
DeKalb	-8,626
Huntington	-3,991
Kosciusko	-11,738
LaGrange	+1,364
Noble	-3,674
Steuben	-9,131
Wabash	+1,610
Wells	-826
Whitley	-2,242
Total in Northeast Indiana	**-46,012**

REGIONAL INSIGHTS

Local Food Economy Public Input

Throughout the needs assessment process, qualitative input was received through the public engagement process throughout the region. The local economy was one of the breakout discussion topics in the general sessions. In addition, the economy was discussed in several of the focus group sessions including those in Southeast Fort Wayne, in Adams, LaGrange, and Wabash Counties, as well as with a group of Chamber, Main Street, and Tourism agencies. Given budget limitations, focus groups were not held in each county.

General Regional Input

The integration of local food farming and sales into community and economic development efforts was seen as an area in need of improvement. Small farmers often lack support from local economic development agencies, particularly in areas like business planning, education, and navigating regulations. Entities like Brightpoint, which assists hospitality businesses, and the Summit City Entrepreneur and Enterprise District (SEED), which supports entrepreneurs, were mentioned as resources, but participants stressed the need for more tailored support for farmers.

150 Barr, Kathryn. (2023). https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12891197
151 Indiana Department of Agriculture. (2024). https://www.in.gov/isda/files/Inventory-of-Lost-Farmland-FULL-REPORT-Corrected-Map-7.8.24.pdf
152 American Farmland Trust. (2022). https://storage.googleapis.com/csp-fut2040.appspot.com/state-reports/FUT2040_IN.pdf

Focus Group Input

In the **Chamber/Main Street/Tourism Focus Group**, participants suggested that more locally sourced food establishments, particularly restaurants, could boost the local food economy. They pointed out that improving the walkability of neighborhoods to local businesses, along with leveraging Main Street programs to provide grants and resources for signage and other business needs, could further stimulate local food initiatives. A key recommendation was fostering better connections between farmers, food entrepreneurs, and support resources. Looking forward, the group agreed that outreach to regional chambers of commerce would be vital in making connections within communities. Creating more opportunities for farmers and food entrepreneurs, through initiatives like year-round markets, was identified as a priority. These steps were seen as crucial for developing a more accessible and resilient local food system in Northeast Indiana.

The **Southeast Fort Wayne Focus Group** believed that exposure to farming and connecting people with available resources were seen as critical. Participants suggested leveraging media channels such as public access television, local newspapers, and flyers in schools and churches to promote urban farming opportunities. Building partnerships with local stakeholders was also emphasized to generate interest and create sustainable growth for urban farming.

Southeast Fort Wayne Focus Group

To integrate local food into broader community and economic development efforts, participants recommended planting fruit trees in neighborhoods and organizing community events around harvesting and sharing the produce. They also suggested offering classes on preserving and canning, which could help build a sense of community and self-sufficiency. These efforts could help bridge the gap between local food production and community engagement, fostering stronger connections between residents and their food sources.

Looking ahead, the group identified several priorities for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network. One key focus should be on encouraging local farmers to grow food for people rather than animals, with incentives provided to support this shift. Equity in farming was also emphasized, as data shows disparities in the number of local producers in the region. Mentorship programs connecting prospective farmers with experienced farmers, along with resources like the Purdue Extension, were highlighted as important strategies for developing the local food system. Participants expressed a desire for more meetings like this one to continue fostering collaboration and community-driven solutions.

The focus group discussion on **LaGrange County**'s local food system highlighted several successes occurring in their local food economy, particularly in relation to the abundance of local farmers and produce growers. Residents benefit from easy access to local food through three farmers' markets and numerous roadside stands. LaGrange County also produces over half of Indiana's organic products, thanks to small farms that sell into cooperatives like Organic Valley or Horizon Dairy. Dutch Country Organics contributes with egg production. A key driver of this success is the traceability of organic products and the growing interest in farming among both the Amish and non-Amish populations in the area. On the other hand, communication between Amish farmers and consumers was identified as a barrier to economic growth due to the Amish community's avoidance of digital marketing. Market Wagon and the Seven Sons model have helped overcome some of these barriers, but more avenues for selling local food are needed to make it easier for farmers and consumers to connect. Improving communication and establishing a drop point to bring local goods to a larger market would help connect producers with consumers more effectively.

The LaGrange County Economic Development Corporation (LCEDC) is also using the local food system to boost tourism in the county. They are currently working on the Agricultural Heritage Trail, a tourism-focused initiative that highlights farm stands and agritourism across the county. While agritourism is a significant opportunity for some farmers, others are hesitant to participate. The LCEDC is meeting to inform farmers about the benefits of listing their farms on the trail, which will serve as a promotional tool for local food and farming. Participants also called for more local food celebrations to enhance community engagement. The need for a permanent storefront where local produce and meat can be purchased was also highlighted.

There is also interest in integrating local food more fully into the community and economic development efforts in **Wabash County**. While there are already a few local restaurants that sell local food, such as Four Partners in Crime, Moon Dog, and 50 East, participants expressed a desire for more establishments to adopt this practice. Expanding the presence of local food in restaurants could help support local farmers and strengthen the local food economy.

Chef's Survey

Nine chefs participated in the Local Food Chef Survey, seven working in Fort Wayne, one in South Whitley and one in Warsaw. 100% of the chefs who participated in the survey currently source local ingredients for their restaurants and food trucks. Sixty-seven percent of the chefs define "local" food as sourced from farms in the 11 counties of Northeast Indiana, the same as the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network. The remaining 33% of the chefs use a broader definition of "local" food as being sourced from farms in the Midwest (Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, and Wisconsin) or even more broadly as within a 24-hour drive from Fort Wayne).

The chefs source a variety of ingredients from local producers: 100% purchased local meat, 100% - local vegetables, 100% - local eggs, 89% - local greens (lettuce, spinach, kale, etc.), 89% - local fruits, 89% - local honey and/or maple syrup, 56% - local dairy products. Eighty-nine percent of the chefs serve local ingredients on their menu every day, and 11% of the chefs serve local ingredients seasonally.

The chefs state that they feel the selection of locally produced ingredients is sufficient for their menus. One chef states they need larger quantities of local ingredients to fully supply their needs, and several chefs say they need more time available to purchase and use fresh local ingredients. Ingredients that chefs are having trouble sourcing from local farms include local pasture-raised duck, local dairy products including milk, cream and butter, and a broader selection of unique locally grown fruits and vegetables.

The chefs shared the successes they are experiencing since buying and serving locally sourced ingredients.

Relationships with local producers

- Understanding where ingredients come from and how they are produced
- Working with farmers who know how to produce and deliver ingredients to restaurants

Customer appreciation

- Community engagement and education around local ingredients
- Customer response to taste and freshness of food
- Customer trust and appreciation of local ingredients

Chef & Restaurant Quality

- Excellence of ingredients
- Delicious taste of ingredients
- Enjoy learning about local ingredients and engaging with farmers
- The challenge of working solely with local, seasonal ingredients pushes creativity
- Pride in what we serve

The chefs noted several barriers they experience in sourcing and serving locally sourced ingredients. Logistics and product availability are emphasized. Pricing of local ingredients was only noted by two of the nine chefs.

Logistics

- Time to search for and purchase ingredients - seasonal produce and fruits.
- Distance from local ingredients
- Delivery timing and frequency

Availability

- Lack of knowledge of who to contact and what they produce
- Local farms don't produce enough to sustain the supply needed throughout a season in order to offer consistent menu offerings
- Limited selection of local dairy producers selling butter, cream, and milk
- Limited selection of producers selling wholesale
- Unpredictability due to weather

Price as compared to non-local ingredients

To purchase local ingredients, the chefs connect with producers in various ways. Initially they meet growers at local farmers markets or do online research to contact farms in the region that produce the special ingredients they want. Over time, the chefs largely only work with a handful of producers with whom they have built relationships. They contact the producers on a regular basis by phone, email, text, or in-person when the farmer makes deliveries. Some chefs purchase ingredients from midwestern farms through distributors such as Piazza Produce. One chef uses ingredients they grew on their own farm.

The chefs prioritized these needs for the local food system in Northeast Indiana.

Expand consumer awareness and education

- Generate excitement and momentum about local ingredients.
- Raise awareness about the health, financial, and local economic benefits of eating these amazing products. Increase understanding, appreciation, and absolute astonishment of the value of local ingredients. Create a stronger, obsessed fan base with appreciation for local food.
- Increase public exposure to producers and buyers of local ingredients.
- Bring more of the public into this space, and create a larger, well-educated following for local food.
- Help consumers and culinary students learn to cook real food with fresh ingredients.
- Increase consumer knowledge of how to cook raw produce.

Expand the number of restaurants that regularly & authentically serve local ingredients on their menu daily or weekly.

- Challenge larger capacity 'local' restaurants to use more local ingredients and not have a locally sourced burger being the only item on their menu.

Improve local food availability and logistics

- Make local food more easily accessible…though chef adds that it is "actually easy if you know how to do it."
- Raise awareness on where to find and how to source local ingredients.
- Expand connections between smaller local farms and local businesses.
- Expand availability and access to local produce in grocery stores.
- Increase the number of local farms producing local ingredients.
- Produce higher amounts of local ingredients to sustain menus at local restaurants.
- Improve delivery options and frequency of local food to wholesale accounts.

The chefs suggest that NEILFN prioritize their focus in these areas in the NEILFN strategic plan.

Chef Focus

- Create excitement about local, seasonal ingredients for both chefs and restaurant customers.
- Provide marketing signage and information we can give to our customers to turn them towards local food when eating in our restaurant. Do this in a way that in a sense, forces it in front of them as much as possible, including: QR Codes, scrolling screens, literature, stickers, etc.
- Create excitement for local ingredients in culinary programs in high schools and colleges.
- Support chefs across Northeast Indiana, not just in Fort Wayne.
- Build relationships with local chefs who are not using local ingredients.

Consumer Focus

- Build up hype about restaurants serving local food.
- Create excitement about local food and why supporting restaurants that truly use local ingredients matters.
- Raise awareness of local food farms.
- Do not just promote local food and local food restaurants to those who are already interested; intentionally promote to those who do not currently care about or seek out local food.

Producer Focus

- Educate farmers on how to communicate and sell to restaurants.
- Connect farms with local businesses.
- Support farmers to keep up their hard work.
- Make our local food farmers "local celebrities."

The chefs want NEILFN to offer these services to help them build connections with local food producers and to support their restaurants.

- Create connections between local farmers and local businesses.
- Provide a resource guide for chefs and farms to know who has/needs what ingredients.
- Provide networking opportunities, dinners.
- Help farmers sample their products, so chefs and consumers can taste the difference.
- Promote local ingredients and local food businesses, with a wide variety of partners to get others involved and create connections.
- Provide more business insights for first time entrepreneurs.
- NEILFN should have a stronger online presence, with more sharable posts.

The chefs want NEILFN to understand that:

- We want to feed people well, but we also need to profit from it.
- The hospitality business is brutal, and the margins are tiny. To make the increased costs of goods work we must push menu prices and make portions smaller. I hope the consumer will understand why menu prices look the way they do.
- That they personally do not have the time to inform as many people/ patrons and other like-minded chefs/ restaurants/stores of the amazing efforts to bring local food to them.

Farm to School Programs: Bringing It All Together

School Farm Tour at BroxonBerry, Wells County,Indiana

FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS: BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Farm to School programs serve as powerful connectors within local food systems, bringing together farmers, schools, students, and communities to create a more sustainable and integrated approach to food. Here is how these programs achieve this:

Supporting Local Farmers

There are a number of ways that Farm to School programs support local farmers. For one, schools become dependable customers for local farmers, offering a steady market for their produce. In addition, these programs often encourage farmers to grow a wider variety of crops to meet school needs, fostering crop diversity and improving farm resilience. By partnering with schools, farmers gain visibility and support from the community, boosting local agriculture's profile.

Improving Nutrition and Education

As part of Farm to School programming, schools incorporate local fruits, vegetables, and other farm products into their meal programs, providing healthier options for students. Farm to School programs also often include educational activities like school gardens, cooking classes, farm visits, teaching students about nutrition, agriculture, and sustainability.

Strengthening Community Connections

Programs bring together farmers, school administrators, parents, and community organizations to discuss shared goals and challenges. Also, keeping food dollars within the community supports local economies and fosters community pride.

Reducing Environmental Impacts

Sourcing food locally reduces the environmental costs of transportation and storage. Many programs prioritize sourcing from farmers using eco-friendly farming methods, promoting long-term environmental health.

Cultivating Cultural Preservation and Resilience

These programs often emphasize foods that are culturally significant or traditional to the area, helping preserve local food heritage. By connecting communities with their local food sources, these programs empower regions to rely less on external food systems.

Inspiring Broader Policy and Community Initiatives

Success stories from Farm to School programs can influence local and state governments to support agriculture-friendly policies. Programs can have ripple effects, with communities often adopting complementary initiatives, such as farmers markets or community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs.

State and Local Farm to School Programs

Indiana Grown for Schools is conducting a strategic planning process at the state level in support of Farm to School activities that will be conclude in 2025. Listening sessions were conducted in 2024 along with strategic priorities centered around three pillars: Local procurement, School Gardens, and Agricultural and Nutrition Education. Strategic recommendations included:

- Convening a Farm to School Conference for School Administrators
- Deepening Farm to School Educational Support Structure
- Establishing a Farm to School Policy Task Force
- Creating Local Food Hubs

Recent Farm to School efforts in Northeast Indiana included a collaboration with Parkview Health and the NEILFN. This initiative was funded through a USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program grant which concluded in 2024. This program had a broad reach, with between 2,500 - 7,000 PreK-12 students in over twenty school districts across Northeast Indiana enjoying locally grown fruits and vegetables through the Harvest of the Month taste test program. Future funding support from the USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program is uncertain, given the cancellation of the program for 2025 by the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under the Trump Administration.

Northeast Indiana Farm to School Focus Groups

Participants in Farm to School activities across the Northeast Indiana region were engaged through focus groups and an online survey as part of this needs assessment to gain their feedback for future programmatic consideration. Two focus groups were held in September 2024, with fourteen in attendance. Participants discussed the successes and challenges in scaling up local food sourcing for schools. It was shared that Harvest of the Month has grown to reach twenty schools across seven counties, engaging around 2,500 students each month. Various school staff members, including teachers, principals, food service directors, and nurses, organize the program. The desire to scale up and source more locally produced food is evident, but value chain coordination and collaboration between neighboring districts will be necessary to meet growing demand. Farmers are willing to participate if they receive enough lead time to prepare.

The group stressed the importance of continued connection through the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network and resource exchanges. Learning from each other and collaborating on initiatives like Local Food Week was highlighted as a key strategy to avoid working in silos and to strengthen regional efforts. Marketing and promotional support, particularly for smaller school districts, was identified as an area where additional help could make a significant difference in expanding the program.

Partners like Parkview have been instrumental in providing resources that allow schools to pilot ideas, and a curriculum developed around healthy eating is a notable success. However, concerns were raised about succession planning, as many food service workers and directors are nearing retirement. Training and preparing the next generation of staff is essential for maintaining momentum and expanding the program's impact.

Looking ahead, the need for a larger team to expand the program and for closer, more direct connections between schools and local farms was identified. Ideally, each school would source food from farms in its vicinity without needing an intermediary. However, there are barriers to broader adoption, such as school budgets and the ability to pay for additional local food for tastings. Addressing these issues will be crucial to sustaining and growing the Farm to School initiative.

Northeast Indiana Farm to School Survey

An online survey was administered to existing Farm to School program participants and a total of 11 responses were received. The respondents included school administrators, school nutrition staff, parents/guardians, volunteers, producers, and nonprofit partners. Three respondents had ties to the Fort Wayne Community School District. The remaining responders were from East Allen County Schools, Southwest Allen, Lakeland School District (LaGrange), Northern Wells School District, Wabash County or "did not identify".

When asked what type of farm to school activities were currently occurring within the districts respondents had ties to, top responses included: indoor tower gardens (36%), cafeterias purchasing products from local farms (28%), outdoor school gardens (18%), indoor gardens (9%), curriculum (9%), and farm field trips (9%). In addition, the survey asked what respondent would like to see implemented with top answers including: purchasing products from local farms (100%), curriculum (73%), farm field trips (73%), farmer visits to the classroom (73%), and outdoor school gardens (64%).

Questions were asked about the existence and make of Farm to School Steering Committees within their districts. A total of 45% responded that this type of committee does not exist and 55% responded that they did not know. Similarly, only 10% responded that they had a Farm to School Strategic Plan, 20% responded that they did not, and 70% did not know. Strategic planning in place focused on curriculum and local food procurement.

School food services programs were identified to mostly be independently managed by the school/nutrition director (66.6%) vs. being contractually managed by an outsourced company (11.1%) or other (22.2%). All the programs offered breakfast and lunch, 67% offered vegetable/fruit snacks, and 33% offered summer meals.

The top five ranked opportunities were identified to adopt Farm to School programming within the district. These include:

1. Improved Nutrition
2. Enthusiasm of Parents/Students
3. Understanding Food and Farming
4. Health and Wellness
5. Enthusiasm of Staff/Administration.

The top five ranked limitations were also identified. These were ranked as follows:

1. Lack of Enthusiasm of School Administration
2. Lack of Funding/Resources
3. Lack of Enthusiasm of Educators
4. Lack of Enthusiasm of School Kitchen Staff
5. Lack of School Kitchen Infrastructure or Equipment for Scratch Cooking (Tied with 4).

Respondents were asked what the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network and the Northeast Indiana Farm to School Team could do to expand programming across the region. Top responses were to:

1. Facilitate Connections to Farmers/Producers
2. Grow Community Awareness about the Benefits of Local Food
3. Organize a Local Food Buying Group for School Food Service
4. Problem Solve Distribution Challenges with School Kitchen/Farm Schedules
5. Provide School Service Menu Planning

The survey prompted respondents to provide a future vision of Farm to School programming in Northeast Indiana. Responses emphasize a comprehensive approach to improving nutrition and fostering local connections. Goals included:

- Partnerships and Accessibility: Partnering with local school systems to provide better nutritional options for students and connect families to improved food resources.
- Regular Deliveries: Weekly deliveries of local produce and goods to all schools in Indiana.
- Local Sourcing: Prioritizing the use of local farmers, produce, and livestock to create a sustainable food supply chain.
- Educational Integration: Implementing tower gardens in classrooms, school gardens, and gardening clubs to teach students how to grow food and develop life skills.
- Scratch Cooking: Preparing all meals from scratch using locally sourced ingredients.
- Engagement and Policy Support: Hosting farmer visits, teaching nutrition and life skills, pursuing policy changes, and securing grant funding.
- National Leadership: Establishing the region as a model for sourcing local food and delivering nutritious meals to children nationwide.

Survey responses highlight key actions the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network (NEILFN) can take to support the Farm to School vision in Northeast Indiana:

- Grant Support: Assist with grant writing and identifying funding sources to improve food options for school meals and snacks.
- Resource Sharing: Provide more information, including a comprehensive list of available local products and producers.
- Facilitating Connections: Function as a bridge to connect schools with local farmers and producers.
- Policy Guidance: Develop and share a step-by-step toolkit to help schools and community partners implement policy changes for Farm to School programs.
- Educational Resources: Equip schools with curriculum ideas and practical ways to integrate local foods into menus.
- Ongoing Support: Be a reliable resource for questions, advice, and additional grant opportunities to establish and sustain Farm to School initiatives.

These actions emphasize collaboration, resource development, and practical guidance to help schools adopt and expand Farm to School programs.

Harvest of the Month, Kosciusko County

Fort Wayne Community Schools Nutrition Processing Center, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Key Issues and Opportunities

Springfield Acres, LaGrange County, Indiana

KEY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Preliminary Recommended Core Values and Areas of Focus

The following recommended core values, areas of focus, and associated issues and opportunities for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network are based on an initial synthesis from public engagement sessions, focus groups, and demographic data. This is to be used for conversation by the planning team and is by no means a final recommendation.

The following **Core Values** were identified for consideration by the NEILFN based on the synthesis of public input thus far.

- Accessibility
- Agricultural Heritage
- Collaboration
- Economic Opportunity
- Environmental Sustainability
- Health
- Self-sufficiency
- Transparency / Traceability
- Respect
- Accountability
- Celebration
- Community
- Education
- Family
- Nutrition
- Stewardship
- Regeneration
- Wealth-Building

The following **Focus Areas** were identified for consideration by the NEILFN.

1. Awareness
2. Education
3. Healthy Local Food Access
4. Connection and Engagement
5. Empowerment
6. Diversifying Funding Support and Advocacy

Awareness Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 1: Northeast Indiana is a large region with diverse populations. Attention should be given on how to efficiently and effectively engage throughout the region.

Opportunity – Develop a Communication Plan:

To broaden the reach of regional communication and engagement, a communications plan could be established to guide public engagement efforts.

Opportunity – Empower Local Initiatives through County-level Plans:

County-wide/neighborhood plans can help establish local policy and strategy to participate in the local food system. These efforts can empower rural, suburban, and urban areas by coordinating efforts of local stakeholders and leveraging their work into the regional framework.

Opportunity – Expand Reach through Advisory Network Members/Ambassadors:

The NEILFN should explore ways to institutionalize regional outreach and influence.

ISSUE 2: Awareness of the local food system is increasing but could use continued attention.

Opportunity – Develop a Marketing Plan:

An increased marketing campaign is needed. Activities could include a continuation, expansion, and/or addition of new activities, including Local Food Week, a Local Food Guide – digital and print, newsletters, social media, branding signage at local farms, menu ingredient highlights, etc.

ISSUE 3: Agritourism is underdeveloped in the region.

Opportunity – Work with Community and Economic Development Stakeholders to Cultivate Agritourism.

This could be a strategic opportunity to advance efforts with C&ED stakeholders since economic development has long been a driver in communities and a system is in place to do this via Economic Development Agencies, Chambers of Commerce, Tourism Bureaus, and Main Street Organizations. This could include developing local foodways, bundled backyard cultural route experiences, and facilitating micro-grant programs.

ISSUE 4: Farm to School is an impactful program that builds awareness for children and their families; however, its current sustainability is limited due to grant funding.

Opportunity – Work with School Systems on Sustainable Farm to School Programming.

Facilitate program delivery and encourage children to try local food. A scaled down program could be Farm to School Month.

Education Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 5: More consumer education is needed regarding the authenticity, origin, and benefits of local food, and how to prepare healthy, local food on a budget.

Opportunity - Consumer Education.

Hold nutrition classes in coordination with local hospitals, provide recipe cards and samples at farmers markets (including modified recipes of culturally popular food), conduct outreach with international populations about cultural preferences.

ISSUE 6: More educational opportunities are needed for producers.

Opportunity – Producer Education.

Conduct producer education opportunities regarding such topics as Irrigation, growing, soil health, etc. High School/College programs.

Healthy Local Food Access Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 7: There needs to be more opportunities for consumers to access local food. A lot of access is seasonal, only on certain days/times of the week, and not within a walkable distance.

Opportunity - Farmers Stands/Markets/Store/CSA Supports.
Provide educational opportunities to producers on year-round growing and increase the variety of foods grown. Support winter market start-ups (See Grand Rapids). Provide consumer information on locations through the local food guide online and in print – listed and mapped. Facilitate and/or support mobile markets, transportation to markets, and other food delivery activities within food deserts.

Opportunity – Encourage Sourcing of Local Food by Retail, Schools, and Hospitals.
See Value Chain Coordination under Issue 9.

ISSUE 8: Inflationary pressures on food costs have been increasing food insecurity.

Opportunity – Nutrition Incentive Expansion and Coordination.
Programs such as SNAP Double UP and Veggie RX should be expanded and systematized throughout the region. Both efficiency and effectiveness of these programs would be improved though more centralized coordination efforts. More farmers could be connected to the programs as they expand. The addition of proteins and senior-specific programming could be explored if funding allows.

Opportunity - Home/Community Gardening and Shared Kitchens.
Home and community gardening should be supported and promoted. Activities could include outreach and information sharing to catalyze churches and community centers to take on this work. Providing grants to pay for such things as raised beds, soil, seeds, fruit trees, gardening and canning supplies, educational opportunities on gardening, canning, and value-added product creation, and community events around harvesting and sharing of food.

Opportunity – Enable Food Pantries to be Able to Accept More Local Food.
Provide opportunities for local pantries to obtain grants for additional refrigerators/cold storage and shelving. Cultivate more opportunities to increase local food supply and distribution to food pantries.

Connection and Engagement Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 9: Broader and more coordinated effort is needed to build out the local food system.

Opportunity: Value Chain Coordination.
Value chain coordination plays a vital role in building local food system capacity by fostering stronger connections among producers, processors, distributors, and consumers. Through effective coordination, stakeholders in the food system can work together to optimize production, reduce inefficiencies, and address gaps in supply and demand. Targeted coordination opportunities exist within Farm to School, Food as Medicine, and Food Insecurity initiatives within the community. Of particular note, the NEILFN is a collaborator with FARMWISE, Indiana's Farm to Institution Value Chain Professional Network.

Opportunity: Food Hub Support and Facilitation.

Food hubs serve as intermediaries that help small and mid-sized farmers reach larger markets, often providing services like transportation, storage, packaging, and even marketing support. There are food hubs that exist to different degrees in the region, including Plowshares, the produce auctions in Adams and LaGrange counties, local CSAs, and businesses like Market Wagon. Opportunities to strengthen entities providing this service and ways to fill the gaps should be identified.

Opportunity: Networking and Matchmaking Events.
Regional sessions and annual county-level meetings/presentations should be held to continue cultivating relationships and increase understanding and capacity throughout the region. This should help continue the development of the local food system.

Empowerment Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 10: More producers are needed, including young farmers and farmers of different races and ethnicities.

Opportunity: New Farmer Attraction and Support.
Activities could include attraction outreach and events, education, mentorship, technical support, shared land access/trusts, start-up funding, conducting resource fairs and providing resource information. This will help bolster the supply of local food, increase food security and resilience, and provide entrepreneurial economic opportunities.

Opportunity: Legacy Farmer Transition to Local.
Most agriculture in Northeast Indiana occurs on long-held, family-owned farms that grow commodity crops like corn and soy. As farmers retire, family-owned farms may sell, leaving family members to seek out additional approaches to revenue, there may be an interest for these families to engage in smaller-scale local food production. Activities could include attraction outreach within existing agricultural support frameworks including: FFA, Purdue Extension Offices, and the Farm Bureau.

Diversified Funding Support and Advocacy Issues and Opportunities

ISSUE 11: The capacity of the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network needs to grow in a sustainable way to provide adequate support for regional needs.

Opportunity: Development of a Strategic Plan.
A strategic plan is being developed for the NEILFN based on input received and research conducted as part of the Northeast Indiana Needs Assessment. This will include prioritization of focus for the organization over the next three years, estimated resources needed to implement the plan, potential sources to pursue to fund the efforts, and a case for support.

ISSUE 12: Strategic Public and Private Investment is Needed.

Opportunity: Coordination of Collaborative Local System Development.
NEILFN could be a central player in collaborative initiatives of local food system funding, investment coordination, and project implementation across the Northeast Indiana region. Grant and contractual funding relationships could be cultivated with community foundations, civic organizations, and city/town/county/state/federal governments, as well as producers and buyers associated with value chain coordination.

ISSUE 13: More partners are needed to build the capacity of the local food system in Northeast Indiana. Local Food System Stakeholders need to have a "seat at the table" with economic developers and elected officials.

Opportunity: Inform and Engage Stakeholders.
The results of the needs assessment should be shared with local food stakeholders across the region so the results can be used to help justify their endeavors. Additional public and private stakeholders that may have an indirect interest in the local food system should also be informed.

ISSUE 14: More leadership is needed in advocacy efforts.

Opportunity: Advocate for Regulatory Support of Local Food Issues.
The evolving landscape of federal and state policies underscores the urgent need for enhanced leadership in local food advocacy. Recent federal actions, including the cancellation of USDA programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance and Local Food for Schools, have significantly impacted small and mid-sized farms that relied on these initiatives to supply food to schools and food banks. On the state level, Governor Mike Braun's new "Make Indiana Healthy Again" initiative reflects a shift towards promoting healthier food choices by proposing the exclusion of candy and soft drinks from SNAP benefits and includes study on how to expand access to local food throughout the state. Advocacy leadership can assist regional stakeholders in aligning local priorities with regulations and broader policy developments, ensuring that local food systems are integrated into planning and investment decisions at all levels.

Benchmarking

Pequash Farms, Allen County, Indiana

BENCHMARKING

Primary Agency Overview

A review of other organizations that work to advance local food systems was conducted to understand how others align values, structure their organization, conduct marketing and events, implement programming, budget, and fundraise. Consideration was given to organizations in similar geographic areas and specific initiatives of interest. Combined, a handful of organizations, both local and across the country, were chosen to benchmark to understand options for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network (NEILFN) to consider as they pursue strategic planning. The organizations chosen include the following as outlined in Table 27:

Table 27: **Benchmarking Organizations**

Organization	NW Tennessee Local Food Network	San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition	NW Indiana Food Council	Urban Seeds	Seacoast Eat Local
Service Area	6 Tennessee Counties	6 Colorado Counties	7 Indiana Counties	4 Indiana Counties	3 Maine/ New Hampshire Counties
Established	2018	2009	2015	2005	2006
Staff Size	3 staff members	21 staff members	9 staff members	4 staff members	5 staff members
Budget (From Latest 990 on Guidestar)	$20k revenue $12k total expenses $7,800 net assets	$3.8m revenue $2.9m total expenses $2.8m net assets	$1.4 mil revenue $1.2m total expenses $214k net assets	$316k revenue $247k total expenses $227k net assets	$370k revenue $451k total expenses $140k net assets
Board	12 members	6 members	15 members, plus 4 advisory	4 members	11 members

Benchmarking Considerations

It will benefit NEILFN to set values for the organization. Values which they anchor the administration of their operations by, and the reasons behind the programming that they endeavor to pursue. Setting values will help the community buy into the good work, and assure transparency and accountability worthy of continued community support and engagement. Values speak across time, geographies, histories, and ideologies and assist defining scope and scale of efforts to maintain committed focus in the ever-changing and nuanced space of local food systems. The NW Indiana Food Council has set excellent operational values for their board of directors to reference.

Staff size and structure varies among the assessed organizations, with the clearest distinction being those that host food hubs requiring additional, necessary, logistics positions. Primary local food systems non-profit positions otherwise include Executive Directors, Community Outreach Managers, Equity and Outreach Managers, Farm to School and Education Coordinators, Market Coordinators, Local Food Access or Value Chain Coordinators, Development Managers, Marketing and Communications Managers, Marketing and Events Managers, Program Managers, and more. It is understood that as NEIFLN finalizes their strategic priorities for the coming years, the most beneficial positions will be more easily identifiable as the organization steps up its capacity for meaningful and measurable impact.

Benchmarking revealed that while there is a variety of marketing and outreach conducted by these organizations, a marketing plan or strategy is not entirely clear through online research. Social media platforms used across the board include Facebook and Instagram. Most organizations also host a newsletter sign-up option with some archiving their published articles on the website or in a blog form. Some organizations also take advantage of online and physical published food guides as a platform to inform the community about the organization, partners, sponsors, and to highlight stories of local food access opportunities and success. Some host community events to build awareness. Some have branded materials for sale. What is unclear is if there is a workplan set for not just publishing frequency, but if organizations work to land an article in local news outlets with frequency, are buying ads on public transportation, if their logo is displayed on stakeholder websites, or if they give presentations to local government boards and other civic community groups.

Important to awareness building and outreach includes hosting events. Examples of excellent engagement opportunities hosted by the benchmarked organizations include an array of invitations to the table, including quarterly program planning meetings focused on value chain and Farm to School coordination, fundraising dinners, producer meet-ups, value-chain meet-ups, film nights, regular presence and activities at farmers markets, and cooking programs, as well as a variety of volunteer opportunities that included seed saving, school garden work, grow challenges, and more. For an example of a thorough volunteer waiver form, it is recommended to reference the online volunteer application Seacoast Eat Local has posted on their website.

The chosen organizations for benchmarking varied in budget size and diversified income streams. Likely, the significant distinction between the high-low budgets includes receipt of United States Department of Agriculture funds to build out local food programming and value chain development as well as Food Hub operations that provide income streams. Such significant infusions of funds can serve as catalysts for organizational agency, however, can be somewhat inconsistent given political pendulum swings.

One organization received substantial backing from a local foundation with a mission to help address food insecurity in the community. Other ways these organizations receive funds include having online "Donate" pages with provided options of individual or monthly recurring donations. Mention of #GivingTuesday and #ColoradoGives were also found. Some of the organizations revealed that they benefited from investment income, albeit apparently minimal in the most recent reported fiscal year. A standout in creative diversified income is Seacoast Eat Local. They provide announcements of donor matches to catapult donations on their website, as well as employer match programs in their Annual Report. Aside from individual and monthly donations, options on their donate webpage include gift donor-advised funds, stock donations, and bequests. They offer the opportunity for sponsorship of their "Seacoast Harvest Guide" as well as farmers market efforts. Businesses are spotlighted in the Annual Report for their donations too. Seacoast Eat Local also links to a Bonfire-hosted online shop where supporters can purchase branded shirts and sweatshirts that not only help to grow income, but build community awareness and pride by showcasing local artwork. Otherwise unknown is the role of the board of directors responsibility in fundraising cultivation and appeals.

Partnerships and industry memberships are a powerful way to expand impact reach and awareness-building. All organizations benchmarked clearly understand this opportunity, and appear to be benefiting from collaboration. There is an opportunity seen for improved storytelling of partnered programming, responsibilities, and impact however. Partner highlights, meeting report-outs, and gratitude social media posts tagging partners are all excellent ways to keep the community curious and engaged in momentum. Co-hosting events and celebrating community, state, national, and global food system celebratory days are also wonderful opportunities to build consistent relationships with the business community. What can become problematic, however, in food systems work is a lack of focus. The benchmarked organizations provide great insights into how NEILFN might approach drafting a partnership plan.

Annual Reports are important monitoring and evaluation tools impressed upon non-profits often for accountability to donors. They are also an excellent avenue for powerful storytelling. Benchmarked organizations exemplify a variety of approaches for NEILFN to consider. They include a letter from the Executive Director, staff acknowledgment, program highlights, quantitative impact, financial details of income and expenditures, and thank yous to donors and partners. In review of the linked Annual Reports, it is encouraged that NEILFN understand the opportunity to express utmost transparency and gratitude, and include qualitative impact through stories, quotes, and photos all highlighting program momentum, and challenges or needs for continued support. NW Tennessee Local Food Network's Annual Report is a focused and vibrant example, however components of all reports are well done and worth referencing as NEILFN considers what they want their impact to be, and how they want the summary of their impact to land as an annual milestone to build upon.

Programmatic Review

In addition to benchmarking organizations that drive relevant and varied programming aligned with the interests we heard among Northeast Indiana community outreach and engagements, a variety of organizations were identified that excel in subject area expertise that NEILFN was interested to learn more about. These programmatic initiatives include SNAP and Double Up Bucks program administration at area farmers' markets, agricultural producer business support and hosting a food hub, value chain coordination, Farm to School programming, farmland access and transition support, and excellent examples of program marketing, and diversified funding.

The Olde Farmhouse booth

SNAP and Double Up Program Administration

Although benchmarked organizations, Urban Seeds in Southeast Indiana and Seacoast Eat Local in New Hampshire both administer SNAP and Double Up programs at numerous farmers markets all year long, two notable organizations that also manage impressive programs include the Fair Food Network in Detroit, Michigan and the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, Texas.

SNAP
Putting Healthy Food Within Reach
USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

DOUBLE UP™ INDIANA

Fair Food Network[153]

Fair Food Network, with offices in Detroit, MI and Washington, DC, believes "that when we start with food, everything else is possible". The organization was the first to pilot Double Up Food Bucks at five Michigan farmers' markets in 2009. Today, after 15 years of success, "from farms to families, Double Up helps improve health, ignite local economies, and open opportunities" across 230 Michigan locations. The success of the program has also become a national model for nutrition incentives across 25 other states with access available at 900 locations.[154] Of their three pillars of focused work, the Double Up Bucks program is seen as the initiative that supports healthy communities, leveraging the federal government's $80 billion annual investment ensuring fresh, locally grown food options are available across the country.

- Since the program implementation in Michigan, 45+ million pounds of healthy food has been purchased through SNAP and Double UP Bucks.[155]
- Since 2009, SNAP and Double Up customers have purchased more than $28.3 million in fruits and vegetables—dollars directly benefiting Michigan farmers, local markets, and grocers, influencing some grocers to expand their produce sections to meet demand.[156]
- In 2022, independent grocers purchased $6.39 million in Michigan produce through the program during peak growing season. In 2023, that number grew to $7.8 million.[157]

For reference, Fair Food Network publishes an annual evaluation report on the Double Up Food Bucks program that provides information and inspiration for monitoring, evaluation, and impact storytelling, searchable through their archived resources.[158] The Double Up Food Bucks Michigan also issues an annual Evaluation Report.[159]

Sustainable Food Center[160]

Sustainable Food Center (SFC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that serves the Central and West Texas regions, based in Austin, Texas. The two origins of the Sustainable Food Center are the Austin Community Gardens, and the Sustainable Food Center itself. The Austin Community Gardens started in 1975 as part of the YWCA, providing growing lessons and community garden space. The Sustainable Food Center was formed in 1993 with a focus on food policy, access, and distribution. In 2001, these two organizations merged in order to consolidate administrative functions, reduce costs, and capitalize on the diverse talents each brought to the local community food system, laying the groundwork for stronger programming that is the SFC today.

Their mission weaves efforts to improve the health, land, and livelihoods of Texas communities by addressing food security holistically. To achieve this mission of building a sustainable food future for all, SFC designs programs and builds partnerships across the Texas food system.

The import of their holistic approach can be understood by reading their incredible articulation of the challenge at hand: "Texans face the second-highest level of food insecurity in the US, with 1 in 8 Texans experiencing food insecurity according to Feeding Texas. Even more Texas children – 1 in 5 – experience food insecurity, even though Texas is one of the top four food producing states in the nation. With 20% of Texas children experiencing food insecurity, schools play an important role in improving food access and supporting Texas farmers through local food purchasing. That's why our Farm to School initiative connects local farmers to Texas school districts looking to make wholesale purchases for school meals."

Therefore, SCF conducts several SNAP-related programs to improve access to nutritious food for low-income individuals and families across Texas. Their Double Up Program is accessible at farmers markets, mobile markets, and local groceries.

Farmers Business Support

Rural Action[161]

Rural Action of Southeast Ohio celebrates their good work and membership with the tagline, "Thriving Communities. Healthy Environments.". Rural Action was founded in 1991 with the vision that the main strategy for building resilient rural Appalachian communities is principled on locally-based, sustainable, and inclusive development. This outlook is reinforced by the organization's mission "to build a more just economy by developing the region's assets in environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable ways". In

153 *Fair Food Network.* https://fairfoodnetwork.org/what-we-do/nutrition-incentives/
154 *DoubleUp America.* https://doubleupamerica.org/
155 *Fair Food Network.* https://fairfoodnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/FFN_DUFB_MI-Overview_2023_05162024.pdf
156 *Double Up Food Bucks.* https://doubleupfoodbucks.org/get-involved/become-a-participating-location/
157 *Ibid.*
158 *Fair Food Network.* https://fairfoodnetwork.org/resources/
159 *Fair Food Network. (2023)* https://fairfoodnetwork.org/resources/double-up-food-bucks-michigan-2023-evaluation-report/
160 *Sustainable Food Center.* https://sustainablefoodcenter.org/
161 *Rural Action.* https://ruralaction.org

order to accomplish this good work, members have identified prioritized sectors as food and agriculture, forestry, environmental education, zero waste and recycling, watershed restoration, and energy. More recent additions to Rural Action's portfolio include emerging work in social enterprise development and local tourism.

Focusing on food and agriculture, in order to strengthen the local food system, to increase production, and provide equitable access to local food while supporting both beginning and established farmers in Southeast Ohio, Rural Action provides a comprehensive range of farm business services that effectively and critically supports and develops sustainable agriculture in the region.

These incredible services include, but are not limited to:

1. Whole Farm Project: This initiative offers wraparound support for beginning farmers, including access to capital, land, mentorship, professional services, site visits, and management plans.
2. On-Farm Learning: Rural Action coordinates paid internships and apprenticeships for the 2025 growing season, helping individuals grow their networks and learn from professionals in agriculture.
3. Rural Food Hub Development: The organization operates the Chesterhill Produce Auction, working with over 200 farmers annually to build the food and farming economy in the Mid-Ohio Valley.
4. Incubator Farm Program: This program provides accessible land, educational resources, and startup capital for beginning farmers and food entrepreneurs.
5. Farm to Institution: Rural Action works to increase local food procurement from K-12 schools, universities, and healthcare providers, creating opportunities for farmers to access larger markets.
6. Local Food Access Projects: These initiatives, such as Country Fresh Stops and Produce Prescriptions, help farmers distribute their products to rural communities, building demand for local food.
7. REAP Grant Assistance: Rural Action helps rural, small businesses and agricultural producers prepare grant applications for renewable energy systems or energy efficiency improvements.
8. Market Managers Scholarship: Rural Action provides $350 scholarships to market managers for professional opportunities.

Altogether Rural Action's core work is centered on "helping small communities do big things, growing local business and jobs, restoring the environment, and cultivating the next generation of leaders".

Additional farmer and food producer services, programming, and resources of impressive note identified in research are offered at the San Luis Valley Local Food Coalition, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, and the Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network.

Food Hubs and Value Chain Coordination

Three Rivers Farmers Alliance[162]

Three River Farmers Alliance (3RFA) is a farmer-owned aggregate food hub founded in 2014 in the Seacoast region of New Hampshire. It was established by four founding farmers: Kate Donald of Stout Oak Farm, Greg Balog and Andre Cantelmo of Heron Pond Farm, and Josh Jennings of Meadow's Mirth.

The alliance formed after they found they were consistently bumping into each other at delivery locations and suggested that by banding together they could cut unnecessary overhead and share costs and resources. The alliance began by delivering local produce to restaurants, farmers' markets, and food distributors in the Seacoast area of New Hampshire and the North Shore of Massachusetts. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Three River Farmers Alliance quickly pivoted to offer direct-to-consumer home delivery services, and included a donate button at checkout that accrued significant funds enabling them to send fresh, local produce to area schools during the pandemic for family distribution for free. They continue donations to area schools and pantries to this day.

Today, Three River Farmers Alliance supports over 50 farms and food producers, connecting them with expanded markets and transportation, storage, sales, and marketing logistics. They serve parts of New Hampshire, southern Maine, the North Shore of Massachusetts, and Boston offering year-round delivery of fresh, locally sourced food to homes, restaurants, and regional institutions and universities.

This coordinated approach allows Three River Farmers Alliance to support local agriculture, expand economic opportunities for regional farmers, and increase access to fresh, locally-sourced food for consumers.

The key aspects of this local food value chain coordination includes:

1. Aggregation: 3RFA aggregates products from over 50 farms and food producers, allowing small farms to meet wholesale demand without scaling up individual operation.

162 Three Rivers Farmers Alliance. https://www.threeriverfa.com

2. Distribution: They provide weekly deliveries to restaurants, institutions, retailers, and households across New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts.
3. Marketing: 3RFA operates an online storefront powered by Local Food Marketplace, offering a one-stop shop for customers to access local products.
4. Logistics: The alliance handles transportation, storage, sales, customer service, and marketing, enabling small farmers to reach expanded markets.
5. Infrastructure management: 3RFA facilitates the storage and transportation of regionally produced food products on behalf of their producer partners.
6. Order fulfillment: They coordinate exact product counts from farms based on customer orders, ensuring freshness and efficiency.
7. Market access: By combining resources, 3RFA helps small farms access institutional and retail markets that might otherwise be out of reach.

Research revealed a number of food hub models across organizations of interest. For additional examples for developing a food hub, or exploring value chain coordination, please visit the websites of San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition - Valley Roots Food Hub, Rural Action - Chester Hill Produce Auction, and Northwest Indiana Food Council - Region Roots Local Farm & Food Hub.

These food hubs serve fresh, locally produced food to a variety of consumers, in some instances limiting their customer base at the start as a soft launch to instill confidence in readiness for market. Northwest Indiana Food Council shared they limited their initial coordination to farmer to farmer for pre-scheduled CSA pick-up locations. Some hubs may start with wholesale buyers, or specifically Farm to School buyers, for Food is Medicine prescriptions, etc.

For another great example of services offered in value chain coordination, with a specific focus on Farm to School, visit the good work of the Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network. Also, for state-wide value chain collaboration inspiration, research revealed a new and potentially promising effort in Maine called the Local Food Switchboard, hosted by the Maine Food Convergence Project.

Farm to School

Feed Our Future[163]

Feed Our Future is an organization based out of Northeast Ohio that connects schools, homes, and communities by providing practical information about sourcing, eating, and promoting local foods that nourish young students. Active in their local region, they share their offerings nationally for the benefit of school food service professionals, producers, parents, or staff and administrators to be inspired by, engaged in, and benefit from. In 2024 Feed Our Future won a USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant for their Feed Our Future (FOF): Empowering Youth Leaders to Champion Local Foods program. This program aims to engage rural and urban youth leaders in their school districts to uplift the student voice to shape schools' access to local food. A program of youth empowerment and leadership development, the program will also work to connect value chain opportunities, increase and revamp food systems education assets like that of their Harvest of the Month program, and build organizational capacity.

The Farm to School programming that Feed Our Future provides garners attention because they design and provide resources for a variety of stakeholders, from food service professionals, to teachers and administrators, parents, and producers. This menu of programming includes:

1. Harvest of the Month: This program promotes a different Ohio-grown food each month, making it easier for food service professionals to serve local foods and providing materials for educators to encourage students to eat healthfully and locally.
2. Online Course: "Launching Local: Your Farm-to-School Guide" is a practical online course for school food service professionals to help them in preparing local foods in their school kitchen, created with feedback from regional school nutrition professionals.
3. Food Service Guides: Feed Our Future offers guides on incorporating local foods into day-to-day operations and improving school lunch nutrition.
4. Educational Materials: The organization provides resources for educators and administrators to inspire young minds to make mindful choices about what they eat.
5. Community Engagement: Feed Our Future works to connect people with practical information and tools that inspire young minds to make healthy food choices, rooted in Northeast Ohio but expanding nationally.

Additionally, research into the Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network revealed excellent and inspiring resources, specifically for Farm to School value chain building including regularly scheduled local food procurement gatherings, and a variety of well-curated, useful resources for the variety of stakeholders involved.[164]

163 Feed Our Future. https://feedourfuture.org
164 Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network. https://nwtnlfn.org/local-food-procurement/

For more inspiration, information, and community, it is also suggested that the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network reference the National Farm to School website for their library of resources[165] and it is strongly recommended that staff attend the Farm to Cafeteria Conference.[166]

Diversified Funding

Full Plates Full Potential[167]

Full Plates Full Potential is a non-profit organization based in Maine dedicated to ensuring all children have consistent access to nutritious food so that they may thrive, and realize their full potential. Full Plates Full Potential was importantly involved in driving research and coalition building to advocate for universal school meals in the state (the first program passed in the United States). Today their work includes strengthening child nutrition programs with food insecurity and nutrition awareness-building, providing organized libraries of research and resources, as well as offering grants to schools.

Particularly impressive about Full Plates Full Potential is the sophistication of their diversified funding strategy demonstrated through their recent activities and partnerships, and the variety of options for ways of giving that they provide:

1. Online or Mail In Giving: Suggested gifts range from $50 - $1,000.
2. Planned Giving: Estate or Trust Gifts
3. Corporate Giving: Partnerships, Sponsorships, Cause Marketing Opportunities, Named Events, and more.
4. Hosting Fundraisers: In-person or Virtual as a way to mobilize personal or professional networks
5. Employment Matches: Business CSR programs that allow employees to select Full Plates Full Potential as a beneficiary
6. Federal Grant Distribution: Full Plates Full Potential received and distributed $7.4 million in School Food System Innovation Grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).
7. Focus on Innovation: By distributing grants aimed at overcoming barriers to purchasing Maine-based foods for school meal programs, they're investing in innovative solutions that can potentially lead to new funding streams in the future.
8. Replication of Best Practices: Their approach aims to establish long-term solutions and best practices that can be replicated in other regions, potentially opening up opportunities for consulting or knowledge-sharing revenue.

This diversified approach of providing a wealth of opportunities for community members to support the vision and initiatives of Full Plates Full Potential, combined with their proactive federal grants pursuit and partnerships for innovation and replication of best practices, helps the organization to reduce reliance on a single funding source, increases their organizational stability, and expands their impact in combating childhood food insecurity in Maine, and beyond.

Research and conversation with Seacoast Eat Local and Northwest Indiana Local Food Network also revealed the importance of community relationship-building over the years that can lead to financial gifts. Both organizations host fundraising dinners to bring supporters together to the table over local food and conversation. Seacoast Eat Local also reinforced the importance of people wanting to be a part of something, for voicing your dreams for the organization, and making the ask by sharing what different gifts could mean for programming and growth. Other creative revenue streams that Seacoast Eat Local activates include securing matches for giving campaigns; providing a variety of sponsorship opportunities for their annual printed and online harvest guide; farmers' market sponsorships; partnerships for hosting events; charitable gaming; government and business grants; employee matching programs; and selling branded merchandise at markets across the community. 25% of Seacoast Eat Local's revenue comes from individual donations. For donors who give monthly, their Development Manager mails a thank you card with a Seacoast Eat Local magnet celebrating their year anniversary.

North American Food Systems Network[168]

The North American Food Systems Network (NAFSN) is a professional association dedicated to strengthening local and regional food systems across North America. It serves a diverse community of practitioners, educators, researchers, consultants, and advocates by offering resources such as webinars, podcasts, job postings, leadership opportunities, and collaborative projects. NAFSN operates under a sociocratic-circle governance model, emphasizing inclusive, non-hierarchical decision-making and transparent communication. Its mission is to equip food systems professionals with the tools and support needed to develop resilient, equitable, and culturally appropriate food systems that benefit both producers and communities

To fund its operations and ensure accessibility, NAFSN employs a tiered membership model with a sliding scale. Membership options include open access (free), individual memberships ($10–$90/year), institutional memberships ($36–$150/year), and sponsor memberships ($500/year).

165 Farm to School. https://www.farmtoschool.org/
166 Ibid.
167 Full Plates. https://www.fullplates.org
168 North American Food Systems Network. https://www.foodsystemsnetwork.org/index.php

Higher membership tiers offer additional benefits such as one-on-one career coaching, participation in national projects, access to leadership meetings, and promotional opportunities for organizations. NAFSN encourages members with stable incomes or institutional backing to select higher membership levels to subsidize costs for others, fostering an inclusive and supportive professional community.

Dirt Capital Partners[169]

Dirt Capital Partners is a real asset impact investment firm founded in 2014 with a mission to support regenerative farmers across the U.S. by improving their access to land and enabling long-term ownership. Recognizing the limitations of traditional financing, Dirt Capital provides tailored financial solutions that allow experienced regenerative farmers to secure and grow their operations. These solutions include long-term leases with purchase options, joint ventures, conservation-based land transfers, blended capital partnerships, and mortgages. Their flexible, farmer-focused approach helps overcome land access barriers and facilitates transitions of existing farms to new owners, especially in high-cost areas or among underserved communities.

Through over 46 projects covering 20,000+ acres, Dirt Capital emphasizes four core impact themes: ecological stewardship, farmer equity, community benefits, and field-building. They collaborate with land trusts, nonprofits, and mission-aligned funders to integrate conservation, renewable energy, and agritourism into their land strategies. Their efforts not only promote soil health, biodiversity, and climate resilience but also help farmers build wealth and strengthen regional food systems. Dirt Capital's model represents a transformative approach to agricultural finance, aligning investment capital with the long-term sustainability and resilience of regenerative farming.

Marketing

Abundant Montana[170]

Abundant Montana is an organization that promotes local food and farming in Montana, connecting consumers with local farmers and ranchers. The organization's website clearly states their goal:

> ***"We envision a resilient and reliable Montana food system where all Montanans can access and enjoy locally-grown, nutrient-dense, and culturally-appropriate foods. Our goal is to have more Montana food on all Montana plates. In collaboration with partner organizations, our goal is that one-third (33%) of the food Montanans eat is grown in Montana by 2033."***

In order to build this resilient and reliable Montana food system, their programming is prioritized to building consumer demand, building market channels, and building community knowledge and networks. Their articulation of the problem, and the solution, is well done.

Also impressive, Abundant Montana uniquely employs a multi-faceted marketing strategy to support local food businesses and promote sustainable agriculture in Montana. They offer a menu of services under the "For Businesses" navigation on their website that includes, but is not limited to, Digital Marketing Services, Content Marketing, Print Marketing, Strategic Planning for Marketing Plans, Custom Logo Design, and Website Design with ecommerce set-up and ongoing maintenance.

Additionally, Abundant Montana uses various channels to build consumer demand and support local food systems that include the maintenance of a comprehensive online directory listing over 1,100 food and farming businesses and 70 farmers markets, and the production of the "Local Food Guide," an evolution of their original "Directory to Montana Food".

By offering these diverse marketing services and maintaining a robust local food directory, Abundant Montana aims to increase visibility for local food businesses, drive customer traffic, educate the community about their local food options and stakeholders involved in resilience and reliability, and enhance the overall value of the local food system in Montana.

Farmland Access + Succession

Land For Good[171]

Land For Good, a non-profit organization founded in 2004 and based in Keene, New Hampshire, was founded as an organization to focus on helping older farmers with farm succession. Years of experience in the farming community clarified that beyond simple farm linking, planning assistance was sorely needed for aging farmers. This vision led to the development of a unique coaching program called the Farm Legacy Program. In 2009 Land For Good hosted the first-ever national conference on farm and ranch access, tenure and transfer, "Changing Lands, Changing Hands". Years of good work continued with increasing services, and Land For Good's programs and reputation were established regionally and nationally.

Today Land For Good hosts a variety of guides, tutorials, worksheets, and links on their website as well as a variety of online and in-person workshops, webinars, and gatherings that should prove helpful for reference as conversations continue in Northeast Indiana about legacy farmland transfer as well as innovative, and necessary, land access.

169 Dirt Capital Partners. https://www.dirtpartners.com/for-farmers
170 Abundant Montana. https://abundantmontana.com
171 Land for Good. http://landforgood.org/

Collaborative Initiatives

Chicago Region Food System Fund [172]

The Chicago Region Food System Fund, is a collaborative funding initiative launched during the early months of COVID-19, that focuses on building a more equitable, adaptive, and resilient food system within the city's foodshed - a 200 mile radius which includes Northeast Indiana. Using a reform and investment approach, the Fund supports experimentation, BIPOC leadership, and long-term collaboration. Since June 2020, it has awarded $21.27 million to 203 grantees, including farmers, growers, advocates, community associations, houses of worship, and local food businesses. The Fund is governed by a Steering Committee composed mainly of community representatives, ensuring practitioner voices shape grant strategy and design. Fresh Taste, fiscally sponsored by Forefront, manages administration. Some of the funding providers involved with the initiative include: Builders Initiative, Crown Family Philanthropies, the Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, Fresh Taste, Little Owl Foundation, The Lumpkin Family Foundation, Margot Pritzker Fund, Walder Foundation, and Walter Mander Foundation.

Indiana Regional Stellar Initiative [173] [174]

The State of Indiana has had good success in incentivizing regional collaboration and strategic economic investment. One example is the Indiana Stellar Pathways (Communities) Program led by the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs. The Stellar program incentivizes collaboration, planning, and asset-based strategic investment by leveraging federal and state funding from multiple state agencies in addition to local government, philanthropic, and private investment. A regional strategic investment plan is created by applicants that presents a portfolio of projects to be implemented by partner entities including project/program rationale, budgets, and proposed funding streams. A separate fund is not created for the initiative, but rather collaborative commitments are made by partner agencies that align efforts toward shared priorities that are implemented within an agreed upon timeline.

The NewAllen Alliance, seven communities in East Allen County, was one of the first Indiana Regional Stellar Communities Designees. NewAllen implemented ***East Allen's Rural Revival Regional Investment Plan*** comprising a $65 million dollar portfolio of quality-of-life initiatives, including downtowns, parks, trails, housing, nutrition education, public art, and small business development over a four-year period from 2018 - 2022. The collaboration was led by a bridging entity, Sturtz Public Management Group, that coordinated regional efforts and provided technical assistance to individual development teams. Individual projects were led and administered by partner entities, with the assistance of the Northeastern Indiana Regional Coordinating Council and additional contracting entities.

New England Feeding New England Initiative [175]

The New England Food System Planners Partnership (NEFSPP) is a collaboration of state-level organizations, government agencies, and Food Solutions New England working to build a reliable, resilient, and equitable regional food system. Their goal is for 30% of food consumed in New England to be produced locally by 2030, while addressing climate change, food security, and racial equity. Through the New England Feeding New England initiative, they are setting production milestones, assessing economic impact, and developing resilience strategies. Their 10-year project, Cultivating a Reliable Food Supply, focuses on preparing the region for climate and public health shocks by strengthening supply chains and expanding regional food production. Phases of work include:

- Research Phase: Gathering baseline data and strategies.
- Convening Phase: Disseminating findings and engaging stakeholders.
- Implementation Phase: Acting collaboratively to reach the '30 by 30' goal.

Atlanta Working Farms Fund, The Conservation Fund[176]

The Atlanta Working Farms Fund, launched by The Conservation Fund, aims to support the next generation of farmers by securing affordable access to farmland in the rapidly developing 23-county region around Atlanta. By acquiring farmland at risk of development, placing it under permanent conservation easements in cooperation with non-profit partners, and leasing it to new farmers with a clear pathway to ownership over 5–10 years, the Fund reduces barriers to land access and promotes long-term stewardship. The program prioritizes inclusivity—supporting women and farmers of color—and emphasizes climate-smart, sustainable agricultural practices that enhance environmental resilience.

In addition to land access, the Fund helps farmers build economically viable businesses by connecting them with institutional buyers like Emory University and food distributors such as The Common Market. It has already protected hundreds of acres and supported successful farm enterprises like Atlanta Harvest and Love is Love Cooperative Farm, which provide fresh, locally grown food to underserved communities. Through this model, the Fund is transforming the local food system while building a more equitable and sustainable future for regional agriculture.

172 Chicago Region Food System Fund. https://chicagoregionfoodfund.org/
173 Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs. https://www.in.gov/ocra/stellar/
174 NewAllen Alliance. https://www.newallenalliance.net/
175 New England Food System Partnership. https://nefoodsystemplanners.org/
176 The Conservation Fund. https://www.conservationfund.org/our-impact/news-insights/next-generation-farmers-get-boost-from-partnership/

Recommendations

Hawkins Family Farm, Wabash County, Indiana

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the research conducted as part of the ***Northeast Indiana Local Food Assessment***, the following recommendations pertain to the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network as well as the region's stakeholders.

Organizational Recommendations for the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network

1. Organizational work of the NEILFN should proceed through the combined efforts of a working board and hired staff. Current staff capacity is at 1.5 FTE. Staffing should be increased as work expands along with financial capabilities.
2. Given the large geographic footprint of the Northeast Indiana region, the Ambassador network should be further defined and operationalized to enhance communication and engagement efforts.
3. The NEILFN Board should consider adding advisory stakeholder members to the board that represent the multi-disciplinary nature of the work of food systems.
4. A committee structure should be established led by board members with the inclusion of non-board volunteers. Committees should include an analysis of the return on investment of efforts at the beginning of each year as well as complete after-action reports at the conclusion in order to integrate continuous improvement into efforts.
5. The NEILFN should increase its understanding of and resources to develop and manage diverse funding streams including: an annual fundraising appeal; year-end donations; major donor relationships; fundraising events; local, family, and community foundations; informal memberships; fees for service; federal and state grants; impact investing; corporate/non-profit relationships, etc.
6. The NEILFN should seek ways to retain their existing foundation of work around increasing consumer awareness of the local food system while building in efficiencies to minimize the effort.
7. The NEILFN should foster knowledge building and collaboration of stakeholders throughout the Northeast Indiana region and should establish a way to financially support this work.
8. The NEILFN should focus on addressing food insecurity throughout Northeast Indiana, as it relates to nutritious, local food.
9. The NEILFN should lead the region in understanding how to advance food hub activities throughout the Northeast Indiana region.
10. The NEILFN should support and promote connections between schools, local farmers, and community organizations to promote the integration of locally grown foods into school meals and educational programs.

Hawkins Family Farm, Wabash County, Indiana

Rose Avenue Education Farm, New Haven, Indiana

Recommendations for the Northeast Indiana Region

This is a **Call to Action** is recommended for local food stakeholders in the Northeast Indiana region to focus on accelerating the development of the local food system through targeted funding and initiatives. The region needs to increase both the supply of and demand for local food in order to take advantage of emerging opportunities, supplant foreign market pursuits, and provide reliable access to nutritious food for all residents. It is in the best interest of the residents of the Northeast Indiana region to have a voice in how the food that is grown regionally can also be consumed regionally in order to build resilience for the local population.

Recommended region-wide activities include the following:

1. Establish a collaborative **Northeast Indiana Local Food Initiative** to advance regional recommendations over a five to ten year period. The initiative would include a provision for administrative support. This initiative would be funded and implemented through a collaboration of stakeholders and in alignment with other efforts underway across the State of Indiana.
2. Launch a **Northeast Indiana Grown Here** Marketing Campaign, building off of the existing **Made Here** brand of the Northeast Indiana Region. This campaign would bring together awareness and inspiration around the Northeast Indiana Local Food Initiative.
3. Research the development of a **Northeast Indiana Food Hub** and associated value chain coordination. This initiative would be developed in addition to other aggregation and distribution activities already occurring in the region by filling the gaps to opportunity and access and increasing the local food system capacity. The benefits would be to increase producers' access to larger markets, boost the local economy, and build resilience into the local food system.
4. Provide **Local Food Business Micro-grants** to support local food entrepreneurship activities for small businesses related to production, processing, aggregation, distribution, retail, and agritourism activities.
5. Conduct a **Know How to Grow** educational series and associated regional engagement to increase knowledge of and interest in small-to -medium scale local food production in addition to home growing in order to increase self-sufficiency.
6. Provide **Community Orchard, Community Garden** and **Shared Kitchen Grants** for nonprofits, schools, and faith-based organizations to increase opportunities for regional residents to grow food within plots of land owned and managed by community organizations.
7. Scale a region-wide **Double Up Nutrition Incentive Program** that matches fruit and vegetable purchases for SNAP benefits dollar for dollar to increase access to fresh, local produce that builds off of the success of the Allen County Double Up Nutrition Incentive program.
8. Scale a region-wide **Food is Medicine Program** that builds off of the success of Parkview Health's Veggie RX prescription produce program for income qualifying patients with health issues that can benefit through improved nutrition.
9. Offer **Local Food Pantry Infrastructure Grants** to increase refrigeration, storage and transportation, and food banks and pantries across the region to accept and store fresh, locally grown food.
10. Provide funds for **County Local Food Plans** that would include a policy audit, demographic data compilation, convening of a local food committee, and action plan recommendations in order to reduce barriers to agriculture and increase local food activities at the grassroots level.
11. Create a **Farm Legacy Program** to aid older farmers with farm succession through coaching, farm linking, and planning assistance. This program will help foster farmland preservation and increase farmland access to new farmers.
12. Pursue **Regenerative Agricultural Conservation Efforts** through an impact investing fund and/or through conservation easements that provide added benefit of access to farmers.

In addition, a Fort Wayne Urban Agriculture Initiative is an additional, focused initiative recommended within the largest urban area of the region. This initiative seeks to enhance urban farming through a policy audit and updates, physical investments such as in-fill gardens, orchards, and farms, as well as expansion of existing programs. The initiative emphasizes hyper-local education and community engagement to foster sustainable urban agriculture within the City of Fort Wayne and builds off of existing efforts including Johnnie Mae Farm, the Pontiac Street Market, and the Plant, Pick, Plate Program.

Our land. Our tables.

Our local food system, like an egg, is full of promise, but needs to be nurtured. By working together, we can open new possibilities, nourish our communities, and grow a resilient future from the inside out.

Pequash Farms, Allen County, Indiana

NORTHEAST INDIANA · LOCAL FOOD NETWORK ·