

Food Hubs & Collaborative Marketing

2025 NEW HAMPSHIRE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE STRATEGIC PLAN

Purpose: To understand the shared or collaborative aggregation, marketing, and/or distribution of locally and regionally produced foods, facilitated by an organization, enterprise, or group of producers.

What's at Stake?

Direct-to-consumer markets, such as CSAs, farm stands, and farmers' markets, are critical to many New Hampshire farms. However, they require extra time and effort, while providing fewer options and higher prices for consumers. While selling directly connects farmers with customers, direct-to-consumer markets require significant time and labor and often lack sufficient consumer participation to ensure adequate markets for farmers. Collaborative marketing models offer additional marketing channels that require less time for farmers, while increasing convenience, choice, and flexibility for consumers. These collaborations can increase access to local food for communities and support farm viability, but require policy and funding support to ensure their economic viability and success.

Current Conditions

New Hampshire farmers and community organizations have developed food hubs, online farmers' markets, multi-farm CSAs and stores, and other models in which multiple food producers work together to aggregate and market their products. Collaborative marketing can enable producers to differentiate their products by social and environmental values, such as sustainable production practices. These partnerships make it possible for small-scale farmers to sell to larger buyers, such as restaurants and retail stores, by aggregating their products, rather than individually producing the volumes required by those buyers.

Collaborative marketing benefits both producers and consumers, but there are systemic, financial, and logistical barriers. A study of New Hampshire livestock producers found that some are interested in collaborative marketing, but have concerns about how to manage the staffing, expenses, and coordination required to make them successful. The common challenges reported by farmers selling their products collaboratively are coordinating crop planning, supply and customer fluctuations, pricing, and shared decision-making.

The broader market context exacerbates the greatest challenge farmers face: financial viability. National food supply chains are dominated by large corporations that squeeze large-scale food producers and processors down to razor-thin margins that small-scale food producers cannot compete with.

NH FOOD HUB NETWORK

Launched in 2020, the NH Food Hub Network builds trust and communication in order to trade goods that are unique to each of the hub's regions, create sales avenues for farmers, fishermen, and food producers, offer communities of practice for food safety, foster efficiency in distribution routes, and more.



SOURCE: NH Food Alliance

Challenges and Opportunities

CHALLENGES

- Economic viability is the central challenge; the financial costs of staffing, transportation, marketing, software, storage, and distribution infrastructure can exceed revenue from local product sales, even with premium prices. Operational costs hinder profitability, posing a barrier to making local food accessible to everyone.
- Small-scale producers lack food safety compliance training and support, further straining the staff and costs of aggregating their products.
- Grant programs offset some costs but are unreliable and require substantial time for grant writing, administration, and reporting. Relying on grant funding is an unrealistic expectation for farmers and it can exacerbate staffing issues and increase financial instability.
- The geographic distance between farms and sales outlets in rural areas is a logistical and distribution challenge.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Collaboration increases market access for farmers, reduces labor and infrastructure costs, diversifies product offerings, increases convenience for consumers, and can reduce food waste through coordinated crop planning.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, collaborative marketing models were able to adapt and scale up quickly to meet the increasing demand, suggesting that these models have potential.
- The NH Food Alliance coordinates active statewide and regional food hub networks that connect food hubs to catalyze learnings and relationships and to realize market access efficiencies.



Recommendations

- **Advocate for improvements to state and federal funding programs.** Improvements should be made to programs including the USDA Local Agricultural Marketing Program, to reduce administrative burdens and include general operating support for collaborative marketing.
- **Develop capacity to coordinate and support fundraising efforts for food hubs and multi-farmer collaborative marketing initiatives.** Increased capacity will reduce grant writing and administrative burdens, leverage partnerships, generate increased support for operating funds, and increase impact.
- **Increase technical assistance capacity for food hubs and multi-farmer collaborative marketing initiatives.** Increase technical assistance capacity in four areas:
 - Coaching to design and facilitate a process for farmers and food businesses interested in developing collaborative aggregation and marketing plans.
 - Technical assistance for participating farms and food businesses to evaluate their financial performance and identify strategies to increase their profitability.
 - Food safety regulation compliance support for farmers to secure the certifications and licenses needed to access wholesale buyers and sell through food hubs.

- Hiring one full-time equivalent (FTE) joint Community Economic Development & Food and Agriculture position that broadens support from UNH Extension and other technical assistance providers for non-farm food producers and businesses, such as bakeries, fishermen, and food hubs.

- **Conduct research to examine the benefits and limitations of different collaborative aggregation and marketing models.** This research would guide the development of organizational and legal structures for different contexts and needs. Identify the factors that determine financial profitability to inform the development of technical assistance, policy, and programmatic support.
- **Analyze the distribution routes of New Hampshire's food hubs to identify coordination opportunities.** Collaborative distribution would include backhauling and other creative solutions to address the unique distribution needs of underserved rural areas.

Authors

Lead Author: Analena Bruce, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Food Systems, Department of Agriculture, Nutrition & Food Systems, University of New Hampshire

Contributing Authors:

France Hahn, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Kearsarge Food Hub, Sweet Beet Farm, Market, & Cafe
Katelyn Porter, Value Chain Coordinator, NH Food Alliance, Sustainability Institute, University of New Hampshire
Jesse Wright, Field Specialist, UNH Extension
Peter Allison, Executive Director, Farm to Institution New England (FINE)

New Hampshire
*Department of Agriculture,
Markets, and Food*



This brief was developed through a participatory process led by the NH Food Alliance, a program of the University of New Hampshire. The brief content is comprised of the opinions, perspectives, and information gathered by the authors and participants, and does not necessarily represent those of the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food or the NH Food Alliance.

For more information, including references and opportunities to get involved, visit the 2025 NH Food and Agriculture Strategic Plan web page on nhfoodalliance.org or scan the QR code on the inside front cover of the print version.