



# FARMER PERSPECTIVES ON FARM TO INSTITUTION IN MICHIGAN

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In summer 2015, researchers from the Michigan State University Department of Sociology interviewed 22 Michigan fruit, vegetable, and livestock farmers to learn more about farmers' participation in and experiences with institutional sales. Interviews were conducted over the phone, and lasted for an average length of 30-70 minutes. Participants were recruited through CRFS email lists and staff contacts, supplemented by snowball sampling, and all participants were compensated \$50 for their time. This project was conducted in partnership with the Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN) and the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems.

Of the farmers interviewed, 14 farmed vegetables, 4 farmed fruits, and 4 produced livestock or animal products. Half had prior experience with selling their products to institutions. The majority (20 out of 22) had small- to medium-sized farms ranging from 1 to 1200 acres in 2014, with an average farm size of 234 acres. Eight of the interviewed farmers held United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certifications at the time of the interviews, and five of these GAP-certified farmers had previous experience with institutional sales.

## FINDINGS

Interviewed farmers' motivations for engaging in sales to institutions can be grouped into two main categories. One is social – farmers said they enjoyed being able to supply nutritious foods to local consumers, especially to children and schools. The other motivator is economic, as farmers appreciate the larger and relatively more stable customer base of institutional buyers, as compared to farmers markets and other direct to consumer outlets. Farmers were also asked about their perceived or experienced challenges in selling to institutions. Their responses included the difficulty of establishing initial contact and maintaining clear communication with institutional buyers, managing potentially mismatched expectations around cost and availability of products, and meeting any required food safety standards and certifications.

These findings validate the results from a previous survey conducted in 2012 by researchers from MSU CRFS<sup>1</sup> and the University of Vermont. This 2012 survey was conducted in partnership with the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Michigan Field Office and was mailed to a representative sample (825) of Michigan vegetable farmers. Surveys were returned by 311 farmers with active farms, for an overall response rate of 38%. The majority of responding farmers had small- to medium-sized farms. Unlike the 2015 interviews, the survey was limited to vegetable farmers, and only a few (7%) had any experience selling their products to institutions. The top motivators for selling to institutions were supplying healthy foods to customers; fair, steady prices; and supplying local foods to customers. These motivations line up with the two main categories – social and economic – of perceived benefits reported in the 2015 interviews.

The challenges reported by the 2015 interviewees also reflect the main challenges and concerns reported in the 2012 survey responses. One of the top concerns of surveyed farmers regarding selling vegetables to institutions was the need for regular communication with customers, and they indicated that both knowing which area institutions

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<sup>1</sup> Matts, C., Connor, D. S., Fisher, C., Tyler, S., & Hamm, M. W. (2016). Farmer perspectives of Farm to Institution in Michigan: 2012 survey results of vegetable farmers. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, 31(1), 60-71. doi:10.1017/S1742170514000465.



were interested in buying and having those institutions contact them directly would be very important in helping them sell more to institutions. Other concerns and logistical challenges rated as very important by the highest percentage of farmers in 2012 were issues of timely payment, prices that were too low, and meeting institutional requirements around packaging, consistency, and delivery. These concerns are very much like the challenges reported in 2015 of communicating with buyers and aligning cost and availability expectations.

Farmers interviewed in 2015 indicated that knowing and meeting any institutional requirements surrounding food safety standards and certifications is one of the main challenges they face in pursuing institutional sales, while respondents to the 2012 survey did not include this issue among their top concerns. However, 41% of 2012 survey respondents did say that having a food safety audit would help them sell to institutions or increase sales of vegetables to institutions, so farmers were thinking about food safety requirements even if they ranked other challenges as more important. The change in concern about food safety requirements could also be connected to the implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). Though signed into law in 2011, most FSMA rules were not finalized until late 2015 and early 2016, and the imminence of these changes for the 2015 interviewees could have made food safety rules a more pressing concern. It could be beneficial to investigate current requirements at different institutions and explore additional ways to disseminate this information to farmers.

### NEXT STEPS, FURTHER RESEARCH

Reviewing the results of these two studies together makes it clear that Michigan farmers have an interest in selling their products to institutions. They perceive some clear benefits to doing so, but room remains for further research. Although the 2012 survey managed to reach a representative sample of vegetable farmers, it did not include perspectives from fruit growers or livestock producers. The interviews conducted in 2015 were able to reach this broader set of farmers, but only a very small sample. A study able to reach a large sample of vegetable, fruit *and* livestock farmers could offer valuable insights into the current state of overall farm-to-institution interest and efforts in Michigan.

The landscape and support network for Michigan farmers selling to institutions has also changed significantly since the 2012 survey was conducted. The Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN), co-coordinated by CRFS and the Ecology Center, launched in 2014 with the goal of getting more local foods to institutions. Some interviewed farmers, particularly those who had experience selling to institutions, mentioned that external organizations (including MFIN) and events had helped them make institutional connections. These interviews did not specifically examine farmers' current level of engagement with MFIN, but it would be helpful to learn whether or how involvement with MFIN can help with overcoming any of the perceived or experienced barriers to selling to institutions (such as helping farmers establish initial contact with institutional buyers). MFIN works to increase opportunities for farm-to-institution sales through projects like farmer workshops and Cultivate Michigan, a local purchasing campaign for institutions, and could play a valuable role in helping farmers surmount the challenges they described in these studies.

*For more information, visit the MSU CRFS website at [foodsystems.msu.edu](http://foodsystems.msu.edu) or contact Megan Thompson, Farm to Institution Data Manager, at [thom1306@anr.msu.edu](mailto:thom1306@anr.msu.edu). Visit [mifarmtoinstitution.org](http://mifarmtoinstitution.org) and [cultivatemichigan.org](http://cultivatemichigan.org) for more information about MFIN and its local food purchasing campaign, Cultivate Michigan.*

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