ALASKA | REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESS CENTER

AK Food Systems Analysis

Prepared by Kitchen Sync Strategies for the Alaska Food Policy Council

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USDA

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Alaska's Food System: An Introduction

Alaska is the largest of the 50 United States, and the least densely populated. The majority of its residents live in the urban areas of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau — small cities by the standards of most other states — but the majority of Alaska's small villages and communities are very remote and not connected to the road system, accessible only by small plane or boat. The vast expanse of coastline, dense forest, high mountain ranges, and tundra make for difficult conditions for industrial and commercial-scale agriculture in most parts of the state, and the numerous small, rural communities present logistical and supply chain challenges for today's import-reliant food system.

Alaska Natives have lived in this environment since time immemorial and have persevered through centuries of Western settlement and colonization, relocation, and forced assimilation in an environment harmed by extractive industries and a warming climate. These changes threaten important, long-time sources of food like salmon and wild game, and the traditional foodways that have sustained Alaska Native communities for generations.

Today, communities throughout the state are revitalizing their foodsheds and food economies with a mix of old and new practices. Indigenous methods of preserving and storing food, the adoption of newer technologies like controlled-environment agriculture (CEA), and the growth of vibrant direct-to-consumer markets and food hubs are all strategies for developing and strengthening Alaska's food system. This work is critical to improving residents' food security, helping to restore balance to the environment, and fostering a resilient local food economy.

As part of the Islands and Remote Areas Regional Food Business Center (RFBC), Alaska's RFBC will coordinate and direct funding and technical assistance to food and farm businesses and other Alaska food systems actors. The RFBC will focus on improving access to food system data and information about resources, technical assistance and capacity-building opportunities; strategically direct funding to Alaskan farm and food businesses (particularly those that have historically been underserved); and expand market opportunities for small and medium-scale producers, to help address the challenges and leverage the momentum in the state's food system as described below.

Food Systems Analysis

In the sections that follow, we synthesize many resources shared with us by our key partners in Alaska (including the Alaska Food Policy Council), as well as findings from key informant interviews we conducted as part of the baseline assessment. This Food Systems Review is intended to provide a fairly detailed consideration of the current conditions, challenges, and collaboration occurring in the core steps of the food cycle, from production to market access. For all subregions of the Islands and Remote Areas RFBC, these so-called Program Areas[1] serve as guideposts for understanding where each subregion can focus its research, the Business Builder awards, and Technical Assistance funds provided by this RFBC, and ultimately energy to improve the local and regional food economies in these places.

We review each Program Area in four parts. We briefly describe the current reality of the Program Area, providing a sense of the conditions and capacity. We then highlight some relevant businesses, organizations, networks, and other actors who are shaping the on-the-ground reality of Alaska's food system. We summarize key challenges and, lastly, underscore opportunities in each Program Area — these are some of the barriers and pieces of momentum the RFBC can address and leverage through its priorities and strategies. This is not intended to be an exhaustive or even holistic database of all actors, projects, or work unfolding; rather, it is intended to serve as a snapshot-in-time and evidence base for Alaska RFBC's key partners to share with collaborators. We hope it also illuminates the resilience, brilliance, and daily realities faced by the communities around Alaska for readers who may not be familiar with them.

PRODUCTION

Current Reality

Alaska's food production is relatively minimal compared to other states. It is often reported that an estimated 95% of the state's purchased food is imported by land, sea, or air. This figure is widely disputed due to the outdated research that informed it, and its failure to account for significant personal and subsistence harvests of fish, game, and wild plants that are an invaluable part of residents' diets and cultural identity of most Alaskans, especially Alaska Natives. Nevertheless, it is understood that the state is reliant on imports and not in-state production for the majority of the food its residents consume.

The state's geography and environment present challenges to large-scale, land-based agriculture, and increasing production is a significant hurdle given that reality and the high cost of necessary inputs for farming and other food production (utilities, fertilizer, equipment, animal feed, etc.). These challenges are mitigated in part by the strong presence of small-scale production and innovative models of season extension, as well as the deep foundation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) held by Alaska Native communities. The state also has a high rate of new and beginning farmers and producers (second

[1] Program Areas include: Production, Processing, Aggregation, Distribution, Access to Markets, and Access to Capital.

[2] 2022 Census of Agriculture Highlights https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2024/Census22_HL_Beginning.pdf

in the nation, per the most recent USDA Agriculture Census),[2] with more than one-third of the farms in Alaska operated by those who have been farming for 10 years or less. Plant and shellfish mariculture, fishing, and season-extending methods (especially high tunnels and greenhouses) represent other key strengths and areas of opportunity.

Examples of Relevant Actors and Networks

- Alaska's food production landscape includes numerous small-scale diversified crop farms. Nearly half of the farms captured in the most recent USDA Agriculture Census are <10 acres (500 of 1,173).
- One of the world's most advanced and productive fishing industries, especially for salmon, halibut, and crab. This sector includes large, consolidated corporations who have recently closed some operations in the state (e.g, Trident, Peter Pan) and many small-scale local fisheries who continue growing with sustainability at the heart of their businesses.
- A growing aquaculture or mariculture (e.g., oyster, seaweed, and kelp) sector, with recent private and government investments and a statewide task force with an established goal of developing the state's mariculture sector to a $100 million industry.
- There is limited commercial animal husbandry compared to other states, but Alaska is home to small-scale cattle ranchers as well as elk, bison, and reindeer production.
- Local and regional organizations that support farmers and food producers, like Sitka Local Foods Network, Alaska Village Initiatives, Kenai Local Food Connection, Alaska Farmland Trust, Alaska Farm Bureau, and Alaska Farmers Market Association and their emerging Beginning and Young Alaska Farmers chapter.
- The 229 federally-recognized Alaska Native Tribes, Tribal-serving organizations, and other collectives focused on issues of Indigenous food sovereignty (e.g., Inuit Circumpolar Council, Tanana Chiefs Conference).

Examples of Key Challenges in Food Production

- Limited topsoil, poor soil indexes, difficult weather and environment for land-based agriculture

The state's unique geography and climate, characterized by cold temperatures, very short growing seasons, frequent rain in the maritime climate areas, and permafrost in many other areas, make it difficult for farmers to cultivate many crops and maintain consistent yields. With a few notable exceptions (like the Mat-Su Valley), generally poor soil quality including limited topsoil further compounds these challenges, requiring farmers to invest in expensive soil amendments, fertilizers,

and/or innovative growing techniques to improve growing conditions (like soil warming equipment). Even small-scale production wouldn't be feasible in many places without the use of high tunnels, hoop houses, or greenhouses — all infrastructure that require additional expense and upkeep. This is evident in small farms across the state relying on these season-extending methods like the numerous farms in **Homer** and across the **Kenai Peninsula** (dubbed the high tunnel capital of the United States), **Orsi Organics** in Juneau, **Calypso Farm** outside Fairbanks and **Meyers Farm** in Bethel. While these structures make diversified fruit and veggie farming a possibility in places it otherwise would not be, changes to the USDA-NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) — which provided funds to purchase and install these materials — have contributed to increased costs of shipping and installation, meaning high tunnels may no longer be a simple solution for growers in the state.

▲ High start-up costs, and costs associated with sustainability or growth, including land, equipment and infrastructure, labor, and inputs like feed, fertilizer, and power/fuel, contribute to production constraints

Alaska's distance from the lower 48 and the state's limited suitable agricultural land (and pressure from developers for housing which contribute to high costs for raw land) as well as high electricity costs and limited access to skilled labor, make it difficult for existing producers to maintain profitability and scale their operations. Farming and food production have become increasingly expensive and are often seen as a risky investment given the economics of small-scale food. These challenges can deter entrepreneurs from starting farms or food businesses, and ultimately limit the potential growth of the agricultural sector in Alaska.

For existing farmers and food producers, these high costs of operations can lead to challenges to economic viability, increased financial risk, and difficulty in expanding their businesses to meet the demand for local food products. Successful small farms tend to build gradually, adding production capacity and improving operations over years or even decades. This requires long-term commitment by producers, sustained access to loans and grants, and the ability to withstand an uncertain financial future- all of which is challenged by Alaska's uniquely complex production environment. This all contributes to significant constraints on the overall productivity of the state's food system.

▲ Changing climate patterns threatening wild and subsistence foods

Subsistence foods are crucial for the food security and identity of many Alaskans, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities, and climate change poses an existential threat to the environment where these foods have sustained communities for millennia. Rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, and changes in sea ice and permafrost are altering the habitats and migration patterns of key subsistence species, making them less predictable and harder to access. For example, several factors including warming water have contributed to a **years-long decline in salmon population on the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers**, which has uniquely impacted Alaska Native communities in the region.

As subsistence harvests become more difficult and less predictable, entire communities may be forced to rely more heavily on imported and processed foods to feed themselves, often in areas of the state where options for quality, store-bought food are also extremely limited. This shift away from traditional foods is also likely to erode the intergenerational knowledge and practices associated with subsistence

harvesting, further undermining the resilience, health, and self-sufficiency of these communities in the face of a changing climate.

While there are considerable challenges to agriculture and food production in Alaska, there are also a number of assets, opportunities, and areas of momentum.

Opportunities and Bright Spots

- Growing interest in small-scale production, with a 54% increase in the number of farms between 2012 and 2022, and increased use of controlled-environment agriculture (CEA) like hydroponics, greenhouses, and high tunnels

These trends suggest that more Alaskans are engaging in agriculture and seeking innovative ways to overcome the state's unique production challenges. The increased number of small-scale producers not only contributes to the diversity and resilience of Alaska's food system but also stimulates local economic development and improved access to fresh produce. For example, **Anchorage Greens**, **Alaska Seeds of Change**, **CityFarms**, **BrightBox Farms**, and **Outpost Agriculture** are small hydroponics operations that opened in the last 10 years and bring lettuces, culinary herbs, and other greens to direct-to-consumer and wholesale markets. **Will Grow Farm** and **Twitter Creek Gardens** are two small-scale farms that have expanded their production over the last 15 years, selling in the town's farmers market, their local food hub (**Alaska Food Hub**), and through seasonal CSA boxes. These are just two examples of many such farms around the state.

Providing additional support and resources to new and established small-scale producers like these — including expanded access to training and technical assistance, financial assistance for start-up costs and infrastructure, and the development of robust networks for knowledge sharing and collaboration among producers — will help sustain this momentum, and help small-scale producers leverage new technology and equipment.

- Urban and rural community gardens and community-run farms

Local community gardens and community-run farms promote food security, resilience, and preservation of traditional agricultural practices. They are a source of fresh, local produce and can also act as educational and cultural hubs, fostering connection to both community and the environment. These community-based farms and gardens exist in the state's urban settings and remote villages, and are attuned to their area's growing conditions and local needs. For example, **Grow North Farm**, an urban farm with a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program and small food business incubator in Anchorage is run in partnership with a social services agency that supports new immigrants and refugees. **Gardens in the Arctic** in Anaktuvuk Pass is a social enterprise that sells produce from a small high tunnel garden and provides families with materials for backyard gardening. **Tyonek Community Garden** is a small-scale farm that provides free produce for Elders in the Native Village of Tyonek in addition to selling produce at local markets. Tribal and community-owned farms in the **Alutiiq Grown** collective also provide food to community members on Kodiak Island. These types of 'hyperlocal' gardens or farms might be associated with nonprofit organizations or other community-based initiatives, and their mission is often focused on supporting a particular population and improving community food security.

As Alaska continues to develop its local food system, supporting and expanding community-based agriculture projects can help ensure that the benefits of increased food production are shared more widely and contribute to the overall health and well-being of the state's diverse communities.

- Exponential increase in the number and size of new aquatic farm lease applications, especially for seaweed, driven by the Alaska Mariculture Task Force's comprehensive Mariculture Development Plan

The heightened interest and investment (public and private) in the state's mariculture sector has led to an exponential increase in both the number and size of new aquatic farm lease applications, particularly for seaweed cultivation. As of 2022, there were 78 permitted and operational aquatic farms and six mariculture hatcheries in the state, with more in development. The growing momentum in seaweed farming is driven by several factors, including the potential for fishermen to diversify their income by utilizing existing boats and gear to plant and harvest seaweed during the spring and fall seasons, as well as the increasing global demand for seaweed products in various industries, such as food, pharmaceuticals, and biofuels. However, even with these signs of growth, viable markets and demand for kelp products remain fairly limited, and fundamental challenges like the energy required to dry seaweed in such wet climates make it more difficult to scale the industry profitably.

PROCESSING

Current Reality

The state has limited capacity for processing both whole foods and value-added products. It has only one commercial dairy farm, three USDA-inspected slaughtering facilities, and there is a well-documented need for more dispersed, community-managed cold storage and value-added processing facilities to support smaller-scale producers, especially in remote communities. While the state's current cottage food regulations allow some flexibility for direct-to-consumer sales of certain categories of prepared foods, there is a growing demand for local value-added products and a need for more accessible processing equipment, shared used kitchens, and collaborative models to support smaller-scale producers and better utilize existing resources.

Examples of Relevant Actors and Networks

- Small-scale fish and meat processing facilities (e.g. Homer Fish Processing, Alaska Meat Company)
- USDA-certified slaughterhouses in Delta Junction, Palmer and North Pole, and mobile slaughter units currently active in Kodiak (for cattle) and Nome (for reindeer)

- University of Alaska Fairbanks — Cooperative Extension
- Small-scale farmers and producers who are interested in more accessible options to add value to their crops, for example, by processing whole/raw produce to meet the needs of institutional purchasers and creating prepared/packaged foods
- The state's food hubs (six active, and at least three in development) that could be home to shared processing equipment and facilities
- Alaska food businesses like Barnacle Foods, Alaska Chip Company, Bambino's Baby Food, Alaska Flour Company, Alaska Fermentation Company, among many others

Examples of Key Challenges in Food Processing

- Limited processing capacity and infrastructure for meat and seafood, and regulatory barriers associated with USDA inspections for meat and poultry processing

Demand for food processing in the state exceeds the current capacity and infrastructure: this includes value-added production, meat slaughter and butchering, and seafood processing. While there are some small-scale meat processing facilities (i.e. **Indian Valley Meats**, **Echo Lake Meats**, **McNeil Canyon Meats**, and **Delta Meat and Sausage**) these businesses process relatively low volumes of product at a high price compared to larger-scale, commercial processors.

Additionally, USDA requirements for meat and poultry processing present regulatory barriers and high costs, and Alaska does not have a state meat inspection program.[3] With additional capacity for meat processing (via mobile slaughter units or other new facilities throughout the state), more communities could access local proteins. A recent USDA grant program under the federal Build Back Better initiative seeks to address this with the **Indigenous Animals Grant**. Two Alaska Tribal Nations (**Alutiiq Tribe of Old Harbor** and the **Tribal Government of St. Paul Island**) were awarded funds in 2023 to develop their local processing capabilities for reindeer, wild game and/or fish, to improve food security and preserve traditional practices, while developing economic opportunities.

- Underdeveloped community-level cold storage and shared value-added processing facilities, especially in rural areas

Cold storage and ice production are important prerequisites for safe food processing (especially for seafood). Large businesses have access to commercial-scale processing equipment and cold storage, but there is a clear need, particularly in rural and Alaska Native communities, for more accessible, community-run cold storage and flake ice machines.

[3] 29 states, including places with similarly low population density to Alaska like Wyoming, do run state inspection programs.

Promising storage options include freezers and refrigerators that require electric or other fuel/power sources, and root and ice cellars (the most common approach in remote areas and in Alaska Native communities utilizing traditional methods of food preservation). However, changing climate patterns are impacting permafrost and ice conditions, threatening these methods, particularly in the North Slope.[4]

Additional freezer capacity, processing equipment, and commercial kitchen space that is accessible for both community harvests and locally-owned small-scale businesses would increase community food security and provide additional products for the local market. For example, more spaces like the rentable **Anchorage Commercial Kitchen** could allow entrepreneurs to develop new food products made with local ingredients without needing the capital to launch their own facility. While there are many examples of small businesses making products from Alaska Grown and harvested produce, seaweed/kelp, and salmon and other fish, the landscape is still relatively small with high price point products.

Lack of USDA commercial dairy processing facilities

The story of the dairy industry in Alaska illustrates the importance of developing appropriately scaled *systems* alongside farm and food businesses. The number of dairy farms in the state has dwindled over the last century, with a notable loss of a 3-generation dairy in Palmer in late 2021. Currently, there is just one USDA-certified cow dairy in Delta Junction, and one goat dairy in Kodiak. While there are numerous factors that influence the sustainability of an agricultural business like a dairy farm, the implications of regulatory requirements can make it particularly difficult for small-scale operations to maintain, even when there is a market demand for something like locally-produced milk. Much of the difficulty lies in the challenges of requiring expensive processing facilities that dairy products require.

Certified dairy processing facilities are key for small dairy producers to do things like sample and test fluid milk, and they are a necessary piece of any local dairy value chain. The lack of this type of infrastructure in the state, and the challenges of applying one-size-fits-all food safety regulations to all dairy producers or processors (versus appropriately fitting regulations to the size/scale of the business), is part of the larger context of limited processing capacity that impacts all farmers and food producers here, and especially those that operate on a smaller scale. Balancing food safety and regulatory oversight with the realities of operating a small agriculture business is a complex and significant part of strengthening this component of Alaska's food system.

[4] Villages like Nuisqut and Kaktovik have experienced changes to the once consistent permafrost levels, threatening those communities' ability to safely store seal and game meat in traditional ways.

Opportunities and Bright Spots

▲ Growing interest and investment in the mariculture sector, with efforts to create processing facilities and explore new technologies.

There is a growing plant mariculture industry in the state, and several innovators and private/public partnerships are researching and investing in the processing and marketing of local seaweed and kelp. Existing businesses and facilities like **Blue Evolution** (in Kodiak, with another site in Mexico), and cross-sector collaborations like the **Alaska Mariculture Cluster** (which brings together federal Build Back Better Regional Challenge funds and other funding streams to invest in workforce, research, processing technology and infrastructure, and market development) show how this sector is experiencing significant growth in recent years.

Currently, most mariculture producers are low-volume and oriented to specialty (often high price point) markets, and products for sale out-of-state require FDA approval creating challenges for these businesses' growth. **Barnacle Foods** is an example of a business that has navigated these challenges successfully, selling kelp-based value-added products like spices and hot sauce across the United States. The growth of this industry is an example of how targeted investment across government and private sectors can yield new techniques, products and expand markets.

▲ Expansion of cottage food regulations allowing for increased entrepreneurship and value-added product development — and scaling availability of local, processed products

For many, food processing starts as a hobby and develops into a cottage industry: selling low-risk food products like jams, ferments, or baked goods at local markets allows food business owners to refine their production processes and increase their scale without needing to sustain themselves 100% on their food business revenue. The state's cottage food laws currently allow direct sales to consumers of non-temperature controlled baked goods, jams, jellies, and pickles produced in home kitchens, but there is a $25,000 annual sales limit before a producer must upgrade to a commercial facility. Beyond this scale of production, additional safety regulations for items that require temperature control also create some barriers for these entrepreneurs to scale beyond their home kitchens.

Policy changes like increasing this annual sales limit, increasing access to certified shared-use kitchens and batch processing equipment, and training and education for cottage food operators on topics like marketing and food safety are all opportunities to support new and existing micro-businesses and increase the availability of local value-added products in the state. For example, **Evie's Brinery**, a fermented foods business, used the cottage food exemption to launch but quickly reached the $25,000 sales cap that requires a permit from the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) which involved annual fees and more stringent regulatory requirements and inspections.

Importantly, while many cottage food producers prefer not to scale their micro-business, regulatory changes and technical assistance would help those who do want to expand do so efficiently. In spring 2024, **House Bill 251** passed and is slated to go into effect in July, pending action from the Governor. The bill further reduces statutory restrictions on cottage food production and sales in the state.

▲ Collaboration among organizations and agencies to support food processing and storage infrastructure development

Networking and collaboration across sectors and areas of the state are critical to continue developing Alaska's food processing industries. Since food processing can require a range of expertise and technical know-how (based on the product category of what is being processed, regulatory bodies, and seasonality), strong partnerships across multiple industries and geographies are important for the development of this area of the state's food system. As such, organizations and food system actors like state agencies, Tribes, universities, Cooperative Extension services, private businesses, and nonprofits can coordinate to play in improving food processing infrastructure statewide.

For example, the **Alaska Food Policy Council** is well-positioned to gather information about available facilities and processing equipment, facilitate access for small-scale producers and food business, coordinate relevant technical assistance, and potentially pool resources for shared equipment. Similarly, there is an emerging vision for a **food hub in Fairbanks** that includes shared processing equipment and DEC-certified kitchen, with support from local government, farmers, community-based groups, and other private and public funding sources.

AGGREGATION & DISTRIBUTION

Current Reality

In Alaska, creating points to aggregate and store food, as well as reliable, affordable, and efficient distribution networks is essential for ensuring food access due to the state's vast size and numerous remote and dispersed communities. While large-scale entities like wholesale food distributors and nonprofits focused on emergency food assistance have traditionally provided this service by importing and warehousing large volumes of food, opportunities exist to support alternatives like root or ice cellars, less expensive options for cold storage space (e.g., Coolbots), as well as develop community food access points.

More than 80% of the state's small villages and communities are off the road system: consequently, barges, ferries, small boats, small/bush planes, and even snow machines are involved in moving food around the state. This contributes to the high cost and limited access to food in Alaska's most remote areas. While larger businesses have some advantages in distribution such as centralized temperature-controlled distribution center warehouses, small local producers often face barriers in accessing enough storage and temperature-controlled transportation. This creates opportunities for community-level food aggregators like food hubs to gather improved food systems data to support a distribution network that better serves these producers and rural communities, as well as retailers and restaurants who want to source more local food.

Indeed, food hubs have emerged as key players in aggregating food from small- to mid-scale producers across the state. There are six active hubs and at least three more in planning stages as of Spring 2024, and these hubs are collaborating through the **Alaska Food Hub Working Group** to share knowledge and develop plans for improving and expanding this kind of capacity in the state.

While food hubs are likely the most visible and organized community-based aggregators of food from small and mid-sized producers, aggregation is also happening at some production sites. For example, Twitter Creek Gardens, a 5-acre farm outside Homer, purchases some product from other farms to include in their CSA boxes, and could aggregate more variety from other small farms with additional storage capacity. On the other end of the spectrum, larger scale, conventional aggregators and distributors like Charlie's Produce, Sysco, Costco, Country Foods, and others continue to warehouse and distribute imported goods to population centers statewide.

Examples of Relevant Actors and Networks

- Retail chains and their networks and infrastructure: Safeway, Fred Meyer, Costco, Alaska Commercial Company, Three Bears
- Food Bank of Alaska, and other food banks and pantries
- Food hubs (more detail below)
- Tribal food caches and other communal food storage and distribution practices
- Alaska Marine Highway System, small/private ferry and boat services, regional airlines and bush planes
- Bypass Mail system (USPS program that allows shipments to bypass a post office and go straight to carriers who distribute to remote locations, often by bush plane, and is less expensive than private freight alternatives)
- Non-traditional aggregation points could include community institutions like K–12 schools and local food banks (who often have the added benefits of being able to process food they aggregate), and these non-traditional aggregators could play a central role in helping distribute local food to broader swaths of their communities

ALASKA'S FOOD HUBS

NAME	LOCATION	HIGHLIGHT OF UNIQUE ASSETS	EXAMPLE PRODUCTS
Alaska Food Hub	Homer, Seldovia, Ninilchik, Soldotna, Anchor Point	Serves Seldovia — not accessible by road, operates in shared space with food pantry and free community fridge	Oysters, rabbit, pork, fermented products, seed potatoes
Arctic Harvest	Anchorage, Mat-Su Valley	Delivers to wholesale and retail/individual customers	Beef, eggs, value-added products, range of produce
Catch 49	Anchorage, Fairbanks	Buys seafood directly from fishers and local processors	Frozen seafood
Kodiak Archipelago Leadership Institute/ Qik'rtaq Food Hub	Kodiak Archipelago	Deep connection to rural and Alaska Native communities — sources from tribal and community-owned farms in Kodiak	Hydroponic greens (leafy greens, herbs), potatoes, other vegetable crops
Kodiak Harvest Co-op	Kodiak	Strong community presence and offers more organic than chain grocery	Salmon
Salt and Soil Marketplace	Juneau	Social enterprise (nonprofit and for-profit capacities) that is adaptable and flexible	Salmon, cod, shrimp, hydroponic greens, baked goods, seasonal produce, jams, hot sauces, kelp salsa, pickles

*As of spring 2024, there are emerging efforts to develop food hubs in three other parts of the state — **Ketchikan**, **Fairbanks**, and **Haines/Lynn Canal**. Community groups, farmers and producers, entrepreneurs, and other food systems actors in each region are assessing how a food hub could best support their communities' unique needs in the areas of aggregation, processing, distribution, marketing/sales, and other potential food hub roles. The community organizations leading these planning efforts are now part of the Alaska Food Hub Network.*

Key Challenges in Aggregation and Distribution

Difficulty accessing product from small and mid-sized farmers and food producers

The challenges in production and processing (due to Alaska's difficult climate, limited access to land, expensive inputs, the lack of processing equipment and cold storage, and limited opportunities for developing the state's food production and processing workforce) hampers how aggregators like food hubs can develop markets for local foods. In a recent report on Alaska's food hub network, most of the organizations interviewed expressed that there was more demand than supply for local products.[5] Hubs noted that the upstream challenges of increasing production and processing discussed previously were specific barriers to scaling their aggregation and market development.

Unpredictable and/or insufficient funding sources

Aggregators who support small-scale producers need access to capital to improve and expand their facilities and services, but funding from government and philanthropic sources is often unreliable or insufficient. Alaska's food hubs have typically relied on federal grants to launch and develop, but struggle to find additional support in the intervening years before becoming financially self-sustaining. Options for additional funding are limited, and what is available to food hubs can depend on the business/legal structure of the organization. For example, **Arctic Harvest** is a for-profit business, while the **Alaska Food Hub** is a program housed at a regional non-profit focused on watershed protection (Cook Inletkeeper), and this has implications for the types of capital or funding each business can access.

The state's size, terrain, extreme weather, and limited infrastructure creates inconsistent food distribution, especially in rural areas off the road system

These factors make it difficult for farmers and food producers to reliably get their products to markets, leading to food waste, lost income, and limitations on how and where they can scale. Retailers and consumers, particularly in remote communities, face unpredictable access to fresh, quality food and higher prices due to the added costs and risks of transportation in the state. For example, food may sit on bush planes for days or weeks before conditions allow for local last mile distribution to communities. The lack of reliable and affordable food distribution infrastructure also limits options of which markets can be served, as small or new farm and food businesses rarely have the transportation and storage infrastructure needed to cover vast geographic spreads.

Farragut Farm in remote southeast Alaska provides an example of the effort and resourcefulness required to transport food to markets in the state. The farm is located in a bay, 35 miles by boat from the closest town (Petersburg, population less than 4,000 people) and is productive enough to sustain the farm owners and seasonal team, as well as supply the Petersburg farmers market. To transport produce to Petersburg, the farm utilizes a small skiff (to travel the slough out to the bay) and then a larger sailboat on a five-hour journey that must be timed around the tides. While the owners have successfully managed this for more than 10 years, it illustrates the added complexity of transportation and distribution in Alaska, on top of the difficult growing conditions.

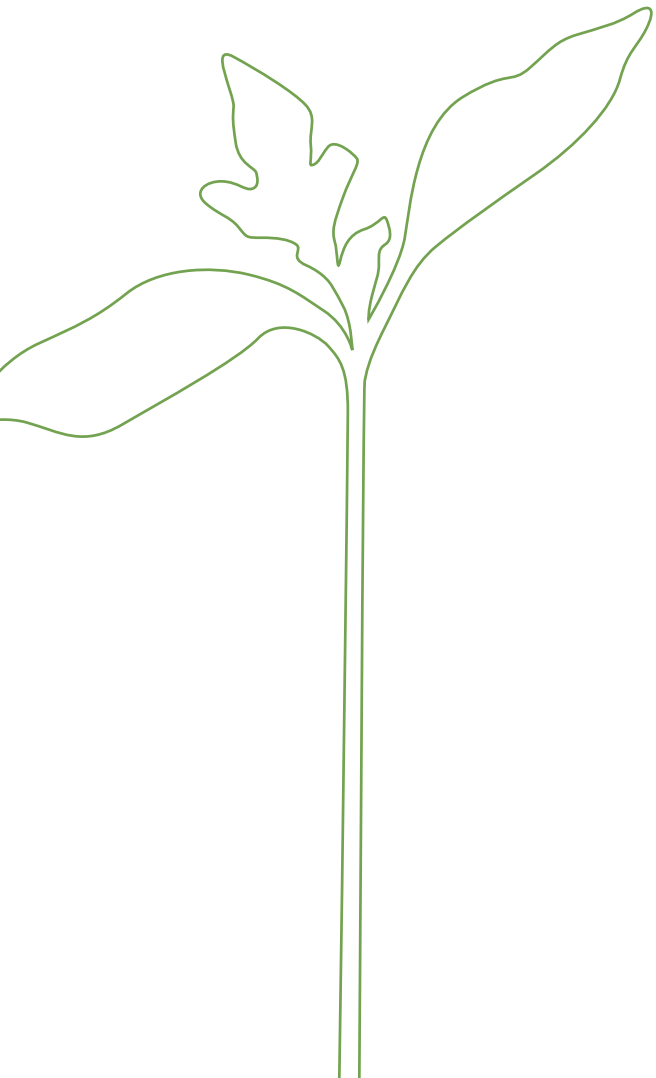
[5] How the Alaska Food Hub Network Can Best Move Forward, 2024 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/584221c6725e25d0d2a19363/t/6609cf144c719a6d74bd8287/1711918934904/AFPC+Food+Hub+Network+Report+-+FINAL.pdf

▲ Inconsistent funding for the state ferry system, airline bankruptcies, and climate-related disruptions leading to distribution uncertainties.

The **Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS)** is a critical transportation link for many coastal communities, but budget cuts and reduced schedules have made it harder for businesses to ship goods and for residents to access affordable, reliable transportation. The system is a network of car-bearing ferries that travel the Aleutians, the Kenai Peninsula, Southeast Alaska and beyond. Coastal Alaska communities have felt this acutely, as producers, businesses and consumers who previously relied on the state's ferries for food distribution have had to adapt using more expensive, less consistent and less efficient transportation options.

Similarly, the **bankruptcy of RavnAir in 2020** highlighted the vulnerability of air cargo services that many rural communities rely on for food deliveries (the airline has since been acquired by another company, but now runs fewer routes and service is more expensive). Climate change-related hazards, such as wildfires, thawing permafrost, and extreme weather events, are also increasingly disrupting road networks, further compounding food distribution challenges.

These uncertainties make it riskier and more expensive for farm and food businesses to invest in aggregation and distribution infrastructure. Without this investment, small and mid-sized producers struggle to access new markets, aggregators like food hubs struggle to source more local products from these producers, and consumers wind up paying higher costs for food, particularly in underserved and rural areas.



Opportunities and Bright Spots

Development of food hubs, as well as strengthening the network of food hubs around the state

Food hubs, mostly located in southeast and south central Alaska, have already significantly increased the state's capacity to aggregate from small and mid-sized growers, and even backyard gardeners and cottage food businesses, supplying fresh produce and Alaska-made food items to more than 2,000 customers around the state.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent supply chain disruptions have highlighted the need for models like these to coordinate food access and support the local food economy in ways that large traditional distributors do not. For example, the **Alaska Food Hub**, operating on the Kenai Peninsula, reported a huge increase in purchases and vendor participation between 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic laid bare the consequences of Alaska's reliance on imported food. As noted above, the **Ketchikan Agricultural Producers Association (KAPA)**, **Four Winds Resource Center** (Haines) and a group in Fairbanks are all exploring the development of food hub models in their region.

The growth and momentum of individual food hubs and the development of a statewide network of food hubs represent promising opportunities for Alaska's food system. Representatives from the state's food hubs have been collaborating as part of the Alaska Food Policy Council's **Alaska Food Hub Working Group** since early 2023 to share knowledge and develop plans for continuing to improve and expand food hub capacity in the state. This collaboration has the potential to build a stronger, more resilient peer learning network that can better serve the needs of producers and consumers alike. By focusing on expanding their own base of support and delivering food to local customers while also exploring opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing, Alaska's food hubs can play a vital role in creating a more sustainable and equitable food system for the state.

Protecting and adapting traditional community food aggregation in Alaska Native and rural communities

Sharing subsistence food harvests across households in Alaska Native communities is a highly valued practice that has sustained Indigenous communities for generations. These food sharing networks and practice of cooperative hunting or fishing, processing, and storing food for the benefit of all community members continues today, even as residents also engage in the cash economy and acquire food from other sources. For example, **caribou hunters in the Interior community of Venetie** butcher, preserve, and store harvests to share with elders and others who cannot hunt for themselves, typically based on factors of kinship/familial relationships, reciprocity, and need. The **Kenaitze Tribe's food cache** is stocked by tribal fish catches and other food provided by members of the community.

There is opportunity to maintain and expand these practices, especially given the threat of climate change. This could include recognizing and funding community-based efforts to construct or improve traditional food storage infrastructure like ice cellars (sisigluaqs), as well as investing in other climate-controlled storage options, smokehouses, and processing equipment in villages. For example, the emerging **Smokehouse Collective**, a mutual aid and Indigenous food security and sovereignty network

[6] The vendors that food hubs source from change seasonally and year over year, but based on estimates from the 2024 food hub network report, food hubs have worked with more than 70 Alaska growers and 30 seafood providers. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58422 1c6725e25d-0d2a19363/t/6609cf144c719a6d74bd8287/1711918934904/AFPC+Food+Hub+Network+Report+-+FINAL.pdf

founded by two Alaska Native women, aims to revitalize and nurture Indigenous food preservation and food sharing practices. The collective has purchased a mobile fish processing unit, and plans to build a smokehouse near Dillingham and expand their cross-regional networks to aggregate and distribute traditional foods like salmon, berries, and game meat to Native communities around the state.[7]

Traditional harvesting and preservation practices, especially those that distribute wild foods to elders and others who cannot harvest for themselves, could be better represented in federal or state agriculture programming or funding priorities — a recent example is the **Division of Agriculture's Micro Grants for Food Security Program**, which included funding for these types of subsistence activities. Investments in transportation and distribution infrastructure, like refrigerated vehicles and staging areas, could improve the reach and reliability of this wild foods and subsistence harvest sharing.

▲ Cross-sector partnerships such as the collaboration between Meyers Farm, Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, and the Food Bank of Alaska, to address transportation costs

The **Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation** (YKHC) and the **Food Bank of Alaska** partnered with **Meyers Farm**, a small-scale farm in Bethel, to address the high cost of shipping food to rural communities in the Y-K Delta region. YKHC initially ran a 6-month pilot in 2018–2019 to provide Meyers Farm produce boxes at no cost to patients in the YKHC diabetes program. Later, the health organization and the Food Bank of Alaska continued to subsidize shipping costs as well as a portion of the cost of the produce boxes themselves so that village households could access fresh, local food for less than $20/box. Without this financial support, the actual cost would be more than double that price. Replicating collaboration like this will help to make locally grown, healthy food more accessible and affordable.

ACCESS TO MARKETS

Current Reality

Small-scale farm and food businesses in Alaska have reliable access to direct-to-consumer sales through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Community Supported Fisheries (CSF) programs and farmers markets, all of which have increased over the past 15 years and continue to provide some of the highest economic returns to farmers and producers. About 20% of farms in the state sell directly to consumers, and Alaska ranks 9th in the country in the percent of agriculture sales that remain in local markets, according to the 2022 USDA Agriculture Census.[8,9] These two metrics highlight the support for local producers across the State in a mix of market channels.

Wholesale market channels, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and institutions are also developing steadily, with food hubs and distributors acting as intermediaries. The recent Agriculture Census shows

[7] An Alaska Native mutual aid network tackles the climate crisis (High Country News, 2024) https://www.hcn.org/issues/56-1/food-an-alaska-native-mutual-aid-network-tackles-the-climate-crisis/

[8] 2022 Census of Agriculture, Alaska profile https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Alaska/cp99002.pdf

[9] Based on 2022 NASS reporting of total commodity sales to local markets, which includes D2C and wholesale channels

an increase in farms selling to retail markets, institutional buyers and food hubs; from 83 farms selling $3.5 million in product to such markets in 2017, to 99 farms selling $6.7 million in product in 2022.[10] Programs like the **Alaska Product Preference Program** have the potential to support smaller-scale producers to meet the needs of these larger markets, though many small-scale producers would benefit from additional support in breaking into these new markets and scaling their supply and infrastructure.

The **Alaska Local Food Purchase Program (ALFPP)** has likewise created some new opportunities for smaller producers, farmers markets, and food hubs since 2022, though this program is currently one-time funding via a USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA), and expires in mid-2025.

Examples of Relevant Actors and Networks

- **FARMERS MARKETS:** There are 64 seasonal farmers markets in communities around the state, from the 50-year-old Tanana Valley Farmers Market in Fairbanks to the Kodiak Farmers Market on Kodiak Island, providing some of the best returns for farmers and producers as they can sell directly to consumers. The Alaska Farmers Market Association estimates that markets generate around $7 million in sales annually.

- **COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE MODELS:** many farms operate CSAs, where customers pay up front for a regular supply of produce and other products. CSAs allow farmers to secure revenue ahead of the growing season, but require infrastructure for storage and distribution, and a customer base with the financial means to pay in full in advance. There are also fisheries with CSA models, though unlike farm CSAs, many generate meaningful revenue from CSA sales to consumers and restaurants in the lower 48, rather than in Alaska.

- **FOOD HUBS:** As discussed in the aggregation section, food hubs are another direct-to-consumer sales channel for producers. While Alaska's food hub models and operations vary, they often utilize online platforms and provide another option for consumers to access local food from a variety of producers in one marketplace. Food hubs may also facilitate sales to larger buyers, like restaurants.

- **INSTITUTIONAL PURCHASING:** The landscape for institutional purchasing in the state is currently quite limited. School districts are an important potential buyer, and programs like USDA's Local Food for Schools (LFS) have provided funding to the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development to procure local foods for school breakfast and lunch programs. The largest district in the state, Anchorage School District, was recently awarded funding to increase local food purchasing including local seafood, for its school meal program.

- **WHOLESALE AND RETAIL OPTIONS:** While the majority of wholesalers that service large grocery chains, food service, and hospitality buyers source foods imported from the lower 48 and elsewhere, some grocery stores, like Three Bears, Alaska Commercial Company, and Save U More stores, and even national chains like Safeway, source some local product.

[10] 2022 Census of Agriculture, Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Alaska/st02_1_002_002.pdf

Key Challenges to Accessing Markets

Inconsistent funding and support for programs that incentivize local food procurement by institutions and restaurants.

When funding is unreliable or incentive program requirements too complex, it can be difficult for institutions and restaurants to make long-term commitments to sourcing local foods, especially from small and mid-sized farm and food businesses. This uncertainty makes it harder for food producers to plan production, invest in infrastructure, and establish stable market relationships. This poses a classic "chicken or the egg" dilemma — producers cannot scale their production without commitments from wholesale purchasers, and these purchasers cannot commit until the producers can guarantee their production has scaled. Tailoring and improving implementation of incentive programs like the Alaska Product Preference Program will create the support system needed for both producers and purchasers to de-risk their commitments, while also increasing access to fresh, high-quality local products for consumers and businesses across the state.

Food security challenges and high poverty levels, with an estimated 1-in-8 Alaskans struggling with hunger and relying on food assistance programs.

For farmers and food producers, food insecurity can limit the potential customer base for locally grown and produced foods, as many Alaskans may not have the financial means to purchase these often higher-priced items. About 10% of Alaska residents live below the poverty line according to recent US Census data, but that percentage varies significantly around the state — for example, more than 20% of Alaskans in the Nome area live below the poverty threshold compared to about 6% of the Valdez-Cordova census area.[11] Businesses such as grocery stores and restaurants in places with lower average income and/or high food insecurity rates may face challenges in maintaining profitability and implementing local sourcing programs. This can lead to a vicious cycle, where businesses struggle to stay afloat, leading to reduced access to food options in communities that are already underserved. Food hubs, and other direct-to-consumer markets and food system advocates, are working to increase access to online marketplaces of local foods for lower-income Alaskans, for example, by advocating for the ability of food hubs to accept SNAP/EBT for eligible items. Food hubs who have sought certification to accept SNAP benefits have been denied because they did not meet federal Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) eligibility criteria (specifically consistent inventory of required product categories). Alaskan consumers can use SNAP benefits at some farmers markets in the state, though barriers like the technology for accepting EBT cards as a form of payment, and training for vendors on eligible purchases, have prevented more markets from accepting SNAP — something the Alaska Farmers Market Association is working to address.

Retail and restaurant markets need more consistent supply and larger orders than small farmers and producers can provide

[11] NIH HD Pulse - Persons below poverty https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov/data-portal/social/table?socialtopic=080&socialtopic_options=social_6&demo=00008&demo_options=poverty_3&race=00&race_options=race_7&sex=0&sex_options=sex_3&age=001&age_options=ageall_1&statefips=02&statefips_options=area_states

Small-scale producers often struggle to meet the demands of larger buyers due to limited production capacity and the logistical challenges of storing, processing, and distributing products across the state. This mismatch in supply and demand can make it difficult for small farmers and producers to access these markets, limiting their ability to grow their businesses and reach new customers, and subsequently limiting the variety and availability of locally-sourced products for consumers. For example, chefs and buyers from several dozen restaurants, stores and institutions in Homer were interviewed by Homer Soil & Water Conservation District in 2018 and reported mixed experiences trying to source local foods due to inconsistent availability, lack of information, and inconvenient or inefficient ordering systems. While nearly all businesses interviewed reported buying at least some local products, the majority still sourced less than 25% locally, even in summer, and had unmet demand for products like meat and dairy in addition to more commonly available local greens.

Addressing this challenge will require innovative solutions, such as scaling or expanding the presence of food hubs or cooperative marketing structures in the state, providing technical assistance to help producers scale, and supporting the expansion of key value chain coordination roles like market matchmaking to better connect producers and potential buyers.

Opportunities and Bright Spots

Direct-to-consumer (D2C) sales channels like farmers markets, CSAs, and farm stands

The number of farmers markets in Alaska more than quadrupled in the last two decades, from 13 in 2005 to more than 60 today. These channels allow producers to capture higher retail margins and build relationships with customers, and can be tailored to the circumstances and needs of local communities. Additionally, online D2C marketplaces create even more access for these producers. The 20-acre farm **Arctic Organics**, near Palmer, sells at local farmers markets and maintains a farm stand and an online store, and shifted to a "CSA card" model of their CSA program instead of a typical box. Customers purchase a pre-loaded card at the start of the season, which can be used at any of the farm's sales outlets. This is a creative marketing approach that gives producers the assurances to support and scale their business while also giving consumers more options to access their products.

Growing interest in and support for food hubs as market matchmakers

While food hubs in the state have been primarily focused on D2C sales, there is potential for expanding their role to include more connection to wholesale, food service and institutional markets. Given their size and infrastructure, **Arctic Harvest** is able to sell a higher volume to buyers like these, with the opportunity to expand to serve larger public markets like K–12 school districts additionally. Each community's food hub is focused on best serving their local producers and markets' needs and growing in sustainable, measured ways (not to mention maintaining current operations), and with continued support and collaboration of the emerging Food Hub Working Group, some hubs will likely develop more market matchmaking capacity in the future.

▲ Wholesale retail markets like grocery stores and institutions present opportunities for producers to access larger, more stable markets

While grocers and other food outlets overwhelmingly source food from outside Alaska given the numerous production constraints and logistical challenges noted above, there are many retail outlets — especially smaller and locally-owned ones- that source some or most of their product from Alaska producers. Three examples are the **Kodiak Harvest Food Co-Op** (which opened its brick and mortar store in 2022), **Roaming Root** in Fairbanks, **Blue Market** in Anchorage, and **Rainbow Foods** in Juneau. Supporting more of these grocery stores and expanding to partner with larger retailers will provide new, steady market opportunities for producers and intermediaries like food hubs.

Institutions like schools, prisons, and healthcare entities also represent new marketplaces for Alaska's food producers that are, by and large, undeveloped. The state had a three-year initiative called Nutritional Alaskan Foods in Schools that faced challenges in adequate supply of fresh, local food, but this initiative hasn't been funded since FY 2015. Recent federal programs from USDA-FNS like Supply Chain Assistance Funds and Local Food for Schools have reinvigorated the farm-to-school potential in the state, but their implementation has not benefited many small-scale producers. There are informational resources and procurement guides available for schools and other organizations, and the Alaska Product Preference Program allows for institutions to award slightly more expensive bids from local vendors, but generally school districts and other institutional buyers, with limited budgets, have been a difficult market for small and mid-sized farm and food businesses to serve.

Recently, **Anchorage School District** (ASD) received significant funding and dedicated support through the **PLANTS Grant** (a USDA-FNS funded program) to expand their local procurement and scratch cooking. This represents an opportunity for the rest of the state as its largest school district deepens its commitment to local suppliers.

CAPITAL ACCESS

Current Reality

While grants and other types of funding are available through the USDA and other federal and state entities, stakeholders across Alaska have identified the need for technical support to access these opportunities and the need for additional opportunities that are more accessible to small, underserved farm and food businesses. One key gap they have identified is the need to centralize data and technical information to support farmers and food systems actors in accessing funding best matched to their circumstances and activities. To develop the capacity needed to meet larger market opportunities noted above, small-scale producers and the markets they serve generally require no-cost loans, working capital, and/or grant funding, as opposed to traditional debt- or equity-based financing.

Examples of Relevant Actors and Networks

USDA PROGRAMS

- Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS)
- Farm Service Agency (FSA
- Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)
- Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE)

DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE

- Resilient Food Infrastructure Program
- Specialty Crop Block Grants
- Local Food Purchasing Agreement
- Agricultural Revolving Loan Program

OTHER

- Agwest Farm Credit
- Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (ARRC)
- First Financial Bank

Examples of Key Challenges

▲ High cost of inputs and other challenges related to Alaska's location and environment

The challenges related to production, food processing infrastructure and the implications of Alaska's remote location compared to the contiguous states carry through to the funding landscape and cannot be overstated. Land, equipment, construction and utilities are more expensive or limited than many other states, meaning the support available through existing grant programs often doesn't go as far as it would in a place with lower input costs. For example, while numerous small-scale farmers have utilized EQIP for high tunnels, the amount of funding and stipulations of the program have changed over the years, making it a less functional option for Alaskan farmers.

Opportunities and Bright Spots

▲ Targeting funding to small-scale producers and businesses, and areas of the food system that have historically been overlooked

This RFBC is an opportunity to target support to new/beginning farmers and entrepreneurs and those who have generally been underserved by existing funding, and invest in sectors that do not have other significant sources of support and interest from public or private sources.

▲ Technical assistance and training, and easier to access food systems data and information about funding opportunities

There is a need for training and TA on topics like grant writing, business planning and management, and other topics related to capital and finance, to build capacity of the state's food system actors to successfully attract additional funding and maintain or grow their businesses. In addition to the technical assistance itself, the system would benefit from more accessible and accurate data (to guide decision making and utilize in funding applications), and a centralized location to find funding opportunities that meet the needs of the diverse nonprofit and for-profit entities that are part of Alaska's food system.

RFBC Priorities for Alaska

The RFBC program is designed to support the "middle" of the value chain in local and regional food systems. This means it focuses not on production (the "beginning" of the chain) or consumption (the "end" of it), but on improving or expanding infrastructure for processing, aggregation and distribution, supporting small and medium-scale farmers and food producers in connecting to new markets, and providing technical assistance and training opportunities, particularly for historically underserved and marginalized food and farm businesses. This is especially meaningful for the Islands and Remote Areas RFBC, whose states and territories face unique challenges given their geographic isolation, challenging logistics, underdeveloped infrastructure, and the profound impacts of colonialism, extractive industries and climate change.

The Centers will coordinate across regions with USDA and other agencies and regional food system stakeholders, identify technical assistance needs for their region and provide TA, and build capacity of their region's food and farm businesses by directing financial assistance in the form of business builder subawards. Through these activities, the Alaska subregion and the Islands and Remote Areas RFBC will build more diversified, resilient, and localized food systems.

SUMMARY OF PRIORITIES

Given the challenges and opportunities in each Program Area, the Alaska RFBC intends to focus on the following priorities and strategies:

- **Gather and organize food systems data and information about funding, training, events and other opportunities.**

  Food systems data (for use in production planning, business planning, etc.) and information about resources and opportunities exist across many partners and stakeholders in the state. Collecting and aggregating this data might involve researchers and universities, Cooperative Extension, State of Alaska agencies, Tribes, and other support organizations.

  Improved data quality and accessibility is important for decision making, policy advocacy, accessing funding opportunities, and measuring the impact of these investments and system changes — which can address the challenges seen across the value chain from production to accessing new markets. And having a centralized place for resources and support lowers the barrier to entry for the state's small-scale producers and small businesses, and fosters more statewide networking and connections.

- **Accelerate the development of food hubs and other aggregation and distribution improvements.**

  The state's existing network of food hubs and other partners working on aggregation and distribution in their communities are well-positioned to understand their local technical assistance, infrastructure/equipment, and market development needs.

Strengthening the aggregation and market matchmaking capacity of food hubs or other aggregators, and creating opportunities for sharing best practices and other collective action like fundraising, bulk purchases of materials, and coordinating trading across hubs, can improve conditions for both producers and the potential consumers.

- **Provide technical assistance opportunities that support business planning and operations, marketing, access to funding, and other priority topics.**

  Identifying technical assistance needs and connecting food systems actors to providers and opportunities is a core responsibility of the RFBC. Existing TA opportunities are often underutilized, in part because the intended audience may not be aware of what is available, or have difficulty fitting these opportunities in among the demands of running a farm or food businesses. There is room to build capacity of the state's producers, business owners, and other stakeholders to provide quality TA to their peers, as well as coordinate with federal agencies and national organizations to better connect Alaska's food producers and entrepreneurs with resources and opportunities that make sense for the state's unique conditions.

  Relevant, targeted technical assistance, training and other support (for example, financial literacy, marketing, grant writing, and food safety) can make Alaskan farmers and producers more competitive when seeking funding and capital, improve businesses' ability to launch and scale, and ultimately strengthen the local food economy.

- **Increase shared use/community-run processing capacity.**

  Increasing accessible processing equipment and infrastructure around the state, like commercial kitchens, mobile processing units, and community cold storage can benefit farmers, seafood harvesters, and entrepreneurs, as well as people living in Alaska's more remote communities. Food hubs (existing hubs and those in development), University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension, Tribal organizations, and local food-focused nonprofits and coalitions or networks could be key partners in developing and managing these facilities.

  The state's limited food processing capacity, especially in rural areas, constrains the growth of local food businesses and overall food security in Alaska. Investing in shared-use and community-run processing facilities can address multiple challenges and gaps in the state's food system. These facilities can provide small-scale producers with accessible equipment and space to process harvests and create value-added products, helping them diversify offerings, extend selling seasons, and access new markets.

Conclusion

Alaska's food system stands at a threshold. Shaped by a complex interplay of geographic, cultural, economic, and environmental factors, the state's food economy faces many challenges with food production, processing, distribution, and market access. The vast distances between communities, limited infrastructure, and condensed growing season have long presented obstacles to developing a robust local food economy. However, these same factors have also fostered resilience, innovation, and a deep connection to the land among Alaska's people, particularly with Alaskan Native communities. Tensions between traditional foodways and today's extractive agribusinesses, between preserving subsistence harvesting and excessive commercial harvesting, and between local self-sufficiency and reliance on imported goods all speak to the broader questions of sustainability, cultural preservation, and economic development in the face of global changes.

The opportunities and bright spots identified throughout this report - from the growth of food hubs and farmers markets to the revitalization of traditional food preservation practices - demonstrate the potential for a more resilient and equitable food system in Alaska. These initiatives are not just about increasing local food production or improving distribution networks; they represent a reimagining of the state's relationship with food, land, and community. The emphasis on small-scale, diversified agriculture, the integration of traditional ecological knowledge with modern techniques, and the focus on community-based solutions all point towards a food system that is more adaptable, culturally relevant, and ecologically sensitive. However, realizing this vision requires more than just technical solutions or increased funding: it calls for a fundamental shift in how we value local food production, how we support rural and Indigenous communities, and how we balance economic development with environmental stewardship.

As Alaska moves forward in developing its food system, the Regional Food Business Center initiative is poised to play a key role in coordinating the state's value chains in facing the immense challenges and seizing its unique opportunities. The impacts of climate change (which are felt more acutely in the Subarctic and Arctic regions of the state) threaten traditional food sources and agricultural practices while also potentially opening up new areas for cultivation. Through targeted development of small and mid-sized farm and food businesses, strategic value chain coordination, and a sharp focus on the priorities identified throughout this report, key on-the-ground partners like Alaska Food Policy Council and many others have the potential not only to improve state's own food security and economic resilience, but also to offer valuable lessons and models for other regions grappling with similar challenges in an increasingly uncertain global climate.

HOW DID WE CREATE THIS REPORT?

Below is an overview of the types of food systems practitioners that we engaged to inform the findings presented in this Food Systems Review throughout this RFBC Planning Year. Lead Partners in this region were key in gathering farmer, food business, and support actor feedback.

Key Outreach to Practitioners

Key partners in the region (**Alaska Food Policy Council**, based in Homer) coordinated producer outreach, community meetings, and gatherings with government leaders across Alaska. These partners engaged actors across the state and worked alongside collaborator organizations in Southeast Alaska, Kodiak, and the North Star Borough of the state.

Did you know: Alaska's land area is so large, it could fit the other island partners of the RFBC more than 54 times over?!

Outreach metrics

25	Producers interviewed
60	Small gatherings, town halls, and farmer meetings
50	Food Businesses + Support Actors interviewed

Key Message of Hope

> *I, frankly, see [food systems practitioners] as the most important healthcare professionals out there. Because Food is our Medicine. And what you do matters*

- **Professor Jessica Ross**

Dena'ina Athabascan & Tribal member of the Native Village of Eklutna

From AK Food & Farm Festival opening, Nov. 2023

Alaska Food + Farm Festival

November 2023

50+ Virtual Attendees **500+** In-person Attendees

The conference was co-hosted by AFPC and the AK Farm Bureau, & featured over a dozen info sessions, workshops, & TA plenaries.
Next conference is March 2025 in Kodiak!

Artwork by Valisa Higman, resident of Seldovia Village, AK

Items Incorporated into our Research

Producer Site Visits	15
Food Business Site Visits	15
Articles and Reports	10
Food Systems Conferences	2

Key Input from Practitioners

Need for Aggregation & Distribution Capacity

- [illegible]
- [illegible]

Resilience and cultural foodways are core to progress

- Subsistence harvesting is central to Alaska Native identity
- Climate change threatens key foods like salmon

Alaska Food Policy Council
health. self-reliance. prosperity.

HAWAI'I GOOD FOOD ALLIANCE

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