

# INTERIM REPORT ON THE STATEWIDE COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL MARKETS

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## Introduction

This report is required by the Minnesota Legislature (Laws of Minnesota 2021, 1st Spec. Sess. chapter 3, article 1, section 2, subdivision 3h):

*\$10,000 the second year is to provide an interim report on the Statewide Cooperative Partnership for Local and Regional Markets, including recommendations for strengthening local and regional food systems. No later than February 1, 2023, the commissioner must submit the report to the legislative committees with jurisdiction over agriculture policy and finance.*

In 2020, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) joined with the University of Minnesota (UMN) in launching the **Statewide Cooperative Partnership for Local and Regional Markets (the Partnership)** with funding from the USDA Federal State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP). The Partnership's three-year grant project is approximately two-thirds complete. This interim report provides an overview of the work completed, plans for the remainder of the project, and recommendations for strengthening local and regional food systems.

The Partnership is a group of more than 40 organizations that meet quarterly to provide input on the diverse experiences of small- and mid-sized producers, retailers, and consumers across the state. Over the last two years, the Partnership has collected robust data on local and regional markets to support data-informed market development in Minnesota. A list of partners can be found in the Appendix and on our [website](#).



Figure 1: Members of the Statewide Cooperative Partnership. See Appendix for complete list of members.

## Project funding and resource commitment

In September of 2020, the MDA was awarded a three-year, \$235,000 grant from the USDA Federal State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP). The MDA and UMN are collectively providing an additional \$239,000 of matching funds, primarily in the form of staff time, for a total project cost of more than \$474,000. The three-year grant will end in September 2023.

The project is jointly led by staff within the MDA Agricultural Marketing and Development Division, the MDA Food and Feed Safety Inspection Division, and Dr. Hikaru Peterson of the University of Minnesota (listed in Appendix as Core Team). A 14 member Project Team (listed in Appendix) of MDA staff and other university and community partners provide ongoing input and direction.

## Why is this project important?

- Collects data from producers, supply chain partners, and consumers to identify market trends and opportunities for small and mid-sized farms.
- Helps supplement the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [National Agricultural Statistical Service's Census of Agriculture](#) with data about farmers and markets not fully represented in the Census of Agriculture: emerging farmers; Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers; direct-to-consumer; and direct-to-institutional sales.
- Supports program development at the MDA based on data to better serve small and mid-sized farms.
- Strengthens recommendations to the state Legislature supporting historically under-represented and under-supported farmers.
- Contributes to ongoing research about local and regional markets in Minnesota conducted by partners such as the University of Minnesota.
- Gathers information that will be used in the MDA's next agency-wide strategic plan.

## What is the Partnership doing?

- Prioritizes an equitable approach for collecting baseline data on local and regional markets.
- Designs data-informed values and priorities for local and regional market development in Minnesota.
- Identifies and informs strategies for the [Minnesota Grown](#) program to better support small and mid-sized farms.
- Builds relationships that can collaboratively identify and support market issues and needs.
- Develops data management and sharing practices that protect privacy while improving collaboration within the MDA and with stakeholders.

## Project timeline



## Work Accomplished

### Year one: gathered what is known

In the first year of the project, the Core Team, Project Team, and the Partnership were established. To ground ourselves and begin building relationships, we conducted four main activities designed to inform best approaches for data collection on local and regional markets, based on what we already know as a community of practitioners. These initial activities are summarized below.

#### Asset mapping

Members of the Partnership engaged in an **asset mapping** activity to build relationships with each other and identify areas of strengths and data needs within the group. The following themes emerged from this activity that helped to guide project work:

- Be respectful of partners' time and include BIPOC partners/organizations to better center equity in project process and outcomes.
- Maintain direct connection with farmers and center the “why” and “who” of the project.
- Engage with farmers to learn how to collect data in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways. The MDA had \$10,000 in the grant budget for this work; however, a total of \$17,000 was requested by partner organizations to support engagement activities.
- Identify ways to expand the partnership, especially looking into opportunities for private institutions and organizations to engage.
- Connect at the national level — how are other states building strong local/regional food and ag markets? What can we learn from them?

**Learn more:** The full [Asset Mapping Summary](#) is available on our website.

#### Evaluation of the partnership

The Core Team worked with Dr. Kathy Quick and the University of Minnesota Center for Integrative Leadership to evaluate whether — and, if so, how — the Partnership is influencing relationships among the partners and the potential to strengthen local and regional markets. The survey was disseminated electronically in August of 2021. While the following findings cannot be generalized to reflect the collective views of the Partnership, they did provide key points of consideration, including strengths, challenges, and opportunities to facilitate the efforts of the Partnership going forward.

##### Strengths of the Partnership

- Many respondents felt positively about the work of the Partnership and its potential to achieve its goals, and indicated their interest to contribute.
- Respondents indicated a relatively high level of connection to many of the other partner organizations and self-identified as highly skilled across various skill sets and knowledge areas.

##### Challenges of the Partnership

- Respondents expressed the difficulty of collaborating across organizations and backgrounds, as well as the challenges of facilitating continued buy-in and sustained participation.
- Several of the survey respondents indicated that they had low capacity to contribute to the Partnership and/or experienced barriers to participating fully in the Partnership.

Respondents also offered potential solutions to facilitate buy-in and collaboration, which were implemented. These included the addition of time on partner calls to hear from and learn about other partners' work and the creation of a values proposition to establish more collective clarity around the Partnership's goals. A focus on engagement and outreach with organizations who weren't participating in the Partnership was also made in an attempt to expand diversity and representation in the project.

#### **Opportunities for the Partnership**

- One of the greatest opportunities lifted up by survey respondents was the chance to foster increased partner connection and bring additional perspectives to the Partnership. Survey respondents recommended including representatives from more BIPOC groups and tribal nations.

### **Review of current literature**

Dr. Hikaru Peterson's team at the University of Minnesota conducted a literature review on current state-level regulatory, promotion, and data-collection activities. The data and literature review helped to summarize how other states support producers in local and regional market development, in addition to identifying areas where Minnesota could improve programs to better serve small and mid-sized farms across the state. Key findings from the literature review were grouped into three main categories: investment in local food systems, food safety implementation, and a need for improved data collection. These are summarized below.

#### **Investment in local food systems**

- Local market channels serve as critical outlets for equitable access to healthy foods.
- COVID-19 showcased the need/demand for functioning local supply chains.
- Small and mid-sized farms tend to grow specialty crops and are more racially/ethnically diverse.
- Long-term planning and investment in supply chains and farmers can be a direct economic driver.

#### **Food safety implementation on small farms**

- Navigating food safety requirements poses barriers for small farms who are confused about what they are required to do versus how they can access education and resources to minimize the risk of food safety on their farm.
- Streamlined food safety requirements, education, and funding can help.
- Preliminary research shows that cottage food laws have led to economic growth, though the requirements are often still confusing for producers to navigate.
- Continued analysis and development of risk management systems for farms and producers is needed.

#### **Need for improved data collection**

- Hard to identify trends for specialty crops and small and mid-sized farms in available data.
- Emerging farmers aren't accurately represented in the Census of Agriculture.
- Lack of understanding about local and regional supply chains and data collection consistency that can allow for a stratified analysis of these supply chains.
- Lack of data prevents producers from accessing capital, insurance, and market opportunities.
- Data can guide investment and support more efficient program development and services.

**Learn more:** The full [Literature Review Summary](#) is available on our website.

## Community engagement: round one of Community Connector contracts

Contracts (up to \$3,000) were awarded to seven community-based groups to lead preliminary engagement in their community. These partners conducted surveys, focus groups, interviews, and informal discussions to capture the perspectives of their networks regarding data collection, data needs, effective communication and engagement strategies, support needed for emerging farmers, and more.

These small contracts provided an abundance of insight and specific feedback on how best to engage diverse communities with data collection about local and regional markets. We learned the importance of community engagement and the need to support it financially. This means having dedicated staff who can commit to building trusted relationships with community members and organizations. Without these relationships, the MDA and the University of Minnesota are not perceived as trusted institutions and our programs and services do not reach many communities, especially emerging farmers and BIPOC farmers.

Table 1: Recipients of Community Connector contracts in year one

NAME OF RECIPIENT	GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS	ENGAGEMENT FOCUS
Dr. Lakisha Witter	Metro	Kenyan farmers
Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation	Southeast Minnesota	Southern Minnesota farmers, entrepreneurs, farmers' markets
Latino Economic Development Center	Statewide	Latino farmers
Hmong American Partnership	Metro	Hmong farmers
Minnesota Grocers Association	Statewide	Retailers, wholesalers
Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society	Northwest Minnesota	Northwestern Minnesota farmers and food system partners (including New American farmers)
Sprout Minnesota	Central Minnesota	Central Minnesota farmers (including Plain farmers), food systems partners

***Heard from Community Connectors:** Language is an upfront barrier, but solutions must reach beyond translation and will benefit from working through people that communities already trust. Individuals throughout the supply chain rely heavily on personal relationships. Relationships and trust will strengthen communication efforts.*

We also learned that:

- Traditional survey methods will not reach a broad range of individuals.
- Farmers have expressed privacy concerns, or concerns about what data is being used for.
- Emerging farmers are often not offered the same opportunities as other farmers or face additional barriers to success.
- Focusing on engagement with farmers and partner organizations can demonstrate how the MDA and UMN are working to meet the needs of emerging farmers and connecting them to resources and services that they are often not able to access.
- Farmers are not always aware of grants, experience barriers applying to grants, or are overwhelmed by information. Multi-year grants are most helpful to partner organizations who can assist with paperwork.
- Farmers need clear examples of how Minnesota Grown will benefit them.
- Retailers are interested in participating in Minnesota Grown but need the program to connect them with producers and provide upfront product information including availability, quantity, and packaging.

**Learn more:** A full [Community Engagement Summary](#) can be found on our website.



## Year two: baseline data collection

In year two, the Partnership designed and launched three surveys to collect data from producers, supply chain partners, and consumers. Learnings from year one informed the development of these surveys. The results of this data collection are being compiled and will be analyzed using participatory evaluation techniques at the Cooperative Partners Data Workshop scheduled for late winter 2023.

Table 2: Summary of surveys conducted to collect baseline data on local and regional markets

	<b>PRODUCER SURVEY</b> February – October 2022	<b>SUPPLY CHAIN SURVEY</b> August – October 2022	<b>CONSUMER SURVEY</b> September – December 2022
<i>Target Audience</i>	Anyone in Minnesota who sells approx. \$500 or more in agricultural products annually to local markets	Individuals, businesses, organizations, and institutions that make, distribute, or sell food in Minnesota	Anyone who resides or works in Minnesota and buys food for personal consumption
<i>Information Collected</i>	Crops grown for local and regional markets, market channels and challenges, access and barriers to resources, participation in government programs and USDA Census of Agriculture	Purchasing factors, food sources, pricing, demand for Minnesota products, barriers to local sourcing	Food expenditure patterns, food sources, preference for local and other product characteristics, familiarity, and affinity towards the Minnesota Grown brand
<i>Survey Responses Received</i>	551	37	800

## Community engagement: round two of Community Connector contracts

Based on learnings from stakeholder engagement in year one, a second round of Community Connector contracts (up to \$3,000) were made available to partners and additional organizations to support the promotion and solicitation of responses to the producer and supply chain surveys. Nine individuals and organizations received small contracts:

Table 3: Recipients of Community Connector contracts in year two

<b>NAME OF RECIPIENT</b>	<b>GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS</b>	<b>ENGAGEMENT FOCUS</b>
Farmer Veteran Coalition of Minnesota	Statewide	Veteran farmers
Hmong American Partnership	Metro	Hmong farmers
Kilimo Minnesota	Metro	African farmers
Latino Economic Development Center	Statewide	Latino farmers
Midwest Farmers of Color Collective	Statewide	Farmers of color
Minnesota Farmers' Market Association	Statewide	Minnesota farmers
Minnesota Farmers Union	Statewide	Minnesota farmers
Minnesota Grocers Association	Statewide	Retailers, wholesalers, and farmer partners
Sprout Minnesota	Central Minnesota	Central Minnesota farmers (including Plain farmers)

Individuals and organizations shared and promoted the producer survey with their communities through email, social media, newsletters, postcard mailings, and one-on-one outreach. Some partners also helped individual farmers complete surveys in person or over the phone. One direct outcome of this model was that 38% of responses to the producer survey came directly from links associated with organizations that had received a small contract. Dedicating funds for engagement with organizations that are trusted by community members provides an opportunity for the state to build trust and relationships with communities that are not as supported by the government. A full summary of this second round of small contracts, with additional outcomes and learnings, is forthcoming.

***Heard from a Community Connector:** “Generally, the farmers do not prioritize filling out these surveys or understand their long-term importance to the success of the MDA in creating programs that will be helpful to their farm enterprises in the future. This is a slow process to build that trust and knowledge within the community.”*

## Looking Ahead

### Year three: data analysis and planning for the future

Year three began in September 2022 and will end with the conclusion of the FSMIP grant in September 2023. The goal of year three is to work collaboratively to evaluate the data that was collected and identify priorities and next steps for supporting local and regional market development in Minnesota.

Year three project timeline:

- February 13-14, 2023 — Data workshop
- March through April 2023 — Development of Minnesota Grown strategic plan
- April through August 2023 — Public engagement on proposed action areas
- September 2023 — Conclusion of the FSMIP grant

### Data workshop

The Partnership will gather on February 13 and 14, 2023, for a two-day data workshop. The workshop will bring together representatives from the Partnership’s 40+ partner organizations, the Minnesota Grown Advisory Committee, the MDA Produce Safety Advisory Group, recipients of Community Connector contracts, and other agricultural stakeholders to build community and relationships, discuss the key findings from the survey data, and identify action areas for future market development. The workshop will be facilitated by Dr. Kathy Quick, chair of UMN Humphrey School’s management and leadership area and academic co-director of the Center for Integrative Leadership. Dr. Quick specializes in bringing together people with diverse perspectives to work on complex public policy problems.

The three priorities for the data workshop are to:

1. Increase awareness of newly collected local and regional market data and provide guidance to the MDA and UMN on how to best house, manage, and share this data for public use.
2. Collect narratives, informed by data, regarding the current state of local and regional markets in Minnesota and collective priorities for the future.
3. Identify action areas to support local and regional market development.

In an effort to make the workshop inclusive and representative of Minnesota’s diverse agricultural communities, the project team convened an advisory planning team of people representing local and regional food producers across Minnesota. All planning team members (listed in Appendix) received an honorarium from the University of Minnesota for their time and contributions.

## Minnesota Grown strategic plan

The Minnesota Grown Program, housed within the MDA's Agricultural Marketing and Development Division, will develop a new three to five year strategic plan that will be informed by the data collected by the Partnership and key takeaways from the Data workshop. This strategic planning process will take place in March and April 2023 with Minnesota Grown program staff and the Minnesota Grown Advisory Committee, and will be facilitated by a consultant from Management Analysis and Development (MAD), a fee-for-service management consulting group from the Minnesota Management & Budget Department.

## Engagement and finalizing future action

After the data workshop, the Project Team will summarize the data analysis, collaborative interpretation work, and proposed action plan. In addition, the Project Team, working with the Cooperative Partners, will develop an engagement plan to broadly share and collect feedback on key data findings and takeaways from the Cooperative Partnership Data Workshop. The goal is to ensure that 1) stakeholders know that these data are available for their use, and 2) visioning and planning processes for local and regional food markets align with proposed action areas and incorporate these data to better meet the specific needs of different businesses and communities across the state. This engagement plan will include in-person and virtual events and presentations from April through August 2023.

During this time, the Cooperative Partners will continue to meet quarterly to discuss plans for how to continue collaboration on local and regional market data and development after the FSMIP grant ends in September 2023. Dr. Kathy Quick will also perform the final evaluation of the grant project to reassess if and how the Partnership is influencing relationships among the partners and the potential to strengthen local and regional markets in Minnesota.

The MDA will use findings and takeaways from the data workshop to help inform local and regional market and food system development goals and priorities, to be included in the agency's strategic plan in the spring of 2023. More generally, lessons learned from this project will be discussed in relation to the strategic plan and the agency's approach to engagement and outreach.

Once the grant is complete, the MDA and UMN will continue to share the data and results of the project with the public. This will likely include presenting at conferences, publishing articles in academic and practitioner journals, and using additional communication channels. The Project Team will produce a final written report that will be shared with policy makers and other key stakeholders.

## Recommendations for Strengthening Local and Regional Food Systems

Our state's local and regional markets are an important dimension to building greater economic prosperity, health, and sustainability for all Minnesota communities. **Investment of state funding and resources is critical to support state agencies as well as partner organizations** in their efforts to provide financial and technical assistance to emerging, small- and mid-sized producers; create and expand local and regional markets; invest in food systems planning and capacity-building; and strengthen local supply chains.

This interim report has been submitted roughly two-thirds of the way through the grant project. As described above, key findings from the data collection will be shared at the Cooperative Partners Data Workshop shortly after this report is submitted. Summaries, including shared narratives and action plans, will be developed and refined over the next several months. Therefore, the recommendations below summarize only part of what is needed to invest in and strengthen local and regional food markets in Minnesota. A broader list of recommendations will be finalized and released at the conclusion of the project.

## 1. Prioritize agricultural data collection, including local and regional food markets, in Minnesota

The best way to support Minnesota's food systems, and the economic resilience they provide, is to continue collecting data that accurately reflects the diversity of the state's producers, crops, and markets. The Producer Survey in particular collected data on small- and mid-sized farmers in Minnesota that supplements the USDA National Agricultural Statistic Service's Census of Agriculture with data about farmers and markets not fully represented in the Census of Agriculture such as emerging farmers, direct-to-consumer, and direct-to-institution sales. This project highlights the need for more representative agricultural data collection, which is also a key priority of the Emerging Farmers Office. The state should prioritize data collection in the following ways:

- **Collaborate with the USDA to encourage more farmers to fill out the Census of Agriculture.** Significant state and federal resources are determined by participation in the Census of Agriculture. It is critical that all Minnesota producers be accurately represented in agricultural census data.
- **Continue to identify ways to collect data needed specifically in Minnesota.** This project provides valuable new data revealing who is contributing to Minnesota's local and regional markets, what makes these markets work, and what is holding them back. We need to continue to pursue supplemental data collection that responds to the unique needs of the state's agricultural industry and producers.

## 2. Continue building relationships with tribal staff and communities to learn about their data needs

This project did not collect representative data from within Minnesota's tribal nations, which represent a significant part of Minnesota's food system. To ensure that food system development equitably serves all Minnesotans while supporting tribal food sovereignty, **it is imperative that staff at the MDA continue to build relationships with tribal governments and communities to learn if and how the MDA can support or assist in future data collection, led by or conducted in partnership with tribal nations.** Staff should establish relationships with tribes and communities before asking for data by attending tribal events and in-person meetings with tribal staff, visiting and listening to tribal communities, and genuinely learning about each individual tribe and their potential data needs. In addition, the state must allocate time and resources to collaborate with tribes and their internal processes.

## 3. Support data sharing and communication

This project is laying a foundation for data-informed storytelling and decision making to strengthen local and regional markets. **It is important to continue sharing and communicating with stakeholders to build awareness, understanding, and trust in this work.** Financial support for the MDA to prepare public-facing reports and other media resources that summarize work and data from this project as well as other ongoing efforts related to local and regional foods systems work is essential. Investment in data sharing and communication will help stakeholders better understand how the MDA and its work can support their own success.



#### 4. Invest in Community Connectors to do outreach and engagement

**Dedicated funding for contracts with community organizations to support and broaden the reach of MDA messaging is crucial to engaging with more of the state's population.** There are many farmers who do not trust government or academia, but they do often trust certain individuals or organizations that are known and live and operate in their own communities. The MDA contracted with these known individuals and organizations to work as Community Connectors between specific farming communities and the state. Trusted Community Connectors used their respected relationships to help UMN collect data from many farmers who typically do not answer surveys. In return, these organizations, which are often nonprofits, brought in money that helps support their operations. The MDA and UMN could not have generated stakeholder engagement or collected data for this project without the support of these community partners.

#### 5. Coordinate and align local and regional market efforts to maximize impact

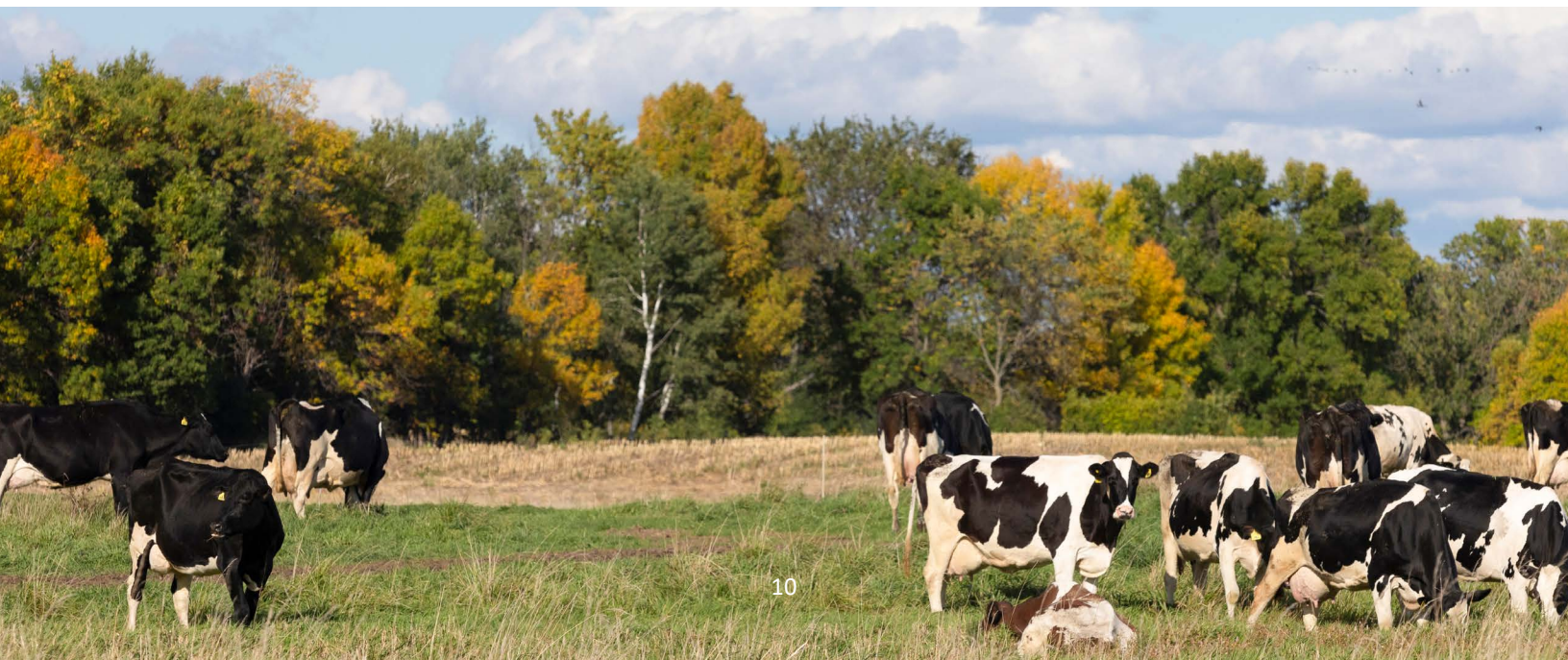
The state should prioritize cross-agency investment in local and regional market development. Our state's local and regional markets are an important dimension to building greater economic prosperity, health, and sustainability for all Minnesota communities. **This work requires commitment and collaboration across state agencies, as well as with organizations and stakeholders.** Several local and regional food efforts are underway, including Minnesota's Local Food for Schools (LFS) and Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) programs, which together will infuse approximately \$7.2 million into local markets over the next two years. It is important for agencies to dedicate time and resources to collaborate on engagement, outreach, implementation, and evaluation of programs and initiatives related to local and regional market development to have a greater impact.

#### 6. Include local and regional market development in the MDA strategic plan

The MDA's next strategic plan will be developed during the spring of 2023, allowing authors to consider data and stakeholder input from this project. There is enough economic benefit and interest in these spaces to support specific strategies for the agency in the local and regional food system space. **Inclusion of local and regional market development in the strategic plan will help to align, integrate, and promote ongoing and future food systems initiatives in support of the agency's mission.**

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This project will conclude in September 2023. Additional recommendations will be made after the Cooperative Partners have had the opportunity to review key data findings and provide their input throughout year three of the project. **A full list of recommendations will be included in the final project report,** which will be shared with policy makers and other key stakeholders.





## Appendix

The *Statewide Cooperative Partnership for Local and Regional Markets* is a group of more than 40 organizations that provide input on the diverse experiences of small- and mid-sized producers across the state. This project is led by representatives from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and University of Minnesota (UMN), and supported by members of the Project Team.

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Doubting Thomas Farm  
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Growing North  
Hmong American Farmers Association  
Hmong American Partnership  
Kilimo MN  
Latino Economic Development Center  
Live Organically Farm  
Mezclada  
Midwest Farmers of Color Collective  
Minnesota Apple Growers





Minnesota Apple Growers Association  
Minnesota Association of Meat Processors  
Minnesota Buffalo Association  
Minnesota Christmas Tree Association  
Minnesota Cooks, a program of Minnesota Farmers Union  
Minnesota Department of Health  
Minnesota Elk Breeders Association  
Minnesota Farmers' Market Association  
Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association  
Minnesota Grape Growers Association  
Minnesota Grocers Association  
Minnesota Grown Advisory Committee  
Minnesota Honey Producers Association  
Minnesota Indigenous Business Alliance  
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture  
Minnesota Lamb & Wool Producers Association  
Minnesota Landscape Association  
Pine Tree Orchard  
Pluck Flower Farm  
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