



Minnesota Food Network Landscape

FOOD NETWORKS

Food networks are groups of food advocates in a region who gather for the purpose of learning from each other, to build relationships, and generate collective action around food systems programs and policies. For the sake of consistency in this report, “food networks” refers to regional and sub-regional food networks, policy councils, and partnerships.

There are at least twenty active food networks in Minnesota, with members who partner with Extension in various ways. A Health and Nutrition Extension intern interviewed leaders of these networks during the summer of 2014 to learn about the geographical area, barriers to the work, accomplishments, and governance structure of the various networks. This report summarizes the information gathered from the interviews.

FOOD NETWORK STRUCTURE

Each food network in Minnesota has a different structure, though there are some similarities across the state.

Affiliation

Some of the food networks in the state are appointed by the city or county government or have become established 501c3 nonprofit organizations. Others are independent networks functioning on a completely voluntary basis or with funding through grants such as the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP).

Membership

Members of food networks across the state represent diverse aspects of the food system, including farmers, gardeners, consumers, producers, health professionals, retail authorities, leaders of food and hunger-related non-profit and grassroots organizations, university staff, local public health, and other state and county based government employees.

A few of the food networks also seek to have non-traditional members, such as economics experts or members from disenfranchised populations, in order to broaden the view of the food network. Membership in food networks can be voluntary, application-based, or appointed.

Staff

At least five food networks in Minnesota have paid part-time staff dedicated to organizing and facilitating the networks. The staff are paid through the local governmental body they are appointed under or through grant funding such as SHIP. The other networks operate on a voluntary basis or as part of the core work of the organizations involved.

Steering Committee

At least nine of the food networks in Minnesota have a steering committee that meets on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and guides the work of the network. The steering committee is typically a smaller entity, consisting of 5-10 members, which are appointed, application-based, or voluntary positions.

Governance

At least seven of the food networks in Minnesota have seen a need to outline the expectations and levels of accountability for the members of the network. Accordingly, these networks have developed bi-laws, which guide the structure and participation in the network.

Task Forces

At least six of the food networks in the state also have task forces or work groups as a way to allocate responsibilities across the group. Task force groups typically meet on a monthly or quarterly basis, either at regular network meetings, outside of regular network meetings, or both.

Many food networks have members from the steering committee lead the work of the task force groups, therefore, having a clear line of communication and mission-alignment with the larger network. Common task force areas include: marketing/outreach, food access, food infrastructure, education, urban agriculture, and food literacy, although over 15 different task force areas were identified in the food networks across the state.

FOOD NETWORK FUNCTION

Each food network has a different mode of operation and different goals, although there are similarities between the activities of many of the networks.

Networking

Many of the food networks in the state hold larger quarterly meetings open to the general public, with a focus of networking, sharing resources, and learning from each other. The larger meetings range in participation from 20 to 60 members and serve as an arena to discuss food systems issues in the region as well as build cross-sector collaboration.

Minnesota Example

The Metro Food Access Network (MFAN) began in October 2012 as a SHIP-funded project based in the 7-county metro area. The network has over 180 members, with about 50 members regularly attending quarterly meetings. Until recently, the primary purpose of the meetings was to share resources, learn from each other, and build relationships. However, as of 2014, the task force groups started to take on more action-oriented projects and in 2015 the network will be rolling out a new strategic plan including a higher level of collaboration.

Metro Food Access Network small group discussion on the impact of MN Food Charter on food systems work in the



Community Needs Assessment

A community needs assessment tends to be the inaugural project of a food network. In this way, food networks are able to understand the landscape of food needs in the region and focus the forthcoming work of the food network on the outcomes from the assessment. More than five food networks in the state have started their work with a community needs assessment.

Minnesota Example

The first project of the Crow River Region Local Foods Initiative was to contract with a partner to conduct interviews with producers, consumers, processors, and decision makers in the region, in order to generate feedback about barriers to reaching goals of accessing healthy foods and what bridges exist to establish change. Currently the initiative consists of a 4 person leadership team, but will evolve to a 15-20 member food policy council, which will use the input from the community needs assessment to create policy recommendations for the region.

Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations help to inform the local government officials on the importance of the integration of food access into local legislation, zoning, and city planning. Accordingly, the food networks are able to leverage partner capacity to influence policy, systems, and environmental approaches in the region. Sample policy recommendations may include:

- Updating outdated city ordinances related to land use for agriculture, farmers markets, community gardens, and/or mobile markets
- Proposing new legislation which would incentivize local foods procurement or distribution

Minnesota Example

The Cass Clay Food Systems Initiative began in 2010 and is a cross-state initiative, including representation from Minnesota and North Dakota, which work to ensure the people of Cass and Clay Counties have access to safe, nutritious, and affordable foods. Leaders from the Initiative worked in conjunction with the Metropolitan Council of Governments (MetroCOG) to develop a food systems plan, which is being presented to the two county and four municipal jurisdiction in order to garner support for the formation of a Cass Clay Food Systems Advisory Commission.

Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are common projects taken up by food networks in the state because they improve access to fresh, healthy, and local foods, build community, and improve the local economy. At least 4 food networks in Minnesota have established farmers markets in their regions.

Recently, farmers markets, especially those supported by food networks, have started accepting electronic benefits transfers or EBT and offering special incentives, such as

Fergus Falls Community Food Partnership gathered to learn marketing tips for the regional farmers market.



“Market Bucks” where SNAP benefits can be doubled for the purchase of fruits and vegetables at farmers markets, therefore, making the farmers market experience accessible to all populations.

Minnesota Example

The Fergus Falls and Detroit Lakes Community Foods Partnerships each have a goal to expand their communities’ enthusiasm for and ability to grow, distribute, and eat sustainably and locally grown food. In accordance with the Partnership’s goals, the group established a 40-vender farmers market with bi-laws, a board, and the certification to accept EBT.

Potential Project – Food Hubs

Another common theme that emerged from the interviews, was a lack of infrastructure for aggregation of local foods in the regions across the state. Communities and institutions suffer from limited availability of affordable local foods, whereas, small farmers struggle to find a profitable market for their produce. Both consumers and producers would benefit from improved infrastructure for aggregation, also known as food hubs. At least eight food networks in Minnesota are interested in establishing a food hub in their region, or have done so already.

FOOD NETWORK COMMON CHALLENGES

Many challenges faced by food network in the state cut across varied structure, geographical area, and membership base. Common challenges faced by food networks include:

- Limited time and funding
- Having to understand and work within a number of different county and city legislative bodies on a regional level
- A lack of community engagement
- A lack of clarity around member expectations and levels of accountability

CONCLUSION

Food networks across the state of Minnesota come in all shapes and sizes. Whether they focus on projects, networking, or policy initiatives, all food networks in Minnesota are using collaboration as fresh pathway to community health.

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Stakeholder and partner mapping from Southwest Food Network gathering.

