

Executive Summary



Planning for a Northern Illinois Food Systems Network

Prepared for DeKalb County Community Gardens and Illinois Farm Bureau/Local Foods Program
by Northern Illinois University, Center for Governmental Studies

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Center for
Governmental Studies**

Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development

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While Northern Illinois is rich in agriculture and is home to the largest consumer market in the Midwest, little of the food consumed in the region is grown in the region. This time of disruption and change within food systems nationwide is an opportune moment to plan for a stronger northern illinois food systems network. This study is a step in the planning process and was funded by the Chicago Region Food System Fund and the Illinois Farm Bureau, two organizations supporting Illinois agriculture and access to fresh foods for Illinois residents. The study was conducted by the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (NIU-CGS) in collaboration with DeKalb County Community Gardens.

Geographically, this study focuses on the following nine counties in northern Illinois:

- Boone
- Carroll
- DeKalb
- Jo Daviess
- Lee
- Ogle
- Stephenson
- Winnebago
- Whiteside

Research for this project included surveys of farmers and restaurant owners, interviews with key stakeholders, and review of existing research on local food systems. The synthesis of this information offers suggested strategies to build a northern Illinois food system network. The full report presents a detailed discussion of the research and a plan for moving forward.

Underlying Approach

The nine-county area possesses the components to grow a food system network to serve the subject counties, the Chicago area, and other markets. However, there is much work to be done to bring it to fruition. Most of the strategies and resources suggested in this report build on existing assets, strengthening them, and fostering collaboration to create the network, rather than large investments in new facilities or organizations. This approach minimizes risk, gives existing businesses and organizations a strong stake in the system, honors established relationships, can be approached incrementally, and is more cost-effective than extensive new facilities and organizations.



Leadership

With a network built on existing, presently independent components, central leadership is needed to make the pieces into a strong whole. The lead organization will coordinate more often than carry out tasks. There are existing organizations that could provide leadership but are reluctant to take on the expense of additional staff. Dedicated paid staff will be necessary to make implementing the plan a priority. There are options for covering the cost of staff, and these should be investigated. Administrators of potential leadership organizations in the region feel that it will be easier to generate interest in taking on a leadership role after this report has been shared within the region.

Financial and Technical Assistance

Insufficient production volume is an obstacle to area farms becoming a more significant source of fresh food for metropolitan Chicago and elsewhere. Farmers are interested in increasing production and operating more efficiently, but most divide their time between the farm and a nonfarm source of income. There are many sources of financial and technical assistance but sorting through and applying for those most appropriate can be challenging. Having an individual whose job is to assist farmers with this effort will increase the likelihood of success.

Next Steps

After leadership has been established, completing the following tasks will begin to build a stronger northern illinois food systems network.

- **Use farmers' markets as a starting point.** The farmers' markets in the Chicago area are a relatively easy entry to the Chicago market. By coordinating booth rentals, labor, and transportation, multiple farms can find the time and resources to participate in the markets.
- **Work with market managers to make farmers' markets vibrant business centers for farmers, restaurants, and consumers.** Educate market managers on how to make their market a more effective sales location for farmers and a productive purchasing and marketing experience for chefs, as well as increase the fresh local food choices for area residents at all income levels.
- **Establish connections with restaurants and other food service providers.** Personal connections were cited by both farmers and restaurants responding to surveys as the key to working together. Farmers' markets are where these two groups can come together to establish these connections. Help farmers to be well-prepared to make overtures to restaurants and educate chefs on how to work with farmers.
- **Position small-scale storage, aggregation, and/or distribution sites so they are within a reasonable distance of every farmer.** Start by building on existing organizations already playing this role in the area. Add other sites as needed, but retain the small scale of each, minimizing investment and risk.
- **Support improved meat processing through one or more new or expanded facilities.** Lend support to proposed projects that appear to have a good chance of success.
- **Coordinate transportation of products through truck sharing.** In some instances, the availability of a truck is less of a problem than finding someone to drive it. This task can be shared among participating farms.

- **Work with community colleges to expose disadvantaged groups to opportunities in agriculture.** This may include participating in events, outreach to high schools, and outreach within the existing college student body. Work through existing organizations with established relationships wherever possible.
- **Set up a mentorship program for new farmers, perhaps connecting them with farmers in or near retirement.** Such a system would make entry into farming easier and aid older farmers looking to lighten their load. Such a program might be housed within one or more of the community colleges.
- **Establishing a stronger local food system network will make it easier to ensure that branding local products is successful.** Once infrastructure is in place, mechanisms to ensure quality and consistency can be established.

The first step towards implementing this plan is to share the findings of this report and bring local stakeholders together to discuss the contributions each can make. Organizations and individuals in the nine-county area stand ready to assist with this effort.