

NATIONAL RURAL GROCERY SUMMIT

*May 5-7, 2026
Fargo, ND*

NDARECs
North Dakota Association of
Rural Electric Cooperatives
Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

K-STATE
Research and Extension
Rural Grocery Initiative

Regional Sustainable
Development Partnerships
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION

PRE-CONFERENCE BUS TOURS

Innovative Grocery Tour (MN)

Tuesday, May 5 | 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Cost: \$125.00

Spend the day visiting three rural Minnesota groceries to learn how local leaders are sustaining food access in their communities. The tour departs from Fargo and first stops at [Manna Food Co-op](#) in Detroit Lakes, a store opened in 2015 that is now owned by over 1,100 members. The community-owned store moved to a new location in early 2026 and participants will be able to tour the space, including a shared processing kitchen which food entrepreneurs can use to be able to enter the wholesale market. Next, the group will travel to [Larry's Grocery in Pelican Rapids](#) for a guided tour, lunch, and time to browse the store which has been providing service to the community for over 40 years and offers diverse grocery items to serve their community's needs. The final stop is [Main Street Market](#) in Evansville, where attendees will split into two groups for an outdoor talk and indoor walkthrough of this unique self-serve grocery store with a 24-hour unstaffed model. Rest breaks are included throughout the trip. The tour concludes with a return to Fargo by early evening. This mobile session gives participants a direct look at rural grocery models and the practical approaches these stores use to serve their communities.

Up North Tour (MN)

Tuesday, May 5 | 8:00 AM - 5:15 PM

Cost: \$125.00

This full-day mobile session takes participants across northwest Minnesota to visit three rural grocery stores and learn how each community supports local food access. The tour departs from Fargo and begins with a morning drive to Grygla (pop. 180) for a visit to the [Grygla General Store](#) featuring a guided walkthrough, time for lunch, and an opportunity to shop the store which has served the store for over 65 years with the current owner having taken over in 2022. The group then travels to Erskine (pop. 403) for a tour of [Groceries Plus](#), a recipient of funding from [Minnesota's Good Food Access Program](#) that enabled the store to update their refrigeration and become more energy efficient. The final stop of the day will be in Callaway (pop. 224) at [Native Harvest](#) which is a retail store and food enterprise owned and operated by the White Earth Land Recovery Project. The store sells traditional Ojibwe foods and locally made products—including wild rice, maple syrup, preserves, and Indigenous crafts—many of which are harvested or produced by community members. Its purpose is to support the local economy, preserve traditional food systems and cultural knowledge, and generate revenue that helps fund the programs and mission of the organization. Restroom and shopping time is included at each location as available. The bus returns to Fargo by early evening. This tour offers an on-the-ground look at rural grocery operations, challenges, and the creative solutions these stores bring to their communities.

North Dakota Tour (ND)

Tuesday, May 5 | 9:00 AM - 4:15 PM

Cost: \$125.00

Join us for a full-day tour exploring two rural grocery stores in northeast North Dakota. The tour departs from Fargo and begins with a visit to [Jim's Supervalu](#) in Park River, where participants will take part in a guided walkthrough, enjoy a lunch break, and have time to shop. This store is a member of the innovative [Rural Access Distribution \(RAD\) Cooperative](#) which exemplifies an effective community-based response to alleviate food sourcing challenges faced by many rural grocery stores. Through the RAD Co-op, member stores purchase collectively from suppliers, ensuring better pricing and more diversified product offerings. The group will then travel to Hillsboro for a tour of [Millers Fresh Foods](#) who has 10 stores across North Dakota as well as two stores in Minnesota. This stop will include time for shopping and restrooms as available. After the final stop, the bus returns to Fargo in the afternoon. This mobile session provides a direct look at how rural grocers operate and the ways they continue supporting food access in their communities in the face of challenges.

Fargo Area Tour (ND/MN)

Tuesday, May 5 | 1:00 - 4:30 PM

Cost: \$75.00

This afternoon mobile session offers a close look at regional food distribution and grocery operations across Fargo and nearby Minnesota communities. The tour begins with a short drive to the UNFI Distribution Center for a guided walkthrough highlighting warehouse logistics and supply chain processes. Participants will then travel to Barnesville, MN (pop. 2,757) to visit [Barnesville Grocery](#), a store which sources product from UNFI and which recently celebrated their first anniversary under new ownership. After the tour, participants will have time to shop the store. The bus returns to Fargo in the early evening. This half-day session provides a practical look at how food moves through the regional system and into local grocery stores.

Thank You to Our Tour Sponsors!



AGENDA AT-A-GLANCE

Tuesday, May 5

- 8:00 - 5:15 PM** **Rural Grocery Tours in MN and ND** - *Exact times vary based on tour*
- 4:00 - 8:00 PM** **Early Registration | Atrium**
- 5:00 PM** **Welcome Reception | Harvest Hall**
 Light Hors d'oeuvres and cash bar will be available. Peruse the [Fargo Dining Guide](#) for meal ideas to check out before or after visiting the welcome reception on Wednesday night.

Wednesday, May 6

- 7:30 - 8:30 AM** **Light Continental Breakfast and Registration | Atrium**
- 8:30 - 10:00 AM** **Welcome and Opening Keynote | Great Hall**
 More than a Grocery Store, Jon Steinman
- 10:00 - 10:30 AM** **Break**
- 10:30 - 11:30 AM** **Breakout Session #1**

EMBASSY	HARVEST A	HARVEST B	DAKOTA
Community Co-op Conversions: An Exit Strategy That Preserves Local Grocery Access	Making the Case for Rural Grocery through Mapping and Data	Connecting Rural Grocers, Healthcare and Community Nutrition Access	Local Connections: A Grocery Store at the Heart of Rural Community

- 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM** **Lunch and Afternoon Keynote | Great Hall**
 Securing the Store's Next Chapter: Transition Planning in Rural Grocery, Panel
- 1:00 - 2:00 PM** **Poster Session | Foyer**
 Visit our poster session and hear from our presenters. See page 17 for a full list of posters and descriptions.
- Exhibitor Fair | Foyer**
 Be sure to visit with our exhibitors located in the convention center foyers. Get a stamp on your passport from all exhibitors, and enter to win complimentary registration at the 2027 National Rural Grocery Summit! Winners will be announced in the final keynote session.

- 2:00 - 3:00 PM** **Breakout Session #2**
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| Cold Chain Wholesale Distribution: Results from a Northern Wisconsin Study | Battling Bigness: How Federal and State Officials Can Fight for Fairness in the Grocery Industry | Expanding GusNIP Impact Through Statewide Collaboration: Centralized Models for Advancing Rural Grocery Access | A Scalable Model for Local Food Production and Rural Grocery Integration |
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3:00 - 3:30 PM

Break and Exhibitor Fair | Foyer

3:30 - 4:30 PM

Breakout Session #3

EMBASSY	HARVEST A	HARVEST B	DAKOTA
Data-Driven Business Decisions to Sharpen Rural Grocery Operations	Farm Stops - A Novel Retail Store Model to Grow Local Food Economies	Basics of Shared Governance for Community-supported Rural Grocery Stores	Grocery Retail for All: Strengthening Independent Operators in Underserved Communities

4:30 - 5:15 PM

How Do Small Grocers Navigate Market Dynamics? A Roundtable Discussion | Dakota

Kiki Hubbard and Paulina Jenney, Seedhead Strategies

The North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives is conducting a study on market concentration in grocery supply chains and emerging challenges to independent grocer viability. Researchers will share preliminary data from a state-wide survey of North Dakota grocers and invite participants to share their stories about how the marketplace has changed over the last ten years, including whether and how these changes have influenced their store performance and profitability. Findings from this study will be used to identify solutions that support small and local grocers.

Who is invited: Anyone who identifies as a small or independent grocery store owner is invited to participate. The roundtable will not be open to the press, and participants will have the option of remaining anonymous in all records created from the conversation. There is no cap on the number of participants that can attend.

6:00 - 8:00 PM

Evening Reception and Award Ceremony at Brewhalla

Heavy hors d'oeuvres and cash bar will be available. brief awards ceremony program will take place from 6:30 – 7:00 PM. Brewhalla Market, located on the ground floor, is home to 15 food and drink vendors and local shops. Attendees are encouraged to peruse Brewhalla Market throughout the reception and may bring purchased food back up to the reception space. Brewhalla Market menu is available at brewhalla.co/market/.

Meet in Lobby beginning at 5:45 pm to catch the shuttle to Brewhalla. A shuttle bus will loop between the Holiday Inn and Brewhalla roughly every 20 minutes. The final bus from Brewhalla to the Holiday Inn will depart at 8:00 pm.

Evening Reception @ Brewhalla

Wednesday, May 6 | 6:00 - 8:00 PM

1702 1st Ave N, Fargo, ND 58102

Join us for an evening reception at Brewhalla as we present the 2026 Rural Grocer of the Year and 2026 Grocery Champion of the Year awards. Help us honor leaders who are making a positive difference in rural grocery.



Thursday, May 7

7:00 - 8:30 AM **Light Continental Breakfast | Great Hall**

8:30 - 10:00 AM **Workshops**

EMBASSY	HARVEST A	HARVEST B	DAKOTA
Connecting Capital to Rural Communities: How HFFI Programs and the FARE Fund Support Rural Retailers	Real World Solutions for Today's Retail Challenges	State-Supported Tools for Rural Grocery: Examples from Three State Programs	Surviving and Thriving in Today's Grocery Landscape: Strategies to Build Sales and Loyalty

10:00 - 10:30 AM **Break**

10:30 - 11:30 AM **Breakout Session #5**

Bending the Economic Curve: Overcoming Today's Hurdles with Smart Excess Inventory Solutions	Restoring the Flow: Aligning Rural Grocery for Growth and Succession	Innovative Partnerships in GusNIP: How Grocers are Using Nutrition Incentives to Boost Sales and Support Local Agriculture	Proven Ideas for Local & Regional Sourcing: Examples from Hanover Co-op Food Stores
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11:30 AM - 12:30 PM **Lunch | Great Hall**

12:30 - 1:30 PM **Afternoon Keynote | Great Hall**
Across State Lines: Rural Grocery Policy in Action, Panel

1:30 - 1:45 PM **Break**

1:45 - 2:45 PM **Breakout Session #6**

Beyond the Bottom Line: Know the Numbers That Actually Run Your Store	The 24-Hour Rural Grocery: The Future Model for Community Sustainability and Small-Town Growth	Food Waste Prevention: A Boon for Rural Grocer Bottom Lines, Communities, and Climate	From Aisles to Action: How Rural Grocery Stores Can Play a Significant Role in the Growing Food is Medicine Movement
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2:45 - 3:00 PM **Break**

3:00 - 4:30 PM **Closing Keynote | Great Hall**
Grocery Stores as Community Hubs, Rebecca Udem

More than a Grocery Store

Wednesday, May 6 | 8:30 - 10:00 AM

Jon will explore how rural grocery owners and stakeholders can more effectively communicate their essential value to customers, communities, policymakers, funders, and partners. In a sector shaped by increasing consolidation, shrinking margins, and shifting consumer habits, how do we preserve and strengthen independent grocery stores—not just as places to buy food, but as foundational community assets? Jon's presentation will trace 125 years of grocery retail history to reveal how competition law, price-driven culture, and policy neglect have made it nearly impossible for independents to thrive by playing the same game as the dominant grocers. If rural grocers are to survive and flourish, they must stop trying to win on the same terms—and instead, change the terms of engagement.

A circular portrait of Jon Steinman, a man with glasses and a white shirt, smiling. The portrait is framed by a colorful diamond shape with green, purple, and red sides.

Jon Steinman

Food Systems Thinker, Author, and Educator

Jon Steinman is a food systems thinker, author, and educator with a 25-year career shaping how communities engage with food. From the soil to the shelf — from community farms to co-operative groceries — his work revolves around a single question: what if our food supply chains put people, health, and communities first? As the author of *Grocery Story: The Promise of Food Co-ops in the Age of Grocery Giants*, Jon's work continues to strengthen and amplify the importance of community stewardship of independent grocery stores. A former board president of the Kootenay Co-op — Canada's largest natural foods co-op — Jon now leads Grocery Story Press — publisher of *This Could Be Ours*, the Food Co-op Finder app, and a growing suite of webinars and resources for retail grocery co-ops across the U.S. and Canada. A sought-after speaker and educator, he works closely with co-op boards, staff, and member-owners to deepen understanding of the cooperative model and the critical role of independent grocery stores. Jon is also known as the voice behind *Deconstructing Dinner* — once Canada's most-listened-to food podcast and radio program, and later an award-winning television series. From grain co-ops to cohousing communities, to food documentary film festivals, Jon's many projects all share one ingredient: a belief that food can bring communities together.

Securing the Store's Next Chapter: Transition Planning in Rural Grocery

Wednesday, May 6 | 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM

Across the country, 2.9 million businesses are operated by individuals at or near retirement age, signaling a significant shift in business ownership on the horizon. Rural grocery stores are no exception. Grocers in these communities face distinct and complex challenges as they plan to exit their business and ensure their towns retain a vibrant, locally owned store.

This session will lift up three rural grocers who are actively integrating transition planning into the successful operation of their store, offering practical insights on how to prepare for the future while sustaining the store today.



Regena Lance

Owner/Manager, Mildred Store, Moran, KS

Regena Lance has a background in education and has been an educator for over 20 years. Growing up in a rural community, she

understands the importance of the rural grocery store to her own community. When the local store was set to close in 2014 Regena and her husband Loren intervened and have a thriving store in a town of 17 people.



Pat Tracy

Owner, Tracy's Market

Originally from Watertown, South Dakota, Pat and Debbie Tracy were living in Everett, WA, when they decided they wanted to move back to the Dakotas.

They found an advertisement in the Everett Newspaper for a small grocery store in Leeds, ND. In 1989, they bought the store sight unseen and moved to North Dakota where they still operate the grocery store in Maddock.



DuWayne Ditterich

Owner, Ditterich Mercantile

DuWayne Ditterich started farming his family's land in west central Minnesota in 2007. In 2013, with row

crop prices declining, they transitioned to beef. A few years later they opened a small meat store on their farm, and in 2022, they took it to the next level by opening a brick and mortar grocery store.



Carly Whorton

Grocery Consultant and Transition Coach, Holton, KS

Carly's experience in rural grocery began in 2017 when she joined forces with her cousin to open Cecil K's

Hometown Market, in their hometown of Holton, Kansas. Together, they later grew the business with a second location before Carly exited the business in 2023. Since 2021, she has served in a grocery consulting capacity where she combines her grocery expertise, background in change management, and passion for depth psychology.

Across State Lines: Rural Grocery Policy in Action

Thursday, May 7 | 12:00 - 1:30 PM

In recent years, state legislatures have shown growing interest in supporting rural grocery stores through policy. In 2023, Illinois allocated \$20 million for grants and technical assistance for independent grocers, while North Dakota's Legislative Assembly established the Rural Grocery Store Sustainability Grant Program to assist small-town stores. Both efforts were the result of years of relationship-building, data collection, and clear communication. More recently, in neighboring states of Iowa and Nebraska, the Center for Rural Affairs has spearheaded legislative efforts to support rural grocery stores in both states. This keynote panel will explore the strategy behind this work - from identifying legislative champions to drafting effective policy language and navigating the legislative process.



Audra Espinoza

Senior State Policy Manager

Audra Espinoza is the Senior Nebraska State Policy Manager for the Center for Rural Affairs, advocating at the state level for policies that support rural communities. A lifelong

resident of Hastings, Nebraska, she previously led community engagement and communications work with the United Way of South Central Nebraska and the Hastings Public Library. Audra holds her bachelor's degree in political science from Hastings College and a Master of Public Administration from the University of Nebraska-Omaha.



Cynthia Farmer

Iowa Policy Manager

Cynthia Farmer is the Iowa State Policy Manager, leading state policy efforts in Iowa for the Center for Rural Affairs. She grew up on her family's 60-cow dairy farm in northeast Iowa,

where she attributes her interest and curiosity to rural communities and Iowa's food system. Cynthia attended Iowa State University double-majoring in agriculture policy and dairy science, and received her B.S degree in 2021.



Carlie Jonas

Nebraska Policy Associate

Carlie Jonas is a Policy Associate at the Center for Rural Affairs, focusing on Nebraska state policy and championing issues spanning food access, health care, and economic development. She

holds a bachelor's degree in history from Nebraska Wesleyan University and a graduate certificate in public management from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Before joining CFRA, she worked in roles at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Heartland Family Service, and in grassroots voter turnout efforts, and she currently serves on the Wahoo Public Library Board of Directors.



Deborah Solie

Senior Project Associate

Deborah Solie is a Senior Project Associate at the Center for Rural Affairs, where she partners with rural communities to address environmental challenges and strengthen local food systems

through initiatives like farmers markets, food hubs, and support for rural grocery stores. With a bachelor's degree in agricultural communications from Oklahoma State University, and graduate work in rural sociology, negotiation, and natural resource management, she brings a diverse interdisciplinary perspective to her work. Having worked previously in higher education, alumni relations, and community development, Deborah draws on a rich professional background to support resilient and vibrant rural communities.

Grocery Stores as Community Hubs

Thursday, May 7 | 3:15 - 4:30 PM

Rebecca will explore how grocery stores serve as community hubs. Local grocery stores are critical to the success of small communities. Access to high-quality food is a huge determining factor in guiding a person's decision to choose a place to live. Today, more than ever, rural grocery stores have unique opportunities to position themselves as community hubs, offering more than simple food access. In her keynote, Rebecca will explore the connections between the store and the broader community. By attending, you will rediscover the competitive advantages of being small and locally owned, explore the generational shifts at play in the workforce, learn strategies to engage the newest generation of workers and residents, and explore new ways of collaborating within your community.



Rebecca Udem

Founder and Executive Director, Growing Small Towns

Rebecca Udem has always been passionate about two things: people and talking to people. As an inspirational speaker, community advocate, and host of the podcast *The Growing Small Towns Show*, she's put her gift of gab to good use. As Founder and Executive Director of Growing Small Towns, a regional non-profit organization, Rebecca helps the communities in southeast North Dakota be places people love to call home through programs that grow their human, social, and cultural capital. Not one to let people down, Rebecca still lives up to her childhood label of drama queen. She binges on Netflix shows, coffee, and anything that makes her feel verklempt—her self-declared favorite feeling. Rebecca went against her youthful declarations and married a farmer, Jeremiah, and together, they have three amazing kids: Andrew, Carter, and Brynlee. They love their small town and the crazy-good life they get to live there.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Breakout #1

Making the Case for Rural Grocery through Mapping and Data

Sean Park, Program Director for the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs; Melanie Canales, Challenging Corporate Power Project Manager, RAFI; Dylan Halpern, Full-stack Software Engineer, University of Chicago

This presentation will look at the results from the economic impact studies of rural grocery stores developed by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. We will then look at the impact created from new stores opening and existing stores closing. We will then discuss potential uses for this information and how it can be an effective tool in lobbying for more governmental support of rural grocery stores. This presentation will introduce the Grocery Gap Atlas, a geospatial analysis tool that illuminates the correlation between market concentration in the grocery industry and food access. This tool offers highly robust data to support what rural populations have articulated anecdotally; food access outcomes get worse when a small number of corporations dominate the market share in grocery. RAFI and the Open Spatial Lab at the University of Chicago will discuss high-level findings, offer a technical walk-through of the tool, and consider its applications to further the policy, engagement, and narrative goals of rural grocery operators and advocates.

Connecting Rural Grocers, Healthcare and Community Nutrition Access

Nikki Johnson, Community Health and Nutrition Specialist, North Dakota State University Extension and University of Minnesota Extension; Abby Gold, Health and Nutrition Extension Specialist, University of Minnesota; Kate Welshons, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Extension

Rural grocers are essential partners in supporting access to nutritious foods that prevent disease and promote overall community health. With increasing recognition of the link between diet and chronic disease, opportunities are emerging for rural grocers to collaborate with healthcare providers, local farmers, and community organizations to expand nutrition access. This session will explore how rural grocers can engage in merging models of care and nutrition access.

Community Co-op Conversions: An Exit Strategy That Preserves Local Grocery Access

Leslie Watson, Executive Director, Cooperative Development Services; Tracy McIntyre, Executive Director, Montana Cooperative Development Center

This presentation introduces grocers and community leaders to the cooperative conversion process—a proven strategy for preserving rural grocery stores when longtime owners seek succession options. Participants will learn the fundamentals of cooperative ownership, explore real-world conversion success stories, and receive practical guidance on next steps for communities considering this model.

Local Connections: A Grocery Store at the Heart of Rural Community

Shaundra Ziemann-Bolinske, NDSU Extension Food Systems Specialist, NDSU Extension; Brenda and Matt McCasson, Rural Grocery Store Owners, Velve Foods; Gillian Lavik, Fellow Community Member and Entrepreneur, Dakota Medical Surgical Center; Jan Stankiewicz, NDSU Extension Specialist Community Health & Nutrition, NDSU Extension; Lesley Jones, NDSU Extension - McHenry County Family and Community Wellness Agent, NDSU Extension

Creative ideas drive progress in rural communities. Since 2020, Brenda and Matt continue to revitalize their small-town grocery store through innovative programs like “Drop a Crock,” local producer partnerships, loyalty discounts, round-up giving, and plans for a teaching kitchen. This dynamic panel blends entrepreneurial grit, community connection, and Extension expertise to offer a powerful, real-world model of rural grocery innovation.

Breakout #2

Battling Bigness: How Federal and State Officials Can Fight for Fairness in the Grocery Industry

Ron Knox, Food Program Manager, Open Markets Institute; Justin Stofferahn, Minnesota Farmers Union; Claire Kelloway, Food Program Manager, Open Markets Institute; Corey Christianson, Store Owner, KC's Country Markets; Wayne Isaacson, Store Owner, A Clean Plate Grocery

Many federal and state policymakers are revisiting the Robinson-Patman Act, a bedrock fair competition law designed to prevent large retailers and chain stores from abusing their market power to demand special pricing and terms from their suppliers at the expense of small and independent grocers. A panel of fair competition advocates and Robinson-Patman experts will explain the history of this law, the state of play at the federal and state level, and how independent grocers can advocate for stronger enforcement.

A Scalable Model for Local Food Production and Rural Grocery Integration

Zachary Paige, Board President, Manna Food Cooperative; Ryan Pesch, General Manager, Manna Food Cooperative

This session will explore how Manna's member-owned grocery store, expanded with a shared-use commercial kitchen, is fostering a new model for hyper-local food processing, distribution, and retail. The approach directly connects small-scale producers with consumers via a trusted retail location, offering a viable alternative to centralized food hubs that often struggle with logistics, scale, and sustainability in rural settings.

Cold Chain Wholesale Distribution: Results from a Northern Wisconsin Study

Michelle Miller, Senior Researcher, University of Wisconsin CIAS

Our team combined distribution data from the Department of Transportation with in-depth interviews to document the effects of grocery concentration and vertical integration on rural communities. Produce and other fresh foods give independent stores a competitive advantage over big box and dollar stores, yet wholesale access is insufficient. We found that improving LTL cold chain logistics is one high leverage strategy for supporting rural grocers and the communities they serve.

Expanding GusNIP Impact Through Statewide Collaboration: Centralized Models for Advancing Rural Grocery Access

Chelsea Matzen, VP, NGA Foundation, National Grocers Association Foundation; Jazzmine Brooks, Healthy Incentives Director, Iowa Healthiest State Initiative; Sam Hedges, Director of Operations, Virginia Fresh Match; Hannah Thornton, Senior Director of Food Access and Education, Sustainable Food Center

This session will explore how three statewide GusNIP collaborations have advanced GusNIP implementation through centralized coordination and regional partnerships. By consolidating program management under a lead agency and leveraging local expertise and committed rural retailers, these models expand equitable access to nutrition incentives in rural and underserved areas. Presenters will highlight replicable strategies for building statewide networks that meet SNAP shoppers where they need it most.

Breakout #3

Grocery Retail for All: Strengthening Independent Operators in Underserved Communities

Ertharin Cousin, Founder and managing director, Food Systems for the Future; Sean Park, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

This panel will explore strategies to strengthen independent grocery stores as critical infrastructure in underserved communities. Panelists will share insights from FSF's Grocery Retail for All report and 2024 Summit and introduce the Grocery Retail Executives Corps (GREC), a new initiative connecting veteran industry leaders with emerging operators in rural and urban settings. The session will highlight the need for cross-sector collaboration to build sustainable, community-rooted grocery solutions.

The Basics of Governance for Community Grocery Stores

Chris Dilley, Director of Startup Support, Food Co-op Initiative

Whether your grocery store is a non-profit or a community-owned cooperative, it is governed by a board of directors that needs to work together to represent the community, and provide support and oversight to successful operations. Join Chris Dilley, FCI's Director of Startup Support, as he covers the basics of what governance is for and how one system of governance - Policy Governance - can work as a tool to support good governance.

Data-Driven Business Decisions to Sharpen Rural Grocery Operations

Joel Haskard, Clean Energy Resource Teams Co-Director, and Zachary Paige, Program Coordinator for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, University of Minnesota

Rural grocery stores operate on thin margins, where small improvements in operations and customer traffic can have a significant impact. This session explores how retailers can use real-world data, including foot traffic analytics from tools like Placer.ai and energy assessments, alongside store-level operational data to better understand customer behavior, peak shopping patterns, and store performance. Participants will learn practical ways to align staffing, merchandising, and energy use with actual demand, with strategies to prioritize energy efficiency upgrades in order to achieve more efficient operations and stronger financial outcomes.

Farm Stops - A Novel Retail Store Model to Grow Local Food Economies

Laura Matney, General Manager, Argus Farm Stop; Casey Miller, External Training Manager, Argus Farm Stop

Farm Stops are increasingly growing in popularity as a new approach to connecting local farmers, ranchers and producers directly with customers through a year-round every-day farmers market retail model. Join General Manager, Laura Matney and External Training Manager Casey Miller in learning how this retail approach could supercharge local food in your town or community.

Workshops

State-Supported Tools for Rural Grocery: Examples from Three State Programs

John O'Conner, Policy and Program Development Manager, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity; Sean Park, Value-Added Sustainable Development Program Director, Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs; Mickey Davis, Community Food Access Program Manager, Colorado Department of Agriculture; Lisa Bates, Assistant Director Community and Economic Development and Courtney Long, Food Systems Program Manager and AgMRC Director, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

This session will feature three state-level rural grocery programs in Colorado, Iowa and Illinois each with varying components, structure and design, yet tailored to each state. Participants will leave with an understanding of the spectrum interventions that can be used to support your rural grocery stores in your region and state. Colorado's Community Food Access program is a state-led effort to alleviate food access issues by supporting small food retailers and the farmers who supply them. This program has evolved in recent years from a grant program into a tax credit program and to include support for a Community Food Systems Consortium. In Iowa, a statewide initiative is strengthening Iowa's independent grocery sector through assessments, technical assistance, and peer learning. The session will highlight the collaborative strategies, lessons learned, and opportunities for the future related to building resilient food infrastructure and expanding the Independent Grocery Network across Iowa. Enacted by state legislation, the Illinois Grocery Initiative allocated grant funds to support existing and startup stores in food deserts across the state. Attendees will leave this session with an understanding of the spectrum of programs an organization can provide and awareness of stumbling blocks state-based rural grocery supports may face. Come to this session if you already implement rural grocery programs or aim to start or expand your organization's tool chest of rural grocery support efforts.

Real World Solutions for Today's Retail Challenges

Jimmy Wright, President, Wrights Market

Join independent grocer and food industry expert Jimmy Wright in an interactive discussion of the challenges being faced by independent supermarkets in America. Topics will cover inflation, governmental policy, competition, supply chain challenges, changes in consumer spending, and more. Hear best practices and proven solutions for today's difficult retail environment.

Connecting Capital to Rural Communities: How HFFI Programs and the FARE Fund Support Rural Retailers

Bridget Palombo, Director of Healthy Food Access, The Food Trust; Anne Misak, Managing Director, Equitable Food Systems, Reinvestment Fund

This session will explore how the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) and the FARE Fund provide critical financial and technical resources to sustain and strengthen rural grocery stores. Representatives from The Food Trust and Reinvestment Fund will share how these programs help retailers strengthen operations, expand fresh food access, and connect with complementary state and philanthropic funding. Attendees can also sign up for one-on-one "office hours" following the session for tailored guidance.

Surviving and Thriving in Today's Grocery Landscape: Strategies to Build Sales and Loyalty

Jeanie Wells, Independent Grocery Specialist and Trainer, Mighty Community Markets

In an increasingly competitive market, independent grocery retailers must adapt quickly to shifting market conditions and changing consumer preferences. Our success hinges on our ability to resonate with our communities and build customer loyalty no matter our location or store size. In this session, we will look at some of the most important grocery trends that shape the competitive landscape we all operate in, and we will explore the opportunities all rural grocery stores have to differentiate ourselves from the large chains that surround us.

Breakout #5

Proven Ideas for Local & Regional Sourcing: Examples from Hanover Co-op Food Stores

Allan Reetz, Owner, Local Food Factors

Come learn and understand proven strategies for growing balanced partnerships with your produce-dairy- and livestock-vendors. Gain insights of how a 90-year-old food co-op plans the summer harvest with farmers, collaborates with food producers, and commits for the long-haul.

Bending the Economic Curve: Overcoming Today's Hurdles with Smart Excess Inventory Solutions

Mark Fleming, Chief Executive Officer and President, Natural Choice Foods

Independent grocers, particularly in rural communities, face shrinking populations, increased competition from dollar stores and big box chains, rising transportation costs, and limited access to affordable, high quality inventory. This session, presented by Natural Choice Foods, focuses on practical, proven ways excess inventory can help independent retailers remain profitable while continuing to serve as essential community anchors. Attendees will learn how short dated, overproduced, off spec, foodservice, and private label products can deliver safe, high quality food at significant cost savings while reducing waste. Through a real world case study from Daily Deals Food Outlet in West Michigan, participants will see how sourcing from the secondary market drives traffic, improves margins, and supports competitiveness in challenging markets. The session also highlights how Natural Choice Foods supports rural grocers through flexible order minimums, direct delivery to remote areas, access to proteins and private label options, and retail expertise, equipping attendees with actionable strategies to create value, differentiate their stores, and offer customers a compelling treasure hunt shopping experience.

Innovative Partnerships in GusNIP: How Grocers are Using Nutrition Incentives to Boost Sales and Support Local Agriculture

Erica Raml, Senior Director of Nutrition Incentives, Fair Food Network; Ashley Cavender, Equitable Nutrition and Food Access Director, Appalachian Resource Conservation and Development Council; Kate Miller-Corcoran, Food as Medicine Coordinator, Rural Health Network of South Central New York; Meta Jo Riseling, Store Manager, Walsh Community Grocery Store; Allison Russell, Retail Manager, Russell Farms; Laurel Smith, Value Chain Coordinator and Caitlin Stuart, Senior Program Manager, Nourish Colorado

Rural communities often have fewer resources and options when it comes to food assistance programs. In response to this unmet and growing need, rural grocery stores across the country have been able to partner with nonprofit organizations through the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP) to implement innovative strategies that increase the sale and purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income and SNAP shoppers. This panel will feature GusNIP grantee organizations and their partner grocers, who will share about their rural communities, how they run their nutrition incentive or produce prescription program, and how these programs have supported the health and well-being of rural communities while increasing sales at their stores and supporting local agriculture. This session will be facilitated by Fair Food Network.

Restoring the Flow: Aligning Rural Grocery for Growth and Succession

Phillip Brooks, Leadership and Family Business Coach

Rural grocery stores operate within a food system whose flows have fundamentally changed—driven by food safety risk management, cost pressures, and industry consolidation. These forces have created highly efficient but less flexible supply chains, shifting risk upstream to producers and downstream to retailers, often leaving independent grocers feeling out of alignment with the flow of opportunity. In this interactive session, Phillip Brooks helps participants understand how these structural shifts occurred and uses insights from nature—such as the oxbow river pattern and adaptive ecosystems—to illustrate how businesses can realign to survive and thrive. Drawing on real-world examples, including agritourism, experience-based retail, and moving up the value chain, participants will explore practical ways to reconnect with customers, strengthen relevance, and design more responsive business models. The session also connects alignment to succession, showing how the same practices that create a thriving business—clear decision-making, strong systems, and engaged teams—also prepare the next generation of leaders, whether family, employees, or external buyers. Participants will engage in small-group discussions and leave with actionable steps to restore flow, strengthen their business, and position it for long-term success.

Breakout #6

Food Waste Prevention: A Boon for Rural Grocer Bottom Lines, Communities, and Climate

David Ly, Senior Manager, Business Initiatives, ReFED

Reducing food waste is one of the most impactful strategies for maximizing resource use and ensuring that local communities get the most out of their food system. This session will show how rural grocery stores can turn food waste from a hidden cost into a strategic asset—saving money, helping feed their communities, and reducing the environmental impacts of wasted food. Attendees will learn practical food waste reduction strategies—spanning prevention, recovery, and diversion—with the help of real metrics and recommendations drawn from the latest ReFED analysis.

The 24-Hour Rural Grocery: The Future Model for Community Sustainability and Small-Town Growth

Alex Ostenson, Owner, Rural Grocery Solutions; Caileen Ostenson, Owner, Main Street Market

Rural grocery stores are closing at an alarming rate, but a new model is changing that story. We explore how a 24-hour hybrid grocery model can reduce overhead, increase access, and strengthen our rural stores through smart technology. Learn how this approach keeps small-town stores open, thriving, and modernize our rural grocery stores.

Beyond the Bottom Line: Know the Numbers That Actually Run Your Store

Jon Cline, Chief Relationship Officer, FMS Solutions

Most independent retailers are too busy running their business to truly understand what their financial statements are trying to tell them — and that blind spot is costly. This session gives independent and rural grocers a practical, plain-language framework for interpreting their P&L, balance sheet, and cash flow statement, and connecting those numbers to the KPIs that drive real profitability. You'll learn which metrics matter most in the grocery industry, how to benchmark your performance against rural and independent peers, and how to spot problems before they become emergencies. Leave with the financial confidence to make faster, smarter decisions for your store.

From Aisles to Action: How Rural Grocery Stores Can Play a Significant Role in the Growing Food is Medicine Movement

Ian Walker, Store Owner, Simple Food Market; Jack Becker, Principal Program Strategy Advisor, Colorado Food Cluster, Inc.; Kelli Mark, Director of Healthy Communities, Sunflower Foundation

Food is Medicine - the integration of nutrition into the medical model - is a growing movement with potential for reimbursement through healthcare payers. But where will rural residents obtain their therapeutic dietary treatments including Medically Tailored Groceries and Produce Prescriptions? To date, national FIM vendors have not successfully penetrated the rural market, creating opportunity for rural grocers to offer these products and also serve as trusted community partners to local healthcare. The Sunflower Foundation will highlight lessons from their Food is Medicine pilot program and exploratory research around rural grocery and Food is Medicine. The Colorado Food Cluster's Food Trust Program, in partnership with Simple Foods grocery, is testing a grocery-based universal access to healthy food model that redefines how healthy food can be accessed and delivered through local grocery stores. This session will share insights from this Colorado pilot, exploring how technology integrations with store point of sale systems can create opportunities for a plethora of community driven programs.

POSTER PRESENTATIONS

A Community Tool to Map and Measure Rural Food Access

Ashley McCarthy, Research Scientist, USDA Agricultural Research Service, Meredith Niles, Professor, Brown University

In this interactive presentation, we will share a web-based mapping tool we developed to measure food access in rural areas and identify underserved communities. The presentation will include: 1) an overview and tutorial of the publicly available map; 2) examples of how the tool is being used by stakeholders to improve food access; 3) a review of our initial research findings from using the map to examine the relationships between food access, dietary intake, health outcomes, and community prosperity in rural areas; and 4) an opportunity for attendees to provide feedback as we continue to refine the tool to meet stakeholder needs.

“A Decidedly Rural Strategy”: Dollar General’s Impact on Food Access in Iowa

Eliana Hornbuckle, Research Assistant, Brown University Urban Studies Program, Providence, Rhode Island

Geo-spatial analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews were used to explore Dollar General’s impact on food access in six Iowa communities. Findings show that Dollar General increased access to food, but to consumables that were perceived to be less nutritious, inconsistently available and more expensive. This impact was most severe in rural communities which had few to no other food stores locally and were located far from other communities and food stores.

AgriCluster to MegCluster: Value Added Food to Market Hubs

Bevin Brooks, Owner, LionBerry (by Mama Pajama LLC); Jenny Doty, Food Business Resource Navigator, Community Food Systems Team, K-State Extension

We are a local elderberry growers co-op enrolled in the NAFSN (North American Food Systems Network) for ACRE (AgriCluster Resilience and Expansion) facilitation that will allow us to create goals, write grants, and build a shared hub for distribution, cold storage, and processing. We are a pilot study for Kansas and Kansas State University, for smaller growers to collaborate and share a hub for value added foods to get to local grocery store shelves. Farmer vertical integration is a priority.

Beyond the Aisles: Rural Groceries as Anchors of Health and Equity

Pam Gulleon, Megan Langley, Executive Director, StrengthenND, Nicole Benson, Chair, Cultivating Wellness Goal Group, Multi-Partner Health Collaborative

Rural communities face persistent challenges in food access, workforce shortages, and declining health outcomes. Once ranked the healthiest state in the nation, North Dakota has since fallen to 14th. The North Dakota Multi-Partner Health Collaborative (MPHC) is a statewide initiative designed to reverse this trend by advancing food access, promoting health equity, and strengthening local economies. This session will explore how rural grocery stores and food system partners can play a pivotal role in building stronger, healthier, and more resilient rural communities. Through innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and data-driven strategies, the MPHC is charting a path forward that can be replicated in rural regions across the country.

Bridging Access & Supply Through Nutrition Incentives & Local Procurement

Caitlin Stuart, Senior Program Manager, Double Up Food Bucks Colorado, Nourish Colorado; Meta Jo Riseling, Store Manager, Walsh Community Grocery

This session, co-presented by Caitlin Stuart of Nourish Colorado and Meta Jo Riseling of Walsh Community Grocery Store, highlights how Double Up Food Bucks and Local Procurement Colorado (LoProCO) came together to strengthen a community-owned grocery in one of Colorado’s most isolated towns on the far Eastern Plains. The partnership continues to expand affordable access to fresh produce while connecting the store to regional producers through value chain coordination and cross-collaboration with institutional procurement initiatives.

Bridging the Gap: Strengthening Support for North Dakota’s Small Farms through NDSU Extension

Julie Garden-Robinson, Professor and Food and Nutrition Specialist, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND

This poster shares how local food systems connect people, farms, grocers, and communities across North Dakota. It introduces North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension’s small farm resources—covering local foods, food entrepreneurship, local meats, nutrition, and food safety—and highlights a new tool that links you directly with NDSU Extension specialists and agents for hands-on guidance and support.

Connecting Farmers and Buyers to Grow the Organic Marketplace in Rural Communities

Bridget Gilmore, Market Development Manager, Rodale Institute

Rural grocery stores are essential community builders for food access and to promote healthier, regionally based organic food systems. The Markets team at Rodale Institute has partnered with the Organic Trade Association to grow the organic marketplace via TOPP. TOPP (Transition to Organic Partnership Program) is a network assembled by the USDA's National Organic Program to support existing US organic farmers grow and help conventional farmers transition to organic. Through this work, we are hosting in-person events in the form of Supplier/Buyer Discovery mixers or farm tours to facilitate connections between organic sellers and buyers and Market Development Workshops with subject matter experts focused on a specific market topic. These events are designed for organic farmers, those transitioning, and those who are curious about organic production, and organic buyers. We are also creating toolkits to equip farmers and buyers to better understand organic marketplace data.

Creating a partnership with WIC: Leverage your location to improve food access in your community

JoDell Geilmann-Parke, Utah WIC Vendor Manager, Utah Department of Health and Human Services - WIC

This presentation will focus on how rural retailers can better collaborate with WIC agencies to leverage their location to improve food access in their community. Rural retailers are an invaluable asset for WIC agencies. They provide access to healthy foods that improve the health and wellbeing of the women, infants and children who would not otherwise have access to healthy food in small communities. While WIC does have certain regulations that must be followed, accommodations can be made to partner with your store to find solutions that work for you. In this workshop you will learn what the WIC program provides for their clients, the financial value of being a WIC authorized retailer, and also inside tips for working with your state agency to advocate for your business and your customers.

Expanding Food Access: Partnering with Rural Grocers to Grow the Double Up Food Bucks Program

Joseph Ramirez, Grocery Retail Specialist, Sustainable Food Center

Learn how the Sustainable Food Center partners with rural grocery retailers to bring them into the Double Up Food Bucks Program. We'll share how we identify potential partners, build relationships, and support them in expanding access to SNAP incentive programs. This work highlights the vital role retailers play in helping communities access healthy, affordable, and nutritious foods.

Feasibility Study and Business Plan for a Grocery Store in Elmore, Alabama

Stacey Ingram, President, Southeast Research Inc; Jerry Ingram, President, Southeast Research Inc

The presentation will include discussing of charts and tables that represent each phase of the research supporting the conclusion that reestablishing a grocery store in the town of Elmore, Alabama was economically feasible.

Improving Healthy Food Access in Rural Food Retail Through the Food Retail Assessment (FRA) Tool

Jade Owen, Program Manager, Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust, Christi Erwin, Evaluation Research Project Manager, University of Oklahoma Health Campus

This poster highlights a statewide effort to improve healthy food access in rural grocery and convenience stores through use of the Food Retail Assessment (FRA) Tool. The FRA helps Oklahoma communities and retailers identify and implement evidence-based strategies to create store environments that promote healthy eating, contributing to reduced rates of obesity and chronic disease.