USDA AMS Local and Regional Foods Division Agreement Summary

AMS’ Local and Regional Foods Division (LRFD) works to improve market access for producers and develop new markets through its three main roles as a researcher, convener, and technical assistance provider. AMS recognizes that it is important for local food producers, markets, and communities have easy access to ideas, innovations, and research in order to grow and sustain productive businesses. This information ensures that opportunities for U.S. food producers are readily available and communities are equipped to successfully grow and sell regionally produced foods, while also supporting increased access to locally produced foods. LRFD accomplishes much of its work through cooperative and interagency agreements. For more information on LRFD’s work, visit the Local and Regional Food Development webpage.

Fiscal Year 2022 Cooperative Agreements

Wholesale Produce Markets: On-Site Infrastructure Assessment

Partner: Cornell University (and internal support from the AMS Transportation Economics Division)

Through a survey of market managers and selected case studies, this agreement investigates the state of on-site infrastructure at wholesale produce markets. The project will identify infrastructure and transportation needs, suggest areas for future investment, and create tools for market managers to support market modernization and growth.

Many Hats - All the Roles Food Hub Operators Must Play

Partners: Michigan State University and University of Vermont

This agreement aims to better understand the roles food hub operators must fill and provide guidance on how to fill such roles effectively. Project objectives include:

- Understanding the current state of resources aimed at practitioners and verifying the most up to date information on the state of the sector and barriers faced by food hubs;
- Developing technical assistance resources for operators, with a focus on ensuring resources are widely available and useful to practitioners; and,
- Supporting food hub operators in successfully running hubs and developing stable, resilient operations that facilitate access to markets for local and regional producers.

Analyzing the Diversity and Impacts of Farmers Markets Managed by Organizations

Partners: Emory University

This agreement seeks to understand how external management structures for farmers markets affect producers’ experiences and shape local food systems. Key objectives of the project include:

- Documenting the varied organizational structures managing farmers markets across the country;
- Identifying the range of activities these organizations undertake in support of their producers;
- Exploring organizations’ definitions of success related to the farmers markets they manage and the work that they undertake; and,
Evaluating the benefits and disadvantages of farmer participation in farmers markets managed by organizations from the perspectives of staff and vendors (vendor sample drawn from the southeast).

**Taking a Regional Approach to Strengthening Food Systems through Food Policy Councils**

**Partners:** The Ohio State University, Colorado State University, and Johns Hopkins University

This agreement aims to better understand regional approaches to strengthening food systems through food policy councils. The project will develop resources to support food system practitioners working across geographies not circumscribed within a single government (municipal, county, state) jurisdiction, requiring coordination across multiple sectors and/or governments. Resources and information will explore opportunities for regional food policy councils to build capacity and leverage expertise as supply chain matchmakers to support development of food hubs and other regional food businesses.

**Evaluation and Development of a Data Standard for Regional Food Systems**

**Partners:** The Wolfe’s Neck Farm Foundation, Inc.

This agreement will establish a standard for produce pack sizes and naming conventions across the local foods sector. The project will review existing guidance to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the current standards for local and regional producers; establish a steering committee to understand what is needed from a data standard; develop a voluntary consensus standard; and disseminate and encourage adoption of the standard.

**Continuing Agreements Started in Previous Fiscal Years**

**Education and Outreach: Removing Barriers in USDA GAP Programs**

**Partner:** National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) Foundation

NASDA Foundation developed a pilot education and outreach program to address the barriers associated with GAP products, focusing on GroupGAP. The toolkit was piloted in seven states (Virginia, New York, Illinois, Tennessee, Texas, Kentucky, and Florida) to bring GAP awareness and outreach to underserved producers. The toolkit explains GAP and GroupGAP, the advantages of the programs, expected costs and fees, misconceptions, the audit process, and relevant resources. The toolkit is available for printing and sharing in future trainings. A recorded train-the-trainer is available enabling State Departments of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension, and non-governmental organizations can provide the new material to growers and other stakeholders.

**Empowering Local and Regional Protein Processing in the Upper Midwest**

**Partner:** Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI)

This project will help ensure a viable small and local protein processing industry through various support mechanisms. Using the upper Midwest as a learning laboratory, the project will develop resources and training to increase the competitiveness of small and mid-sized meat processing plants across the country.

**List-Frame Development to Implement a Survey of Wild-Catch Fishers Selling Direct to Customers**

**Partner:** University of Maine

This project aims to develop a comprehensive list of fishers that sell wild-caught seafood direct to customers, which has become the list-frame for a survey of the direct to customer wild-caught seafood marketing channel. Data collected by the survey will be analogous to the Local Food Marketing Practices Survey that USDA performs for farms and ranches. In February 2022, focus groups with direct seafood marketing companies in the Local Catch Network helped identify the different types of direct marketing channels and emergent themes. The
project team has identified and sent surveys to 39,000 permitted seafood harvesters across the United States and almost 4,000 others involved in direct marketing, compiled from state and federal databases. This effort has resulted in survey responses from approximately 7,000 participants.

**Local Food Directories Platform Update**

**Partner:** Michigan State University

AMS launched the new Local Food Directories platform in March 2022. This is the first redesign since the inaugural launch of the Farmers Market Directory in 2010. The platform now includes an Agritourism Directory. The improved website includes better security, batch update capability (a frequent request from stakeholders), updated programming language, and a more user-friendly design. With these improvements, the USDA Local Food Directories will better serve the local and regional food systems sector, allowing organizations to easily market their products and consumers to easily find local foods through a variety of market channels.

**Local and Regional Food Systems Recovery and Resilience**

**Partners:** Colorado State University, University of Kentucky, University of Maine

This project is building on the innovation and success found in the Local and Regional Food Systems (LRFS) Response to COVID-19 project. The project focuses on translating lessons learned from local food systems stakeholders during the pandemic into a specific, long-term collaborative strategy for fostering recovery and equitable approaches to LRFS resilience. Notable activities include:

- Harmonized data, metrics collection, analysis, and member training opportunities across Community of Practice Coordinating Organizations (COPCOs) to support the effective implementation and evaluation of sector-level activities, Federal programs and initiatives, and cross-sectoral analysis of LRFS.
- Timely cross sector research and analysis to support the efforts of policy makers, program developers, funders, and other key LRFS stakeholders.
- A “Resiliency Playbook” will contain a set of recommendations based on experiences from LRFS practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic to support policy makers, funders, and LRFS leaders. To create a more inclusive resource with utility beyond a health-related crisis, the Playbook will also focus on strategies enacted in response to climate change disruptions (e.g., wildfires, tornadoes, etc.) and look at distinct impacts on non-contiguous states.
- Continuing education and professional development for network weavers, LRFS project and grant administrators and evaluators, and others.

For more information, visit the [Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID-19 Resource Hub](#).

**USDA AMS Grant Applicant Technical Assistance with Underserved Community Focus**

**Partners:** University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) and Florida A&M University (FAMU)

USDA AMS Grant Programs are designed to support the economic development of communities and commodities by funding projects that enhance the marketability and competitiveness of U.S. agricultural products. To achieve this mission, it is imperative to consider the accessibility of AMS grant programs to all U.S. agricultural farmers, ranchers, fishers, and businesses. Moreover, it is important to understand the history and context of relations between USDA and black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) populations which has led to a lack of trust between these communities and the agency. To address this, FAMU, UMES, and AMS will 1) thoroughly evaluate barriers to AMS grant opportunities for BIPOC and other underserved communities, 2) invest in rebuilding confidence between these communities and the USDA to overcome historic tensions and mistrust, and 3) take action to improve program access through targeted outreach, training and technical assistance.
Realizing the Promise of Urban Agriculture through New Educational Resources and Approaches

Partner: Cornell University and Rooted, WI

The Promise of Urban Agriculture (PUA), a publication supported through a USDA AMS cooperative agreement, draws on the evolution of 14 urban farms and insights from over 150 policy-makers, urban planners, funders, and nonprofit and community organizers engaged in local food systems and urban farming. The initial work to uncover the policies, resources, and future research and development needed to support the successful development of commercial urban farms. Through a collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and planners, this project is turning the PUA recommendations into meaningful and practical training and educational resources.

To date, the project team has developed a Course for Growers and a Course for Planners including multiple modules to support these two stakeholder groups. The two courses are being adapted to create a Course for University Extension.

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