

Chapter 2

Missouri Farm-to-Institution Stakeholder Interview Summary

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1.1 MISSOURI FARM-TO-INSTITUTION INTERVIEWS

Multiple stakeholders play a role in facilitating and promoting farm-to-institution activity. They include government agencies, businesses that aggregate and distribute food, community educators and the institutions that purchase food to prepare for the audiences they serve.

For this project, 15 such stakeholders from 14 organizations participated in interviews meant to shed light on institutional food purchase decision-making and possible approaches to increase farm-to-institution sales in Missouri. Of the 15 participating interviewees, nine represented institutions, and six were other stakeholders engaged in farm-to-institution efforts.

The following themes emerged from these interviews. Drawing on these findings, several points below suggest opportunities Missouri may consider to increase participation in farm-to-institution programs and procurement.

1.2 CONNECTIONS

- **Generate sales and supplier leads.** For institutions, knowing which farms would have interest in selling food to them represents a hurdle to farm-to-institution procurement. One interviewee said, “I’m not opposed to using them (local farms). I just need to find them.” A supplier directory may provide institutions with a starting point of who’s a potential supplier. By adding their farms to the directory, growers may attract new institutional buyers. One interviewee mentioned that a directory possibly would make institutions feel more comfortable when reaching out to farms because simply being listed in the directory would suggest a farm’s interest in working with institutions.
- **Match a farm’s supply to an institution’s demand.** Institutional sales present a scale challenge for some farms due to some institutions’ size and food demand. By starting small and incrementally growing sales, farms may better manage their institutional commitments. Plus, they can gain the experience and track record needed to prove themselves as reliable suppliers. Such “managed growth” shows consistency that appeals to funders (e.g., granting agencies, loan officers).

To start small, possible markets include working with a small-scale foodservice operation (e.g., one school building, one dining hall) or supplying ingredients for one meal an institution serves each week. One institution represented in the interviews had a challenge in meeting the minimum order amount set by its local food supplier. Small-scale institutions or the suppliers serving them may consider cooperative ordering (i.e., nearby institutions collaborate on ordering) to reach an order size that works for the suppliers in terms of managing delivery costs and logistics.

- **Re-engage following the pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic imposed limits on farm-to-institution efforts as some institutions closed or introduced new health and safety protocol. During this time, farm-to-institution initiatives that had been gaining steam

were forced to change or stop. To reset and generate renewed momentum for farm-to-institution programming, an opportunity may exist to assemble stakeholders and provide new ideas and resources to help them get started or resume farm-to-institution initiatives.

- **Leverage agricultural connections.** A couple of interviewees involved in procuring food had personal farm experience in their families. They mentioned how the family tie allowed them to understand food production. Institutional contacts who have agricultural connections may appreciate sourcing from farms and serve as farm-to-institution proponents to other institutions who don't have decision makers familiar with farms.
- **Encourage collaboration.** Recent grant-funded work has led to coordinated efforts designed to support farm-to-school and farm-to-early care initiatives in Missouri. Plus, some institutions noted collaborating with other like institutions to exchange ideas. To encourage broader farm-to-institution participation and knowledge-sharing, Missouri could assemble a working group that includes representation from multiple types of institutions such as schools, childcare centers, workplace cafeterias, adult care facilities, colleges and universities. Although each type of institution has distinctive needs, collaboration may lead to more diversified market opportunities for growers and create a team where institutional stakeholders can learn from one another and help one another.

Collaboration among growers may also support more institutional sales. By pooling products from multiple farms, the group may have a better opportunity to meet buyer demand if one producer has a product shortage. One interviewee mentioned that buyers consider a “fill rate” when buying food — in other words, how much of product demand could one vendor fill. A group could possibly achieve a fill rate that's more preferred by an institution. In one interview, the individual mentioned that the collaborative model works particularly well for commodity-type products. If a farm has a very niche item or specializes in one ingredient, then the interviewee suggested that buyers may have more of an incentive to work directly with the one grower alone.

Several interviewees mentioned points related to collaboration having the potential to reduce transaction costs. For example, interviewees acknowledged that working with an organization that represents multiple growers would allow their institutions to simplify interactions to fewer points of contact. Another mentioned the importance of foodservice efficiency and how working with multiple suppliers would introduce inefficiencies into food sourcing. In another conversation, an interviewee described collaboration would require compromise. That is, farmers must have a willingness to give up something (e.g., decision-making, autonomy) to collaborate with peers.

If not collaborating with other farms, then finding a pathway to work with distributors, which could offer more local product within their portfolios, may appeal to institutions. Through this approach, institutions could continue buying from existing suppliers but have improved access to local options, according to an interviewee. This pathway enables farmers to focus on growing, and the distributor would manage marketing.

- **Offer training to build key skills.** Two school foodservice representatives who participated in the survey expressed interest in preserving local food harvested in-season, so they could use that food at other points during the year. To do this, one said the school would need support related to ordering enough local product, getting it to the school and preparing it for storage. Another mentioned a need for teaching foodservice staff the needed knife skills and cooking techniques. The school would also need the equipment and space to do this work, and it would require funding to pay for foodservice staff for the time they spend in training. Interviewees also stated interest in local food procurement guidance from their local health departments.
- **Incorporate farm-to-institution principles in various institutional settings.** Selling food to institutions' foodservice operations represents just a single farm-to-institution pathway. Some institutions open their doors to the public — more like a restaurant — and others host market days, mini food shows, local foods dinners or other special events that could serve as an entry point for farms to introduce their products to new customers.

These venues also create an opportunity to marry a product with an experience. For example, senior centers or retirement communities may host a farmers market where residents can find food they remember from their childhoods, or a hospital may plan a mini food show where the chef uses certain local ingredients that also are available at an on-site farmers market. An interviewee mentioned that workplaces are some of the best local product promoters because employees view access to local food — both in dishes available at work and markets hosted on site — as an employment benefit.

1.3 PRODUCTS

- **Prioritize quality.** More than one interviewee appreciated the quality of locally sourced food products. A few interviewees mentioned that product quality may make purchase decisions slightly less price-sensitive, though other interviewees stressed that price is a purchase consideration. One mentioned the importance of finding the right price point for buying a certain percentage of its food from farmers — alluding to the idea that food sourced from farms may have a price premium, but it's possible to dedicate a certain budgeted amount to food sourced from farms and purchase the balance from other sources. Others said that local and nonlocal products have had comparable prices.
- **Make options available that have had some preprocessing.** Seasonality affects fresh product availability for Missouri institutions. Accessing frozen local food would work well for some institutions. The institutions may have the capacity to freeze product themselves, but they would need to plan and coordinate freezing efforts. Even when an institution uses a fresh product, it may need to invest in more preprocessing (e.g., washing, cutting) if it buys food from a farm than it would if it bought food from other vendors. The institution may not have the workforce to handle these tasks, or its workforce may not have the skills needed to prepare food products.

- **Offer the basics, but add some diversity.** Institutions commonly named products such as lettuce, watermelon, peppers and apples as those available to purchase locally. Local product diversity was mentioned as an interest. For diverse products to be available, though, the community and its farmers must have experience, interest or opportunities related to producing those diverse products. Some communities don't have such variety in their local food production.

Interviewees also mentioned interest in sourcing more novel products such as yuca, Aronia berry, asparagus and pawpaw but also cited a need for more locally grown tomatoes and black diamond seedless watermelon — more traditional crops grown in Missouri. Interviewees also mentioned interest in local meat and protein products. One also mentioned plant-based proteins as an interest.

- **Offer a consistent product.** Product consistency was mentioned as a challenge that institutions may experience when sourcing any local food. One school foodservice representative stressed that consistency is important in order for students to accept food. That said, one institution mentioned being open to using “misfit food.” A school foodservice representative, the individual viewed such products as an educational opportunity to show students that food tastes the same, even if it looks different. Institutions concerned about product consistency may value a grading service or certification. Raw foods or processed items could then be marketed as satisfying a certain consistent standard.
- **Understand nutritional considerations.** Depending on the institution, meals may need to meet nutritional guidelines. Adult care facilities serve as one example as registered dietitians must approve menus, and an interviewee mentioned an interest in knowing how local food ingredients align with the nutritional demands. Another interviewee mentioned how child nutrition products must meet certain nutrition standards, which sellers must verify.
- **Meet buyer expectations.** Several interviewees mentioned the importance of farms being familiar with good agricultural practices and meeting food safety standards. Other interests mentioned by interviewees included using organic practices or minimal pesticides, securing an appropriate liability policy and packaging food products in a standardized way. Interviewees also mentioned sustainability. In one context, the term referred to food production practices. In another, an interviewee said sustainability is important because the institution must count on food suppliers year after year.

1.4 PROCESS

- **Teach the basics of farm-to-institution procurement.** One interviewee mentioned not knowing the requirements involved in purchasing from farms. Conversations about how to purchase would help. Sample contracts or agreements may make the procurement process easier to implement. Plus, explaining a typical contract process — one

interviewee noted that institutions may have multiyear contracts with noncompete clauses — and how to become a recognized vendor may prepare farms for institutional sales.

- **Plan in advance.** Preseason planning helps to ensure farms produce enough food for institutions to use. One institution described talking with a grower-supplier before that grower purchases seed. That conversation shapes what and how much seed the grower orders. Another mentioned the lead times for menu development. For examples, meals served in the spring and summer start with menu planning in February. Thus, producers need to be part of conversations early and not wait until they have product available to sell. If they're possible to implement, then preseason commitments give farms more certainty for how to market product during the year.
- **Educate about the payment process.** The payment process institutions follow may require more steps, paperwork and time than what farms experience when they sell to other market outlets. Often, each institution also has its own unique process. Institutions interested in buying more local goods may consider how to standardize their processes, so growers have fewer learning curves when selling to different institutions.
- **Simplify transportation and logistics for suppliers.** If an institution has multiple foodservice sites (e.g., school district with multiple school buildings), then farmers delivering product may need to stop at multiple sites. Centralized warehouses that serve multiple kitchens may simplify transportation requirements for farms fulfilling orders made to institutions. The institution may then have additional logistics responsibilities to transport food from a centralized warehouse to individual facility locations. One interviewee mentioned how transportation costs have skyrocketed and fewer truck drivers are hauling product. These factors can make local purchasing more attractive.
- **Educate about food.** Several interviewees mentioned that they combine educational activities with farm-to-institution procurement. In terms of how to support farm-to-institution initiatives, one school foodservice representative named more help with promoting local products in cafeterias as an interest area. The school already uses stickers, coloring sheets and other marketing materials as they're available. A few interviewees mentioned how gardens at institutions can help to form connections with food. One had interest in seeing more involvement with school gardens and possibly recruiting gardeners or farms to donate a row or acre to the school and teaching the students about food production.