

Who:	Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network
What:	A regional network
Where:	A ten county region in northwest lower Michigan

CHANGING THE MENU. IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE.

What if Michigan schools had the resources to source more ingredients from local farms and spend more time introducing kids to new foods and healthy eating? Proponents say such a step could result in the growth of farms and other local businesses and lifelong success for children who start out eating right.

This idea, a recommendation in the Michigan Good Food Charter policy platform, has caught on with a group of people in northwest Michigan who have taken it upon themselves to advance it. They are school officials, dieticians, farmers, food pantry staff, parents, and even a children's book author. This diverse group comes together regularly as the region's Health and Youth Working Group, a committee of the Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network. This network has set an overarching goal of enabling local food and farming systems to become more resilient and provide 20 percent of the region's food by 2020. The role the Health and Youth Working Group is to identify and pursue opportunities in the health and youth arena for accomplishing the Network's goal.



"Rainbow Salad Day" at one of the Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network's farm to school partner schools. Photo courtesy of Michigan Land Use Institute.

Gary Derrigan, interim food service director at Traverse City Area Public Schools, believes pursuing the goal of 20 percent local food generates many benefits relevant to his job. "We're involved in efforts to build the local food supply chain because it makes a difference in our work to improve lifelong dietary habits," he said. "We've learned through farm-to-school efforts to date that kids will choose healthy, high-quality products that we source from local farms, especially if we market the farmer with the menu."

The Health and Youth Working Group has taken the lead on several initiatives, including the larger Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network's "10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms" campaign. The local campaign is based on one of the agenda priorities in the Michigan Good Food Charter, which calls for supplementing schools' fruit and vegetable purchases with an additional 10 cents per school lunch designated specifically for Michigan produce. In order to pay for the program, the regional Network has set a fundraising goal of \$100,000, which will help nine school districts in four northwest Michigan counties buy and serve locally grown fruits and vegetables. This amount would cover two years of local produce at lunch three days a week in the fall, one day a week in the winter, and two days a week in the spring.

The Health and Youth Working Group and other committees of the regional Network are uniting

efforts across organizations and leveraging broad-based community commitment. “The Network has given diverse people and organizations across the region the capacity to build the local food economy, instead of just one or two organizations that might have that as their mission,” said Diane Conners, who heads up related programming at the Traverse City-based Michigan Land Use Institute. “By working collaboratively, we’re able to generate thoughtful ideas, support each other, and seize opportunities.”

What

The Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network connects people, organizations, and institutions working toward a common goal: for the region’s food and farming systems to grow more resilient and provide 20 percent of the region’s food by 2020. In 2009, individuals and organizations came together for an inaugural Farm Route to Prosperity Summit, which was held to help determine how northwest Michigan food and farm interests should follow up on the region’s Grand Vision, a 50-year planning process that calls for strong local economies, healthy people and abundant farmland. At the summit, attendees committed to goals and objectives for the region’s food system and to pursuing them together as a regional group. This later led to the formation of the network.

Why

Through the region’s Grand Vision process, thousands of residents made clear they welcome growth and development but want it to support their rural and small town culture, and prioritized farming as part of their desired future. Citizens and community leaders formed the Network to realize this vision through local food business development.

How

The Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network operates as a forum for members’ concerns and leads the path to action, gathering the wisdom and will of its participants and taking Network priorities to the streets and to circles of power. Here’s how:

Facilitation. *While not an organization itself, the Network has a structure that keeps it on task and accountable. Participating organizations co-convene the Network, and members choose a chair to facilitate a council that meets regularly. Working groups and projects meet on their own.*

Credibility. *The Network is one of six Grand Action implementation initiatives of the region’s Grand Vision development strategy. Linking into the broader development plan for the region provides credibility and ensures integration with other issues.*

Projects. *Network participants develop and pursue projects collaboratively. The “10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms” campaign (noted earlier) is one example. An emerging regional food hub, called the Grand Traverse Regional Market, is another. This is an effort to develop processing and distribution options for smaller-scale farms and is a joint project of businesses and organizations involved in the Network.*

Annual Summits. *Every year the Network hosts a daylong regional gathering of those engaged in transforming the food system. It is an event for learning and networking where participants also mark and celebrate progress toward the Network’s goal.*

Learn more about the Northwest Michigan Food and Farming Network at www.foodandfarmingnetwork.org.