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IOWAFOODSYSTEM
COALITION

SETTING THE TABLE FOR ALL IOWANS

JUNE 2024

A PLAN TO CREATE A THRIVING, SUSTAINABLE, AND EQUITABLE FOOD SYSTEM

GRATITUDE

Special thanks to members of the Steering Committee, leaders of the nine Priority Teams, and individuals who have contributed through subcommittees and a variety of consultations. These amazing individuals from all across Iowa stepped up to provide needed expertise and leadership that was crucial to the formation of this plan. Several Working Groups, including the Regional Food System Working Group (RFSWG), the Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group (IFHMWG), and the Farm to School and Early Care Coalition are acknowledged in the Coalition leadership.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Giselle Bruskewitz, *Iowa Valley RC&D, IFHMWG*

Marie Boyd, *Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, RFSWG*

Lyndi Buckingham-Schutt, *Iowa State University*

Ilsa DeWald, *Johnson County Local Food & Farm Program, RFSWG*

Kamyar Enshayan, *University of Northern Iowa, Center for Energy & Environmental Education*

Jodie Huegerich, *University of Northern Iowa Local Food Program, RFSWG*

Chelsea Krist, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development Program, Farm to School & Early Care Coalition*

Aaron Lehman, *Iowa Farmers Union*

Courtney Long, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development Program; and Agricultural Marketing Resource Center*

Adam Shriver, *Harkin Institute for Public Policy*

PRIORITY TEAM LEADERS & PARTICIPANTS

Land and Resource Access

- **Zachary Couture**, *Lutheran Services in Iowa Global Greens*
- **Martha McFarland**, *Practical Farmers of Iowa*
- **Jennie Erwin**, *Lutheran Services of Iowa Global Greens*
- **Stephanie Enloe**, *Women, Food, and Agriculture Network*
- **Zach Cassidy**, *Sustainable Iowa Land Trust*

Farm and Food Business Development

- **Jamie Fowler**, *Golden Hills RC&D*
- **Gil Gillespie**, *Retired Sociologist*
- **Bob Ferguson**, *SE Iowa Community Food Web*
- **Michal Lynch**, *Resilient Sustainable Future for Iowa City*
- **Gary Huber**, *business consultant*

Farm and Food System Infrastructure

- **Christa Hartsook**, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Program*
- **Giselle Bruskwitz**, *Iowa Valley RC&D, IFHMMWG*
- **Kate Gilbert**, *ISU Food Science*

Local Food Purchasing & Procurement

- **Kaitlyn Scheuermann**, *Waukee Community School District*
- **Teresa Wiemerslage**, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development*
- **Krista Smith**, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Program, Farm to School & Early Care Coalition*

Food, Nutrition, and Health

- **Jill Lange**, *Iowa Health and Human Services Nutrition & Physical Activity Bureau*
- **Haley Huyhn**, *Iowa Health and Human Services Nutrition & Physical Activity Bureau*
- **Laura Paulsen**, *Iowa Health and Human Services Nutrition & Physical Activity Bureau*
- **Hailey Boudreau**, *Iowa Health and Human Services Nutrition & Physical Activity Bureau*

Labor Equity

- **Megan Kemp**, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development Program*

Environmental Stewardship

- **Adam Shriver**, *Harkin Institute for Public Policy*

Communication and Education

- **Jodie Huegerich**, *University of Northern Iowa Local Food Program, RFSWG*
- **Paul McCormick**, *Eat Greater Des Moines*
- **Hilary Burbank**, *Cultivate: Local Food Connections*
- **Tiffany Stone**, *ISU PhD student*

Local Food Policy Network

- **Luke Elzinga**, *Des Moines Area Religious Council, Iowa Hunger Coalition*
- **Tommy Hexter**, *Iowa Farmers Union*
- **Ilsa DeWald**, *Johnson County Local Food & Farm Program, RFSWG*

INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED THROUGH SUBCOMMITTEES & A VARIETY OF CONSULTATIONS

Aubrey Alvarez, *Past Exec. Director, Eat Greater Des Moines*

Hannah Breckbill, *Humble Hands Farm*

Diane Christofore, *Regenerative Agriculture Alliance*

Josh Dansdill, *Northeast Iowa RC&D*

Suzan Erem, *past Exec. Director, Sustainable Iowa Land Trust*

Sue Futrell, *Consultant*

Linda Gorkow, *Food Bank Association of Iowa*

Jason Grimm, *Iowa Valley RC&D*

Natasha Hegmann, *Practical Farmers of Iowa*

Beth Hoffman, *Farmer, Author, Consultant*

Allie Lansman, *Consultant*

Bob Leonard, *Journalist*

Sandelis S. Miller, *LSI Global Greens*

Madelyn Ridgeway, *Consultant*

Bob Riley, *Consultant*

Mary Swander, *Ag Arts*

Jacqueline Venner-Senske, *Practical Farmers of Iowa*

Angie Tagtow, *Consultant*

Sally Worley, *Practical Farmers of Iowa*

Breanna Miller, *Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Program*

IOWA FOOD SYSTEM COORDINATOR

Jan Libbey

EQUITY CONSULTANT

Astig Planning & Kelley Palmer

PLAN DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT

Rich Pirog, *former director - MSU Center for Regional Food Systems*

WRITING TEAM

Jan Libbey, Courtney Long, Beth Hoffman, Adam Shriver

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

Beth Hoffman

DESIGN & GRAPHIC DESIGN

Carlie Sullivan, Mallory DeVries

COMMUNICATION CONSULTANT

Alexson Calahan, *Small Adventure Communications*

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**A huge shout out to all of the farmers, food entrepreneurs, and farm and food workers
who work tirelessly to grow, raise, and create the food that sustains us.**

“For all you do every day, 365 days a year, rain or shine or snow, THANK YOU!”



*Kate Solko, of Root to Rise Farm.
Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Gratitude

Welcome & Call to Action

About the Iowa Food System Coalition

Introduction

Introducing the Priorities

Background

Food Systems: What are They and Why do They Matter?

Food Systems in Iowa

Progress in Iowa Food System Development, 2011 - 2022

Limiting Factors

From Problem to Possibility: Reimagining our Food System

Setting the Table for all Iowans

Land & Resource Access: Supporting Farmers from the Ground Up

Farm and Food Business Development: Growing Business Innovation

Farm and Food System Infrastructure: Moving Food Along the Value Chain

Local Food Purchasing and Procurement: Reliable Markets for Farmers,

Nutritious Food for Iowans

Food, Nutrition, and Health: Activating the Health & Food Connection

Labor Equity: Elevating the Workers Behind Our Food

Environmental Stewardship: Connecting Land, Environment, and Health in Iowa

Local Food Policy Network: Advocating for Transformation

Communication & Education: Amplifying Our Message

Additional Resources

WELCOME & CALL TO ACTION

What if locally produced food was the norm rather than the exception in Iowa?

Setting the Table for all Iowans: A Plan to Create a Thriving, Sustainable, and Equitable Food System sets out the rationale, priorities, strategies and actions needed to guide the development and increase the impact of Iowa's local and regional food system over the next decade.

The priorities outlined in this plan require the commitment of many partners – those who are already engaged and those we hope will share ideas and perspectives to help us continue to refine this work and bring about its success. We are a growing community of Iowans proving that Iowa's agriculture has so much more to offer us all.

Iowa's capacity to put innovative creativity into motion, combining our rich natural resources with human care and ingenuity will make this state the best place to grow, eat, and thrive.

This is the vision of the Iowa Food System Coalition.

Through better coordination and expansion of education and technical assistance, reasonable and targeted appropriations, and specific policy changes, we can help our local food farmers and entrepreneurs succeed and increase the vitality of our communities and Iowans all across the state. We need increased capacity to organize, fresh approaches to inclusivity, and innovative imagination. We all are connected to this dynamic food system and have important contributions to make. We need you!

We all are the changemakers we've been waiting for! Sign up for the Iowa Food System Coalition newsletter. Expand your imagination and capacity. Reach out to a priority team that connects with your interests, ideas, and goals.

We look forward to working together to make **Setting the Table for all Iowans** an everyday reality!

Visit the [Iowa Food System Coalition](#).

Thank you.

*The Iowa Food System Coalition
Steering Committee*

Marie Boyd
Giselle Bruskewitz
Lyndi Buckingham-Schutt
Ilsa DeWald
Kamyar Enshayan

Jodie Huegerich
Chelsea Krist
Aaron Lehman
Courtney Long
Adam Shriver

Chris Schwartz, Executive Director
Jan Libbey, Coordinator

ABOUT THE IOWA FOOD SYSTEM COALITION

The Iowa Food System Coalition (IFSC) is a network of individuals and organizations formed to chart a course toward a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa. The Coalition came together to develop a food system plan for Iowa and will continue to work to improve Iowa's food landscape. Interest and participation has involved more than 40 farm and food system partners representing farmers, government, universities, extension and outreach, public health advocates and organizations, food banks and pantries, public schools, and more.

The Coalition offers a place to connect and learn, where you can expect regular communications and collaboration among partners. Coalition partners are engaged in strategic reporting and planning, advancing policy development and advocacy, and raising awareness of the important food and farming work taking place throughout the state.

The work will be guided by a commitment to **equity**, relationships, lived experience, and the interconnection between environment, celebration of community, and human health.

We envision an Iowa food system that cultivates health, justice, and sustainability for all people, communities, and the environment.



Tika Bhandari, LSI Global Greens farmer, explains about her crops and farming practices at PFI Field Day in 2023.

Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

OUR FOOD AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND

Iowa's land is a defining resource for this state – a tapestry of amazing beauty and opportunity. Our agricultural legacy is founded on world class soils, skilled farmers, and a deep history – from Indigenous practices to pioneering technology. For our food system to truly nourish everyone, we need to consider our relationship with the land and each other.

Practices and policies over time have had – and continue to have – a direct impact on the land's capacity to sustain life to the fullest. The Homestead Act of 1862 forcibly removed Indigenous communities from their lands in Iowa. We acknowledge the resulting devastation and subsequent work to reclaim the sovereignty of these communities. Injustices continue to ripple across the land and through Iowa's communities, disproportionately impacting people of color. We also acknowledge current policies and practices that impact the integrity of our natural resources, impacting ecosystem diversity, water quality and soil health. These historic and ongoing dynamics create a fundamental vulnerability in our relationship with each other and with the land.

OUR COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

To achieve the food system we envision, the Iowa Food System Coalition (IFSC) holds social and racial equity as foundational to this work. We are committed to the personal and systems change required and are dedicated to the creation of practices and policies to support equitable distribution of food system resources and power. Equity goals are also incorporated into the priorities' strategies and actions. We invite partners to help us continue to be accountable as our collective work develops. Celebrate together when we get it right, keep up the pressure when we misstep.



*IFSC Food & Farm Day on the Hill, 2024.
Source: Luke Elzinga, DMARC*

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our attention was riveted when markets shut down, food insecurity skyrocketed, and the health of workers on farms and in processing plants were compromised. In addition, devastating weather events have led to disruptions in food production, processing and distribution, revealing the inherent vulnerabilities of the global food supply chain and our heavy dependence upon it (Opar, 2021).

By contrast, the local farm and food economy proved its agility and quick responsiveness as farmers pivoted to make food available in their communities during the pandemic (Libbey, Tran Lam, 2020). Across Iowa, food farmers are putting their land, skills and knowledge on the cutting edge of better health and stronger local economies while addressing the dual global crises of climate change and biodiversity loss (ALUS, 2024; Kinney, 2023). As weather continues to intensify in places like California and Florida, where most of the nation's fruits and vegetables are currently grown, a great opportunity is arising for Iowa to take the lead to produce a more diverse range of products able to nourish those across the state and country.

Supporting farms to grow a diversity of foods in Iowa is a strategic investment for the state and the nation, ensuring we have nutritious food to eat, strengthening economic opportunity, and connecting urban and rural communities while insulating us from future supply chain shocks.



Local farms demonstrated their agility when faced with market limitations of Covid-19 pandemic.

Source: Blue Gate Farm

Setting the Table for All Iowans builds upon decades of food system work and nurtured relationships and is today energized by new partnerships and emerging leaders.

From the fall of 2021 through the summer of 2022, community-based input sessions across the state were organized to generate a shared vision, mission, and values, and to identify top priorities for this food system plan. Food system partners continued to meet throughout 2023 to develop goals, strategies, and recommendations for each priority area. The result is the plan before you, developed with the knowledge, insight, and expertise of more than 600 dedicated and passionate food system professionals and Iowa residents, including farmers, educators, non-profits, farm to school and early care advocates, state government, anti-hunger advocates, food hubs, food banks, public health experts, advocates, and more.

Creating a food system plan with the input of so many individuals and organizations helps partners see their work in relation to each other and the whole. It is a tool to help us speak with a unified voice to decision makers, the community, and to each other. The plan calls for priorities and policies to be informed and guided by contributions from those most impacted by the food system, inviting a bottom-up approach to food system planning. The plan holds us accountable to all of these objectives, giving us metrics for determining our success. *Setting the Table for all Iowans* sets forth a bold agenda to find and implement solutions for an Iowa food system that supports all Iowans.



Priority team member planning meeting
Source: IFSC

Introducing the Priorities

Setting the Table for all Iowans identifies high priorities for the state that need urgent and simultaneous attention. Nine interconnected priorities create a big picture approach to the system that brings food from field to plate. Each priority section explains its importance in the larger picture, highlighting strategies and actions needed to impact what is grown, sold and eaten in Iowa. Together, these priorities help create a food system based on equity, fairness and land stewardship. Commitment to these actions offers Iowans a pathway to build greater resilience at the intersection of our health, economy, and environment.

The Nine Priorities



Land and Resource Access

Secure land tenure is fundamental to farm business development and vibrant local economies. Programs, policy, and system change – with an emphasis on equity for those who have been historically and systemically marginalized by government programs – will create clearer pathways to growing and sustaining vibrant food production in Iowa.



Farm and Food Business Development

Farm and food businesses bring the food system to life. Targeted technical support, innovative business modeling, investment, and policy development are critical strategies to foster long term viability in Iowa. Ensuring equity will require unique service development with and for farmers of color.



Farm and Food System Infrastructure

The “machinery” of the food system essential to the harvest, processing, transporting and distribution of food is a critical bridge from farm to table. Strategies needed include investment and innovative collaborations throughout the supply chain.



Expand Local Food Purchasing and Procurement

Getting food into markets where a majority of Iowans shop and eat means addressing the constraints faced by buyers, farmers, and those in between. Additionally, institutional markets like schools, hospitals and food pantries, can create opportunities for Iowa’s farms. Increased investment, education, infrastructure and policy development will take Iowa’s tested models of farm to food access to the next level, expanding local food purchasing and providing new markets for farmers at fair prices.



Food, Nutrition, and Health

Addressing the root causes of chronic diet-related disease and food and nutrition insecurity requires a systems approach. Policy change, incentives, and educational initiatives are needed to improve the well-being of lowans while increasing opportunity for Iowa farmers and food entrepreneurs.



Environmental Stewardship

Prioritizing small and mid-sized farmers committed to innovative environmental practices helps build a resilient food system. Incentives, technical support, and policy will help protect rural and urban farmland, provide for animal welfare, increase space for wild land in Iowa, and protect the quality and quantity of Iowa soil, water and air.



Labor Equity

The food system relies upon invisible workers from farm employees to school kitchen staff and many in between. Increased and coordinated commitment to skill development, livable wages, and a safe, equitable, and supportive work environment is needed to truly ensure the food system works for all lowans.



Communication & Education

Helping lowans improve their knowledge and experience with food and farming and the issues we face when making good choices requires thoughtful coordination among communication and education partners. Consistent messaging will strengthen the impact of a more unified voice.



Local Food Policy Network

True system change is rooted in policy work and requires collaboration among many sectors of the food system and priority teams. Coordination and discussion between state and local partners is needed in order to organize and advocate for the best transformational food system policy change.

BACKGROUND



Figure 1. Food System Elements. Food Systems Diagram from ISU Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development.

Food Systems: What are They and Why Do They Matter?

“Food system” refers to the complex and dynamic labyrinth of people who grow, harvest, store, distribute, transport and sell food. The processes across the system are typically categorized into production, harvest, processing, distribution, and consumption. There are additional interconnections and influences of many external factors (**Figure 1**) (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, 2023).

Overall, food systems matter for three key reasons:

- What we eat – our diets – is one of the biggest drivers of health and well-being.
- Food system policy decisions influence the benefits and challenges for food sovereignty, access, business viability, and general food supply and consumption.
- Current food systems have an enormous impact on our economy, – both rural and urban – drive climate change, and threaten the environment (UNICEF, 2024).

Food Systems in Iowa

In Iowa, the national and global food system plays a major role with 85% of Iowa's land in agricultural production and nearly 75% of that - 23 million acres - dedicated to growing two crops – corn and soybeans. These crops are used primarily to feed livestock, generate ethanol, create processed food products and are heavily dependent on markets outside of Iowa. By comparison, the acres dedicated to vegetables, fruit, and berry production - 12,650 acres - represent a fraction of a percentage of Iowa land ([USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022](#)). The small and medium sized farms in Iowa raising horticultural crops and other, diverse food products for direct-from-the-farm sales play a rather minor role in Iowa's agriculture at this time.

While Iowa is known for its farming, most of what we grow isn't food that's improving the health of Iowans. Additional, complex interconnections between food access, racial inequities, and diet-related disease also impact food system development. One in 13 Iowans face hunger ([Feeding America, 2024](#)) and that hunger disproportionately impacts people of color ([Iowa Department of Public Health, 2022](#)).

With ultra-processed food making up more than 70% of the American food supply ([Agostino, 2022](#)), the affordable choice is often the high calorie choice. And ultra-processed foods are increasingly recognized for their connection to chronic, diet-related disease ([Godoy, 2023](#)).

A [50-state food system scorecard](#) points out that there is a balancing act between food system decisions and investments and health, economic, and environmental outcomes. From farm to fork, our food system can be something we are proud of—supporting farmers, workers, and local economies; ensuring that everyone has access to enough nutritious food to stay healthy; and protecting our soil and water for the future. Expanding the role of the local and regional food system in Iowa starts with frank, open conversations and greater understanding to illuminate the opportunities we have for change.

There's more to "local food" than miles. Uses of the term share a common desire to shape a food system that provides positive outcomes for the economy, health, equity, and environmental resilience. Visit "[Talking about Iowa's Food System](#)" for additional definitions of the local food system.

Progress in Iowa Food System Development, 2011 - 2022

The 2011 Farm and Food Plan, adopted by the Iowa legislature, provided the state's first outline of a statewide plan of action including a comprehensive set of 34 recommendations. A second report from 2011, Cultivating Resilience connected the dots between chronic, diet-related disease and the need to create environments and systems in which healthy food is the most accessible and easiest choice for all Iowans. Since the adoption and dissemination of these reports and an expanded national conversation about local food, there has been growth in demand for and interest in local and regional food in Iowa. Some of the notable achievements of the past years include:

"The [LFS and LFPA] programs build [capacity] for long term partnerships that will grow economic opportunities for farmers, increase access to local food and improve supply chain resiliency."

-Iowa Secretary of Agriculture
Mike Naig, June 9, 2022



- Iowa's farm to school and early care program has seen steady growth in the number of schools and early care sites buying local food for meal programs with a 22% increase between 2019 and 2022. (Farm to School & Early Care Coalition, 2024).
- Between 2021 and 2023, Iowa legislators expanded state commitment to farm, school, and food hub infrastructure, meat lockers, dairy processing, and local food marketing, growing local food investment from \$1 million to nearly \$2.8 million.

Local Food Momentum

Programs	2021	2022	2023
Local Food & Farm Program	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$75,000
Choose Iowa Grants	\$250,000	\$463,000	\$463,000
Butchery Innovation Program	\$750,000	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
Choose Iowa Promotion Program		\$500,000	\$500,000
Dairy Innovation Program			\$750,000
Total: \$5.9 million	\$1,075,000	\$2,038,000	\$2,788,000

Source: Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship

- Between 2022 and 2025, more than \$8 million will have been invested in Iowa’s local and regional food system through two sister USDA programs – Local Food for School (LFS) and Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA). These programs have successfully connected the farmers who want to grow the food with the people who need it. The key to success has been relationships rooted in trust between farmers, food hubs, and schools and community food access partners. The program recognizes the need for investment of funds to pay farmers a fair price while also making nutritious, locally grown food affordable.
- The [Iowa Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program](#) (RFSI), added another \$5.2 million to recent investment in Iowa’s food system development in 2024. Iowa’s RFSI partners will work with USDA to make competitive subawards to support infrastructure in the middle of the supply chain. Part of the funds will be earmarked to develop and strengthen supply chain coordination and targeted market development activities in Iowa.
- Iowa State University is one of five state partners in the new \$25 million [USDA Heartland Regional Food Business Center](#) announced in 2023. This Center, while in early stages, will be a new source of technical support, coordination, and capacity building.
- Governmental agencies, including the Iowa Department of Education, Health and Human Services, Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and Economic Development have all been increasingly active with local and regional food system efforts over the past 5-8 years.

IMPACT		
FARMS & FOOD BUSINESSES SERVED	276	243
COUNTIES SERVED	69	95
SCHOOLS OR COMMUNITY ACCESS POINTS	135	778
STUDENTS SERVED IN THE 1ST YEAR	180,212	

The Local Food for School program generated almost \$2 in local economies for every \$1 spent.

([Wiemerslage, 2023](#))

([Local Food by the Numbers, Wiemerslage, 2023](#))

Limiting Factors

Yet, with all of these steps forward, farmers and food businesses still experience challenges in finding labor, distributing products and ensuring profitability when bringing food from the farm gate to the dinner plate in Iowa. Additionally, strong federal, state, and corporate support for farmers to grow commodities like corn and soybeans disincentivize farmers to take the risk of switching to table products. Access to land for aspiring farmers is limited by high land prices, urban development pressures, and the consolidation of land in the hands of the few.

“Between, 2020-2023, the average per acre cost of land in Iowa has increased by 56%”

- Iowa State University’s Farmland Value Survey ([Chandio, 2023](#))

Shifts in precipitation, air temperature, and soil moisture are disrupting agricultural production and are projected to reduce the availability and affordability of nutritious food. This “new normal,” unpredictable and often catastrophic, elevates the importance of local and regional food production that advances ecologically based practices and improves the resilience of rural communities ([U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, 2023](#)). With some of the most fertile soil in the world, a central location in the country, and plentiful land and ground water resources, diversifying Iowa’s crops can give Iowa another agricultural advantage – **helping guarantee the availability of nutritious food for Iowans as well as the nation, while ensuring higher incomes for farmers.**

The vision of a thriving, sustainable and equitable food system calls for a new commitment to equity as an integral element of the many strategies and actions outlined, much as the USDA did in its [2024 Equity Commission’s Final Report](#). We must reckon with profound racial injustices that are historic and ongoing. The exploitative economic institution of slavery and the land theft of Indigenous communities set wealth disparities into motion as an early and real factor of the United States of America’s rich agricultural heritage. Persistent wealth and **health disparities** connected to food systems continue through purposeful exclusion like segregation and municipal redlining, repeated denial of government loans, and inequitable allocation of grants and resources to Black, Indigenous, and other farmers/producers of color ([Bustillo, 2023](#)).

Dismantling unjust systems and achieving equity must be collaborative, intentional, and actionable to effect systemic change. We need a consistent commitment to addressing deeper, structural change by those who hold the most power. ([Scalera, Mickie, Johnson, Mensch, & Kelly, 2022](#))

To address the root causes that impact our food system, consideration of place and class must be integrated along with racial equity ([Community Strategies Group, 2022](#)). Rural communities vital to U.S. agriculture have excelled at entrepreneurship, but also struggle with high rates of poverty ([Farrigan, 2020](#)) and often lack the capacity to leverage resources such as The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act ([Headwaters Economics, 2023](#)).



FROM PROBLEMS TO POSSIBILITIES

Reimagining Iowa's Food System

What if Iowa were to:

- Encourage more diversity in our fields and in our diets?
- Prioritize support for farms that grow the food we eat?
- Ensure that all have enough nutritious food to eat and the opportunity to participate in creating a better system?

These are not just rhetorical questions – these scenarios are necessary and possible. But it means envisioning new ways of thinking about how our food is grown, processed, transported, accessed, and valued. It means understanding and working with the whole system. It means systems change and solutions that are informed by a mixture of research and the lived experience of many parties across the food system and those – rural white as well as people of color – whose voice has not been included in past planning.

In order to facilitate intentional change and turn problems into possibilities, *Setting the Table for all Iowans* breaks complex issues within the existing system into nine priority areas in need of urgent and simultaneous attention. Together, the priorities can be grouped into three categories (**Figure 3**): the building blocks needed to grow our local and regional food system, the health and resilience we support for Iowans, our communities, and the land, and the strategies needed to empower Iowans as leaders and changemakers. These categories provide a three layered framing of the plan while also emphasizing the dynamic interconnection between all priority areas.

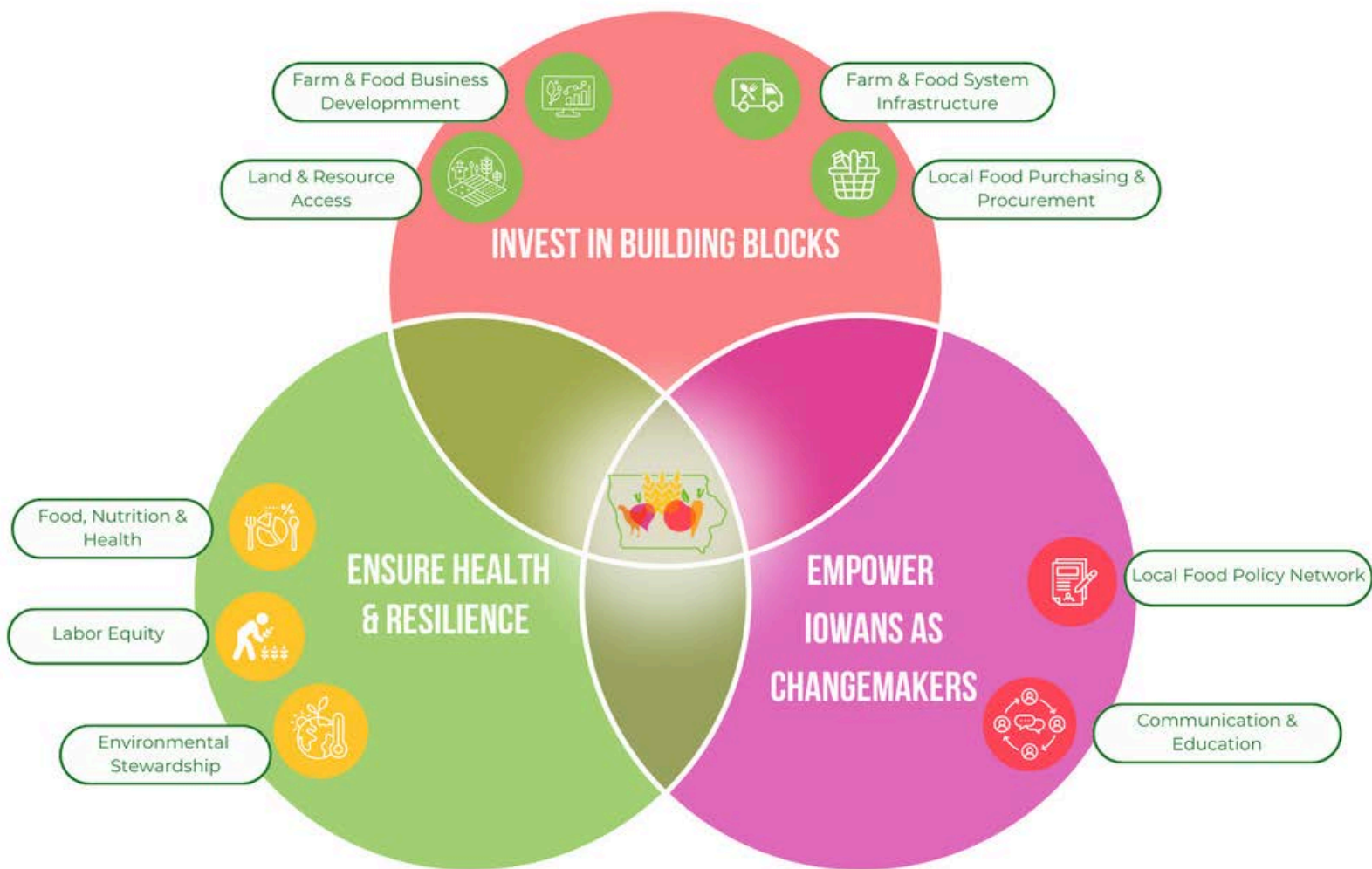


Figure 3. Iowa Food System Coalition Priority Area categories and their interconnection



Investing in Food System Building Blocks

What the plan calls for:

Targeted investment, policies, technical assistance, and investment in relationships can support more equitable access to land and resources, an increased number of farms and businesses producing food in and for Iowa, and better coordinated infrastructure development.

The impact:

Ensuring that a solid foundation of our food system increases the opportunities for Iowans to fill their nutritional needs with locally and regionally produced food and farmers are supported and paid a fair price.

Ensuring Health & Resilience

What the plan calls for:

A focus on education, program, policy and system innovation targeting human, animal, plant and soil health. Acknowledgement, coordination, and advocacy for the many layers of workers involved in the food system, from farmers and farm workers to school kitchen staff and grocery workers – strong and consistent support of the human infrastructure necessary for our food system to thrive.

The impact:

By focusing solutions on root causes, the change in health outcomes will be more impactful and long-lasting. Encouragement for environmental innovation and more diversity on the Iowa landscape supports greater resilience in the face of climate change. Increased health and wellbeing of workers across the food system supports more justice and vitality for all Iowans. Addressing the intersection of health and resilience expands partners engaged in meeting complex societal problems with food system solutions.

“If Iowans ate the recommended five daily servings of fruits & vegetables, and Iowa farmers supplied that produce three months of the year, this would add \$302.4 million and 4,094 jobs to Iowa’s economy.”

([Iowa State University, 2006](#))

Empowering Iowans as Changemakers

What the plan calls for:

Coordination among many communication and education partners along with policy development and advocacy. More unified messaging based on a shared vision will result in better communication and policy development supporting the translation of all priorities into action.

The impact:

Real change comes from the ground up. Leadership development through communication and policy development are core elements of building power and influence. Innovative and culturally appropriate solutions will assure that actions are better aligned to address root causes.

Reimagining

Flawed systems designed by humans can also be fixed by humans when people work together.

These partnerships will continue to grow, rooted in shared values, holding each other accountable to balanced and equitable decision-making and advancing political, economic, and environmental structural change.

“A growing number of farmers want change because they’re watching their rural communities disappear, their schools are consolidating, and hospitals and public services are shutting their doors. They’re seeing that the next generation of farmers can’t afford to come back to farm, and they’re seeing their friends’ and neighbors’ health and vitality suffer due to a lack of fresh, affordable food and clean water.”

-Johnson, 2023

SETTING THE TABLE FOR ALL IOWANS

Creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system.

The Chapters for each priority provide the reader with a goal statement, why the priority is important, and a set of strategies, actions, and outcomes, followed by an in-depth description of the existing conditions related to the priority. A list of partners actively engaged with the priority is also listed.

These chapters represent the backbone of the plan, intended to guide work over the next decade. We will review and evaluate the plan on a regular basis, allowing time to incorporate new insights as the work progresses.

Setting the Table for All Iowans is not destined for the bookshelf. It will be an active, living, and responsive plan.

The Priority teams provide the leadership to guide the strategies and actions called for in each chapter and will meet regularly. Updates from each group will be shared during quarterly Coalition meetings, incorporating the input from new partners. Work plans for each priority area will be developed and updated along the way.

The Plan at a Glance can be used to envision and understand how the priorities overlap and complement each other. Alternatively, you can dig deep into the chapters that interest you the most.

CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about Setting the Table for All Iowans and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Get connected with a priority area. Each priority chapter offers practical suggestions for how to apply the plan to your community. Find the Call to Action prompt after each Strategy Section.

Explore the Priority Chapters

1. [Land and Resource Access](#): Supporting Farmers from the Ground Up
2. [Farm and Food Business Development](#): Growing Business Innovation
3. [Farm and Food System Infrastructure](#): Moving Food Along the Value Chain
4. [Local Food Purchasing and Procurement](#): Growing Reliable Markets for Nutritious Food
5. [Food, Nutrition, and Health](#): Activating the Food & Health Connection
6. [Labor Equity](#): Elevating the Workers Behind Our Food
7. [Environmental Stewardship](#): Strengthening the Land, Health, and Environment Connection
8. [Communication and Education](#): Amplifying the Local Food Message
9. [Local Food Policy Network](#): Advocating for Transformation

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Tika Bhandari, LSI Global Greens program graduate, speaking to a crowd at PFI Field Day.
Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa



LAND & RESOURCE ACCESS

SUPPORTING FARMERS FROM THE GROUND UP



LAND & RESOURCE ACCESS

GOAL

To improve food farmers' access to long term **land tenure** and the resources necessary to build viable businesses, especially for those who have been historically and systemically marginalized.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

Access to land is deeply connected to multiple issues –

- Society needs farmers to grow healthy food, fiber, and other crops.
- Access to land is the number one challenge facing the next generation of farmers in the United States ([National Young Farmers, 2023](#)).
- Land access is key to supporting positive public health outcomes and social equity as it impacts what is grown, ¹ where, and by whom.
- Access to land is particularly important for marginalized communities as it can be one of the largest forms of generational wealth ([Gilbert, Wood, Sharp, 2002](#)).

Data on who owns and farms Iowa's land clarifies why this is an issue.

- Two thirds of Iowa farmers are over 65 years of age – retirement age ([Tong and Zhang, 2023](#)).
- 84% of Iowa farm ground is owned debt-free and is increasingly owned by non-farmers who like fixed cash-rent contracts and are highly unlikely to sell their ground to someone outside the family ([Clayton, 2023](#)).
- Agricultural land value in Iowa has seen sharp increases in recent years (29% from 2020 to 2021), putting land ownership out of reach for most young and beginning farmers and farmers of color with less generational wealth ([Chandio, 2023](#)).



- Most common method of transfer - **willing to family**
 - accounts for 50% of all acres in Iowa farmland.
- Just 4% of Iowa farmland will be available for sale to a non-family member.
- Only 11% of Iowa landowners expect to transfer their land in the next 5 years.
- Top concerns of selling to beginning farmers include
 - finding competent beginning farmers and;
 - receiving fair market value.

Figure 1: Key factors influencing land transfer in Iowa. Source: 2023 Land Ownership and Tenure Report



Daquan Campbell, Founder of We Arose, with staff members at the We Arose Demonstration Garden in Waterloo, Iowa. We Arose aims to elevate urban farming cooperation by building community & increasing access. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

Millions of acres are expected to change hands in the coming decades as farmers age out of active farming, indicating an opportunity to reimagine the future of farmland ownership and access. The 2022 Land Tenure report identifies factors influencing land transfer in Iowa (Figure 1).

If this window of opportunity is missed, the pattern of wealth accumulation and land use patterns that we see today will continue, further consolidating land into the hands of absentee landlords and corporations with little or no knowledge of farming or the environment. A generation of new growers anxious to expand their operations will continue to face challenges growing food for their communities and building wealth through business development.

We can support a healthy, just, and sustainable food system by focusing attention on land and resource access, supporting the farmers who seek land and landowners who can make a positive impact on the land and in their communities.



LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Land & Resource Access priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating space to support the outlined strategies below. This team is currently led by Lutheran Services of Iowa’s Global Greens program and Practical Farmers of Iowa and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this priority. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goal to improve food farmers’ access to the land and resources necessary to build viable businesses, we have determined the following strategies and actions are urgently needed. We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas, and especially rely on the support teams of the Local Food Policy Network, Labor Equity, Communication and Education priority teams as well as the cornerstone teams such as Farm and Food Business Development, Farm and Food System Infrastructure, and Local Food Purchasing & Procurement.



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY NETWORK



LABOR EQUITY



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



FARM & FOOD
BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT



FARM & FOOD
SYSTEM
INFRASTRUCTURE



LOCAL FOOD
PURCHASING &
PROCUREMENT



Strategy 1

Develop a portfolio of low-barrier funding that bridges gaps for farmers to access land, capital, and other farm resource needs.

Action 1: Identify, compile, and share information on existing funding and financial assistance programs in Iowa for non-profit, federal and state programs, including grant and/or low interest loan programs, etc. (e.g. Innovative Butchery Grant, Choose Iowa, and USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program).

Action 2: Identify and advocate for state policies that support secure long-term land and resource access. (e.g. The Minnesota Down Payment Assistance grant, Iowa Finance Authority down payment assistance loans, strategies for restricting the sale of land when housing is removed).

Action 3: Identify and support programmatic strategies that non-profit and other partners can implement to support farmers to access financial, land, and other resources.

Outcomes

- Increased public and private partners' awareness of this issue.
- Increased farmers and gardeners' knowledge about resources available.
- Increased collective advocacy for policy change across all areas of land and resource access.
- Increased farmer and nonprofits' knowledge of necessary policy priorities to improve available programs, including the creation of CDFIs (Community Development Financial Institutions) for low-barrier loans and money available for savings match programs.
- Improved affordable access to land and other essential resources for small and mid-sized farmers.



Strategy 2

Expand innovative pathways to land ownership and land tenure beyond the traditional pathways of family transfer or financing, loans, or generational wealth.

Action 1: Identify existing organizations and farmers that support land and resource connection. Research non-familial land transfers.

Action 2: Develop case studies of successful, creative land access methods. (e.g. models such as Humble Hands Farm of Decorah, Iowa; LSI Global Greens; agricultural land trusts such as Sustainable Iowa Land Trust, Mad Capital, etc.).

Action 3: Develop material and outreach strategies to promote replicable, innovative pathways to land tenure and develop support networks for farmers to re-create these models.

Outcomes

- Establish a baseline of existing organizations and innovative opportunities within those organizations for land connections.
- Increased formal and informal collaborations between organizations to broaden opportunities for land connections within farm networks.
- Increased number of land seekers and landowners who are supported with guidance and pathway support to make land connections.
- Increased number of individuals who are supported with guidance and pathway support to access land and other essential resources for viable farm business.



Strategy 3

Improve farm linking services between land seekers and landowners.

Action 1: Identify existing programs and gaps (e.g. the capacity among collaborating partners and information on what landowners and land seekers need to make appropriate matches).

Action 2: Expand the support, education, and programming for land access and farm business readiness for farmers and landowners.

Action 3: Foster relationships and mediate connections between land seekers and landowners.

Outcomes

- Increased partner collaboration for education learning platforms and shared resources.
- Secured funding for programming development and delivery.
- Increased number of viable farm businesses and longevity of land access for small and mid-sized farmers.



Strategy 4

Ensure diverse, small, urban, and mid-sized farmers have equitable opportunities and services at USDA and other financial and business institutions.

Action 1: Work with federal, state, and local government agencies to identify the changes needed to create a more welcoming climate for food farmers seeking technical and financial support.

Action 2: Establish a set of best practices and necessary trainings for local agencies and develop material to support the changes needed (i.e. lending to vegetable farmers and other small and mid-sized farming businesses).

Action 3: Foster connections and dialogue between historically and systemically marginalized farmers with USDA agencies and other institutions who work with farm lending capital.

Outcomes

- Increased understanding of the practices and institutions where change is desired.
- Enhance food farmers' capacity and confidence in their relationship with service providers.
- Increased cultural sensitivity about small and mid-sized food farming and decreased barriers to financial support at institutions that administer land and resource access programs.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Feed Iowa First](#)

[Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens Program](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[Sustainable Iowa Land Trust](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education](#)

[Women, Food and Agriculture Network](#)

Existing Resources and potential funding opportunities: [Choose Iowa Grants Program](#),

[North Central SARE \(Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education\) Grants](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Land & Resource Access](#) team.

Whether you are interested in home or commercial scale, access to land to grow food starts in your neighborhood.

- Build your knowledge of land and resource access in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - Are community gardens available in your area? These are important resources that increase affordable access to nutritious food and can incubate future farmers.
 - What zoning discussions are underway in your community that could support food production? It doesn't take a lot of ground to produce a lot of food. Unused lots can be turned into beautiful, productive community centerpieces of food production, but may require advocating for zoning action.
 - Is land available on a larger scale in or around your community? Farmland adjacent to communities can be an access point for local food production. Landowners who learn how their land can benefit a beginning farm might be willing to explore new partnerships.
- Speak up – educate others and advocate for land and resource access in your community.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

“Secure access to land, or land tenure, is the foundation of vibrant communities, food sovereignty, climate resiliency, and sound farm businesses. It is critically important for food safety, mental health, market access, farm planning, soil improvements, and navigating severe weather events”

(NSAC, 2021).

A recent survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition cited land access as the top challenge cited by current farmers, aspiring farmers, and those who have stopped farming, and proves even more challenging for **BIPOC** farmers (Ackoff et al., 2022).

Adding to the complexity of land access is that farmers are not simply searching for land to grow on, they are looking for land to build a life upon. Farms developing in urban communities are well-positioned to serve these larger populations, yet struggle to find affordable and reliable access to land in areas with development competition.

In rural communities, land opportunities may be more accessible at lower rates, but housing, coupled with a limited market base, impact food farm viability. Either the land needs to be within driving distance to farmers’ homes or secure housing needs to be an option on the land. Access to health care is another factor that impacts farm business stability. Insufficient income to cover health care costs often results in farmers seeking off farm jobs which can undercut critical capacity to invest in business development.



Sweet Tooth Farm. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa



Racial disparity in land access - past and present

The history of land ownership and racial inequity in the United States must inform the conversations around land and resource access if we are to realize a more equitable future for farming. The construct of land ownership in the United States has been used to dispossess Indigenous people of their land for centuries, and is tied to ongoing discrimination experienced by Black, Indigenous, and people of color. The result is immense inequity in land ownership ([Rippon-Butler, 2020](#)).

As one of the few (and largest) forms of wealth, land ownership in minority communities is particularly important ([Gilbert, Wood, Sharp, 2002](#)). However, the percentage of Black farm ownership is disproportionate to the percentage of the Black population in Iowa as a whole. White Iowans make up 89.8% of the state population, but own more than 98% of Iowa farm land. Black Iowans make up 4.4 % of the state population, yet own 0.03% of the farmland ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2020](#) and [NASS, 2022](#)).

Landownership by Race



(USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022)

“When we talk about land, we must acknowledge its deep connection to policy and power.”

[Rippon-Butler, 2020](#)

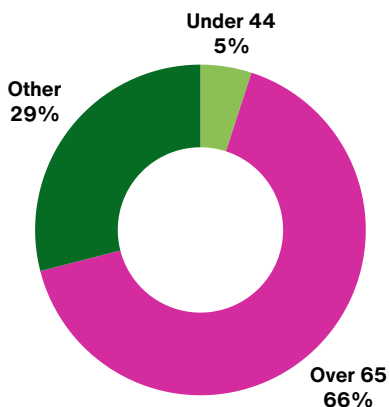
Present day land and resource access disparities continue in the form of lack of support and representation in state and national farm organizations where important farm policy decisions are made and discriminatory lending practices by the government occur ([Jodan, 2022](#)).

A recent report by the USDA Economic Research Service, notes that **socially disadvantaged (SDA) producers** (beginning, BIPOC, disabled, immigrant, **LGBT+**, refugee, veteran and women farmers) “...may have fewer financial resources and face additional constraints when buying or raising capital for expanding farm operations” ([Callahan & Hellerstein, 2022](#), pg. i).

Yet, many beginning and marginalized farmers who call Iowa home bring valuable agricultural experiences and represent a new generation of farmers. Without great wealth or family connections, these new farmers face nearly insurmountable barriers to land access in Iowa ([Gilbert, Wood, Sharp, 2002](#)).

Landownership by Age

Iowa land ownership is dominated by land owners nearing retirement.



Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022



LSI Global Greens - daughter and mother explaining their garden plot during PFI Field Day. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

Understanding more about land ownership and supporting connections may unleash new opportunities

For a state with a deep farming heritage, the aging population of Iowa farmers and the shift away from landowners involved in day-to-day management should raise questions. Who will be making farming decisions and what values will inform those decisions? The approaching land transition can be a significant source of stress - for landowners, land seekers, and families caught in between. Understanding more about this issue can turn this 'problem' into a possibility.

Three insights captured by the [2023 Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey](#) add to the overarching pattern of Iowa's aging farmland ownership. First, land supply is tight with little indication that landowners intend to sell outside of the family.

Tight Land Supply

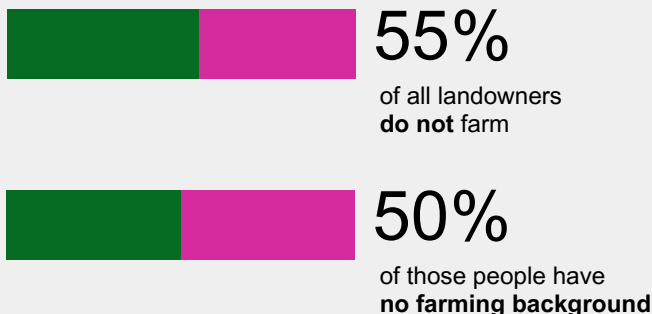
With these two situations, we will continue to see a tight farmland supply.



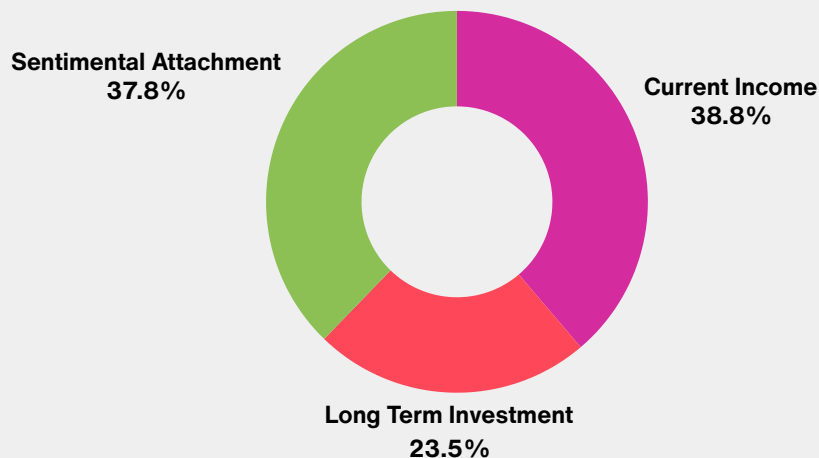
Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022



Fewer Iowa landowners are directly involved as operators



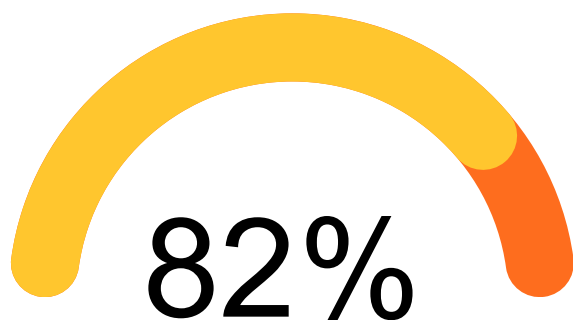
Primary reasons for owning Iowa farmland



(Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022)

Second, increasingly owners have no farming experience, and land ownership is primarily motivated by income, long term investment, and sentimental attachment.

Third, the 2022 survey responses suggest that attitudes toward beginning farmers for the first time. The responses suggest that there is land owner receptivity to selling to beginning farmers when certain criteria (Tong and Zhang, 2023).



of landowners, demonstrated a willingness to sell their land to beginning farmers, especially with tax incentives or fair market price

(Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022)

Primary concerns about selling to beginning farmer



(Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022)



46%
of Iowa
landowners are
women

Nearly 25%
lease their land to
someone other
than a
friend or family
member

Gender and the Land

It should be pointed out that women landowners, in particular, have been identified as having strong viewpoints about the sustainability of their farm.

(Women Caring for the Land, 2023)

(Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey, 1982-2022)

Women bring more receptivity to working with beginning farmers. The Voices of Iowa Women Farmland Owners Survey of 2022, noted that most women in the survey lease out at least a portion of their farm, and that nearly a quarter of respondents lease their land to someone other than a friend or family member. These attitudes reflect greater opportunities for others to lease the land – potentially a beginning farmer or someone else from a younger generation (Zhang & Schultz, 2022).

Strategic and coordinated development of policies and programs aimed at addressing the concerns of landowners and leaning into opportunities with women landowners may open windows where closed doors have been perceived.

Examples and insights of improved land and resource initiatives

Early strides are being made to support farmers in addressing the issues of land and resource access. [Practical Farmers of Iowa's Navigating Land Connections Program](#); a partnership between [LSI Global Greens](#), [In Harmony Farm](#) and [Sustainable Iowa Land Trust](#) (SILT); and local zoning initiatives are a few examples of unique land access models being used.

Practical Farmers of Iowa's (PFI) Farmland Access Navigators help beginning farmers looking for land address what is financially and logistically possible and what is not, and help navigate compromises and decisions. Hannah Breckbill, of Decorah, Iowa has championed innovative land tenure practices as a Land Navigator for PFI and, in partnership with community members, formed Hidden Falls LLC. The Practical Farmers of Iowa's 2023 Farmland Owner Legacy Award was presented to Hidden Falls LLC in recognition of their efforts to create land access for beginning farmers while protecting ecologically sensitive land (Payne, S. 2023).





Members of Hidden Falls LLC gathered on Sept. 10 in Decorah, Iowa, to celebrate Humble Hands Harvest transition to land ownership. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

Lutheran Services of Iowa (LSI) [Global Greens program](#) helps immigrant and refugee farmers get started in farming by providing access to quarter acre plots, technical assistance, and education that helps them navigate Iowa's food and farm system. However, program graduates face challenges of adequate infrastructure when they seek a larger land base within a reasonable distance of their urban markets. Housing becomes an additional resource issue when the farmable land available is far from farmer communities and when the land offered lacks important infrastructure.

One policy and planning practice that can be useful is Land Trusts. Land Trusts have grown in popularity and ensure that land remains farmable. It can also be helpful for succession planning ([May, 2023](#)). [The Sustainable Iowa Land Trust's \(SILT\)](#) provides a unique easement that keeps food production on a piece of ground, permanently. This has helped a number of farmers secure access to the land to build their business.



Bizimana spent years in a Tanzanian refugee camp after fleeing his home country of Burundi, and he dreamed of one day continuing his family's legacy of farming. When his family was relocated to Iowa, he joined LSI's Global Greens program. He now grows his favorite foods from Burundi while building his own business. Source: LSI Global Greens





SILT’s “Circle Our Cities” campaign aims to circle 10 Iowa cities with 10 permanent, sustainable farms in 10 years and has begun in Dubuque, Des Moines, Fairfield, and Iowa City.

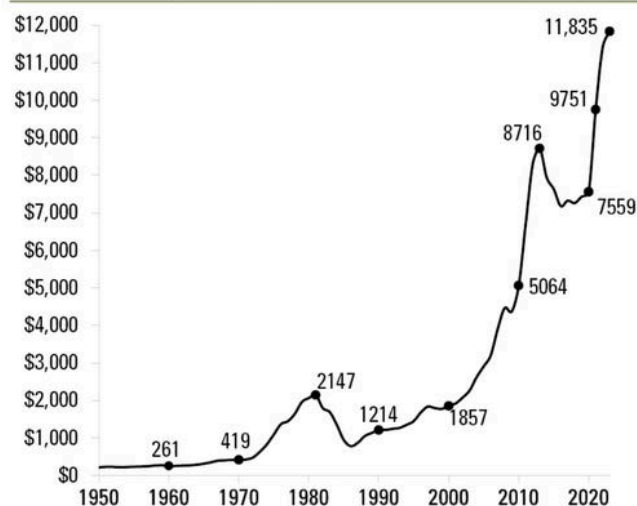
Source: SILT

Dense populations in urban areas and the sprawl of development create competition for land access in these areas. Zoning at the city and county level becomes important to understand. Zoning in these areas plays a major role in this disparity. Community zoning policies present a mixture of limitations, confusing starts and stops, and access to new and innovative initiatives. Food farmers continue to introduce new land use requests in urban communities and it is the zoning boards who have the responsibility of working through new interpretations. In some cases, existing policy has limited urban agriculture opportunities while in others, farmers have persevered and have been able to find a workable solution with their local zoning board. In Des Moines, Jeremy Caron, has been coordinating a reprioritization of public lands within the Des Moines City limits, exploring pathways to land access in partnership with LSI Global Greens and SILT.

Why timing matters

Access to land for new and beginning farmers during a land transition period is impacted by financial stability of current land owners, policies, and sentimental attachment to family land. Anyone that does find available land faces the current high land values. While the 2022 Land Value Survey reported a moderate 3.7% increase in land value between 2022 and 2023, the previous two years’ surveys had reported 17% and 29% respectively with an average value of \$11,835 per acre (as of November, 2023). This valuation was noted as being higher than at any other time since Iowa State University began surveying values in 1941 ([Chandio, 2023](#)).

Figure 1. Average value per acre of Iowa farmland.



Source: Iowa State University Land Value Survey



Expand and improve education programming for farmers and landowners

Bridging the gap in current land ownership and access to land involves a more thorough understanding of considerations by both the land seeker and land owner. Iowa Food System Coalition partners have identified the critical need for education of both farmers and landowners to more clearly align expectations and ensure greater stability and sustainability in new land partnership relationships. Land navigators, noted above, are resource personnel who provide important support and connection to both land seekers and land owners and help facilitate clearer communication and strategic planning. Continuation and expansion of these services will provide necessary support for increasing land access.



Amber Mohr, not only tends her farm, but works with land seekers helping them navigate the many aspects of planning to secure land. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Why increasing cultural sensitivity among institutional service providers is necessary

Institutional service providers such as USDA Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and other financial institution service providers represent another window to land related resources in terms of cost share programs and loans. However, as recognized by the White House Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, “entrenched disparities in laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions, have often denied that equal opportunity to individuals and communities” ([White House, January 2021](#)).





Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development, along with Feed Iowa First, has helped facilitate increased sensitivity at local USDA offices by arranging meetings and conversations between agency staff and area farmers. Source: Claire Zabel

Iowans deserve partners who are committed to an ambitious equity agenda that matches the scale of opportunities and challenges that we face. We call upon these partners to follow the model of the USDA who has begun addressing its equity practices. In February 2023, USDA Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack released the [USDA Equity Commission's Final Report 2023](#) that includes taking action on the following areas for near and long-term issues: How USDA Works with Farmers, Ranchers, and Producers day-to-day; USDA's Need for Department-Wide Change; USDA's Commitment to Farmworkers and Their Families; and Re-evaluating Other USDA Programs. This creates an opening to further engage and support Iowa offices to implement such practices.

Two Iowa partners, Iowa Valley Resource & Conservation Development (RC&D) and LSI Global Greens, have been cultivating relationships with USDA offices by setting up introductory meetings between farmers and service providers to bridge the welcome gap. Programs such as Practical Farmers of Iowa's [Savings Incentive Program](#) have included specific accommodation to increase financial support for farmers of color.

If we're serious about supporting a healthy, just, and sustainable food system, land and resource access must be part of the conversation.



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Early Morning Harvest has developed an on-farm store to feature their own diverse products along with a wide selection of products from Midwest-based producers, supporting sustainability beyond their farm and throughout Iowa and neighboring states. Source: Early Morning Harvest.



FARM & FOOD BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

GROWING BUSINESS INNOVATION



FOOD & FARM BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

GOAL

To expand the number of socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable farm and food businesses in Iowa by providing technical assistance, investment, and policy development, with unique consideration of those who have been historically underserved.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

The business model driving our predominant food system puts Iowans and Iowa at risk.

- Most of the food in Iowa's grocery stores is grown and processed outside of the state, leaving Iowa's citizens at risk to brittle supply chain disruptions like the Covid pandemic, natural disasters, conflicts, and economic turbulence ([McGee, 2021](#)).
- Dependence upon food from outside the state denies Iowans the opportunity to develop economically viable and nutritionally-sound food and farming businesses.
- Corporate consolidation of food production, processing, and distribution in the U.S. over the past 40 years has limited what food is grown, where, and by whom, and who gets to eat it ([Howard, Hendrickson, 2021](#)).
- Iowa has networks of farmers, food businesses, institutional service providers, and nonprofits that are well-positioned to take food and farm business development to the next level.

Expanding current technical assistance and public and private investment to support “**food business clusters**”, “**community food webs**”, and “**community-based, circular food systems**” is an emergent strategy that holds promise. Clusters of product development feed into an interconnected web and the web supports a circular food system economy. Attention to community health and well-being, minimizing waste, and protection of natural resources are all inherent parts of this business model.

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Farm and Food Business priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating space to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by Golden Hills Resource, Conservation, and Development, Harrisdale Homestead, and SE Iowa Community Food Web. We welcome the participation of others who are also playing a critical role in and who are interested in contributing to this work. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goal of expanding the number of socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable farm and food businesses, we have determined that four strategies and associated actions are urgently needed.

We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas, and especially rely on the support of the Local Food Policy Network, Labor Equity, Communication and Education priority teams as well as the cornerstone teams such as Farm and Food System Infrastructure, and Local Food Purchasing and Procurement.



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY
NETWORK



LABOR
EQUITY



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



FARM & FOOD
SYSTEM
INFRASTRUCTURE



LOCAL FOOD
PURCHASING &
PROCUREMENT



Strategy 1

Establish a statewide farm and food system cluster development program or network.

Action 1: Identify, build partnerships with, and mobilize key partners, including, but not limited to technical service providers and farm and food business owners.

Action 2: Develop a clear concept of food system clusters that can be implemented in Iowa.

- Analyze successful local and regional food system clusters in Iowa and across the country to better understand their complex attributes that make the businesses successful.

Action 3: Generate a Local/Regional Food System Cluster Manual of Ideas for technical assistance providers, entrepreneurs, and others (public and private funders, non-profits, local and state government).

- Manual contents: unique features of successful existing clusters, potential development strategies, resource development, and tools for assessing local resources, and analyzing strengths and limits of various options.

Action 4: Develop a plan for assessing the current state of food system clusters in Iowa and the available resources for moving forward with a food system cluster development program.

- Include reasonable short term goals, indicators to measure progress toward those goals, and a schedule for implementing evaluation.

Outcomes

- Increased understanding, awareness, and appreciation of local/regional food system clusters across Iowa.
- Established base to support all components of local/regional food system cluster development.



Strategy 2

Implement a program of developing local/regional food system clusters in Iowa with unique consideration for involving people in historically underserved groups.

Action 1: Integrate cluster support within the diverse organizations currently providing technical support to farm and food businesses.

- Increase capacity among existing technical assistance programs through “training of the trainer” workshops using the Food System Cluster Manual of Ideas.
- Increase the number of food business coaches housed in existing and diverse organizations across the state who are trained in the food system cluster model and are ready to work effectively 1:1 with business owners.

Action 2: Promote and engage farm and food businesses in food system cluster model development.

- Identify current food system clusters across Iowa and involve participants in further developing their clusters.
- Identify and involve potential partners with “cluster readiness” for new cluster development.

Action 3: Provide coordinated technical and equitable financial support for farm and food business cluster development.

- Support the existing and emerging clusters in all parts of Iowa with technical assistance and peer support to help them attain and maintain sustainable scales and provide models for others.
- Pursue options for financing enterprises and other infrastructural needs through government loans, government and foundation grants, and other fundraising means.
- Develop strategic partnerships with local and regional food businesses across Iowa and nationally to create a web of local/regional farm and food business clusters.

Outcomes

- Increased numbers of food system clusters in Iowa.
- Increased support for historically underserved communities.
- Increased success of local/regional food system clusters throughout the state.
- Increased ability to provide technical and financial support for farm and food businesses.
- Increased resilience and sustainability of farm and food businesses.



Strategy 3

Monitor the progress in cluster development.

Action 1: Monitor progress and make improvements based on the indicators established in Action 4 of Strategy 1.

- Seek feedback from individual businesses operators, technical assistance providers, local officials, not-for-profit groups, and academic researchers to identify opportunities for and roadblocks to successful businesses at both the local and state levels.
- Identify and pursue needs for targeted and ongoing support to the businesses in the existing and establishing clusters.

Action 2: At the conclusion of each evaluation of progress, set a new progress evaluation plan with achievable short-term goals, indicators of progress, and timetable.

Outcomes

- Improved understanding of existing technical assistance needs and delivery related to business development and financing.



Strategy 4

Identify and advocate for policy changes needed to advance local/regional food system clusters.

Action 1: Work closely with the Iowa Food System Coalition Local Food Policy Network to develop appropriate policy proposals.

Action 2: Advocate for identified proposals, coordinating with a range of interest groups committed to improved food system development and greater financial investment from government (state, local, and federal), financial institutions, and non-profit organizations.

Outcomes

- Increased policy engagement by food and farm businesses.
- Increased policy development reflecting a changed emphasis and understanding of the role of food and farm business in Iowa, especially those owned and managed by historically and systemically marginalized communities.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Eat Greater Des Moines](#)

[Feed Iowa First](#)

[Food MarketMaker](#)

[Golden Hills Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Harrisdale Homestead](#)

[Heartland Regional Food Business Center - Iowa](#)

[Iowa Farmers Union](#)

[Iowa State University Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

- Fruit and Vegetable Mobile Cart and Processing Research

[Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens Program](#)

[NewBo.Co](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[SE Iowa Community Food Web](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Farm & Food Business Development](#) team.
- Build your knowledge of farm and food businesses in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - Is your local economic development engaged with food and farm businesses?
 - Attend farmers and food businesses field days or tours.
 - Analyze your own local food budget expenditures and set a goal to double that over the next three years.
- Speak up – educate others and advocate for farm and food businesses in your community.
 - Invite farmers or business owners to share their stories to a local economic development group meeting.
 - Write an editorial about the importance of local farmers providing nutritious food and economic activity in your community.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

The history of agriculture in the land we now call Iowa is complex. We have world class soils and a legacy of people with farming skills, yet the arrival of European colonizers brought many changes to the agricultural landscape that still impact us today. Long before European colonizers pushed westward, laying the groundwork for the current Iowa agricultural landscape, Native Americans raised maize, beans and squash, hunted bison, elk, and prairie chicken, and harvested wild fruits. This early phase of agriculture in Iowa was not marked by formal business structures, but rather a culture of cooperation with the land ([Tesfaye, 2023](#)). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the evolution of farm and food business as they have been shaped by an emerging set of European-influenced attitudes toward the land, crops grown, and farming practices.

Farming and food businesses have changed at uneven rates since the late 19th century to today, with defining eras that include the Great Depression, the introduction of mechanization and synthetic inputs, the 1980s Farm Crisis, and the ethanol boom of the 2000s. Consolidation that has intensified across agriculture business structures since the 1950's and especially following the 1980's farm crisis has contributed to conditions that have undermined community vitality. Business closures, school consolidations, and significant declines in local main streets and other social institutions, have changed the character of rural Iowa ([Riney-Kehrberg, 2023](#)). Between 2010 and 2020, 68 of Iowa's 99 counties have experienced population declines ([Iowa Department of Public Health, 2022](#)). A widening gap in the size of farms also has adversely impacted community vitality.

One report from the USDA Economic Research Service states that "farm production has continued to shift to larger farms" ([MacDonald, et al., 2018](#)), leading small and mid-sized farm and food businesses to expand or be pushed out of the picture ([Soergel, 2018](#)). A [2023 report from Iowa State University](#) showed the continuation of this pattern, documenting a 75% increase in large farms and a 27% decrease of small farms from 2011 to 2021 ([Peters, 2023](#)).



Today we have a market dominated by nationally and globally produced goods with high levels of input suppliers, farm operations and output buyers and processors. Iowa agriculture is characterized by the predominance of four products – corn, soybeans, pork, eggs, and subsequently ethanol and biodiesel, with 75% of Iowa cropland dedicated to just two crops – corn and soybeans (USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022). These products drive Iowa's economy with a direct economic output of \$88.3 billion and more than 315,000 jobs contributing \$17.57 billion in wages (Lamm, 2022).

With this much activity and a state population of just 3.2 million (United States Census Bureau, 2020), Iowa's agricultural economy is now dependent upon export markets. Geopolitical dynamics now strongly influence Iowa's economy. Agricultural industry and policy leaders actively engage and lobby for federal policy that is focused on maintaining this product leadership and global market dependence for the state.



75% of Iowa cropland dedicated to just two crops – corn and soybeans ([USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022](#)). Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

We also have seen growth in smaller scale alternatives of farms specializing in horticultural crops and other, more diverse table food products utilizing a variety of markets. Historically, large-scale horticulture farmers found opportunity selling to processors until consolidation and closures in the late 1970s began to shrink access to that market ([Scholten & Walsh-Rosmann, 2022](#)). The demand for local and regionally produced food in the past two decades has led to growth in farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and online and on-farm stores.

Additionally, there's been growth in organic production, urban agriculture, and some large-scale produce auctions created by Mennonite communities. These initiatives have largely been driven by individual entrepreneurial investment, community volunteers, and regional local food organizations.

Considering the capacity for agricultural production in Iowa, it may surprise many that a study from the early 2000s provided a glimpse at Iowans' dependence upon food from outside of Iowa. Calculating the distance food travels to Iowa, the study found one product involved a journey of 2,200 miles ([Pirog, Benjamin, 2005](#)). A 2022 USDA study reported that less than 6% of food sold in Iowa is produced locally (within 400 miles) ([USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022](#)). Both of these reports call for careful interpretation, but there's a clear indication of dependence on the national and global food supply chain. Consolidation and specialization along these long supply chains brings inability to flex and adapt to sudden changes. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed dramatic failures that impacted farmers, farmworkers, and consumers ([Casey, 2020](#)).

The [Iowa Farmland Ownership & Tenure Survey](#) reported that the “agricultural economy in Iowa and the Midwest is arguably at a critical inflection point. On the one hand, commodity prices, farmland prices, and farm income started to show signs of stabilization or slight increases; on the other hand, the agricultural economy is facing pressure through rising interest rates and heightened uncertainty with several of our major trading partners” ([Zhang, Plastina, & Sawadgo, 2018](#)).

Essentially, the current model of agriculture in Iowa is facing uncertain times.





The first Iowa Farmers of Color Conference was held on December, 16, 2023 at Jasper Winery in Des Moines.

Source: Caleb McCullough, Lee Enterprises

Bringing an equity lens to farm and food business development

The business development trajectory outlined in this chapter thus far largely represents Iowa agriculture from the perspective of white farmers, business people, and organizational leaders.

There have long been farmers of color in Iowa. Indigenous farming communities were present well before Iowa became a “territory” in the 1830’s, along with a group of 50 black farmers who settled in Fayette County in 1854 ([McCullough, 2023](#)). Yet the 2022 US Census of agriculture for Iowa reported only 42 black farmers, down from 72 in 2017 or barely 0.03 % of the total 153,680 total producers in Iowa. The 2022 US Census of Agriculture, reported 99 farmers who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, an increase from 81 reported in 2017, but still just 0.06% of all Iowa farmers ([USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022](#)). Studies have found that Black farmers are still disproportionately denied benefits from USDA programs. In 2022, 36% of Black farmers were approved for direct loan applications, while 72% of white farmers were approved ([Bustillo, 2023](#)).

“If you’re Black,” said Valerie Grim, director of African American and African Diaspora Undergraduate Studies at Indiana University, “there are more hurdles, including institutional biases that favor farmers already part of the traditional agricultural system and little representation with powerful agricultural commodity groups” ([Jordan, 2022](#)).

As the state’s population demographics continue to diversify ([Arena, 2021](#)), investment in farmers of color would create a more inclusive culture from the ground up that will strengthen equity from the field to the dinner table. Farmers who gathered for the first Farmers of Color Conference in December 2023, echoed Grim’s assessment of the challenges, but also emphasized the opportunity in coming together to connect with the people and resources they need ([McCullough, 2023](#)).



The inequalities described lead to the concentration of wealth into fewer and fewer hands affecting all farmers. Equity needs to be inclusive of place and class, as well as race in order to support a wider diversity of farmers, business models, and products. Bringing an equity lens to farm and food business development can help remove barriers that prevent business expansion and wealth generation for Iowa's farmers of color.

The history and factors that have been outlined reveal the impact of our current food system business model on rural communities and urban consumers alike:

- The focus on development of a fine-tuned, labor-efficient commodity-based agriculture has not included similar investment in local and regional food systems.
- The loss of the mid-sized farms and processing infrastructure undermines opportunities for farmers and food business operators interested in scaling up with horticulture, food grains, and meat to serve intermediary market opportunities.
- Economic impacts such as the 1980's farm crisis suggest our nation's "cheap food" policies are deceiving us about the true costs in our health, communities, and environment ([Rushton, et. al, 2021](#)).
- Farmers of color and other historically underserved communities have faced injustices limiting business development and wealth generation opportunities.
- The trend toward fewer, larger farms creates barriers for all new farmers. It undermines the historical foundation of rural economies, and drives the depopulation of rural communities ([Ferguson, 2021](#)).

Bringing an equity lens to farm and food business development can help remove barriers that prevent business expansion and wealth generation for Iowa's farmers of color.



Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



Reimagining Our Food System

Against this background are opportunities in Iowa agriculture that reflect a reimagining of how the fundamental assets of this state - land, water and people - can support the emergence of the local and regional food system as an integral part of Iowa's overall agricultural portfolio.

In 2022, Iowa farmers produced and sold \$187 million of local edible food directly to consumers, retailers, institutions, and intermediaries, compared to \$59 million reported in 2017 ([USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022](#)). This growth is spurred by consumer demand and new USDA investment in the wake of the Covid pandemic experience. Iowa's experience with the USDA Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program, for example, demonstrates the success that farmers and regional food systems can attain with targeted investments ([NSAC's Blog, 2024](#)).

Efforts to address equity issues in our food system are gaining traction with increasing support for farmers of color. Programs like Lutheran Services of Iowa's Global Greens Program reconnects former immigrant and refugee farmers with services to grow food and start their own business.

Practical Farmers of Iowa has adopted special parameters into their Savings Incentive Program (SIP) to provide strategic support for farmers of color. They have also been including Spanish language only educational workshops to more effectively serve Latinx farmers. The popularity of Iowa Farm Bureau's "Acres of Opportunity" conference reflects members' growing interest in opportunities outside of the traditional crops and livestock of Iowa (Bjoin, 2023). Communities can build upon the relationships and resources right in their midst, supporting regenerative farming and providing all people with the nourishing foods they want and need (Land Stewardship Project, 2023).



LSI's Global Greens program helps immigrant and refugee farmers grow food and start their own business. Source: LSI Global Greens



New Business Model Emerges around Innovative Framework

This priority calls upon existing technical assistance providers who support financial and enterprise analysis, one-on-one business coaching, and new and beginning farmer cohort development to look beyond serving individual entrepreneurial development and consider how to better support the complex needs of farm and food business networks or clusters, the expanded context of “community food web”, and a community-based circular food economy more broadly.

Food business clusters consist of businesses that provide for all the elements involved in the generation of a particular product, planning for the product’s full cycle to the customer and back into the production system (such as through compost). The community food web, builds relationships between and among business clusters, adding complexity, diversity, and ultimately greater flexibility and resilience. Several Iowa farm families have built their business on regenerative practices, diversity, collaboration, and are deeply embedded in their communities.

Southern Goods

Shaffer Ridgeway, of Waterloo, Iowa and his wife, Madelyn started their farm business venture as a way to pay for a project focused on learning more about soil health. Now, two enterprises - [Southern Produce](#) and [Grazin’ Cattle](#) - specialize in southern products like purple-hulled peas, sweet potatoes, okra, and direct-market beef. Soil health turns into nutrient-packed collard greens and other products that Shaffer prioritizes for his Waterloo farmers market clientele.

Madelyn and Shaffer Ridgeway founded Southern Goods to bring some of their cultural food heritage to their new community. Source: Southern Goods





Danelle Myer's One Farm Market, in Logan, Iowa, models a successful path for collaboration among multiple farm businesses. Source: staciekinney.com

One Farm

Established by Danelle Myer on family land near Logan, Iowa, [One Farm](#) has expanded from primarily marketing fresh vegetables to opening a Main Street storefront in Logan, One Farm Market. The store sells a wide range of products through relationships with other entrepreneurs in the community. One Farm Market is able to feature Alaskan salmon and organic California citrus through direct relationships with salmon fishers in Alaska and organic citrus growers in California.

Early Morning Harvest

Jeff and Shannon Hafner, of [Early Morning Harvest](#), near Panora, Iowa, have developed an integrated farm business with a great support staff producing vegetables, herbs, laying hens, honey, milled organic grains and flour, an on-farm store and a distribution service. The Early Morning Harvest (EMH) on-farm store offers customers a unique buying experience. In addition to EMH farm products, they offer a wide selection of products from other Midwest based producers, supporting sustainability beyond their farm and throughout Iowa and neighboring states. The addition of a delivery service in 2022 connects to markets as far as Kansas City, MO, Minneapolis, MN, Sioux Falls, SD, and Burlington, IA. This web of vertical integration wraps the whole operation together from growing to processing to distribution and helps to expand the farm's reach across the Midwest.



Jeff Hafner, of Early Morning Harvest, is building a diversified and integrated business with a strong community connection and a distribution reach across the Midwest. Source: Early Morning Harvest

In his book, “Building Community Food Webs”, Ken Meter advocates for food supply chains that are networked, incorporating consideration of the entire food system sectors and infrastructure needed to grow, process, and distribute the food. Building from and with the community involves taking into consideration care for soil and water and ensuring effective systems that give everyone, from farmer to food system workers, viable ways to make a living (The Land Stewardship Project, 2023). According to Meter, unique technical support is needed to identify, nurture, and coordinate opportunities for business collaborations. Skilled facilitation is necessary to foster cooperation, provide opportunities to engage low-income residents, farmers, and local organizations in their quest to build stronger communities. Investing in business planning like this holds great potential for building health, wealth, capacity, and connections.

Food clusters and the more complex community food web both leverage the natural cycling principles of a community-based circular food economy. The circular economy concept has been applied to manufacturing sectors to make their supply chains more sustainable, and is increasingly being applied to food systems. A community-based, circular food system draws upon regenerative agriculture practices, improving the health of both the production process and ultimately the food, and maximizing the use of the food that is produced. Circular food systems (Figure 1) benefit business, people and the environment ([Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d.](#)).

Early developers of this model emphasize that the community-based circular food system (C-B CFS) design draws on cultural practices of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color who offer a deep reservoir of practical and resilient information that can inform food system research, policy, and practice ([Antonelli, 2023](#)).



Figure 1. A circular food economy is good for business, people, and the environment. Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation



From business clusters to community food webs, to community based circular economy, these models set the stage for innovative business connections.

Organizations including Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Valley RC&D, Center for Rural Affairs, value chain coordinators with Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, UNI Local Food Program, Golden Hills RC&D, Southern Iowa RC&D, and Eat Greater Des Moines are already providing technical support to small and mid-sized farmers. Additional business development services are available through Small Business Development Centers, Iowa State University Extension & Outreach Food, Farm and Enterprise Development, governmental, regional economic development, and private and non profit partners.

The newly established Heartland Regional Food Business Center, based in Nebraska, is one of 12 centers across the country that will provide coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building to help farmers, ranchers, and other small food businesses access new markets and navigate federal, state, and local resources, thereby increasing opportunities for success. Food system partners from five states are working together through the Center to create a resource hub for regional food systems practitioners in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma. Iowa State University is one of five state partners in this \$25 million project.

To initiate, incubate, and sustain small and midsize businesses, we need more than the traditional business development technical assistance skills. We will need resources and capacity for extensive information sharing and communication, oftentimes across political and other lines of difference. To support this, there will be a need for an increased base of investment through grants, donors, investors and lenders, and equitable and accessible allocation processes. While some examples of business clusters and community food web development have been shared here, further investment and coordination is needed to refine, implement, and test the efficacy of this model. To fully assess the clustered approach, and understand the impact of equitable opportunity and empowerment, we want to ensure that there is targeted and ongoing support to the businesses in the clusters, particularly those led by marginalized, immigrant, and BIPOC people.

We believe we have an excellent opportunity to expand on current farm and food business support with innovation and testing of new business development models such as the farm and **food cluster** and **community food web** models. This intentional, integrated approach is central to building food system resilience, increasing employment opportunities and revenue within the state while improving the long-term social, economic, and environmental health of Iowa's communities.

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Cooperative cross docking between food hubs is building a distribution system across Iowa. Pictured: James Nisly, Camp Creek Organic and staff of Field to Family Food Hub. Source: Field to Family



FARM & FOOD SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

MOVING FOOD ALONG THE VALUE CHAIN



FARM & FOOD SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE

GOAL

To strengthen the capacity of local food infrastructure in Iowa in order to increase distribution and sales for local producers and processors.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

Iowa's farm and food system infrastructure – the tools and pathways of connection between farmers and consumers and between rural and urban communities – serves as a critical link that:

- **Builds resilience in the middle of Iowa's food supply chain.**
 - Developing and improving markets for small and mid-sized farms and food businesses and investing in the development of local food processing, distribution and aggregation infrastructure will make Iowa stronger and better prepared for the future. ([Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, 2023](#)).
- **Increases sales and jobs in the state.**
 - Estimates show that growing more than 25 fruits and vegetables in Iowa would generate \$61.4 million in farm-level sales, resulting in 657 total jobs, and earning a total of \$26.3 million in labor income ([Pirog and Swenson, 2010](#)).
- **Expands sales to institutions.**
 - Iowa was the world's leading canner of sweet corn with nearly 60 sweet corn canning factories in 36 Iowa counties in 1924 ([Pirog, Paskiet, 2004](#)). Today there is no commercial scale fruit or vegetable processing in Iowa ([Farm to Table Task Force, 2021](#)).

Infrastructure elements like processing, distribution networks, transportation, **food hubs** and grocery stores are the backbone of the food supply system and offer numerous benefits to a region including sustained economic development and protection for regional farmland and rural landscapes. Infrastructure development connects many of the other Iowa Food System Coalition (IFSC) priority areas and expands the possibilities for food system growth.



More vibrant and efficient local food infrastructure will make it possible for local farmers and leaders to connect the dots from the farm gate to the consumer's plate, increasing opportunities for Iowa's farmers to diversify what is grown and to make a living on-farm, while increasing the health and well being of Iowans.

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Farm and Food System Infrastructure priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating space to support the outlined strategies. This team is led by the Iowa Valley Resource, Conservation & Development and Iowa State University Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve measurable progress toward our goal to strengthen and increase the capacity for local food infrastructure in Iowa, we have determined the following strategies and actions are urgently needed. We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas and especially rely on the support teams of Land & Resource Access, Farm & Food Business Development, Communication and Education, which includes strategies for communication campaigns, and Local Food Policy Network which includes strategies for policy development and advocacy.



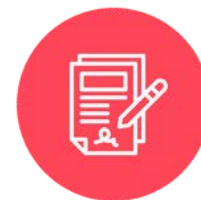
LAND &
RESOURCE
ACCESS



FARM & FOOD
BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY
NETWORK

Strategy 1

Assess and develop an integrated plan for food system infrastructure, including key areas of partnership and investment with special attention to benefits for historically and systemically marginalized farmers and business operators.

Action 1: Catalog existing infrastructure developments and key partners across the state.

Action 2: Determine best strategies for investment in infrastructure, including collaborative partnerships around infrastructure development and scalability of the local and regional food system.

Action 3: Develop opportunities for small and mid-sized producers, with a priority focus on BIPOC, immigrant, LGBT+, refugee, veteran, and women farmers.

Action 4: Develop evaluation and assessment systems to better understand existing constraints across food system infrastructure.

Outcomes

- Increased collaboration among partners engaged in infrastructure development.
- Improved understanding of the pathway for investment with opportunities for marginalized farmers and business operators.
- Established repository of infrastructure capacity.



Strategy 2

Increase capacity for on-farm, regional, and state processing of farmer-owned lowa-grown products.

Action 1: Develop multiple scales for processing of specialty crops, grain, dairy and livestock.

Action 2: Educate farmers, food businesses, and policy makers on regulatory and license needs and connect to support navigators.

Outcomes

- Increased processing opportunities at various scales.
- Improved farm and food business understanding of the regulations and licensing requirements from state and local agency partners.
- Increased sales across the local and regional food supply chain.



On-farm processing at the Grimm Family Farm
Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

Strategy 3

Increase distribution and storage infrastructure for the local food value chain.

Action 1: Expand hub-to-hub route plan to connect communities across the state.

Action 2: Seek funding for middle of the supply chain logistics as well as local food infrastructure and equipment.

Action 3: Continue existing efforts to expand the state-wide system for safely storing and distributing local foods.

Action 4: Create partnerships with retail chains to find ways to increase local food purchasing, especially in rural areas, with potential for expansion of routes to include more opportunity for Iowa's farms.

Outcomes

- New, creative partnerships that expand distribution options.
- Increased storage capacity, aggregation and distribution at various points along the food chain.
- Continue to build best routes for food hubs and nodes across the state.
- Improved market access for local and regional foods producers.
- Increased market matchmaking and logistics coordination.
- Increased farm business sales through direct to consumer and wholesale channels.



Williamsburg Community School District food service staff welcome a delivery of local apples.

Source: Giselle Bruskewitz

Strategy 4

Develop policy priorities for investment in food system infrastructure.

Action 1: Research policy examples from others states and locales related to infrastructure investment including the development of an Ag Innovation and Education Center.

Action 2: Work with support teams to develop awareness campaign messaging and policy language.

Action 3: Work with Iowa Farmers Union, Iowa Hunger Coalition and other lobbying/advocacy organizations to secure investment for infrastructure development.

Action 4: Advocate for an increase in funding for Choose Iowa grant and other infrastructure support programs; including low-barrier matches to make sure historically and systemically marginalized farmers and business operators can utilize the resource.

Outcomes

- Increased awareness of needs for infrastructure improvement by elected officials.
- Vetted legislation with sponsors.
- Increased capacity for the food system to serve Iowa food businesses, institutions and expand local food access to Iowa communities.
- Increased farm and food business growth and development.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Capital City Fruit](#)

[Center for Rural Affairs](#)

[Iowa Farmers Union](#)

[Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Iowa State University Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development](#)

- [Local Food for Schools](#)
- [Local Food Purchasing Assistance](#)
- Fruit and Vegetable Mobile Cart and Processing Research

[Heartland USDA Regional Food Business Center](#)

[Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens Program](#)

[NE Iowa Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[Iowa UrbanFEWS](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Farm & Food System Infrastructure](#) team.
- Build your knowledge of food system infrastructure in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - Find the closest local locker or meat processor – visit and learn which farmers they work with and which products they produce.
 - Buy locally sourced products.
 - Check [this Iowa food hub directory](#). Find the closest food hub in your area – introduce yourself and ask what infrastructure needs are at the top of their list.
- Speak up – educate others and advocate for the issues you’ve identified in your community.
 - Organize with some friends to purchase meat from a local producer and have it processed at a locker near you. Get a local journalist to tell the story of this farm to fork experience.
 - Find out if your local school is buying from local producers and if so, ask what infrastructure issues they need help with.
 - Talk with your local elected officials about the importance of fruit and vegetable processing in Iowa. It might make the difference in availability of local food in your area school.





Hoophouses have become a common and important part of farm infrastructure. Source: Joe Klingelhutz

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The local and regional food system moves food from farm to market through the use of resources that range from high tunnels, pack sheds, cold storage facilities, processing plants and the development of value-added products. These resources require infrastructure on-farm and across the food system. Refrigerated trucks are needed to transport local food; kitchen equipment and storage is needed for **institutions**. And ultimately the people – from farmers and food aggregators to food processing workers, value chain coordinators, and institutional buyers, like school food service staff – are needed to put the equipment to use. Transparency, working together, and providing fair returns to all partners under shared environmental or social values are hallmarks of these strategic alliances all across the food value chain (see Figure 1). Access to appropriate infrastructure along the food value chain can open up tremendous opportunities for the local and regional food economy.



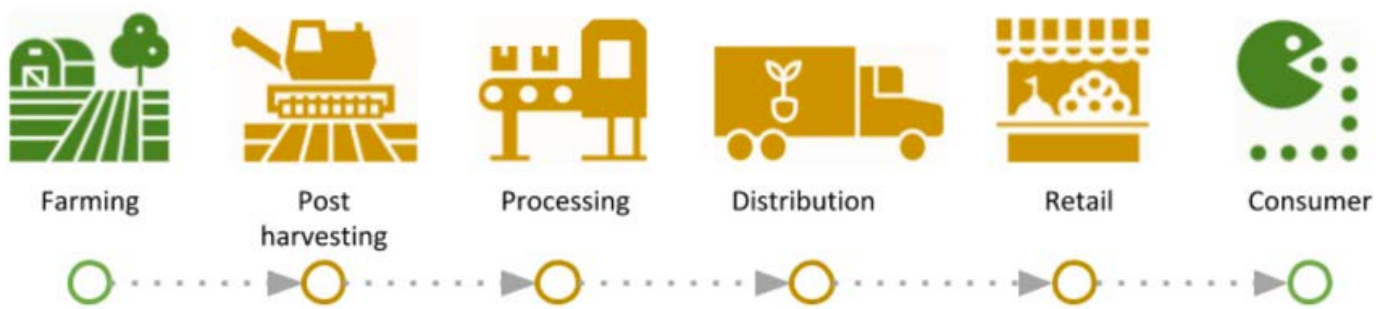


Figure 1: Transparency, working together, and providing fair returns to all partners under shared environmental or social values are hallmarks of the strategic alliances all across the food value chain. Source: [UNC Charlotte Urban Institute](#)

While direct-to-consumer sales are often the most familiar face of local food markets, the [2020 Local Food Marketing Practices Survey](#) reported that 46% of all local food sales were to intermediaries and institutions, while 33% were direct-to-consumer. This, along with the [2021 Iowa Farm to Table Task Force's](#) top recommendations to improve local food sales to institutions, suggest more attention should be focused on retailers, institutions, and intermediate markets. Developing this opportunity requires an understanding of infrastructure needs all along the value chain – from production to consumption, and everything in between.

The scale of much of America's existing food infrastructure is often too large to accept smaller amounts of product, too far away for smaller transportation networks to reach, or unable to preserve the local identity of the food.

Simply put, it doesn't work well for local and regional producers ([USDA, 2012](#)). While there are numerous existing efforts across the state, there is a need to increase capacity for all farm and food businesses throughout the value-chain to have increased investment and reinforcement for improved infrastructure for production, storage, processing, and distribution channels.

While these efforts include support for smaller producers and direct-to-consumer markets, it is critical that we support producer capacity to scale-up operations or collaboratively work together, or aggregate through businesses like food hubs, to meet the demands of larger scale buyers. This is an intersectional goal that reaches across the food value chain from production opportunities, aggregation and distribution, and end consumers within the farm to school and early care community as well as additional large institutions such as nursing homes, hospitals and broadline distributors ([Farm to Table Task Force, 2021](#)). Farmers need support to scale up while intermediary buyers need help to navigate purchasing from the local and regional food system.

A First Step - Coordinating food system infrastructure development

The Farm and Food System Infrastructure priority builds upon the 2021 Farm Table Task Force recommendations. These recommendations highlighted the need for additional analysis into the supply and demand of our local foods to ensure that existing farms, food hubs, and local food buyers are better informed of market conditions and can make economically sound decisions to remain viable as relates to all aspects of infrastructure including production, kitchen facilities, processing, storage, distribution, and policy. A critical first step is to coordinate among key partners and determine a path for investment in opportunities, especially for marginalized farmers and business operators who have historically missed out on these important business development investments.

Production

National patterns find direct-to-consumer markets are overwhelmingly served by small to medium scale specialty crop producers. Institutional markets are served by larger farm operations. The Iowa Commercial Horticulture Food Crop Survey found that the reliance on direct-to-consumers sales has been shifting to more wholesale ([Enderton et al., 2017](#)). In fact, the 2022 US Ag Census data reported that Iowa farms selling food direct-to-consumer has declined from 2,575 in 2017 to 2,427 in 2022. The number of farms selling to retail markets, institutions or food hubs has increased from 558 in 2017 to 957 in 2022 from ([USDA National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2022](#)).



Beanie Bode & JoAnne Roepke Bode, of Moonlight Gardens, Algona, provide an overview of their farm during a field day. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

The 2015 Iowa Commercial Horticulture Food Crop Survey showed that Iowa's horticulture farmers are new to serving the intermediary, institutional, and retail market. Many of these farmers are growing on fewer acres than the previous report in 2000 with a median farm size of 2 acres ([Enderton et al., 2017](#)). The limitation in the production base of Iowa's specialty crop producers creates a constraint for meeting the demand of larger distributors and institutional purchasers interested in sourcing local ([Farm to Table Task Force, 2021](#)). Practices that need improvement include reliability in product quality and quantity, and storage and aggregation between food distribution hubs.

Examples of programs that have been widely promoted to assist producers expanding production in Iowa include the Natural Resources Conservation Service High Tunnel Cost Share program and Iowa State University's Extension & Outreach [Market Ready workshops](#).

Processing

Processing whole products can help producers add value to their offerings – chopping helps meet food handling gaps for institutional buyers and canning or freezing perishables expands access to local food between growing seasons. Regardless of what food product is being processed, establishing processing facilities is an expensive and complex endeavor.

Historically, Iowa had extensive vegetable processing and was the world's leading canner of sweet corn. One example is the Old Grimes Canning Factory that began in 1919 producing its flagship product, "Old Grimes" (later renamed "Mrs. Grimes") sweet corn. The company established contracts with local farmers growing on roughly 1,400 acres (source: [Visit Altoona, 2024](#)). The last cannery operating in Iowa is estimated to have closed in 1977 ([Krouse, Galluzzo, 2027](#)). Iowa Choice Harvest, a vegetable processing business that used flash freezing for corn, apples, carrots, and sweet potatoes for statewide distribution, operated between 2013 & 2019.

Today there are several active small-scale fruit and vegetable ventures including on-farm processing projects, a mobile produce processing cart developed by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and a mobile cider making unit providing regional service in northeast Iowa. At the printing of this report, there is no commercial scale fruit or vegetable



Inside Driftless Mobile Juicer
Source: NE Iowa Resource Conservation & Development

processing available in Iowa. At the release of *Setting the Table for All Iowans*, a fruit and vegetable processing feasibility study is underway, led by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food, and Enterprise Development (FFED), to inform strategies toward closing the fresh fruit and vegetable processing gap in Iowa's food system.

Licensed kitchens provide capacity to repackage or process fresh fruits and vegetables or breakdown an animal after being butchered, but they do have limitations. There is a need to include processing education and research on best practices and case studies from across the country, including assessment of small to medium scale facilities (under \$5 million) that can provide a space for aggregating and processing raw product which can then be developed into both direct-to-consumer or individual servings as well as larger scale quantities for buyers such as schools (Farm to Table Task Force, 2021).

Meat and dairy processing in Iowa has seen quite a bit of activity in recent years – from interagency policy agreements to state investment in new grant programs. The Cooperative Interstate Shipment Status – an agreement between the Iowa Department of Agriculture and USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS) – allows for meat and poultry products from approved

plants to move across state lines of other participating states in the program without a Federal mark of inspection. Iowa has 21 plants with this designation. This is especially important for producers who live on Iowa's border counties (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, 2023).

In response to food system vulnerability realized in the wake of the Covid pandemic, the Butchery Innovation and Revitalization Program, initiated by Iowa legislators in 2021, helps small meat lockers expand, renovate and establish butchery facilities through the Iowa Economic Development Authority (Iowa Economic Development, 2023). In 2023, the Dairy Innovation Grants were launched as part of the Choose Iowa program, administered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. The grants, which were created to increase on-farm dairy processing, reduce farm labor costs and expand the availability of Iowa dairy products for consumers, are available for small dairies and farmers.

Raising poultry is a relatively easy enterprise to incorporate into existing operations. However, poultry processors are few and far between, impacting producers' ability to incorporate this enterprise profitably. Iowa poultry products requiring state mark of inspection currently have only one option for state inspected slaughter (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, 2024).





Raising poultry profitably is impacted by the limited availability of state or USDA inspected poultry processing plants in Iowa. Source: One Step at a Time Gardens

One long range proposal that was included in the 2021 Farm to Table Task Force is the development of a food enterprise or Agriculture Innovation Center that provides comprehensive service for product development, recipe testing, business support and assistance, and angel investing. Several examples exist across the nation that could serve as test cases for this type of model in Iowa, including [The Food Building](#), [The Food Processing Center](#), and [Food Enterprise Center of Viroqua](#) (Farm to Table Task Force, 2021).

While these developments are encouraging, the demand for recently funded grant programs far exceeds available resources, while the lack of commercial scale fruit or vegetable processing facilities in the state limits value added opportunities, and (very) few poultry processing operations limit farm enterprise development. More coordinated attention to processing infrastructure development is needed.

Kitchen Facilities

Food preparation is the last stop in the farm to consumer value chain. Kitchen facilities call for processing and storage infrastructure investment and can bring opportunities to food entrepreneurs and greater access to local food for schools and other institutions. There are commercial kitchens, shared use kitchens and incubator spaces available, but easy access is not always apparent for food entrepreneurs. [Iowa Kitchen Connect](#), a program of Iowa Valley Resource, Conservation, & Development, serves to connect kitchens and entrepreneurs across Iowa. Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, a local food system non-profit in North Central Iowa, is piloting a distributed model for cooking class kits and light processing equipment to meet needs in this rural area. A new North Iowa section in Iowa Kitchen Connect listings includes kitchens which can be rented to host cooking classes and/or provide space for value added processing.



Kitchen staff with local products from local food hub, celebrating Local Food Day. Source: Iowa Farm to School & Early Care Coalition

Storage

Access to refrigerated storage space is necessary for proper post-harvest handling and provides a farmer more time to secure a competitive price for their product rather than having to sell immediately after harvest. Buyers can more easily source from a variety of small farms without the burden of additional paperwork if the farmers have a warehouse in which to aggregate and cooperatively market their products. A lack of cold storage across the state has been identified as a barrier for moving product to appropriate and profitable markets.

Distribution

Farmers with production capacity, but no connection to markets lack important access to valuable growth opportunities. Thankfully, Iowa has a robust network of **food hubs** who have learned and grown together over the past decade. Today the [Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group](#) works collaboratively on several projects and their deliveries serve nearly 70% of Iowa counties (**Figure 2**).

The food hub network played a central role during the Covid pandemic, supplying products to schools through the Local Produce and Protein Program (LPPP). The LPPP led to growth in farm to school and early care sites and reported \$550,000 in local food purchases in 2021. This demonstrated schools' readiness to incorporate locally grown products and the ability of food hubs to meet that need. Nearly half of LPPP funds allocated to schools to purchase local foods were spent at food hubs (Koether, Enderton, 2021), demonstrating the important role food hubs play in connecting farmers to schools.

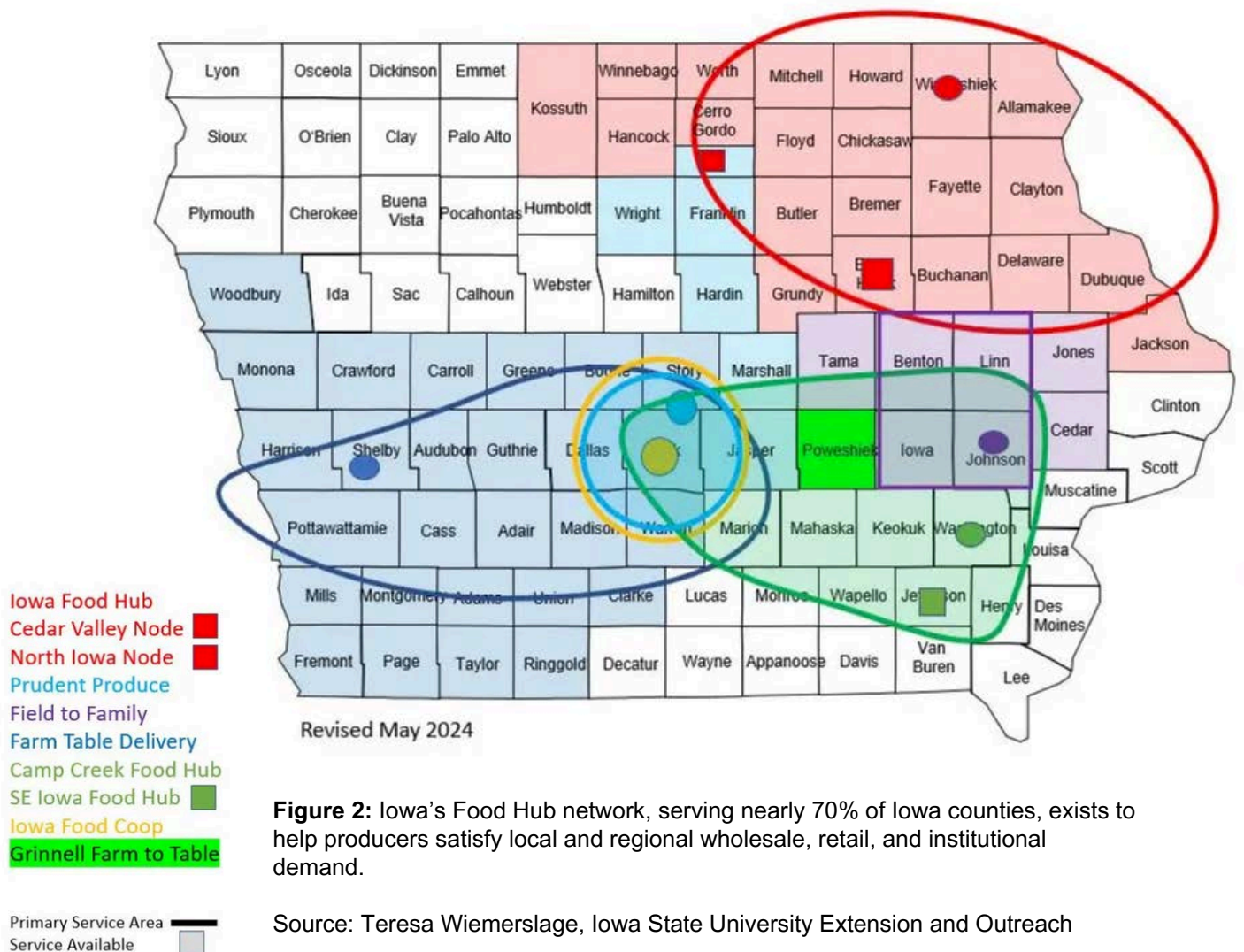


Figure 2: Iowa's Food Hub network, serving nearly 70% of Iowa counties, exists to help producers satisfy local and regional wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.

Source: Teresa Wiemerslage, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach



The food hub network has continued to play a key role in the success of both the Local Food for Schools (LFS) and Local Food Purchasing Assistance Programs (LFPA) which are two USDA farm to food access programs in partnership with the State of Iowa Department of Agriculture. These programs have supported the infrastructure and coordination to connect producers, food hubs and customers across the state ([Wiemerslage, 2023](#)). Through the LFPA program, food hubs are demonstrating they can support farmers on transportation efficiencies and sales. Additionally, food hubs demonstrate their commitment and ability to center equity with this program's priority to source from marginalized farmers and coordinate with food banks and other community distribution centers. The USDA Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) Program reported more than \$2.4 million in

food distributed with nearly 71% of sales coming from producers who identify as BIPOC, immigrant, refugee, LGBT+, veterans, and/or women October 2022 through April 2024 ([Iowa LFPA, 2024](#)). Food hubs are an evolving business model still managing financial struggles and capacity constraints that the Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group (FHMWG) is addressing as a learning community. In 2022, the FHMWG piloted a project to assess opportunities for better sales among the hubs themselves and better coordination in moving food across the state through a routes and nodes project, funded by an Iowa Specialty Crop Block Grant. This project enabled hubs to better distribute available products across the state and offered coordination in transportation, storage and cross-docking (loading and unloading).



Source: Iowa Valley RC&D



Policy

Policy development leads to greater engagement with the issues and addresses real system change – at the local, state, and federal levels. Policy developments have influenced Iowa's local and regional food system development since 1999 with Secretary of Agriculture Patty Judge's Local Food Task Force. This led to then Governor Vilsack's establishment of the first Iowa Food Policy Council by Executive Order. Recent policies that are having direct impact on infrastructure development are inspired by recommendations from the 2021 Farm to Table Task Force and continued legislative interest in food processing industries. The [Choose Iowa grant program](#), introduced in the 2021 legislative session with increased funding after the 2022 session, was created to support farm and food businesses in their efforts to increase capacity and improve infrastructure. The [2021 Innovative Butchery Task Force](#) and subsequent Butchery grant program was funded at \$1 million in 2022 to support meat lockers ([IDALS, 2022](#)). Legislation introduced for the [Dairy Innovation Grant program](#) started in 2021, and was finally passed in 2023, with \$750,000 in state funding. In the 2024 legislative session, bills were introduced addressing rural grocers and fruit and vegetable processing.

The road to new, profitable markets and to expansion beyond direct-to-consumer sales is paved with infrastructure.



IFSC 2024 Farm and Food Day on the Hill Lobby Day - Source: Tommy Hexter, Iowa Farmers Union

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Source: P.J. Pasturczak



LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING & PROCUREMENT

RELIABLE MARKETS FOR FARMERS,
NUTRITIOUS FOOD FOR IOWANS



LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING & PROCUREMENT

GOAL

To develop, support and increase capacity for all food businesses and institutions to purchase local food and to provide new markets for farmers at fair prices.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

The purchase of locally grown and processed foods by institutions such as schools, hospitals, and grocers and by aggregators like food hubs is essential to strengthen local food systems. Investment and targeted technical support to make the connections between buyers and sellers will support farmers by ensuring consistent and reliable markets, while providing healthy foods to our communities.

- Every year, public institutions across the United States – from school districts to city governments – spend billions of dollars on food purchases to feed millions of people. These purchases can be a powerful lever for change, serving better food, promoting thriving communities, good jobs, local producers, environmental stewardship.
- Direct-from-the-farm sales, which includes individuals, retailers, institutions, and intermediaries, was a \$9 billion industry in 2020. This number went up 3% between 2015 and 2020, despite a 12% decline in farms making direct farm to consumer sales demonstrating growing capacity to fill this market ([NASS, 2022](#)).
- Intermediate markets such as schools, grocers, and institutions play a role in farm profitability. An analysis of farm profitability for those selling direct-from-the-farm found that among the top performing farms and ranches, those that sell only through intermediated channels, or a combination of direct and intermediated channels performed much better than those using direct markets only ([Jabolinski, McFadden, Bauman, Shideler, 2018](#)).
- The 2022 US Ag Census suggests Iowa farmers are adjusting to the reported plateauing of direct to consumer sales ([Wilkinson, 2022](#)). Census data shows that there were fewer Iowa farms selling direct to consumers in 2022 than in 2017 and more farms selling to retail, institutions, or food hubs ([NASS, 2022](#)).



In 2022, Iowans spent \$12.6 billion on food and beverage purchases not including food and drink purchased at restaurants, bars, or events. If just 10% of this budget were met through local production, it would put \$1.2 billion to work circulating in Iowa's economy (State of Iowa, 2024).

Iowa should support farms to leverage shifting market opportunities. The 2021 Farm to Table Task Force recognized that to grow this market will require addressing the needs and capacity along the entire supply chain – from farmer to buyer and all of the supporting systems in between (Farm to Table Task Force, 2021). This chapter lays out the steps to act on that recommendation.



Local food in schools helps young Iowans develop an appreciation for locally grown food.
Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Local Food Purchasing and Procurement priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating capacity to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by organizations who support local food purchasing on multiple levels including the Iowa Farm to School & Early Care Coalition, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development and Waukee Community School District and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goals of increasing capacity for all food businesses and institutions to purchase local food at a fair price to farmers, we have determined the following six strategies and actions are urgently needed. We believe that these rely on the support teams of Farm and Food System Infrastructure that includes strategies for food hubs and aggregators needed to improve food distribution; Food and Farm Business Development supporting the farms directly; Communication and Education, which includes strategies for communication campaigns; and the Local Food Policy Network which includes strategies for policy development and advocacy.



FARM & FOOD
INFRASTRUCTURE



FARM, FOOD & BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY
NETWORK



Strategy 1

Increase investment in the procurement of local/regional food through institutions including, but not limited to schools and early care centers, governmental agencies, groceries, restaurants, etc.

Action 1: Using experiences of various local food procurement programs, including the Local Food Makes Sense, Local Food For Schools (LFS), and Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) programs, develop recommendations for a state-funded program for local food procurement across schools, including but not limited to:

- Support continuation of the Iowa Local Food Iowa Local Procurement investment program funded with an adequate annual allocation to support local procurement by Early Care and K-12 schools.
- Create a policy for free meals in every school in Iowa, such as Healthy School Meals for All.

Action 2: Improve food access programs and incentives for organizations and institutions to source local/regional food.

- Create an Iowa Local Food Purchase Assistance program funded with an adequate annual allocation to support local procurement.
- Create an Iowa-made campaign, requiring that participating entities make a certain percentage of their total food purchases from Iowa producers.
- Educate businesses on opportunities for providing food assistance or integrating food assistance programs, like Double Up Food Bucks or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) into their purchasing structure.
- Initiate policy change for food rescue and food donation programs to increase local food procurement.

Outcomes

- Expanded capacity across partners to permanently make nutritious, local food the easy choice for schools and food distribution sites.
- Increased number of businesses and institutions procuring local foods through improved readiness of policies and practices.
- Expanded market opportunities and sales by farmers at fair prices.
- Higher redemption of SNAP, Double Up Food Bucks, and Senior and Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) farmers market nutrition program.
- Improved access to affordable, equitable, and local food for Iowans who are most impacted by our current food system.



Strategy 2

Increase targeted technical support and education for food procurement.

Action 1: Expand support for procurement coaches and **value chain coordinators**.

- Expand procurement coach training to work with institutional buyers.
- Expand procurement coach collaboration with farmers and food hubs.

Action 2: Increase research, analysis, and case study development of supply and demand and scaling up practices.

- Create new policy to address inequality in local food markets and the need for government funding support.

Action 3: Expand farmer focused education and research on scaling up.

Action 4: Facilitate stronger coordination between farmers and food buyers to support necessary business developments for all parties.

Action 5: Encourage the use of regional aggregators and food hubs.

Outcomes

- Improved skill base and preparedness in schools and business to be able to purchase local food.
- Improved skill base and preparedness for farmers able to provide local food to these markets.
- Increased knowledge of best practices related to supply and demand, scale, etc.
- Increased number and depth of relationships across partners to critically solve problems and work towards a common goal to grow commitment to local/regional food purchasing.



Strategy 3

Enhance infrastructure and equipment for all scales of businesses.

Action 1: Collaborate closely with the Farm and Food System Infrastructure team to assure needs for infrastructure and equipment across all scales of businesses are being addressed.

- Identify necessary storage, equipment, and distribution needs for specific schools and businesses.
- Assess and address risk management concerns.
- Coordinate findings across the various processing projects underway in Iowa to assess the various “at scale” lessons to be learned.

Action 2: Collaborate with the Choose Iowa grant program to ensure equitable access to infrastructure funding, especially for socially disadvantaged farmers.

Action 3: Create a toolkit of best practices for sourcing equipment and infrastructure in schools and businesses.

Outcomes

- Increased efficiency and receptivity within kitchens to work with locally sourced food.
- Identified storage and distribution practices that may be a shared asset.
- Increased awareness of existing practices to reduce risk and ensure proper handling of food.
- Increased equitable funding access for local food infrastructure.



Strategy 4

Develop policy recommendations to support this goal, working closely with the Local Food Policy Network team.

Action 1: Identify and initiate policy actions called for in Strategy 1, 2, and 3.

Action 2: Identify and initiate additional policy actions for specific agencies like healthcare, large businesses, etc.

Action 3: Identify and initiate additional policy focused specifically on the availability of diverse, culturally acceptable foods grown in Iowa for different communities.

Outcomes

- Increased number of state and local policies and practices that make healthy food accessible and affordable for Iowans most impacted by our food system.
- Increased local food sales by farmers due to policy change.



Strategy 5

Integrate procurement messaging in communication and education campaigns.

Action 1: Work with the Communication & Education Priority Team to create campaigns for local food advocacy and procurement.

Action 2: Create and provide education for schools around local food procurement.

Outcomes

- A shift in policy and practices that lead to an increase in organizations choosing Iowa grown products. and sharing the brand.
- Increased awareness and knowledge of the importance of supporting the local and regional economy through food purchases.
- Improved support and impact of Choose Iowa, or other campaigns focused on Iowa's local and regional food system.
- Increased and consistent demand for small and mid-sized farms expanding into institutional sales.



Strategy 6

Ensure that all children have access to comprehensive food system education.

Action 1: Identify opportunities for local food education and access specifically designed for children.

Action 2: Create youth leadership courses in food access and food systems, potentially through agriculture education programs.

Action 3: Develop a framework for youth engagement in food systems.

Outcomes

- Improved experience with effective education about food systems.
- Increased awareness by youth, parents, and educators about the role local and regional food production plays in our communities.
- Expansion of agricultural education programs to explicitly describe the local food system as part of Iowa agriculture.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Camp Creek Organic Produce](#)

[Healthy Harvest of North Iowa](#)

[Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship](#)

[Iowa Department of Education](#)

[Iowa Farmers Union](#)

[Iowa Food Bank Association](#)

[Iowa Food Hub](#)

[Iowa State University Extension & Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

- [Local Food for Schools](#)
- [Farm to School & Early Care Coalition](#)

[Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Northeast Iowa Food Bank](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[School Nutrition Association of Iowa](#)

[Southern Iowa Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education](#)

[Waukee Community Schools Farm to School Program](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Local Food Purchasing & Procurement](#) team.

Become a local food purchasing advocate in your community.

- Take action to strengthen support and market opportunities for producers in your community. Wherever you or your family get your food – grocer, workplace-based food service, school cafeteria, senior or early care/childcare center:
 - Encourage the use of locally sourced products.
 - Offer your support to these institutions by making connections with producers, writing grants, marketing skills to promote the local foods, etc.

Become a local food champion for purchasers at all levels (wholesalers, institutions, and direct consumers) and encourage increased investment in local purchasing.

- Advocate to your state legislators to propose and pass sustainable funding to support local food purchasing by schools and institutions, including policies that move us closer to Healthy School Meals for All.
- Share your stories – where you purchase local foods through your own networks; why you value Iowa-produced foods and how their purchases can help grow the local food system and improve community health.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

Researchers have found that most of the growth in local food sales has come through intermediaries, institutions, and retailers as the growing popularity of these markets has led to a plateau in direct-to-consumer sales ([Martinez, 2021](#)). The 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture indicated that Iowa farms may be following the national trend as the number of Iowa farms reporting direct to consumer sales dropped from 2,575 in 2017 to 2,427 in 2022. At the same time, the number of farms selling to retail markets, institutions or food hubs grew from 558 in 2017 to 957 in 2022 ([NASS, 2022](#)).

Collectively, recommendations of the [2021 Farm to Table Task Force](#) and input from listening sessions during the development of this food system plan recognize the dual opportunity and challenge of increased purchasing of local food by intermediary markets and institutions like schools and early care sites, institutions, food retailers and grocery stores.

While many potential buyers recognize the multiple economic and health benefits of buying local food, they also expressed concerns including lack of time to invest in working with both their usual ordering systems and local food systems, budget constraints, inadequate kitchen equipment and staff capacity, and/or access to processing for fruits and vegetables.



Iowa Local Food Day School Lunch Tray
Source: Iowa Farm to School & Early Care Coalition

At the same time, the latest commercial horticulture survey in Iowa (2015) found that Iowa horticulture farmers are new to serving institutional markets and the median farm size is two acres ([Iowa Hort Survey, 2015](#)). What might have appeared to be a bit of a stalemate between interest and capacity experienced a significant breakthrough between 2022 and 2024 when two huge investments and many partners demonstrated what is possible. The development of the USDA Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS) Program in Iowa have shed important light on what's needed to grow this important market for nutritious, locally grown food for all Iowans with fair prices paid to farmers.



The LFPA began in the fall of 2022 to strengthen local and regional food systems, foster economic opportunities for local and socially disadvantaged farmers, and establish partnerships to deliver fresh, nutritious food to underserved communities. By April 1, 2024, the program reported nearly \$2.5 million in sales reimbursed to 243 producers. Seventy percent of those producers identified as socially disadvantaged. Seven hundred and seventy eight distribution sites were served in 95 of Iowa's 99 counties ([IowaLFPA, 2024](#)). The Local Food For School Program (LFS), which started in tandem with the LFPA program in 2022, has increased access to local food in K-12 schools and improved supply chain resiliency through partnerships with local producers, food hubs and school districts, moving nearly \$645,000 in local food to Iowa schools in the first year of the program alone ([Wiemerslage, 2023](#)).

Together LFPA and LFS have unleashed innovative advancements that are making fresh, nutritious food from local producers available to those who need it most and fostering cross-sector partnerships across the state.

As Iowa does not have a statewide food procurement program, the success of this work has rested on committed partners across numerous organizations. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, representatives from Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Valley Resource, Conservation and Development, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, and Practical Farmers of Iowa leveraged their relationships to establish the architecture of a procurement model that centers on "farmer-focused local food purchasing incentives" and builds upon the Iowa Hub to Hub Network and IDALS 2020 Local Produce and Protein Program ([Wiemerslage, 2023](#)).



Three food hubs exchange goods at a cross-dock site. Source: Field to Family



These programs have provided incentives and support for institutional purchases and have demonstrated the proven capacity for farmers, food hubs, schools, and food banks and pantries to get the food where it's needed while paying the farmer a fair price. The incredible success of these two programs demonstrates what's needed to bring locally grown food into a more mainstream position in Iowa's food economy. These two programs, along with previous successful progress in other states, like the [Michigan 10 Cents a Meal](#), provide important models for Iowa to continue to build upon.



Figure 1: These USDA Local Food Procurement programs, begun in 2022, have been game changers for institutional food purchasing in Iowa.
Source: LFS & LFPA programs



For the local food purchasing such as the LFPA and LFS prove is possible to continue and thrive in Iowa, this team has identified six main areas that need attention: 1) sustained funding for local food procurement; 2) technical assistance to farmers and food businesses, food buyers, and food hubs, 3) infrastructure investment at all scales, especially for commercial scale fruit and vegetable processing, 4) coordinated policy development to support system change, 5) robust, consistent messaging about local food purchase at community or state level, and 6) increased awareness and education among children about healthy, nutritious food.

Why is sustained investment a critical step?

Consistent and predictable incentives that support increased purchases from institutions of local foods are necessary as a regular practice rather than a "special occasion". Predictability allows producers and buyers to plan and invest with confidence.

Source: Farm to School & Early Care Coalition



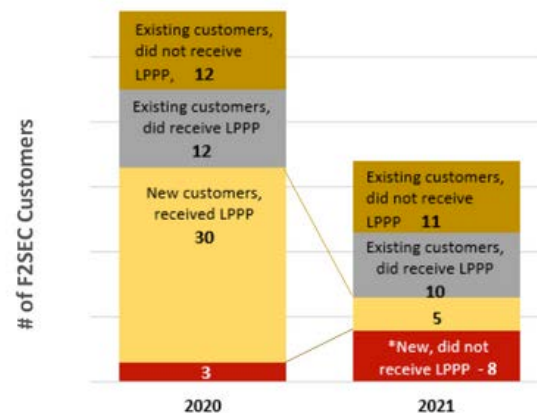
The Local Produce and Protein Program (LPPP), coordinated by Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship in 2020 through CARES Act dollars, demonstrated that school districts have interest in purchasing local and supporting the local food system. According to the [Local Produce and Protein Impact Report](#), 53 of Iowa's 99 counties participated and a total \$603,000 was spent in support of producer equipment, school kitchen equipment and local food procurement in schools and early care sites ([Koether & Enderton, 2020](#)). However, as Figure 2 illustrates, once the supplemental dollars to make those purchases were gone, local purchasing once again decreased, demonstrating the need for sustained financial support to purchase local foods that tend to be more expensive than the conventionally-grown products from other parts of the United States ([Wiemerslage, 2021](#)).

For child nutrition programs that must count every penny, the desire to purchase local and build a stronger local food system is often outweighed by the need to operate a financially solvent program, further demonstrating the importance of financial support for relevant policies. To compliment the procurement incentive policy examples outlined in this chapter's Strategy #1, local buying campaigns from other states including "[Kentucky Proud Buy Local](#)" and "[North Carolina 10%](#)" have proven successful offer a range of opportunities from individuals, restaurants and retailers, and large scale buyers to buy local.

What kind of technical assistance is needed and why?

The 2021 Farm to Table Task Force Report lays out the challenges faced by farmers and buyers alike to expand local food in the intermediary markets and institutions. Few Iowa farmers are currently at scale to meet the consistent quantity needs of buyers. Increasing scale and production of local foods requires additional capacity, new skill base, and planning systems as well as infrastructure.

Figure 1. Few of 2020's new food hub Customers were retained in 2021 because funding was not available.



*Some customers who were "new" in 2021 had purchased from a food hub prior to 2020, and may have suspended purchases in 2020 due to the Covid-pandemic.

(Data source: [Wiemerslage, 2021](#))



Many buyers work within tight food budgets and purchasing guidelines. The seasonality of some locally grown products is a challenge for consistent menus. Kitchen capacity and labor availability are additional limitations. Due to the current limited scale of local food production serving this market, many institutional buyers are simply unable to purchase in an effective manner or may not be familiar with how to buy and serve locally grown fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy products ([Farm to Table Task Force, 2021](#)).

The Carolinas Urban-Rural Connection regional food systems research program found that farmers who become part of the wholesale food supply chain were able to increase the economic viability of their business. However, this commitment not only requires more investment and education than selling directly to consumers, it also requires the support of many partners or intermediaries along the way ([Danis, 2019](#)).

Partners across the food value chain include farmers, aggregators and distributors such as food hubs, broadline distributors, and produce auctions, to name a few. Practices that need improvement include reliability in product quality and quantity, invoicing systems, storage and aggregation between larger hubs.

Local procurement coaches and local food coordinators, also referred to as value chain coordinators, provide critical support in the value chain to make local purchases happen.

These food system experts bring familiarity with meal planning and local food procurement and can help to assist and train early care, K-12 schools, and other institutional buyers on how to effectively utilize local foods. Training such as the [Cafeteria Coaching](#) program has been provided by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Procurement coaches and value chain coordinators are also an important resource for farmers and food hub partners looking to scale up to serve this market. Improved coordination along the whole value chain will increase efficiency of the marketing system.



Jonathan Lawrence, Sr. Value Chain Coordinator, Eat Greater Des Moines, shows off a new community refrigerator in the Fairfield community.

Source: Eat Greater Des Moines



These types of positions have been funded through Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and other non-profit organizations, often through grants, but rarely have long term sustained funding to provide these services. Without reliable funding, relationships and commitments that get started lack necessary follow through to institute new practices across key value chain partners.

More strategic coordination and promotion of farming business coaching services, and conferences available in Iowa from groups listed under our Partner section play a key role in this technical assistance as well.

What infrastructure development is needed?

Infrastructure needs are found at all scales, from on-farm washing, processing and storage to businesses involved with aggregation and distributors, including food hubs, with their unique cooling, distribution, and storage needs. Institutional buyers have unique kitchen scale processing, storage, and handling needs to address in order to make working with unprocessed food items feasible.

The Choose Iowa Grant program, established in 2021 through the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, is proving to be an important state funded program that helps advance infrastructure development. Since the launch of the grants in 2022, \$1,173,690.00 in Choose Iowa Value-Added Grants have been awarded to 67 projects which has leveraged a total investment of \$4,268,099.19 ([IDALS, 2024](#)).

This grant program is an important tool that is helping to address barriers for farmers and food businesses who are building up their business to meet opportunities in this intermediary market. The Iowa legislature revitalized the [Iowa Food and Farm Program Advisory Council](#) in 2023. This team of government and business advisors to the Secretary of Agriculture can play an important role in supporting the Choose Iowa Grant program's ability to meet infrastructure needs and support equity for farm and food business development.

One of the biggest specific infrastructure challenges identified by the 2021 Farm to Table task force, and referenced frequently in partner feedback, is the lack of processing capacity across the state. Regardless of what food product is being processed, whether it's meat, dairy, fruits, or vegetables, establishing these types of facilities is an expensive and complex endeavor.



Additionally, there are constraints to accessing licensed kitchens to repackage or process fresh fruits and vegetables or breakdown an animal after being butchered. This gap in infrastructure impacts both our local food supply chain and ability to develop value-added products (Farm to Table Task Force Report, 2021). The Farm and Food System Infrastructure chapter addresses this issue in depth.

Equipping kitchens and the foodservice professionals that work within them with the scale of tools and skills needed to prepare unprocessed food items is another important area of infrastructure. It will be critical for our food system to find a middle ground where foodservice professionals have the technical skills and equipment needed to prepare local foods, but also for the food system to have the infrastructure to provide products that meet the needs of kitchens at varying levels of production. By finding this middle ground, we have potential to see more local purchasing happening at institutions and higher quality meals being served to patrons of these establishments.



Fruit & Vegetable Mobile Produce Processing Cart, pilot.
Source: Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development and Community and Economic Development.



Currently fruit and vegetable processing in Iowa is limited to farm scale projects. Two initiatives, the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach mobile produce processing cart and the mobile cider unit based in northeast Iowa are building capacity for regional service. At this printing, a fruit and vegetable processing feasibility study is underway, led by Iowa State University Extension & Outreach. Coordination among the lessons being learned and data being gathered across these various projects is critical to assess what system, or mixture of systems, will best meet the needs of Iowa's local and regional food system. For example, can small to medium scale facilities (under \$5 million) provide a space for aggregating and processing raw product that can then be developed into both direct-to-consumer or individual servings as well as larger scale quantities for buyers such as schools?

How does policy development increase food procurement?

Many local, state, and federal policies impact our food system. Policy development leads to greater engagement around the issues and addresses real system change. Establishing policies that reflect this priority may range from direct state funding to inclusion of "local food purchase priority" in a food director's job description. Increased state investment in meat lockers, dairy processing, and the establishment of a Farm to School Fund have come about thanks to timely advocacy spurred by the Covid pandemic and legislator readiness. Policy helps to translate ideas into concrete practice and action. This strategy will be supported by the Local Food Policy Network Priority Team.

Initiating a local food buying percentage or institution policy for local purchases could be advantageous. According to [Policy Link](#), it is estimated that 37 states have laws that require some or all state and local agencies to allow geographic preference for purchasing locally grown food, making regionally grown food competitive with more conventional food procurement options ([Policy Link, 2015](#)).



IFSC members discussing local food procurement priorities with Iowa legislators during the 2024 Food & Farm Day on the Hill. Source: Luke Elzinga



How can coordinated messaging and campaigns help?

A strong, coordinated communication and education effort helps to articulate how all of this work is contributing to a stronger, more vital, and resilient state. Benefits of buying from Iowa producers include boosting the local economy, supporting community-based businesses, lessening dependence on our national and global distribution systems, and providing Iowans with fresh and nutritious food. State institutions, such as schools, who purchase local foods, leverage their tax dollars because more of those dollars stay and turn over in the local economy. (Farm to Table Task Force, 2021). A systematic approach to capturing and conveying these stories will be important to bolster community pride and support policy advocacy. The Communication and Education Priority Team will be an important partner for this work.



Hands-on cooking class

Source: From to School & Early Care Coalition

Awareness and education for children

Food and beverage companies spend nearly \$2 billion dollars each year marketing food to kids and the vast majority of these foods are calorie high and nutrition poor. Studies that take race into consideration find U.S. food companies disproportionately target Black and Hispanic consumers with marketing for high-calorie, low-nutrient products including candy, sugary drinks, snacks, and fast food.

This targeted marketing exacerbates inequities in poor diet and diet-related diseases in communities of color, including heart disease, obesity, and diabetes (Harris, Fleming-Milici, and Mancini, 2022).

The data reveals that food marketing to children is increasing. In 2018, food and beverage ads accounted for 23 % of all ads aired during children's television programming, a significant increase from 15 % in 2012 (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2021).



Contemporary farming is, at once, integral to society and removed from it. Today less than 2% of those actively employed in the U.S. participate directly in producing crops. Many lack personal experience with farming and ways to understand what farming involves, who it involves, what is required to stay in business (Sweetland, O'Shea, John, 2022).

Food system education for children is a powerful investment to help children become more engaged changemakers for a healthy, just, and sustainable food system.

There are a number of food system and agriculture education programs designed for young audiences active in Iowa. SNAP education and Pick a Better Snack through IHHS and ISU Extension & Outreach, 5-2-1-0, Food Corp, and farm to school and early care programming are examples of active programs in Iowa.

Hands-on engagement with gardens, from early care programs to college student gardens, provide students a range of opportunities to learn, explore, and integrate academic disciplines like language arts and science while learning about the very systems that nurture basic life skills as well as their community. Introducing students to food through gardening as well as the experience of school meals sourced locally, helps them translate ideas into action. Leadership development opportunities introduced at an early stage can open students to career opportunities in agriculture – such as a farmer, future educator, or food system coordinator.

With reasonable investment and targeted support for technical assistance, infrastructure, policy, and education, we can make locally grown, nutritious food available to more Iowans while expanding market opportunities for Iowa's farmers.

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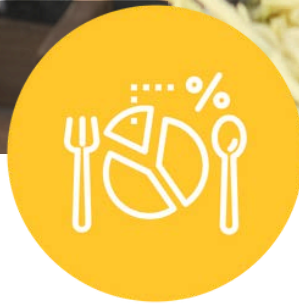
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Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



FOOD, NUTRITION & HEALTH

ACTIVATING THE FOOD AND HEALTH CONNECTION



FOOD, NUTRITION & HEALTH

GOAL

To enhance and sustain the health and wellbeing of all Iowans by emphasizing the role of food in public health, focusing on policy change, incentives, and education initiatives.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

Many of the chronic diseases Iowans face are related to the foods we eat—what we eat and how it is produced ([American Public Health Society, 2007](#)). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), those who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk of developing diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension ([Wise et al, 2022](#)). These diseases can be costly and severely limit quality of life.

- Here in Iowa, nearly 300,000 Iowans (10% of our population), including more than 80,000 children, struggle with food/nutrition insecurity ([Iowa Food Bank Association, n.d.](#)). The impact falls heavily on communities of color as Iowa data reports 25% of Black and Hispanic families struggle to afford food, compared to 7% of white families ([Iowa HHS, 2023](#)).
- In Iowa the adult obesity rate is 37.4%, or roughly one in three adults, compared to the national average of 33.6% ([CDC, 2023](#)). This makes Iowa 11th in the nation for highest adult obesity rates. Obesity increases the risk of developing other chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, stroke, heart disease, and several types of cancers ([Iowa HHS, 2022](#)). Research continues to show that food insecurity and the inability to afford healthy, nutritious foods is a risk factor for obesity ([Carvajal et al, 2022](#)).
- More than 22,000 people in the state are diagnosed with diabetes every year, and there are an estimated 70,000 people in Iowa with diabetes who don't yet know they have it ([American Diabetes Association, 2021](#)).



- The direct and indirect costs for lowans related to chronic health disease runs \$11,125 per person per year ([Waters, Graf, 2018](#)). The collective medical expenses to treat diabetes are estimated at \$2 billion a year, with another \$646 million from lost productivity due to the disease ([American Diabetes Association, 2023](#)).
- Sixty percent of what the typical adult eats, and nearly 70% of what kids eat consist of ultra processed foods like cookies, sodas, cereals, and frozen meals ([Agostino, 2022](#)). While more affordable, these foods are increasingly understood to play a significant role in increased obesity rates ([NIH, 2019](#)).

Improving policies, educational opportunities, and incentives that address the interconnection between food access, health outcomes, and our food system are needed to make the “healthy choice the easy choice” for all lowans.



Investing in Iowa's local and regional food system is a win-win strategy, addressing the interconnection between food access and health concerns while also stimulating regional economies, sustaining healthy environments and creating strong social connections. Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Food, Nutrition, and Health priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating capacity to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by the Iowa Department of Health & Human Services Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) Partnership, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goals of enhancing and sustaining the health and wellbeing of all Iowans, we have determined the following four strategies and actions are urgently needed. We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas, and especially rely on the support teams of Communication and Education, which includes strategies for communication campaigns, and the Local Food Policy Network which includes strategies for policy development and advocacy.



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY NETWORK



Strategy 1

Expand partnerships to support a systems-based approach to address food and nutrition insecurity, while supporting existing programs and initiating innovations.

Action 1: Build relationships with local-level partners throughout the state; including but not limited to the healthcare sector and assistance programs like SNAP, Medicaid, child-care assistance, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance, nutrition professionals and local food providers, value chain coordinators, and other food system sectors.

Action 2: Engage and elevate the voices and experiences of different cultural and demographic groups including indigenous populations in Iowa and People of Color who have historically and systemically been left out of these conversations. By prioritizing input from those most impacted by food system decisions, we will prioritize their ideas in the creation, enhancement or expansion of new and existing food, nutrition, and health strategies.

Action 3: Engage partners, including program beneficiaries, in advocating for equitable legislation that would improve the access and affordability of food for all Iowans.

Action 4: Provide partners with opportunities for education and professional development focused on how policy, systems and environmental (PSE) changes impact the food system.

Outcomes

- Expanded number of intersectional relationships across areas of food, nutrition, and health.
- Increased number of diverse voices (cultural, demographic, identity based, and geographic) contributing to food, nutrition, and health strategy development.
- Increased participation in policy development for equitable access to affordable nutritious foods for those most impacted by the food system.
- Deepened understanding of systemic barriers for food and nutrition insecurity across cultural, demographic (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, income), and geographic areas.
- Increased nutrition security within populations with limited resources through increased awareness and education around the intersectionality of food, health and the environment.



Strategy 2

Develop and advocate for incentives to provide nutritious and culturally relevant foods to Iowans.

Action 1: Analyze barriers to food and **nutrition security** and access to services experienced by people living in Iowa. Gather input about factors that influence food purchasing decisions, access, and preferences through engagement with diverse audiences (e.g., age, culture, gender, race, ethnicity, income, geographic location) to guide collective work.

Action 2: Develop case studies of innovative food system interventions with effective public health wrap-around services to be promoted and replicated. Possible case studies may include produce prescriptions, subsidized Community Supported Agriculture, rural grocer revitalization, community and incubator gardens, teaching kitchens, and more.

Action 3: Support increased procurement of locally sourced, nutrient dense food across a variety of settings (e.g., hospitals, clinics, grocery stores, worksites, schools).

Action 4: Partner with organizations who offer courses related to Food as Medicine and identify new partnerships for creating Iowa specific programming.

1. Include outcomes and next steps that emerged from the Food is Our Medicine course facilitated by Nourish, a Canadian organization that the ISU FFED team helped to coordinate – this took place in the Fall of 2023.

Outcomes

- Improved understanding and awareness of behaviors and key priorities for individuals when making food purchasing decisions.
- Expanded investment in food system-based food, nutrition and health interventions.
- Better coordination between programming for food service procurement and use of nutritious and local foods.
- Increased local and nutritious food procurement across various settings – formal/market and informal/non-market (e.g. home production; food sharing; community gardens; community, school, and other meal programs; and emergency food sources).





In 2023, 2,597 clinic clients and community members received food from the garden at People's Community Clinic in Waterloo.; Source: UNI Center for Energy & Environmental Education

Strategy 3

Identify available food, nutrition and health data and use it purposefully to guide decision-making – share these outcomes with partners and other collaborators.

Action 1: Coordinate and build upon existing food and nutrition needs assessment processes completed by organizations across the state and engage new partners in the process (e.g., healthcare, local public health, universities).

Action 2: Establish systems to coordinate, share and distribute data that can inform collection processes and measure the need, progress and outcomes of food and nutrition activities across Iowa.

Outcomes

- Increased networking, awareness and analysis of available programming through data aggregations and delivery.
- Increased effectiveness of evaluation as a tool to inform and drive new action.



Strategy 4

Develop education that promotes food system literacy and strengthens cultural understanding between food systems and health providers.

Action 1: Work with advocacy organizations, including key Iowa Food System Coalition priority teams, to establish shared messaging on nutrition and **food security** that provides culturally relevant nutrition education in multiple languages.

Action 2: Assess, utilize existing, and create new resources to inform and educate Iowans on intersections between culture, food, and health.

Action 3: Provide relevant nutrition and food system education that is relatable across diverse populations in multiple languages.

Outcomes

- Increased number of new nutrition and food security communication resources and messages created and shared.
- Increased awareness of the intersectionality of food, health and culture.
- Improved knowledge of existing resources and needs for new resources related to food, health and culture.
- Improved programming that is relevant, in plain language, and provided through practical, easy to access channels.



PARTNERS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Camp Creek Organic Produce](#)

[Feed Iowa First](#)

[Grace Fitness](#)

[Harkin Institute for Public Policy, Nutrition and Wellness Program](#)

Iowa Department of Health & Human Services

- [Healthy Eating, Active Living \(HEAL\) Partnership](#)
- [Healthy Iowans](#)

[Iowa Food Bank Association](#)

[Iowa's Healthiest State Initiative](#)

[Iowa Hunger Coalition](#)

[Iowa State University Extension and Outreach - Healthy Food Access](#)

[Iowa State University Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

- [Farm to School & Early Care Coalition](#)

[Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens Program](#)

[Lyndi Buckingham-Schutt - ISU Extension & Outreach, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education](#)

- [Environmental Health Program](#)
- [UNI Local Food Program](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about Setting the Table for All Iowans and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Food, Nutrition, & Health](#) team.
- Build your knowledge of food, nutrition, and health in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - Make an inventory of innovative food system interventions (as listed in Strategy 2, Action 2) that are active in your community.
 - Are food emergency leaders and local farm advocates working together in your community? When food access advocates and farmers work together, they are able to narrow the food access gap.
 - Are community gardens available in your area? These are important access points that increase affordable access to nutritious food and can incubate budding farmers.
- Speak up – educate others and advocate for nutritious food access for all in your community.
 - Work with local partners to hold a community roundtable for individuals who struggle with food access to share their stories and needs.
 - Work with your local public health leaders to organize a community conversation with food access and local food partners about what strategies they are using to increase affordable access to nutritious food.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

Food and nutrition security, chronic health disease, our food system, and the health of all Iowans are interconnected. We have developed strategies and actions that aim to address underlying factors affecting the health of Iowans, using the resources of an integrated guiding framework, and building upon the inspiration of models of innovation in action in Iowa.

“Food security focuses on ensuring that everyone has enough quantity for an active, healthy life at all times.”

“Nutrition security ensures that everyone has consistent access to safe, nutritious and affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being.”

(Wise et al, 2022)

THE FIVE FACTORS BEHIND OUR FOOD EXPERIENCE BEGIN WITH “A”

The list of factors that impact food and nutrition security and consumption of nutritious foods are often categorized around the letter “A” - Availability, Access, Affordability, and Acceptability (**Figure 1**). Recently, experts are pointing to a fifth “A” - referring to the addictive nature of ultra processed foods.

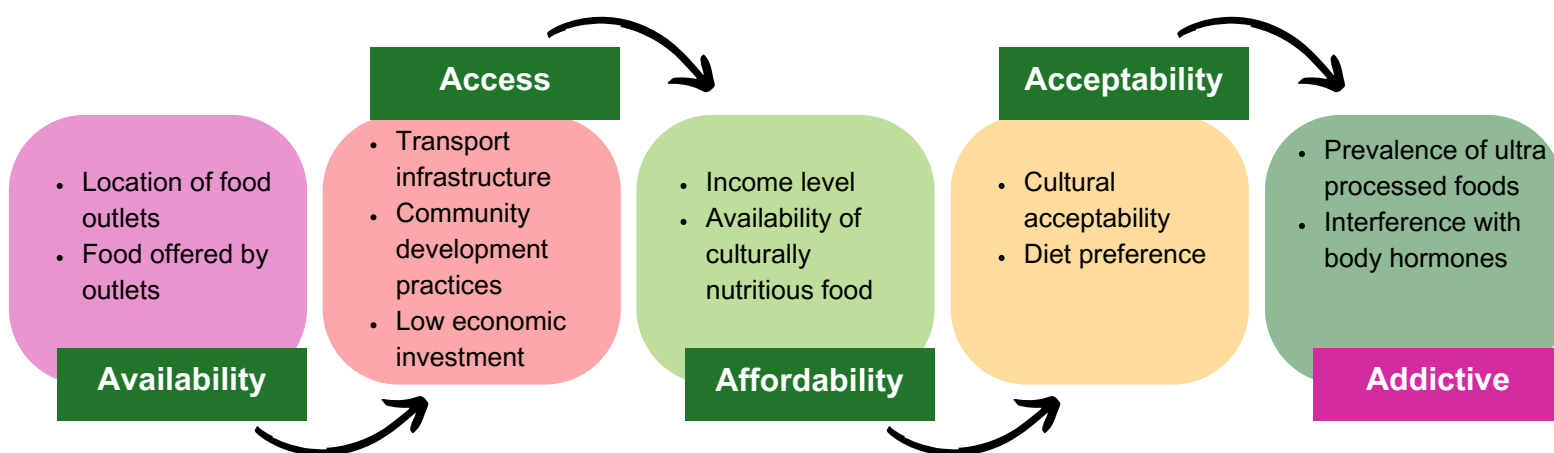


Figure 1. Five factors behind our food experience begin with “A”



Availability - One's ability to purchase nutritious food is impacted by where food outlets are supported, as well as the diversity of foods carried by various food retail establishments.

Food environment refers to the physical presence of food that affects a person's diet; a person's proximity to food store locations; the distribution of food stores, food service, and any physical entity by which food may be obtained; or, a connected system that allows access to food ([C.D.C., 2023](#)).

Access - One's ability to acquire appropriate foods for a nutritious diet is impacted by many factors including transportation infrastructure, access to nutritious food sources, community development practices, and the level of economic investment in certain communities. A vicious downward spiral that has been documented between intentional disinvestment in some communities, including the practice known as redlining, disproportionately impacts historically and systemically marginalized communities (**Figure 2**). On the other hand, nutritious food access is proven to provide a positive upward spiral, generating positive economic impact including increased jobs, community development, property values, and leveraging federal nutrition assistance programs ([Healthy Food Access, n.d.](#)).

Affordability - Income level affects food and nutrition security. Across the nation and in Iowa we see a connection between household income, food access and health status. In 2021, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of adult Iowans with a household income level of less than \$15,000 per year reported fair or poor health status. Additionally, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of adult Iowans with household incomes of less than \$15,000 struggled to afford food that is needed, and nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ struggled to afford balanced meals ([Iowa HHS, 2023](#)).

Acceptability - Personal food consumption preferences include culturally acceptable and/or diet preferences. When addressing food access, practitioners need to account for the complexity of eating habits and the influence that culture, knowledge, advertisement, exposure and other outside factors have on one's willingness to accept available, accessible and affordable foods.



A 5th “A” gaining attention is the **Addictive** nature of ultra processed foods. Ultra processed foods like cookies, sodas, cereals, and frozen meals have become very prevalent in the US food supply and now make up more than 60% of what the typical adult eats, and nearly 70% of what kids eat ([Agostino, 2022](#)). While these foods may be more affordable, they have been found to cause people to eat too many calories and experience rapid weight gain ([NIH, 2019](#)). Studies are also beginning to explore the link between ultra processed foods and depression ([Harvard, 2023](#)).

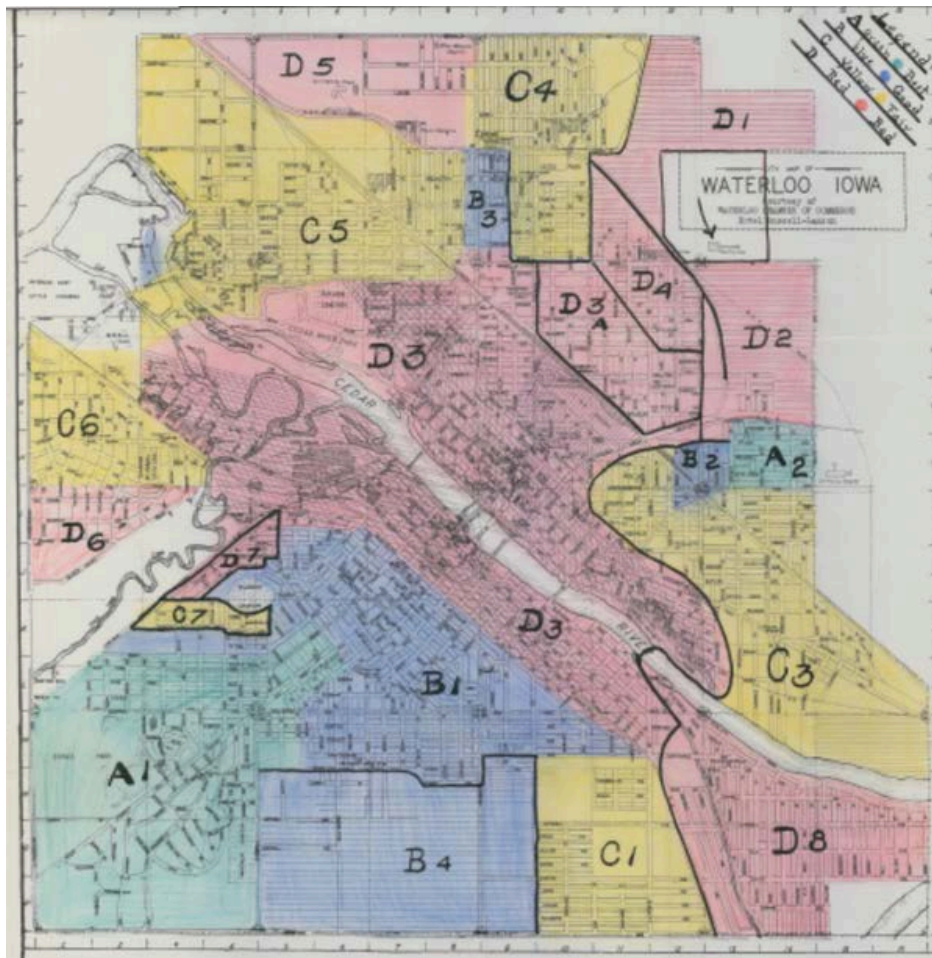


Figure 2. Redlining maps (color coded maps of government sanctioned lending practices), like this one from Waterloo with red and yellow neighborhoods marked as poor investment candidates compared to the blue and green neighborhoods, are not only associated with greater segregation and economic inequality, but impact the most basic attributes of public health, life expectancy and social vulnerability.

Source: HOLC

“It is the ultra-processed food that interferes with our body's ability to say - you know what? - I'm done. I can stop eating now.”

(excerpt from interview with Dr. Chris Van Tulleken, [Aubrey, 2023](#))



ACTIVATING THE FOOD & HEALTH CONNECTION

Farm to Food Access - New Iowa Partnerships Connecting New Strategies

The Iowa Food System Coalition (IFSC) has been helping to increase the connection between numerous public and private efforts to address food, nutrition and health. The development of *Setting the Table for All Iowans* coincided with the planning cycle of the Iowa State Health Improvement Plan and the renewal of the Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) Partnership, both of which are initiatives of the Iowa Health and Human Services (Iowa HHS). While emergency food relief organizations like the food banks and food pantries all across Iowa play a key role in feeding Iowans who face food insecurity, a new term - **Farm to Food Assistance** - has emerged in these circles as well, encouraging food assistance to also be seen through food system development. The partnerships between IFSC and Iowa HHS will deepen the connection between food system development and efforts to address hunger and food and health issues for Iowans.

Frameworks: Integrating food system and PSE strategies

Resources to address complex problems start with a shared commitment to a guiding framework. Over the past decade two Iowa reports highlight the importance of integrating food system strategies within public health planning. In 2014, the Healthy Food, Healthy Iowans, Healthy Communities report called out the need to think beyond programs focused on alleviating the impact of diet-related chronic diseases, and instead shift focus to “effectively preventing diet-related chronic diseases.” The report recommended “ a multifaceted range of strategies including policy, system and environmental changes, in this case, using a food systems lens.” (Tagtow, 2014). In 2022, the Iowa Department of Health & Human Services report, Best Practices in Addressing Food and Nutrition Security with Policy, Systems and Environmental (PSE) Change Projects, (Wise et al, 2022), added a significant body of work to the thinking and planning about food and nutrition security. The report showcases best practices around policy development, community-based programs, and nutrition incentives. Both reports provide the framework for food system strategies to become a more central component of public health approaches.



What are Policy, System & Environmental (PSE) Changes?

PSE change strategies are designed to promote healthy behavior by making the healthy choice the easy choice in the community

- Policy Changes use laws, rules, ordinances & regulations to impact health
- System Changes modify the infrastructure within an organization or community to promote healthy change
- Environmental Changes to the economic, social or physical environment to promote healthy choices



Figure 3: The PSE planning framework has proven to be an effective tool that involves multiple approaches to address complex problems – stretching imagination and creative problem solving.

Both Tagtow's 2014 report and the 2022 Iowa HHS report emphasize the importance of incorporating policy, systems and environmental (PSE) change strategies. Complex problems require complex responses and the PSE planning framework has proven to be an effective tool that helps planning leverage multiple approaches – stretching imagination and creative problem solving. **Figure 3** provides more context and examples of how PSE strategies might play out.

Being intentional about PSE as a guiding lens requires much broader community collaboration to contribute to problem solving. Addressing food access and security with economic development, land access, and procurement, to name a few, expands the ability to see the breadth of issues and develop innovative pathways. Grassroots entities such as local public health, mutual aid organizations, and local government based food policy councils, are great vehicles for this kind of integrated planning and action. For these partners to realize the desired impact, there must be investment in the people doing the work to ensure necessary capacity for relationship development and technical support if using the PSE approach is new.





Grinnell Food Insecurity Roundtable Community Conversation, Fall 2023.

Source: Tommy Hexter, Iowa Farmers Union

Tools: The Data Sources We Use

There are numerous sources of reliable, consistent data at the national, state and local level that can be utilized to assess the food and nutrition environments that impact lowans. State and local level data from the **Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)**, is used to inform Iowa's **State Health Improvement Plan**, published by the Healthy Iowan program. The **Reinvestment Fund's Limited Supermarket Access (LSA) Analysis** and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) **Food Access Research Atlas** provide guidance on how to understand whether a new supermarket, an expansion of an existing store, or a farmer's market is the appropriate strategy to pursue. Layering in lived experience by those most impacted by food system decisions is another critical data set. This qualitative data comes from meeting and engaging with those in our communities not as recipients of services, but as co-creators of solutions. The Des Moines Area Religious Council's [Storytellers Roundtable on Hunger and Food Insecurity](#) provides a prime example of this powerful data. Members of the Iowa Food System Coalition's Local Food Policy Network team incorporated the story telling model when they hosted several food insecurity roundtable events across Iowa in the Fall of 2023. The Evaluation plan for *Setting the Table for all lowans* will pull data from all priority teams, to create an annual report card, creating a new data set for Iowa food system assessment.

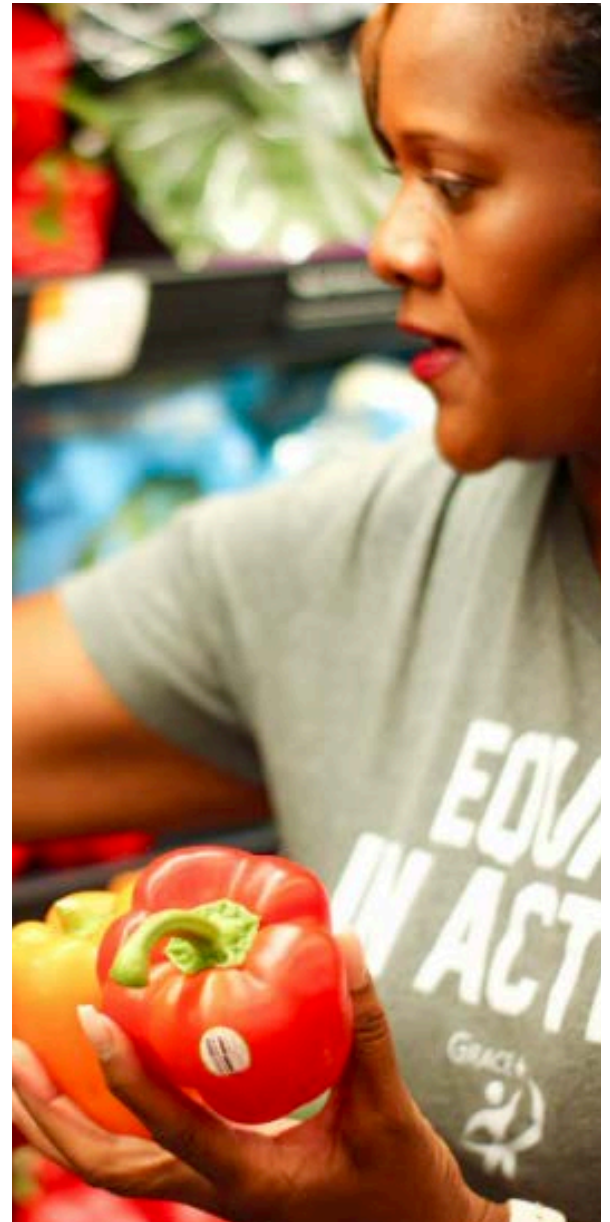
The strategies of this priority call for the use of these data sources and working with cross-sector collaboration to better understand the needs, barriers, opportunities and outcomes that impact food, nutrition and health in Iowa.



Addressing Health Equity

It is clear that policies and investment decisions have created advantages for some groups of people and disadvantages for others related to nutrition and health outcomes. In particular, people of color (such as African American and Indigenous people), people with disabilities, people who are a part of the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and more) community, and people who live in rural areas, experience disproportionate food and health impacts ([Wise et al, 2022](#)). The racial inequities in Iowa's food system are captured in stark contrast in the 2022 BRFSS Survey which reported a quarter of Hispanic (25.7%) and Multiracial, non-Hispanic (24.6%), as well as a fifth of Black, non-Hispanic (21.2%) Iowans struggled to afford food, compared to 7.3% of White, non-Hispanic adults ([Iowa HHS, 2023](#)).

We must address the health inequity gap if we hope to reach our goal to enhance and sustain the health and wellbeing of all Iowans.



Access and education is essential in the black community to address the inequity gap that exists in the health and food system. Source: Neisa Taylor



Innovations in Action in Iowa

There are numerous initiatives across the state putting the partnerships, PSE framework, and data tools into action to improve access to and advocacy of nutritious food options for Iowans. Here are a few examples:

Food Policy Councils and Food & Farm Coalitions – In Iowa, there are a number of state, regional, and county based food policy councils and food and farm networks working to improve food and nutrition availability, access, affordability and acceptability across the state (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. This map represents food policy councils, food & farm networks and coalitions supporting a healthy, just, and sustainable food system in Iowa. Source: IFSC

Color Code

Green - Food Policy Councils

Purple - Statewide Food & Health Coalitions/Partnerships

Yellow - Food & Farm Networks/Coalitions

Click the map for detailed information.



A **food policy council** is an organized group of stakeholders that may be sanctioned by a government body or may exist independently of government, which works to address food systems issues and needs at the local (city/municipality or county), state, regional, or tribal nations level ([Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, n.d.](#))

Two examples include:

1
The **Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Partnership** has been bringing statewide nutrition professionals together for over 20 years to network, share updates, coordinate, and collaborate on nutrition education and PSE strategies.

The **Johnson County Local Food Policy Council** seeks to improve dialogue related to food and agriculture issues in the county and to provide recommendations on policy and programming to the Johnson County Board of Supervisors and other community entities. They have hosted topical forums, managed a Community Food and Farm Grant program, and more.

The Iowa Food System Coalition's Local Food Policy Network, one of the nine priority areas in *Setting the Table for All Iowans*, identified key policy priorities based upon the plan in preparation for the 2024 legislative session, provided a four session advocacy training, and followed up by the first ever Food & Farm Day on the Hill. Top priorities included advocating for state investment in local food procurement to ensure ongoing support of federal procurement programs Local Food for Schools (LFS) and Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA).



IFSC Advocates at Local Food & Farm Day on the Hill January 25, 2024.
Source: Tommy Hexter, Iowa Farmers Union





Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa

There are numerous public and private initiatives engaged in policy development and advocacy including The Healthy School Meals for All Coalition, The Healthiest State Initiative advocating for increased state investment in Double Up Food Bucks, and the Iowa Hunger Coalition, an outspoken advocate for SNAP and Summer EBT.

Regional farm and food coalitions, who have served a broader networking role are beginning to consider opportunities to incorporate a stronger policy lens with the support of the IFSC policy focus.

Nutrition Incentive Programs & Community-based programs offering households with lower incomes extra food dollars to purchase fruits and vegetables, known as a nutrition incentive, helps address food and nutrition security more than financial incentives on their own. Strong community partnerships that leverage resources and coordinate efforts such as community and school gardens, initiating and supporting farmers markets, are effective for achieving community-wide change ([Wise et al, 2022](#)).



Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), embedded within the Farm Bill, **is the nation's largest hunger safety net program**. It's been an effective program to reduce food insecurity. Changes made to federal nutrition assistance programs introduced during the pandemic, including increased eligibility and expanded benefits, offer innovative solutions for the future.



Other effective nutrition incentive programs in Iowa include **Double Up Food Bucks**, administered through the Iowa Healthiest State Initiative, and the **Farmers Market Nutrition Program**, administered through [Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship](#). These are nutrition incentive programs that have helped increase access to fresh produce through farmers markets and grocery stores especially in areas with limited healthy food access.



Source: Iowa Healthiest State Initiative

Produce Prescription Programs provide incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables. The [Healthiest State Initiative's Produce Rx](#) advances health equity by transforming the healthcare system's role to increase access to affordable, nutritious foods for Iowans living with diet-related health risks or conditions (diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular, etc.). Modeled after Black Hawk County's Veggie Voucher program, the Iowa Produce Rx program now is available through Broadlawns and Primary Health Care in Des Moines, MercyOne Mason City, Cass Health, Community Health Center of Fort Dodge, Peoples Community Health Clinic and Community Health Centers of Southeastern Iowa. A majority of patients who participated in the program reported that they ate more fruits and green leafy vegetables after receiving the prescription for six months. The patient program satisfaction was also overwhelmingly positive with more than 90% of all participants reporting they had a positive or very positive experience. For a story about how this program impacted one participant, click [here](#).

Community based approaches, aim to address food and nutrition security and related outcomes (e.g., diet quality, obesity), and can make a significant impact without a big cost while leveraging local leadership. [Nourish Iowa](#), a program of the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Energy and Environmental Education, demonstrates the impact of three, low-cost, high impact community-based initiatives driven with student leadership (**Figure 4**).



A Garden In Every Lot

141 the number home gardens supported

8 the number of participating cities in Black Hawk County

89%

of first time gardeners felt more confident in raising their own food and plan to continue gardening.

Veggie Voucher Program

755 families receiving fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms in 2023

\$97,920

the value of direct local farm purchases since the program began in 2016

Peoples Community Health Program

2,597

the number of clients and families

>3,000lbs

the amount of fresh produce raised and harvested from the gardens

For more information, visit [Nourish Iowa](https://www.nourishiaa.org/)

Figure 4. Impact of three community based initiatives in Black Hawk County.
Source: UNI Center for Energy & Environmental Education

Subsidized CSA shares have been found to significantly improve diet quality and reduce food insecurity. These memberships can be part of health care plans that offer “wellness” benefits, or public health and business groups may support this type of intervention as part of public health programming or business development ([Wise, et al. 2022](#)).

With committed partners who understand the importance of cross-sector thinking and integration of food system strategies, numerous examples of innovative initiatives, and the capacity to measure and evaluate progress over time, Iowa has all the elements needed to develop a game changing path to sustain the health and wellbeing of all Iowans.



CSA boxes packed and ready for delivery. Source: One Step at a Time Gardens



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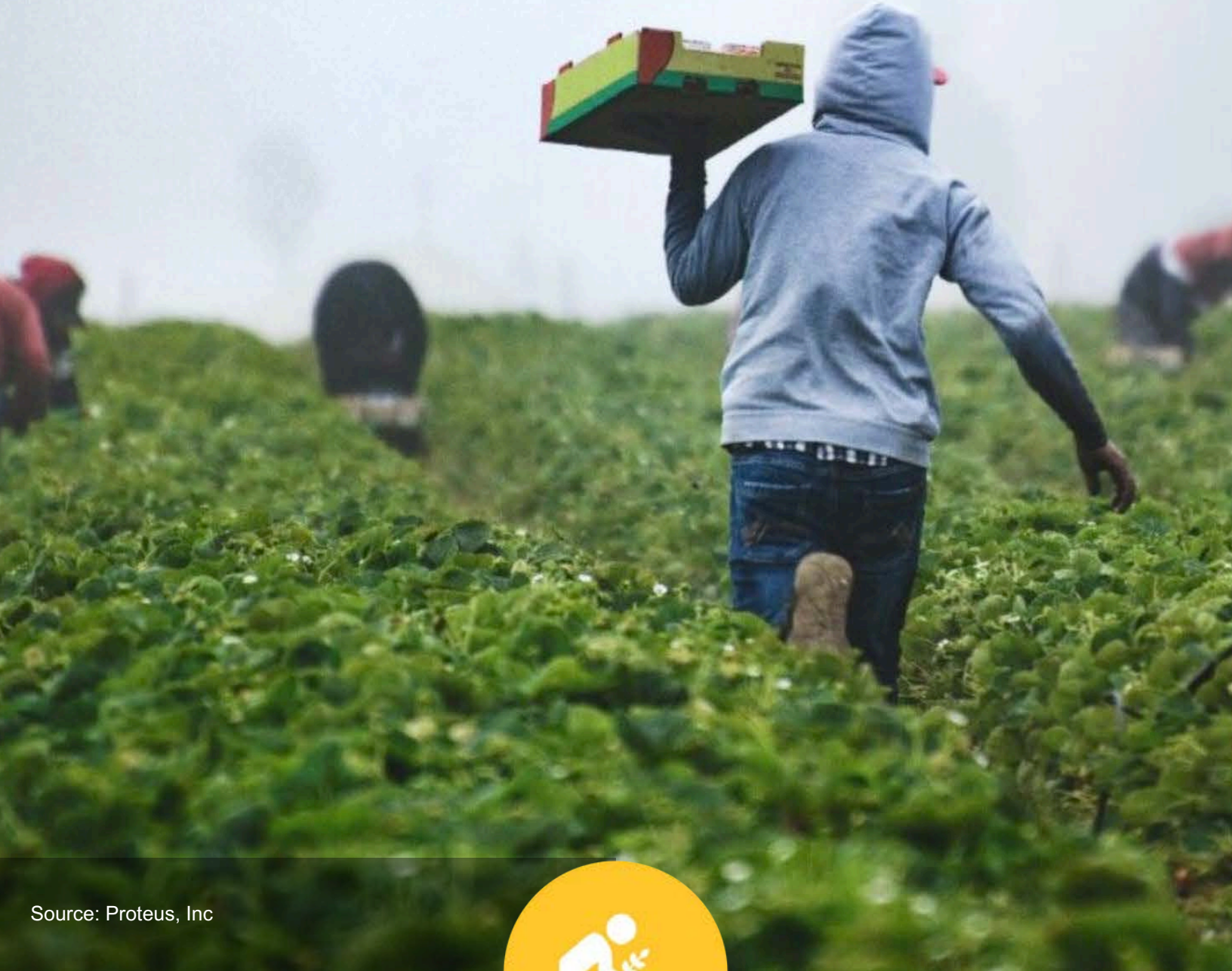
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Source: Proteus, Inc



LABOR EQUITY

ELEVATING THE WORKERS BEHIND OUR FOOD



LABOR EQUITY

GOAL

To support Iowa's food system workforce through skill development, equitable compensation and investment, and to ensure safe and equitable work environments, especially those historically impacted by unjust labor policies and practices.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

We rely upon a vast network of workers to produce, harvest, process, transport, and distribute the food we eat. Historic exploitation of workers in the food system has resulted in direct challenges, such as low wages, poor benefits, and unsafe workplaces, and indirect challenges, such as increased reliance on public assistance and a lack of access to social services ([FCWA, 2016](#)).

- Farmworkers who travel across the country to provide labor-intensive and often risky work live in unsafe housing conditions and lack access to food and food assistance ([Iowa Legal Aid, 2022](#); [Zinnel, 2020](#)).
- Other groups, including school food service staff and other workers along the middle of the supply chain (value chain coordinators, delivery drivers, food hub staff, meat locker employees, and other food processing employees) face challenges of low wages, inadequate resources, unsafe work environments, and a lack of career advancement opportunities ([FCWA, 2016](#)).
- According to the Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa is the number one state in the nation for hog production (Iowa Pork Producers Association, 2020). In the industry, immigration helps make up for extreme shortages in labor, and today, foreign-born labor makes up almost 68% of farm personnel on hog farms across the United States (Vaughn & Rosales, 2023).



Working toward **labor equity** involves addressing full and equitable access to employment opportunities, benefits, and resources for all people working in the various food system sectors.

A key challenge among Iowa's food system workforce partners addressing various labor equity issues is that there has been little cross sectional collaboration around labor equity issues. Partners, including business owners, the workers themselves and service agencies, each have a role in ensuring that food systems jobs protect the health of workers and communities. The Labor Equity priority team seeks to foster new connections and increased engagement on shared labor equity issues.



The many hands required to bring food from farm to plate begin on the farm. Source: Bridgewater Farm

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Labor Equity priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating space to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by Iowa State University Farm, Food and Enterprise Development and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. While there are multiple initiatives in Iowa working on labor equity, we encourage partners to use this priority team as a collaborative space to foster increased understanding and connection of their work. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goal of supporting Iowa's food system workforce through skill development, equitable compensation and investment, and safe and equitable work environments, especially those impacted by unjust labor policies and practices, we have determined the following strategies and actions are urgently needed.

We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas, and especially rely on the support teams of Communication and Education, which includes strategies for communication campaigns, and Local Food Policy Network which includes strategies for policy development and advocacy. Key stakeholders across the food and agriculture system are needed in the conversation on labor equity in order to improve understanding of on-going work and to increase collaboration for effective and successful labor equity projects and initiatives statewide.



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY NETWORK



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



Strategy 1

Identify and promote existing compensated job training programs and education for lowans engaged in food systems work - from the farm to the processing plant and coordination jobs in between.

Action 1: Identify and assess existing job training options across the food system.

Action 2: Identify common skills and practices within job training programs.

Action 3: Promote and build awareness of existing job and training opportunities for participants.

Action 4: Work with businesses providing jobs in this arena to create more awareness of worker needs and fair compensation.

Outcomes

- Expand knowledge of continuing education opportunities and gaps.
- Build relationships to address identified gaps.
- Increase the number of individuals participating in farm and food related apprenticeships and food industry training programs.
- Increase the number of businesses providing compensated job training.



Strategy 2

Improve strong labor protections, livable wages & benefits especially for workers in production, processing, distribution and access, and food service - including, but not limited to meat packing plant workers, on-farm migrant workers, and other food systems workers.

Action 1: Assess existing conditions for a safe and healthy work environment and compile into a shared document for partner collaboration.

Action 2: Engage essential partners to develop and advance desired policy change and worker power.

Action 3: Identify best practices and case studies for policies around food worker livable wages and benefits.

Action 4: Foster collaboration with partners who are developing policy, and advocacy resources for livable wages and benefits.

Outcomes

- Improve environmental conditions and access to healthcare for workers.
- Increase reliability and retention of workforce; policy enacted that requires livable wages.
- Ensure a healthy workforce in Iowa's fields and processing plants, thereby reducing the burden on the healthcare system.



Strategy 3

Increase investment in food system workforce positions including, but not limited to value chain coordinator and food service positions.

Action 1: Using experiences of existing **value chain** coordinators and the 2022 Regional Food System Partnership (RFSP) project Statewide Regional Value Chain Coordination for a Stronger Iowa Food System, develop recommendations for a cost share program for value chain coordinators across the state.

Action 2: Create Regional Food System Choose Iowa/Connect Iowa , a public cost share investment program.

Action 3: Identify and initiate additional policy actions including, but not limited to job descriptions for school food service directors that more explicitly incorporate use of locally sourced products.

Action 4: Develop a marketing and education campaign to highlight and promote the economic, health, and workforce development benefits of public investment using impact data and stories from the 2022 RFSP project and Procurement coaching program.



School food service workers play a critical role in providing daily nutrition for children all across Iowa; Source: Farm to School & Early Care Coalition

Outcomes

- Increased number of schools committed to local food purchase.
- Increased number of farm and food businesses and institutions supported in selling and procuring local foods through improved consistency of value chain coordination services.
- Expanded capacity across partners to strengthen regional food system initiatives across Iowa.



Strategy 4

Enact immigrant, migrant, and refugee labor justice reforms especially to increase transparent and safe access to programs, benefits, and pathways to citizenship.

Action 1: Engage and elevate the voices and experiences of immigrant, migrant, and refugee workers food system worker groups.

Action 2: Create stories about the situations and needs identified to support communication and education development.

Action 3: Identify and evaluate existing social support programs and policy opportunities for immigrant, migrant, and refugee workers based on identified needs.

Action 4: Develop a directory of technical assistance providers and partners that support pathways to citizenship and job access, made available in multiple languages and accessible through appropriate channels where workers get information.

Action 5: Advocate for policy change with key stakeholders for positive outcomes for immigrant workers.

Outcomes

- Improved collaborations among support providers.
- Increased leadership capacity among farm and food system workers.
- Increase public awareness of food system labor injustices, specifically for immigrant, migrant, and refugee farmworkers.
- Increased collaboration around policy development related to labor equity



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Camp Creek Organic Produce](#)

[Iowa Cancer Consortium](#)

[Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

[Iowa Regional Food System Working Group](#)

[Iowa Workforce Development](#)

[Pottawattamie County Health](#)

[Proteus, Inc.](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Labor Equity](#) team.
- Build your knowledge about labor equity in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - How many grocers, meat lockers, meat processors, or schools are in your community?
 - Are there any organizations in your community who support farm and food system workers? Set up a meeting with their staff to learn about opportunities and challenges they are addressing. Learn about how the historical and current movement of labor has affected your community.
- Speak up - educate others and advocate for the issues you've identified in your community.
 - Invite your local newspaper to do a story about the important role food and farm workers play in your community.
 - Work with your local library or civic organization to host a public conversation about this issue with a representative of a local partner organization.
 - Talk to your local representatives and policymakers about your values around labor equity and advocate for pro-labor bills and programs.
- Support food and farm workers in your purchasing habits
 - Learn about the labels that appear, or don't appear, on the products you eat and use. Which labels have labor justice standards? To get you started, The Fair World Project, a nonprofit advocating for fair trade policies, created a [reference guide](#) to fair trade and labor justice programs.
 - Encourage the businesses that you purchase from and work with to carry products with these labels.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

Iowans in the workforce are important contributors to the food system, vital to a thriving and equitable food system, but often invisible. The human infrastructure for local and regional food systems encompasses farmers (including immigrant, migrant, and refugee workers in agriculture), food aggregators, distributors and food hub staff, those who work in processing facilities, school food service staff, cashiers at the local grocery store, and other institutional buyers, and lesser known, but equally important, value chain coordinators. This intersectional approach allows a more comprehensive discussion of the many jobs that are needed to make the food system function.



Migrant farm workers travel to Iowa each year to help with the cultivation and harvest of crops. Source: Proteus, Inc.

Labor is woven throughout the entirety of Iowa's food system. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, an estimated 5,590 workers are employed in Farming, Fishing, and Hunting Occupations, and 127,270 workers are employed in Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations (2023). While these are just two examples of occupations that touch the food system, it is important to acknowledge that these statistics are estimated, may vary in parameters for data, and do not include unreported or undocumented employment. When assessing the economic impact of the food and agriculture industries, researchers found that Iowa's food and agriculture industries directly and indirectly contribute to over 800,000 jobs and generate over \$253 billion in total economic output (Feeding the Economy, 2023). In other words, Iowa is home to thousands of valuable workers in the food system.



Compensated job training programs

As reported in the 2023 Iowa Workforce Needs Assessment Survey Results, finding qualified job candidates is among the biggest challenges that employers face ([IWD, 2023](#)). Sixty five percent of employers surveyed indicate that applicants have a lack of hard skills, meaning job-specific abilities that are teachable and measurable, such as critical thinking, machine operation, software knowledge ([IWD, 2023](#)). Similar challenges were reported in Iowa's [Artisanal Butchery Task Force Report](#) with one-third of survey respondents indicating “they struggle to find workers with the technical skills.” One of the recommendations from the Task Force is to establish a community college certificate program for artisanal

butchery that offers work-based learning in meat processing to benefit individuals seeking to learn new skills as well as employers seeking to fill their open positions.

Registered apprenticeships are another strategy that has seen success in addressing Iowa's workforce development challenges by using an “earn and learn” model. In 2023, legislation was signed by the governor to establish the Iowa Office of Apprenticeship (IOA) within Iowa Workforce Development. In addition to establishing state standards that align with the U.S. Department of Labor standards for registered apprenticeship programs, the IOA seeks to facilitate pathways for Iowans to secure portable and transferable career credentials, increase apprenticeship and credential opportunities for in-school youth, and create multiple points of entry into the workforce ([Earn and Learn Iowa, n.d.](#)).

While there are numerous registered apprenticeship programs in Iowa, there are fewer sponsors of registered apprenticeship programs that are directly related to the food and agriculture system. For example, the nonprofit organization [Veterans in Agriculture](#) is one of only two sponsors in Iowa for registered apprenticeship programs for Farmers and Farm Workers. Other programs directly related to the food and agriculture industry are in categories such as agricultural service worker, cook, and farm equipment mechanic.



The work required to weed, irrigate, harvest, and pack these beautiful strawberries is often under appreciated. Thank your farmer and farm worker! Source: Bridgewater Farm



Farmworkers

While 2017 statistics estimate about 70,000-80,000 farmworkers in Iowa, many farmworkers are undocumented immigrants, and organizations supporting farmworkers assume a higher number when considering the number of farmworkers in Iowa ([Iowa Legal Aid, 2022](#); [Johannes, 2018](#); [Zinnel, 2020](#)). Farm and food workers, especially migrant, seasonal, and immigrant workers, experience injustices such as ([Iowa Legal Aid, 2022](#); [MHP Salud, 2024](#)):

- Low wages and job hazards ([FoodPrint, 2024](#))
- Poor enforcement of labor laws
- Limited access to healthcare and benefits
- Lack of adequate infrastructure like housing and transportation, and
- Inappropriately developed educational and awareness resources



During health & safety training, Proteus staff have provided purple laundry bags and light-colored long-sleeve shirts to farmworkers. Farmworkers need to keep their field clothes separate from their other washing to prevent pesticides from transferring to their other clothes. Source: Proteus, Inc.



Agricultural workers also face challenges indirectly related to their occupation such as language barriers, and poor access to healthcare. In 2022, an [article](#) published by USA Today shared about the unsafe housing provided for farmworkers in Iowa and detailed how the complaint-driven process for housing inspections is flawed and exploits worker-tenants.

While there are activist and advocacy organizations dedicated to farmworkers and their well-being nationally, there are fewer organizations dedicated to Iowa's farmworkers. A limited number of organizations have been identified as key partners in serving the farmworker community:

- **Iowa Legal Aid**, nonprofit law firm that provides legal services to low-income and vulnerable Iowans as well as manages the Farmworker Rights Project, which is a grant-funded program that focuses specifically on civil legal issues faced by Iowa's farmworkers.
- **Iowa Workforce Development (IWD)**, a state agency committed to providing employment services for individual job seekers and employers in partnership with IowaWORKS. IWD has outreach specialists and staff to educate and assist both domestic and non-domestic (H-2A visa) farmworkers and agricultural employers.
- **Iowa Department of Education** that offers services that address the needs of children and youth that arise due to a migratory lifestyle.
- **Proteus, Inc.**, multi-state nonprofit organization that services agricultural workers and their families, especially those who experience lower socioeconomic statuses and need access to resources related to healthcare and job training.



Value Chain Coordination

Value chain coordination is an integral part of sustainable food system development. With intentional connection between producers, consumers, and those in between, the food supply chain transforms into a shorter, more structured process with improved understanding of supply and demand (Anggraeni, et al., 2022). Value chain coordinators (VCCs) play a critical role in partnership as matchmakers, relationships builders, technical assistance, policy thought leaders, catalysts and innovators (EGDM, 2023). VCCs enable producers and buyers to improve their competitive position, leading to more profitability and viability. VCCs can engage retailers and institutional purchasers to lead them through the process of local purchasing and connect them with food hubs, thus reducing costs and navigating hurdles for them. In 2023, VCCs established 39 new local food buyer/seller relationships and secured \$761,700 in non-Federal financial, professional, and technical assistance through partnerships (EGDM, 2023).

While VCCs offer valuable services, the positions are often dependent upon grant funding, leading to a limited scope of work and are unable to meet the emerging needs in their communities. There has been some investment in VCCs by County Board of Supervisors and County Extension Councils, but often limited and inconsistent in scope.

Increased investment that provides more sustainability for experienced VCCs and seed money for emerging VCCs can help expand this important food system workforce position. As a part of the 2022 Regional Food System Partnership grant, there has been [increased documentation](#) of the community impact that VCCs have.



Thanks to relationship building over time that Value Chain Coordinators support along with leadership of school food staff, events like the May 2024 Riceville Elementary Indoor Farmers Market bring the whole community together. Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Reform

While immigrants make up about 5.3% of Iowa's population, they are essential contributors to Iowa's economy, culture, and communities (American Immigrant Council, 2021). From farms to processing plants to restaurants and grocery stores, the food and agriculture industry relies heavily on an immigrant workforce (FoodPrint, 2024). In 2018, immigrant workers made up 7% of the labor force in Iowa, with over 26,000 workers in production occupations and over 11,000 workers in food preparation and serving-related occupations (American Immigrant Council, 2020). Additionally, immigrant entrepreneurship throughout Iowa has driven job growth and generated over \$150 million in business income (American Immigrant Council, 2021).

While new Iowans and guest workers, such as immigrants, migrants, and refugees are essential consumers, taxpayers, employers, and employees, the transition to living in Iowa can be difficult due to institutional and social barriers (Eduviere & G'Sell, 2024). However, these barriers can be experienced differently by immigrants, migrants, and refugees because some pathways to Iowa have more structural support from agencies and organizations available while others are less resourced. At the top of the challenges faced by immigrants, migrants, and refugees are language barriers, finding work and resources, and navigating bureaucracy (Miller, 2023; Williams, 2023). In addition to adjusting to a new climate, especially the cold winters for those coming from warmer climates, new Iowans may also experience culture shock and racism as they settle into their communities (Eduviere & G'Sell, 2024).



Mobile health clinics that are available on weekends when farm workers aren't working are an important service provided by Proteus staff. Source: Proteus, Inc.

Some examples of challenges that immigrants and refugees face as they establish roots in Iowa are navigating strenuous and complicated processes for public services and programs and difficulty accessing land because of documentation requirements from financial institutions (UCS & Heal Food Alliance, 2020). Another challenge that immigrant, migrant, and refugee workers experience is hesitation to report violations of labor laws and regulations due to fear of retaliation and uncertainty about the process (Chadde & Hettinger, 2022).

Overall, Iowa would benefit from increasing awareness of support agencies and organizations for workers throughout the food system. While there are various efforts centered on promoting labor equity in Iowa ranging from organizing meatpacking workers in processing plants (Smith, 2023) to implementing recommendations from the Artisanal Butchery Task Force, gaps in equitable care and support for the workforce still exist throughout the food value chain. Collective efforts to make changes and address different aspects of labor issues are needed. Increasing the visibility of workers as valued contributors to the food system requires coordinated communication and collaboration for expanded program and policy development.



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Integrating pollinator habitat enhances biodiversity and supports important beneficial insects on farms large and small. Source: ISU STRIPS website.



ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

CONNECTING LAND,
ENVIRONMENT, AND HEALTH IN IOWA



ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

GOAL

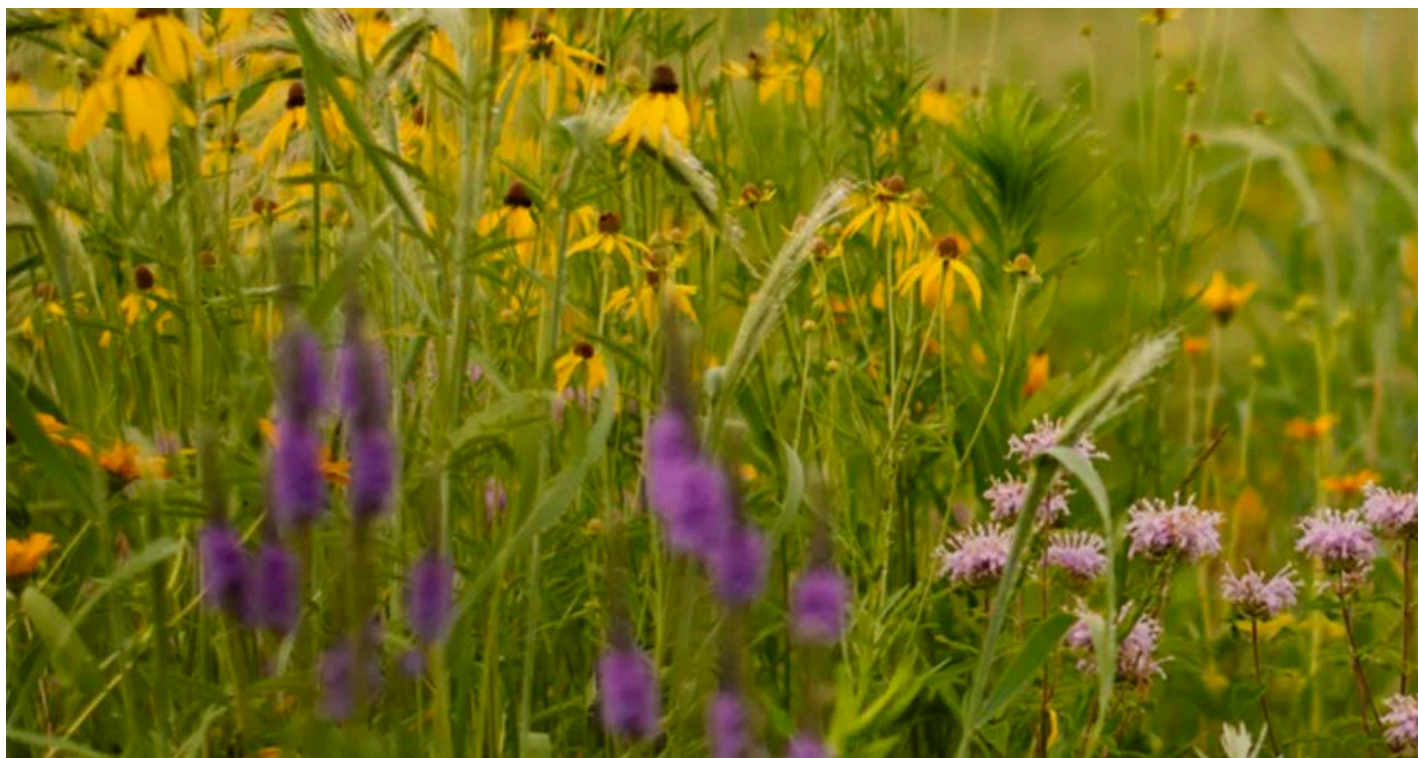
To ensure our food systems meet human needs while also respecting the integrity, stability and beauty of the natural world and the wellbeing of all of its inhabitants.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

The environmental impact of the food we eat is a result of decisions made at every stage of the food supply chain. With 85% of Iowa's land and almost 50% of the world's habitable land used for agriculture ([Ritchie & Roser, 2024](#)), these decisions have an outsized impact on the quality of water, soil, and air - locally and around the globe. Impacts are also felt in the vitality of our rural communities. In order to advance a thriving, equitable food system that works for everyone, we must ensure that our environment is protected and that future generations have access to the natural resources they need to flourish.

- Over the last 200 years, Iowa's rich prairies and wildlands have been transformed into vast agricultural fields. This massive conversion has provided many people with food, fiber, and fuel. But it has also impacted the resilience of Iowa's land, the balance of wild spaces across the state, and created serious environmental problems such as impaired waterways, increased flooding, air pollution, topsoil erosion, and the loss of biodiversity. ([Jordan 2022](#), [Sierra Club](#), [Willett et al. 2019](#), [Clark et al 2020](#), [Stillerman 2021](#), [Mutel, 2022](#)).
- Modern agriculture's impact on water and air have serious health implications. For example, many experts suspect that Iowa's status as the state with the second highest cancer rate in 2023 and the only state with an increasing rate of cancer is tied, at least in part, to practices linked to industrial agriculture ([Jordan, 2024](#)).
- Agriculture is also a significant contributor to the production of greenhouse gasses that are driving climate change.
- Iowa's role in agriculture has significant influence on policy at the national, state, and local levels. Direction set in this state can have transformative impact across the Farm Belt states.





Iowa has lost 99% of the prairie habitat that is so important for holding soil and supporting biodiversity on the landscape. Source: Tallgrass Prairie Center.

We know it is possible to have **a thriving agricultural system that meets all of our needs while protecting the air, water, soil, and the beauty** of nature. If we embrace sustainable practices and promote development that considers the link between farm viability, human health, and environmental health, we can honor the land while securing a thriving, resilient future for all who call Iowa home.

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Environmental **Stewardship** Team is dedicated to building partnerships and creating capacity to support the strategies outlined below. This team is currently led by the Harkin Institute of Public Policy and welcomes others who are playing a critical role in or interested in contributing to this space. There are several existing environmental initiatives across the state, and this IFSC priority area is an opportunity to amplify their work and to build connections between other groups and individuals with shared values. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goal of food systems that produce nutritious food, while protecting the integrity of the environment, and strengthening communities the following strategies and actions are urgently needed. These strategies connect to many of the plan's other priority areas, including in particular the Food, Nutrition, & Health and Local Food Policy Network teams.



FOOD, NUTRITION,
& HEALTH



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY
NETWORK



Strategy 1

Identify and develop policy changes needed to advance environmental sustainability and food system development at the local, state, and federal level.

Action 1: Coordinate existing policy agendas across partner organizations working toward a more unified voice for the intersection of agriculture, environment, and health (i.e. taking positions on issues such as pesticide drift, water quality, buffer zones, soil health, etc.). This work will build off of previous evidence-based [recommendations](#) and [solution-oriented responses](#).

Action 2: Collaborate with multiple partners to develop a new set of recommendations promoting the intersection of environmental sustainability and food system development.

Action 3: Maintain contact with relevant national and out-of-state organizations to ensure coordination with other emerging initiatives/platforms.

Outcomes

- Increased collaboration among environmental, health, and sustainable agriculture organizations that shape IFSC approaches to policy in this area.
- Stronger, more unified policy platforms among agriculture, environmental, and health partners in Iowa.
- Establishment of a new set of baseline recommendations related to sustainable agriculture endorsed by IFSC and partner organizations.
- Stronger ongoing partnerships with multiple national or out-of-state organizations.



Strategy 2

Support & invest in farmers and food producers as leaders of environmental stewardship.

Action 1: Expand incentives and opportunities for farmers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices that protect our soil, water, and air.

- Advocate for policy at every level of government that makes environmentally-friendly practices more profitable.
- Support increased funding for practices such as on-farm research and farmer-to-farmer networking (see American Farmland Trust's [Improving On and Increasing Access to Conservation Programs in the Next Farm Bill](#) for examples).

Action 2: Promote and assist organizations that provide technical assistance to farmers interested in adopting environmentally-friendly practices.

- A key part of this process will be working to ensure that equitable access to land and resources, trusted relationships, and strategic support are in place for diverse groups.

Action 3: Expand opportunities and participation for Iowa farmers and food producers to become [prominent advocates and spokespersons](#) for improved water and air quality, soil health, and public health.

Outcomes

- Increased number of farms incorporating environmentally friendly agriculture practices.
- Increased success of diverse farms participating in and adopting conservation practices.
- Expanded number of farmers in the media advocating for sustainable practices and taking leadership roles in advocacy.



Field days are a central part of Practical Farmers of Iowa's Farmer-led Research program. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa



Strategy 3

Educate and communicate about agriculture, the environment, and public health.

Action 1: Host, support, and/or promote regular events highlighting the connections between agriculture, public health, and the environment.

Action 2: Explore educational models such as the “Iowa Plate” that demonstrate meal(s) grown locally that have the best health and environmental outcomes.

Action 3: Include and prioritize information about environmental stewardship in regular Iowa Food System Coalition convenings and partner events.

Outcomes

- Increased visibility of the interface between farming, environment, and health for audiences including producers, environmentalists, academics, policy makers, and the general public.
- Expanded coordination among those who produce educational material about the ecological benefits of buying from Iowa producers using sustainable practices.
- Growth in engagement across the state with presentations about the relationships between environmental quality and our food system at Iowa Food System Coalition events and activities.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Harkin Institute for Public Policy](#)

[Iowa Environmental Council](#)

[Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation](#)

[Iowa Waste Exchange](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[Sustainable Iowa Land Trust \(SILT\)](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy and Environmental Education,
Farming for Public Health](#)

[Iowa UrbanFEWS](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Environmental Stewardship](#) team.
- Build your knowledge of how land, environment, and health connect in your community. Start by making this simple community assessment:
 - What farms in your area are using practices that support the integrity of water, soil, and wild spaces? Think cover crops, no till, diverse crops, etc.
 - What organizational partners are working on these issues? Think about your Natural Resource Conservation Service, County Conservation Service, area farming organizations, and public health departments.
 - Find out how these practices are making a difference in their operation? What more is needed to expand these initiatives?
- Speak up – educate others and advocate for the connection between land, environment, and health in your community:
 - Work with local partners to arrange a community conversation about farming, environment, and health.
 - Contact local policy makers and educate them on what can be done to strengthen the connection between land, environment, and health.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

Iowa's Land, Environment and Health: The Cost of Productivity

Agriculture currently covers almost 50% of the Earth's terrestrial surface. As such, the way agriculture is practiced clearly has important implications for people's relationship with the environment. In Iowa, this influence is even more dramatic, with over 85% of land used for agriculture - most of which is devoted to crops that go toward energy or animal feed, rather than food for people.

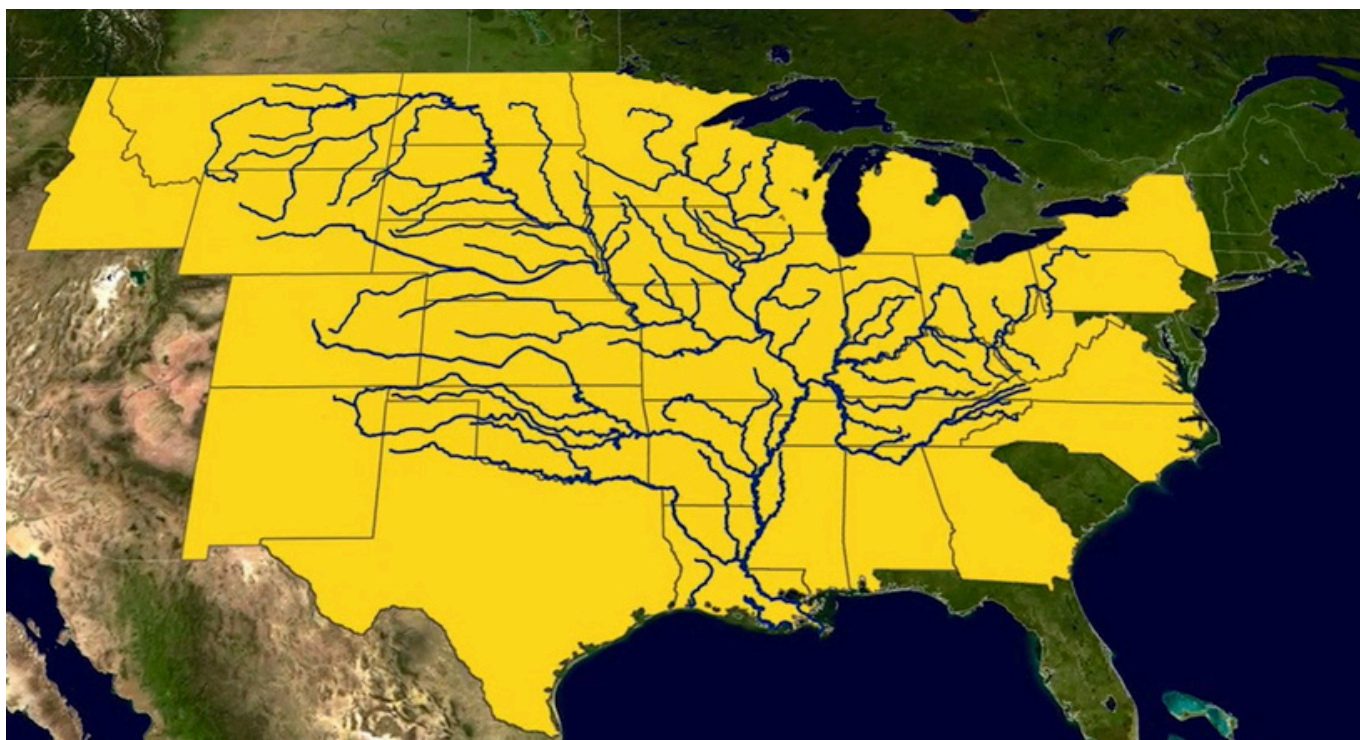
Given Iowa's stature as a leader in agriculture, the methods in Iowa have a large and direct impact on the environment and indirectly have an important influence on how agriculture is practiced around the world. The pressing impact of climate change increases the urgency to think broadly about food systems that can both meet global food needs, sustain the environment, and support resilience in our communities and across the food value chain. The recent [EAT Lancet report](#) highlights ways the food system can stay within planetary limits with attention to a variety of natural resource considerations, including, but not limited to: climate change, nitrogen cycling, phosphorus cycling, freshwater usage, biodiversity loss, and land-system change.

Iowa agriculture is recognized for its economic impact, but the current model is also recognized for a complex of negative impacts.



Water - Iowa's water quality suffers from high levels of fertilizers (inorganic fertilizer inputs as well as manure from confined concentrated animal feeding operations), herbicides and pesticides, and related land use practices that do not fully prevent chemicals from entering into streams and rivers. [Recent reports](#) have suggested that more than half of Iowa rivers and streams do not meet the state's own water quality goals primarily due to agricultural runoff.

Agricultural runoff is currently considered to be nonpoint source pollution and, as a result, it is not covered by the Clean Water Act. Iowa's practices around water have national and international impacts. Iowa is recognized as "[the major contributor](#)" to the massive dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico impacting fish and marine ecology and others who depend upon water resources for their livelihood.



Mississippi River Watershed carries nutrients from more than 30 states into the Gulf of Mexico and Iowa is right in the middle. Source: NOAA



Soil - Iowa, known to have some of the best soil in the world, has for many years been leading the country in soil erosion. This trend puts future agricultural food production at risk. Investment in cover crops, buffer zones, and prairie strips have been important practices to help slow soil erosion - in field and at edge of field. Adopting these practices comes with expense of seed, seeding, and management. These costs can hinder adoption. Many soil conservation practices are encouraged through government policies and nonprofit organizations. The Iowa State University STRIPS project helped establish the U.S. Department of Agriculture support for prairie strips as an “approved” conservation practice. Much research has taken place at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, demonstrating the practice and the changes in soil loss with the addition of the prairie strips.

In 2018, the Farm Bill established a cost share for the prairie strips as a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) practice - CP 43, providing annual per acre rent and covering the cost of planting the strips. Farmers could start signing up for cost share through the USDA in 2020 and by March of 2023, 18,195 acres of prairie strips had been planted nationally, with 5,426 acres in Iowa. It may not sound like much, but roughly 10 times that amount of cropland is protected (Looker, D., 2023). Research shows that by converting 10% of a crop-field to diverse, native perennial vegetation, farmers and landowners can reduce sediment movement off their field by 95 percent and total phosphorous and nitrogen lost through runoff by 90 and 85 percent, respectively. Prairie strips provide a win-win scenario for farmers and wildlife (ISU Prairie Strips, n.d.)



These flumes measure surface water movement and sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus export from field experiment plots at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Compare the transport of these resources from 1) A 100% no-till, corn-soybean crop field, 2) A field treated with a 10% prairie strip and 3) A 100% prairie.

Source: Iowa State University STRIPS Program

Climate change - In Iowa, agriculture is the largest source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, contributing 31% of all GHG emissions in the state ([Iowa DNR, 2023](#)). Even if all other emissions were reduced, we would surpass the target set by the Paris Climate Agreement if current agricultural practices are not changed ([Clark et al., 2020](#)). The three main greenhouse gasses emitted by agricultural practices are carbon dioxide (farm equipment emission), methane (ruminant livestock emission and liquid manure) and nitrous oxide (largely synthetic fertilizer). There are many different evidence-based practices that can be implemented to reduce the impact on the climate, from changing tillage practices to more precisely calibrating fertilizer application or by greater exploration of new initiatives such as Agri solar which pairs alternative energy systems with agricultural production. Studies have documented that different types of foods also may vary in their environmental impact, and as such, changing food production to a more diversified set of specialty crop (table) foods, including more fruits and vegetables, can have an important impact ([Willett, 2019](#)).



Climate change is increasing incidence of extreme weather events such as the August 2020 Derecho responsible for damage to this farm grain storage.
Source: National Weather Service

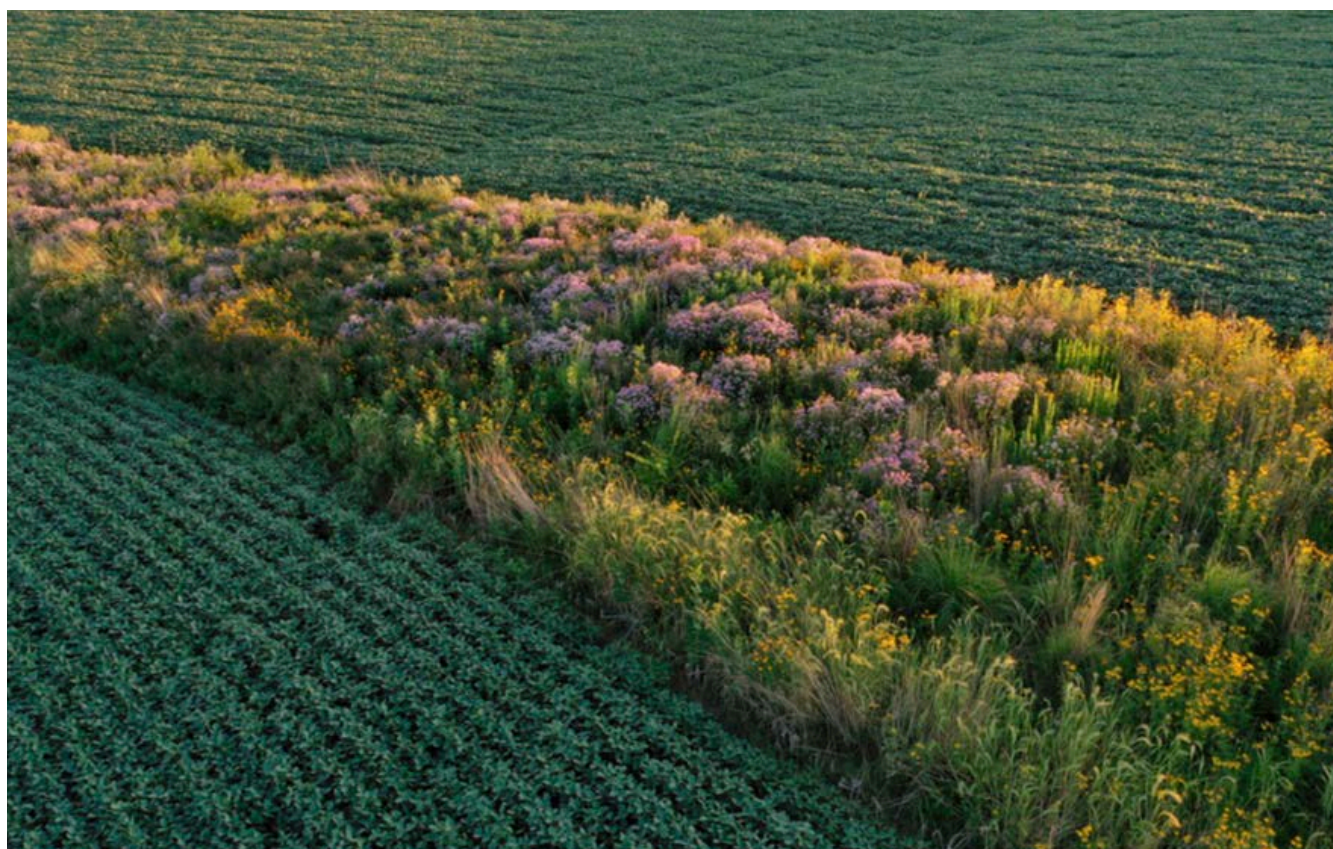


A joint Iowa State University and Alliant Energy 10-acre solar farm – the first utility-scale agrivoltaics project in the Midwest – will raise bees and plant vegetables, fruits and pollinator habitat. (Source: Miller, B., [Investigate Midwest](#))



Air quality - Agricultural practices also have an impact on air quality. Confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) release a number of toxins into the air, including hydrogen sulfide, methane, ammonia, particulates, and drug-resistant organisms. Studies have shown that the closer children live to CAFOs, the greater their risk of asthma ([Barrett, 2006](#)). Farm workers at CAFOs can develop “acute and chronic bronchitis, chronic obstructive airways disease, and interstitial lung disease.” ([Hribar, 2010](#)). Pesticide drift also has been shown to influence air and water quality at neighboring farms, nearby schools, or residential areas.

Habitat - The intensity of land use for agriculture in Iowa competes with the amount of natural areas that are available for wildlife. The prairies that helped develop the highly productive soils have been reduced by more than 99 percent. About 95 percent of the state's prairie pothole wetlands have been drained. Over half of the original forest has been lost ([Iowa DNR, n.d.](#)). As the “most biologically altered state” in the U.S., this puts additional strain on our wildlife and ecosystems. There are numerous proven practices that farms can adopt to reclaim wildplaces while improving the farm's overall productivity.



Prairie strips are a conservation practice that protects soil and water while providing habitat for wildlife.
Source: Iowa State University STRIPS Program



It's Time for Transformational Change

In a 2019 article titled *Iowa's farmers – and American eaters – need a national discussion on transforming US agriculture*, Dr. Lisa Schulte Moore, pointed to regenerative systems as the model that could “...usher in a new era of economic and environmental wealth in Farm Belt states.” (Schulte Moore, 2019).

This article built upon a meeting a decade prior with national, state, and local leaders about the future of agriculture. During that earlier discussion, direction toward environmental sustainability was evident, but the pace was not. Would change to improve communities and landscapes in farm country come as incremental improvement or transformational change?

Fast forward to 2024 and Iowa has seen a number of initiatives advance to address the environmental consequences of agriculture as we know it today:

- The number of cover crop acres has increased dramatically over the past several years — from fewer than 10,000 acres in 2009 to about 1,282,608 acres of cover crops in 2022 in Iowa (Practical Farmers of Iowa, n.d.). That's progress, but there are 30.5 million acres in agricultural production in Iowa.
- 2023 marked the 10th anniversary of Iowa's Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS), the centerpiece of the state's efforts to curb pollution from nitrogen and phosphorus, especially from Iowa farms. According to numerous analyses, the strategy has mixed results, key among them is that the state is still far from reaching its water quality goals - the purpose of the plan ([Gerlock, 2023](#)).
- Coinciding with the landscape impacts are community changes. Iowa has experienced continual decline in rural communities as the size of farms has increased. Small and medium-sized urban areas – and the rural counties that are linked to them – are left with transportation, public works, housing and commercial bases that they struggle to maintain ([Swenson, 2019](#)).





Cover crops are used primarily to slow erosion, improve soil health, enhance water availability, smother weeds, help control pests and diseases, increase biodiversity and have been shown to increase yields.
Source: SARE

As Dr. Schulte Moore reflected in her 2019 article, “ the incremental approach is not moving quickly enough, and rural communities and landscapes are suffering as a result.”

The environmental and health related challenges stemming from current day practices involve complex issues and require a mix of solutions. The Iowa Food System Coalition recognizes the importance of partnerships, strategic planning, and policy to achieve system change. It’s not just the conservation practices that farmers are encouraged to adopt that’s needed, but a transformation of systems including additional and extended rotations, different kinds of crops being planted besides just corn and soybeans, more pasture and more livestock being pasture-raised instead of in confinements. Further consideration of the Eat Lancet Report interjects the important focus on our underlying food system that impacts food production at various scales - rural and urban.



Figure 1. The Eat Lancet Report stretches the consideration that transformative change in Iowa can have a ripple effect into a global strategy. Source: Eat Lancet Report



The sheer scale of change needed and strong opinions on all sides underscore the challenge of addressing the three issues that are at the heart of this chapter - agriculture, the environment, and health.

“The inability to talk about pros and cons of farming, from our environment to our communities to our economy, is unhealthy, “ says Practical Farmers of Iowa’s Executive Director, Sally Worley, in an article about how “enduring curiosity is leading to change”. She continued, “ If we want to advance toward a more resilient farming system, honest conversations about farming impacts are vital.” ([Worley, 2019](#)).

Connecting the Partners, Policies, and Possibilities

The leadership and advocacy of statewide partners such as the Iowa Environmental Council and University of Northern Iowa’s Center for Energy and Environmental Education’s (UNI CEEE) Farming for Public Health contribute recognized expertise, relationships, and evidence-based recommendations and solution-oriented responses. Programs such as REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection program), begun in 1989, have fostered many productive initiatives. A range of cost share programs offered through the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship as well as through numerous non profit partners provide valuable incentives. These programs focus on rural and urban landscapes. The Iowa Nature Summit, launched in 2023, convened the environmental community through yet another venue. Featured sessions included one on Nature’s place in Agriculture and Rural Places.



Several new initiatives including the [Iowa UrbanFEWS](#) project, [Diverse Cornbelt project](#), and the [Fall 2023 Regenerative Agriculture workshops](#), held at the request of the Iowa Economic Development Authority are stimulating increased understanding of the opportunities for regenerative agriculture.

The Iowa Nature Summit is helped reenergize the environment community when it’s inaugural gathering took place in 2023.; Source: The Iowa Nature Summit facebook page



A new concept that warrants exploration is the development of the “Iowa Plate.” Conceived by Audrey Tran Lam, of UNI CEEE’s Farming for Public Health, the Iowa Plate is a project that would depict photos of different Iowa (and regional) cuisine -- dinner plates! It would show meals that are climate friendly, nutritionally dense, and with ingredients that are all sourced locally from the Midwestern region. It would be a tool to ignite Iowans' imaginations and show that a different system of agriculture is possible, profitable, and would support health in a multitude of different ways. The Iowa Plate, in part, builds upon the [Eat Lancet Report](#). Together, all of these conversations are providing a sense that the topic of regenerative agriculture and food systems development in Iowa are gaining momentum and diversity of input.

Setting the Table for All Iowans is guiding Iowa’s food system development. The Nutrient Reduction Strategy moves into its next decade. New initiatives add depth and breadth to the sustainable and regenerative agriculture conversations in Iowa. There's an opportunity for new action among more partners at the intersection of agriculture, environment, and health to expand and strengthen the voice of Iowans calling for a new vision for resilience. There’s an opportunity to fuel that voice with a new generation of recommendations that can create a more open, curious, and honest conversation about farming and food systems and the realistic path to change.

The Power of Farmers As Stewardship Leaders

“A land comprised of wilderness islands at one extreme and urban islands at the other, with vast food and fiber factories in between, does not constitute a geography of hope...With a broader understanding of land and our place within the landscape, our nation’s farms, ranches, and private forest land can and do serve the multiple functions that we and all other life depend upon.”
- Paul Johnson, [America’s Private Land: A Geography of Hope](#).

Farmers sit on the front line of this imagined change as stewardship leaders. Incorporating practices on their own land and working with landowners through rent agreements requires extra time, involves risk of yield loss while applying new techniques or refining new equipment. Many farming organizations use field days, encourage farmer to farmer networking, and offer cost share incentives to alleviate barriers to new practice. Currently USDA is making historical investment in conservation. Technical support to help farmers incorporate new practices is essential for program impact. In Iowa, leaders like Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Organic Association, Iowa Farmers Union, and their diverse partners work closely with farmers. American Farmland Trust, in [Improving on and Increasing Access to Conservation Programs in the Next Farm Bill](#), lays out a set of recommendations that highlight the importance of equitable access, trusted relationships, and the need for strategic support to be in place to ensure practice adoption into farm’s long-term management.



Practical Farmers of Iowa's Cooperators' Program

Practical Farmers of Iowa's Cooperators' Program, their signature on-farm research program, equips farmers, who know their farm best, to address their most challenging farming questions. Farmer cooperators in the program use randomized, replicated trials to test ideas, following rigorously developed trial designs, collect data, and share results through field days and annual Cooperator meetings. PFI staff support design set up, data analysis and logistics necessary to ensure successful follow through. Field crops, horticulture crops, and livestock are the focus of farmer selected projects. Nitrogen trials, one of a farm's greatest expenses, have been a consistent research focus over the years and have produced valuable insights and built important relationships.



Vic Madsen explains his soil conditioning experiment.
Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa

“We learned that we could save money and improve our bottom lines by reducing application rates, and feel better about being stewards of the environment in doing so,” he says. “The results of these trials drastically improved our farms, and overall, they played an important role in building and maintaining PFI’s farmer-to-farmer network.” - Vic Madsen

Farmers play a key role at the farm scale as well as at a larger scales - such as watershed, food system development, and policy making.

Watershed Management Authority (WMA) groups, for example, bring farmers and other partners together to cooperatively engage in watershed planning and management at this larger scale (Iowa DNR, n.d.). WMA's were authorized in 2010 and bring together cities, counties, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and other community stakeholders.



Farmers play a key role in food system development, as the source of diverse table food products. Farmers are important partners for value chain coordinators, local food system staff who help connect farmers and market opportunities. Increasing diverse food crops in both rural and urban communities contributes to economic development, community nutrition, often with reduced application of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

To achieve the transformation envisioned, communication and education will need careful attention and opportunities to facilitate open dialogue about the changes needed at the interface of environment and health will be important. The Fall 2023 Regenerative Agriculture Workshops brought many perspectives together to build a more common definition of and explore the face of regenerative agriculture as an economic driver in Iowa. Focus groups facilitated by Urban FEWS explored producer and consumer perspectives on supporting and diversifying local food systems in central Iowa. Practical Farmers of Iowa's Field Days continue to grow, stretching into other midwest states, and continuing to lift up the diversity of farmers and farming systems in a spirit of "curiosity, a culture of mutual respect and farmers openly sharing their knowledge and experience."



Opportunities to gather with others for discussions about Iowa agriculture can be as informal as a field day picnic or as structured as a conference; on the scale of a commodity crop farm or an urban garden plot. Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Environmental Council, UNI CEEE.

The interface of agriculture, environment, and health requires a broad cross section of partners to connect the dots between practices on the land and goals for resilient and healthy food systems and communities. Bringing farmers together with other farm and food system partners to weave their experience into the fabric of this complex vision is a goal for Iowa Food System Coalition's Local Food Policy Network team. Farmers, policymakers, and consumers working together can chart the course toward increased diversity in the field and in our communities. The Iowa Food System Coalition is ready to help connect the dots for this collaborative conversation.



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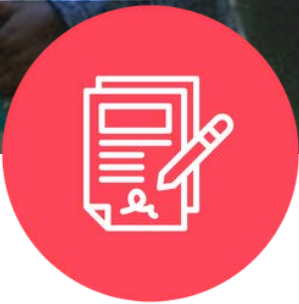
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Members of Lutheran Services of Iowa's Global Greens Program speaking with Nate Boulton as part of the 2024 Iowa Food System Coalition Farm & Food Day on the Hill. Source: LSI Global Greens



LOCAL FOOD POLICY NETWORK

ADVOCATING FOR TRANSFORMATION



LOCAL FOOD POLICY NETWORK

GOAL

We will engage state and local partners to discuss, organize, and advocate for transformational food system policy change.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

Iowans care about important factors that influence the health and vitality of our communities, our neighbors, and our environment. Reports continue to reveal that food system outcomes contradict many of the goals for community health and resiliency ([Schmidt, 2023](#)). Food system outcomes depend on choices made by producers, many partners along the food supply chain, and consumers, as well as policy makers. To transform the current food system, policies are needed to address major challenges and to invest in the multitude of opportunities that exist ([Swinnen, 2020](#)).

Those who want to inform and shape change must be organized and intentional.

- While the 2011 Local Food & Farm Plan laid out an extensive list of recommendations, it did not include a policy/advocacy component. The legislature's 2011 allocation of \$75,000 in Local Food & Farm plan support remained flat until renewed policy efforts in 2021.
- Policy provides a critical connecting lens across all priority chapters in *Setting the Table for All Iowans*. Having a local food policy network actively engaging all other priority teams, expanding advocacy leadership training, and fostering connectivity across local food councils and coalitions in Iowa will increase capacity for **collective impact** on matters central to the food system change envisioned.
- Policy work requires an understanding of the levers of governing. An active network of food policy councils and coalitions in Iowa are important sources of local experience and insight into effective strategies both at the local, municipal, and state level. Fostering a learning community through the network will increase strategic capacity and success.



We are fortunate in Iowa to have several different groups and organizations actively involved in food system related policy. The creation of this report, *Setting The Table for All Iowans*, has provided new opportunities to strengthen synergies between these groups and partners. This collaboration is increasing engagement and growing Iowa's local food policy network which seeks change throughout the state of Iowa.



Iowa Farmers Union members visit with legislator during 2023 IFU Lobby Day. Source: Iowa Farmers Union

LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Local Food Policy Network priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating capacity to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by the Iowa Farmers Union, Iowa Hunger Coalition, Johnson County Local Food Team, and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goals of food system transformation through policy, we have determined the following four strategies and actions are urgently needed. These strategies are informed by and connect across all priority areas. Together, this network will expand our local, state, and federal policy work.



LAND &
RESOURCE
ACCESS



FARM & FOOD
BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT



FARM & FOOD
SYSTEM
INFRASTRUCTURE



LOCAL FOOD
PURCHASING &
PROCUREMENT



FOOD, NUTRITION,
& HEALTH



LABOR EQUITY



ENVIRONMENTAL
STEWARDSHIP



COMMUNICATION
& EDUCATION



Strategy 1

Coordinate a state level effort to identify, document, and analyze existing policies related to food systems issues led by the Local Food Policy Network of the Iowa Food System Coalition.

Action 1: Engage existing state government policy discussion platforms.

Action 2: Track and analyze existing federal, state, and local policies and bills related to food systems.

Action 3: Research and adopt racial equity impact assessments tools to guide policy action and coach other priority teams in the use of the selected tool.

Outcomes

- Improved organization and access to relevant policies and bills for IFSC priority teams and partners.
- Increased relevancy and capacity of the Local Food & Farm Program Advisory Council at Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.
- Improved ability to analyze racial equity elements for bill tracking and development of training sessions.



Strategy 2

Create partnerships and support legislation needed for food systems policy change.

Action 1: Facilitate coordination among all IFSC priority teams' policy priorities including use of shared document space and periodic check-ins by this team with other IFSC priority teams.

Action 2: Increase awareness of local food challenges and opportunities with policy makers.

Action 3: Identify and engage elected officials to support aligned food systems policies as priorities in their platform.

Action 4: Strengthen work with legislators to develop policy initiatives and connections for food system policy change across all priorities.

Action 5: Identify individuals and organizations interested in changes in food system policy.

Outcomes

- Increased policy coordination efforts to advance *Setting the Table for All Iowan's* priorities.
- Improved resources to organize policy development and advocacy for food system transformation.
- Expanded food system policy resources for individuals and organizations concerned about food systems policy issues.



Strategy 3

Strengthen Advocacy Networks around aligned food systems policies.

Action 1: Coordinate advocacy training for all members of the Iowa Food System Coalition.

Action 2: Encourage and support Iowa food system stakeholders (individuals and organizations) to participate in advocacy.

Action 3: Create a toolkit for coalition member engagement with policymakers.

Outcomes

- Increased knowledge about advocacy and key areas of interest for the food system across the state.
- Increased policy support for each priority area.
- Consistent growth of individuals associated with food system advocacy and attending lobby days.
- Expanded set of common practices for Iowa Food System Coalition engagement with policy makers.



Strategy 4

Network local food policy councils and community-based food coalitions.

Action 1: Connect new and existing food systems councils and community-based food coalitions to share and align priorities.

Action 2: Strengthen connections among local, state, and federal food policy councils.

Action 3: Identify municipalities to foster the establishment of new local food policy councils.

Outcome

- Increase the number and collective engagement of local food policy councils and community-based food coalitions across the state.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Cedar Valley Regional Food & Farm Network](#)

[Center for Rural Affairs](#)

[Des Moines Area Religious Council](#)

Iowa Department of Health & Human Services

- [Healthy Iowans](#)

[Iowa Farmers Union](#)

[Iowa Hunger Coalition](#)

[Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

- [Farm to School & Early Care Coalition](#)

[Johnson County Food & Farm Program](#)

- [Johnson County Local Food Policy Council](#)

[Lutheran Services of Iowa, Global Greens Program](#)

[Regional Food System Working Group](#)

[Southern Iowa Resource Conservation & Development](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Local Food Policy Network](#) Team.

Use your voice

- Share your story about your role in the food system with local and state elected officials.
- Run for office.

For elected officials:

- Sponsor and/or register in support of positive food system bills that advance priorities of the Iowa Food System Coalition and partners.

Use the power of your vote!

- For elected officials and individuals alike, your voting practices are an effective tool to influence policy that impacts the lives of Iowans.



EXISTING CONDITIONS

Many local, state, and federal policies impact our food system including formal policy, as in laws and regulations as well as practices and procedures that create policy.

Locally, these may include land use and **zoning** within cities and counties. Other examples may include ordinances for bees and chickens or general use of land for crops and food sales (Vaage & Taylor, 2016). Policies can also include specific organizational practices regarding healthy meal choices, allocation of public funds such as Iowa's Local Produce & Protein Program of 2020, or policy recommendations such as bidding preferences that favor geographic source over price. Policies can be a key tool to help make the nutritious choice, the easy choice by expanding innovations like vending machines or the creation and support of community garden space (Dillemath & Hodgson, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2013).

At a larger scale, state policies can have a broader focus on licensing, food safety, and production practices that detail ways of handling food, branding, displaying product information, and having safe environments for processing and food distribution. This can also include food access programs and local food procurement investment and opportunities (Healthy Food Policy Project, 2023).



Highland Community Gardens, a new garden market incubator in Waterloo, celebrated its open house on April 27th, 2023 - all 48 plots were claimed already!
Source: University of Northern Iowa CEEE



Backyard chickens have become increasingly popular, but require adoption of favorable zoning policy.
Source: Practical Farmers of Iowa





The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program and Local Food For Schools are two federal programs providing important farm to school funding. Source: Farm to School & Early Care Coalition

Federal agriculture policies set the baseline for nationwide nutrition programs, provide funding and technical support for farmers, and encourage the creation of partnerships between entities along regional food supply chains. They can also involve food security, biotechnology and agriculture trade. One example is the Farm Bill, a significant law that governs agriculture and food programs ranging from commodities to energy, rural development and crop insurance (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

An important resource and network for food policy development can be found through the John Hopkins Center for a Liveable Future [Food Policy Council Network](#).

Why is statewide coordination so important to Iowa? Why are local food policy councils important?

Everyone eats and should have a voice in their food system - everyone. They should have a say in what they are eating and where it is coming from. Coordinating efforts creates space to identify cohesive policy solutions that benefit the food system as a whole. Bringing more voices into policy discussion increases the knowledge and perspectives present at the table and raises the bar towards making collective decisions that will benefit the agricultural economy and all consumers in Iowa.



The state of Iowa has the 2nd largest agriculture economy in the United States and is a leader in numerous commodity production metrics. Despite the size of the overall agricultural economy, the state relies heavily on food production from other states and countries (Pirog, Benjamin, 2005) while the dominant food system fails to pay farmers a fair price (USDA ERS, 2022). Local and regional food production, aggregation, and distribution help address the disconnect between farmers and the consumers in their own communities.

Reviewing key turning points in Iowa's food system development over the past two decades (Figure 1), clearly shows that coalition collaboration and food policy councils have played a central role.

IFSC Building on > 20 years of Iowa Food System Work

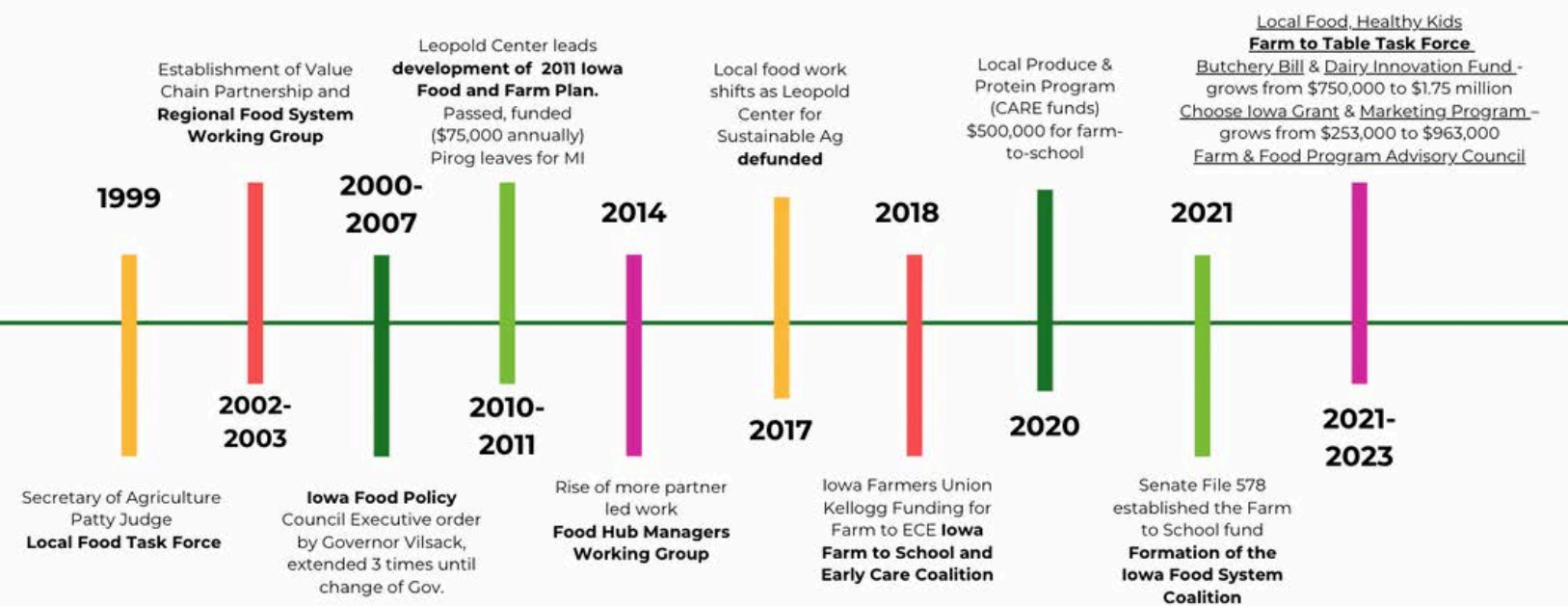


Figure 1. Key points along Iowa's food system development highlight the interconnection between collaboration and policy development in achieving progress. Source: IFSC



Iowa's first food policy council was a direct outgrowth of the 1999 Local Food Task Force called together by then Secretary of Agriculture, Patty Judge. The momentum of the Iowa Food Policy Council and the subsequent Iowa Food System Council from 2007 to 2011 had direct influence on the development of the 2011 Local Farm & Food Plan. And after a gap between 2015 and 2021, renewed policy development, led by Iowa Farmers Union, laid the groundwork for the Iowa Food System Coalition and contributed to renewed state investment beginning in 2021 (**Figure 2**).

Within federal, state, and local levels, food systems coordination is shaped by coalitions and policy councils that typically include a group of individuals that are appointed by elected officials to support a particular issue. This may include specific county or local policy councils, but can also include specific areas of focus like procurement or infrastructure.

Programs	2021	2022	2023
Local Food & Farm Program	\$75,000	\$75,000	\$75,000
Choose Iowa Grants	\$250,000	\$463,000	\$463,000
Butchery Innovation Program	\$750,000	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000
Choose Iowa Promotion Program		\$500,000	\$500,000
Dairy Innovation Program			\$750,000
Total: \$5.9 million	\$1,075,000	\$2,038,000	\$2,788,000

Figure 2: The increase of state investment in local foods has corresponded with growing organization of policy development and advocacy. Data courtesy: IDALS, 2023.



Food policy councils (FPCs) are made up of community-based representatives from many sectors in the food system, including farmers, distributors, retailers, food service operators, government agencies (such as public health, county social services and county agriculture departments), and community organizations that work in the food system. Some FPCs also develop close partnerships with county-based Extension and Outreach to help facilitate their work. Because council members live and work in the community, their insights and processes create more capacity to align policies and practices in response to lived experience of a diverse set of community members.

FPCs support a variety of food and agriculture-related policies and programs, including healthy food access, land use planning, regional food procurement, food waste, food and economic development, local food processing, and regulations related to urban farming and community gardening (Gupta, 2019). The Farm and Food Program Advisory Council, organized under the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, reorganized in 2023, can play an important liaison role around policy and program discussions.



Figure 3. This [map](#) represents food policy councils, food & farm networks and coalitions supporting a healthy, just, and sustainable food system in Iowa. Source: IFSC

Color Code

Green - Food Policy Councils

Purple - Statewide Food & Health Coalitions/Partnerships

Yellow - Food & Farm Networks/Coalitions

Click the map for detailed information.





Participants in the Iowa Food System Coalition first ever Food & Farm Day on the Hill helped carry the message of key Coalition priorities. Source: Tommy Hexter, Iowa Farmers Union

What policies and partnerships are needed for change?

Policies that are needed include, but are not limited to, addressing barriers (i.e., zoning, regulation, etc), providing cost share support to farmers and food businesses, encouraging values-based food purchasing strategies and investment in local/regional food value chain infrastructure, and the personnel that bring the many pieces together. Such policies can boost local sales of farm and food products, encourage environmental and ecologically sustainable practices, and contribute to rural community revitalization.

As the Local Food Policy Network team moves this priority forward, it is building a framework for how IFSC priorities are established. For example, initiatives that helped inform the development of *Setting the Table for All Iowans* have also informed initial policy priorities, including:

- Funding of the Iowa Farm to School fund (referenced in the Procurement Chapter).
- Advocating for fruit and vegetable processing (Infrastructure chapter) to expand upon recent investment in meat locker and dairy processing in Iowa.
- Elevating the role of and advocating for funding support for Value Chain Coordinators (Procurement & Labor Equity Chapter).
- Adaptation within the Choose Iowa Grant program to increase equitable access to resources (Infrastructure and Land and Resource Access chapters).



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Food sampling and cooking demonstrations at farmers markets promotes the local food experience. Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



COMMUNICATION & EDUCATION

AMPLIFYING THE LOCAL FOOD MESSAGE



COMMUNICATION & EDUCATION

GOAL

To promote the value of a resilient and equitable local and regional food system through greater coordination of communication and education initiatives.

WHY IS THIS PRIORITY IMPORTANT?

Food is a hot topic. But what we should and should not eat is more confusing than ever.

- Food companies spend billions of dollars on food marketing – most of which is focused on high calorie, low nutrition products. These dollars disproportionately target youth and people of color ([Harris, et al, 2022](#)).
- Only one percent of Americans are engaged directly in farming ([USDA ERS, 2023](#)), leaving fewer and fewer people with a direct connection to and knowledge of farming.
- Recent consumer studies show a significant lack of consumer trust and knowledge about where their food is grown and how it is produced ([Homans, 2022](#)).

Underneath all of this is a growing lack of “food literacy” which refers to “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to make informed decisions about food and its impact on health” ([Silva et al, 2023](#)). There is little in our educational framework that teaches kids where food comes from ([Holden, 2017](#)) and the importance of those in our communities who grow it.

It’s time for a new conversation about what we eat, where it was produced, by whom, and how it contributes to more vibrant and economically viable communities.

Coordinated, intentional communication about the benefits of locally and regionally produced foods is needed to reestablish the connection between lowans and the food that nourishes them and their communities. Education will also make it easier for consumers to find local food and learn about food system networks, increasing economic opportunity for farmers around the state.



LEADERSHIP FOR THIS PRIORITY

The Communication and Education priority team is dedicated to fostering expanded partnerships and creating space to support the outlined strategies. This team is currently led by the University of Northern Iowa, Eat Greater Des Moines, and Cultivate: Local Food Connections, and welcomes others who are also playing a critical role in and interested in contributing to this space. A more extensive list of partners working in this area follows the *Recommendations* section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve our goal of promoting the value of a resilient and equitable local and regional food system that sustains all Iowans, we have determined the following four strategies and actions are urgently needed. We believe that these strategies connect across all priority areas, and especially rely on the support team of Local Food Policy Network which includes strategies for policy development and advocacy and the IFSC Partnership committee.



LOCAL FOOD
POLICY NETWORK



Strategy 1

Create and implement a plan for communicating and educating about the Iowa Food System Plan, “Setting the Table for All Iowans,” internally among IFSC partners.

Action 1: With the guidance of a Communications professional, create a communication plan for internal communications and education efforts for *Setting the Table for All Iowans* among IFSC partner organizations.

- The communication plan will include clear expectations and pathways for the partner organization commitment process.
- Partner resources will be on the IFSC website, including but not limited to, a *Setting the Table for All Iowans* (the plan) Introduction Guide for new partners and communications tools for sharing about the plan.
- This process will also include a review of existing language for food systems, and will revise or develop new shared language and definitions as a food system resource.

Action 2: Work with IFSC Leadership to bring together IFSC partner organizations and their communications representatives for at least one training on communication tools for them to use through their organization to spread awareness of the plan and its goals.

Action 3: Provide on-going tools and messaging about the plan for partner organizations to integrate into their communications planning.

Action 4: Develop, design, and establish a process for sharing food system stories relevant to the needs of priority areas; and integrate these stories into the on-going communication of the plan and its goals.

Outcomes

- Increase clarity of roles, expectations and collaboration across IFSC partners.
- Improve capacity for partner coordination to communicate the plan’s goals, leading to broader influence, support and engagement with the plan.



Strategy 2

Create and implement a plan for communication and educating about the Iowa Food System Plan, "Setting the Table for All Iowans," externally, with particular attention to socially disadvantaged populations and those who have not historically been invited to be decisionmakers in the food system.

Action 1: With the guidance of a Communications professional, create a comprehensive communication campaign plan for external communications and education efforts for *Setting the Table for All Iowans*.

- Building upon the shared language and definitions called for in Strategy 1.
- Include a clear definition of key audiences, with care to include a variety of lived experiences and expertise, for whom messages will be developed.
- Develop resources including, but not limited to the website, a policy guide, and a plan Introduction Guide for external partners.

Action 2: Implement the communication campaign for the plan, through coordinated press releases, media and marketing campaigns amongst IFSC partners.

- Increase awareness of local food availability (see Strategy 3) in order to ensure the simplest and most accurate experience for potential consumers of local foods. Information will be provided in multiple languages and accessibility options.

Outcomes

- Increased support and engagement with the plan.
- Improve support among elected officials and Iowans for IFSC policy efforts and IFSC partner campaigns.
- Increased recognition across Iowa of the power and influence of Iowa's local and regional food partners.



Strategy 3

Research, convene, and support efforts across the state related to local food system education and access and availability of local foods.

Action 1: Convene partners to coordinate local food directories for potential consumers.

- Identify purpose, funding, and reach of each directory in order to understand potential gaps and overlapping work.
- Secure funding to support the most effective methods and infrastructure amongst local food directories, including, but not limited to: Practical Farmers of Iowa database, Double Up Food Bucks, IDALS Choose Iowa, Farmers Market database, Farm to School & Early Care database, ISU Market Maker, and regional based producer lists such as Cultivate: Local Food Connections, Field to Family, Healthy Harvest of North Iowa, and Cedar Valley Regional Food & Farm Network.

Action 2: Research the current state of local food system education (workshops, Food Corps, webinars, farm tours etc.) in order to understand the capacity, methods of each organization, and support needs, while minimizing duplication of efforts, and creating a broader reach.

- Utilize partnerships and resources including, but not limited to the Regional Food System Working Group (RFSWG), the Food System Practitioner's Education & Resource Database, and the Food, Nutrition, and Health Priority Team of the IFSC.

Action 3: Analyze best practices from statewide and national partners to determine most appropriate ways to enhance existing educational efforts and events.

- Learn from and uplift the progress of the Farm to School and Early Care Coalition and its constituents in order to engage effective ways to educate consumers on: Procurement, School Gardens, Nutrition Education.

Outcomes

- Increase understanding of the current state of how potential customers learn about and access information about Iowa's local/regional food system.
- Improve the experience of how and where to access local food for both consumers and producers.
- Improve collaboration, effectiveness and exposure of education efforts across the state.



Strategy 4

Increase funding and technical support to local organizations and educational institutions to coordinate and host local food system educational events and workshops as well as advise on curriculum development.

Action 1: In conjunction with research and assessment in Strategy 3, secure funding to support local organizations to increase local food system educational events and workshops throughout the state.

- Organize at least one training to educate IFSC partner organizations on educational methods and best practices (lifestyle changes, personal connections, etc).
- If IFSC secures funding, priority will be given to historically and systemically marginalized communities in Iowa while considering the variety of learning styles and language and accessibility needs.

Action 2: Identify and create strategic food system education resources for targeted change makers.

- Reinforce the goals and connections amongst all priority teams.
- Targeted change makers may include but not limited to; health care organizations, universities, policy makers, public health campaigns, school boards, city councils, corporate and government cafeterias.

Action 3: Promote partners' events and workshops to increase reach and visibility of local food.

Action 4: Develop strong relationships among IFSC partners and priority teams, Area Education Agencies (AEAs), Iowa State Education Association, and individual educators, which enrich students' learning about food systems, including applicable curriculum development around STEM and Social Sciences (History, Geography, Economics, Political Science, etc.) subjects.

- Convene the partners identified above at least once, with intent to establish monthly or quarterly engagement to set shared priorities.

Outcomes

- Support local partners to increase engagement and reach of their local food education.
- Improve access to food systems education opportunities for all Iowans.
- Expand awareness and support of educational activities occurring across Iowa related to food systems.



PARTNERS ENGAGED IN THIS WORK

[Center for Rural Affairs](#)

[Cultivate: Local Food Connections](#)

[Eat Greater Des Moines](#)

[Healthy Harvest of North Iowa \(Grow. Eat. Play\).](#)

[Iowa Regional Food System Working Group](#)

[Iowa State University Extension and Outreach - Healthy Food Access](#)

[Iowa State University Farm, Food and Enterprise Development](#)

- [Farm to School & Early Care Coalition](#)

[NE Iowa Resource Conservation & Development](#)

[Practical Farmers of Iowa](#)

[S.E. Iowa Food Hub](#)

[University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education - Local Food Program \(Grow. Eat. Play\).](#)

[Iowa UrbanFEWS](#)

[Wellpoint](#)

[Watershed Mitigation Farm](#)



CALL TO ACTION

This plan is for partners, policy makers, and all Iowans. Find your place in this priority and the Iowa Food System Coalition - it begins in your community and stretches across the state.

Get connected to the Iowa Food System Coalition

- Learn more about *Setting the Table for All Iowans* and sign up to receive regular email updates at IowaFoodSystemCoalition.org.
- [Join the Iowa Food System Coalition](#) as an individual or organization to join a dedicated community working towards a common goal: creating a thriving, sustainable, and equitable food system in Iowa.
- Make the most impact by serving on a Priority Team. Learn more about the [Communication & Education](#) team.

Consider your knowledge of the local and regional food system by reflecting on these questions:

- What is your source of information about where your food comes from?
- How does farming around you impact your life?
- What food and farming events take place near you to learn more?
- Speak up - educate others and advocate for locally grown food in your community and across the state:
 - Invite farmers or local food business owners in your community to share their stories with a local economic development or community group meeting.
 - Write an editorial about the importance of local farmers providing nutritious food and economic activity in your community.





Farmers markets are great places to learn about local food. Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Throughout 2021 and 2022, both the Iowa Food System Coalition and the 2021 Farm to Table Task Force hosted focus groups and input sessions to understand challenges, needs and opportunities for the Iowa food system. From these sessions, one specific theme that emerged was interest in and need to close gaps in understanding how the food supply chain operates. Responding to this interest involves addressing the values and knowledge that impact food purchases, the experiences and activities people invest in, and the policies they support (Long, 2023). Educational programming and communication campaigns are strategies that can assist in growing a more unified message about the role of local and regional food systems and the impacts they can have on communities



Evolution of Iowa's Local & Regional Food Marketing and Communication

Iowa has had a series of active local food communication and education campaigns, and directories over the years. For example, starting in the early 2000's the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign was used by many regionally based food groups. Due to constraints in funding, promotion, and capacity, this statewide initiative has been reduced to limited, regional efforts.

Subsequent attempts to grow a coordinated, statewide marketing program struggled to gain traction. In the absence of this statewide program, a number of local food partners have had success in creating their own place-based identities and local food resources.

This includes "Grow. Eat. Play." led by [Healthy Harvest of North Iowa](#) and the [Cedar Valley Regional Food and Farm Network, Iowa Valley RC&D's](#) "Choose Local," and [Cultivate Local Food Connections](#)' "Find Local Food" resources.

Choose Iowa is a program of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship which offers both a statewide brand and grants. The Choose Iowa brand identifies foods, beverages and agriculture products which are grown, raised or made in Iowa. The Choose Iowa website serves to connect consumers with searchable local food resources. Grant programs are also available that support small to medium-sized farms and businesses, strengthen value-added agriculture, enhance dairy operations, and increase meat processing capacity. (B. Romer., personal communication, May 22, 2024).



"Choose Iowa will help build demand for high quality Iowa grown, raised and made products."

- Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig ([Choose Iowa, n.d.](#)).



The [2021 Farm to Table Task Force](#) report advocated for a statewide branding and marketing program with its recommendation to revitalize the state [Choose Iowa](#) program. That priority found support from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Naig and state legislators and in 2023, a state appropriation put this long held vision into motion.

As the statewide Choose Iowa program gets started, this is an important time for the program to collaborate with partners who have established their regionally specific initiatives. Together, these programs can build upon the strengths of both community identity and statewide branding.

Complimentary to the many ongoing local and regional food communication efforts from farm organizations and farmers themselves, there is a need to build a shared commitment to the core messages that

deliver “Aha” moments necessary to grow support and investment in our food system. This is especially important given the growing gap in connection between those who raise food and those who eat it ([Sweetland, O’Shea, and John, 2022](#)) and the eroded trust in food related messages ([Homans, 2022](#)). The community-based initiatives have an important role to play given the direct and personal relationships at the heart of their efforts.

“Through a growing lack of personal experience with farming, we also lack ways to understand what farming involves, who it involves, what is required to stay in business, and how it affects our environment and society as a whole.”

([Sweetland, O’Shea, and John, 2022](#))

Physical Health and Nutrition

The prevailing messaging about Iowa’s role as an agricultural state that “feeds the world” conceals an uncomfortable truth about how well we feed ourselves: from 2020 through 2022, 8.9% of Iowa households were food insecure, while another 3.1% had “very low food security,” according to [USDA reports](#). Nutrition insecurity is also a key indicator of the stark disparities experienced by marginalized populations. A quarter of Hispanic (25.7%) and Multiracial (24.6%), as well as a fifth of Black (21.2%) Iowans struggled to afford food, compared to 7.3% of White adults (Iowa HHS, 2023).





Source: Cultivate Local Food Connections

According to Iowa's State Health Assessment, 2022, more than 40% of Iowa adults ate fruits less than once per day and nearly 23% ate vegetables less than once per day, falling behind the US average, which itself does not satisfy generally agreed-upon standards.

Despite historic variations in the scope and effectiveness of nutrition education, it is recognized as a powerful tool for how food system partners can intervene in diet-related illness. Among seniors who participated in the Iowa Department of Public Health's 2018 [Fresh Conversations program](#), over 80% reported that the program helped them eat more fruits and vegetables on a daily basis.

Youth-focused initiatives have shown similar promise. A 2023 evaluation of the [Pick a Better Snack program](#) indicated the program improved the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables participating children ate, and a strong majority of parents surveyed indicated that learning materials sent home through the program equipped them to help their children make healthier choices ([Vasold, Walker, Gonzalez, Mantinan, 2023](#)).



School gardens help build connection with nutritious food.
Source: Farm to School & Early Care Coalition



Mental Health & Community Connection (Belonging, Connections to Community)

As consumers, being connected to our food is not only good for our physical health but also our mental health. Farmers' markets and CSAs create new spaces within communities for people to socialize. In fact, sociologists estimate people have 10 times more conversations at farmers' markets than supermarkets.

Further, because these gatherings are about food and the local environment, people may become more interested in their community and environment. Direct marketing by farmers to consumers builds relationships, creating customers who care deeply about 'their' farmers and farmers who work hard to provide the very best food for their customers" (Krouse, 2007). In this context, strong local and regional food systems present a unique opportunity to tackle what the US Surgeon General has referred to as an "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" (USDHHS, 2023).

Better communication between partners to share a more clear and unified message is essential in building a more coordinated and powerful voice in support of Iowa's local and regional food system. Expanding opportunities for Iowans to learn to connect with local farmers and food can be a catalyst for lasting change, advancing the objectives of this, other priority areas, and *Setting the Table for All Iowans* as a whole. It is paramount for this team, in particular, to work in close collaboration with all other priority teams and the overall Coalition communications strategy.



People have 10 times more conversations at farmers' markets than supermarkets. Source: Healthy Harvest of North Iowa



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. [Plan Development Process Timeline](#)
2. Definitions - See [Iowa Food System Vocabulary](#).
3. Partners - [Partner Page](#)
4. Resources

A Place to Grow, 2007 - Laura Krouse & Teresa Galluzzo [PDF Download](#).

2011 Local Food & Farm Plan - Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. [PDF Download](#).

2011 Cultivating Resilience - Angie Tagtow, Sue Roberts. [PDF Download](#).

2020 Local Food, Healthy Kids- Iowa Farmers Union. [PDF Download](#).

2021 Farm to Table Task Force Report- Iowa Department of Agriculture. [PDF Download](#).

Regional Food Hubs: Adding flexibility and resiliency to the food supply system, 2022 - Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, J.D. Scholten. [PDF Download](#).