

# 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**

# CONFERENCE INFORMATION

## REGISTRATION

FEES	Early (until 3/15)	Regular (Beginning 3/16)
General	\$350	\$400
Grocer	FREE	\$150
Presenter	FREE (with promo code)	\$150

[Click here to register online](#)

Failure to attend does not constitute notice of cancellation. Cancellation must be in writing. Telephone cancellations will not be accepted. A 15% cancellation fee will be assessed on all cancellations (this includes purchase orders and unpaid registrations) on or after April 2, 2026. There will be no refunds after Wednesday, April 22, 2026. No exceptions.

## Accommodations

### Conference Hotel

#### Holiday Inn Fargo

3803 13th Ave S, Fargo, North Dakota 58103

Rate: \$124+ applicable taxes and fees

Reservation Deadline: April 20, 2026

[Book your room at the Holiday Inn](#) or call the hotel directly at 701-282-2700 (Option 0) and ask for the National Rural Grocery Summit May 2026 Room Block to secure your reservation.

## TERMS AND CONDITIONS

### Notice of Non-Discrimination

Wichita State University does not discriminate in its employment practices, educational programs or activities on the basis of age (40 years or older), ancestry, color, disability, gender, gender expression, gender identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, political affiliation, pregnancy, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or status as a veteran. Retaliation against an individual filing or cooperating in a complaint process is also prohibited. Sexual misconduct, relationship violence and stalking are forms of sex discrimination and are prohibited under Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. Complaints or concerns related to alleged discrimination may be directed to the Institutional Equity and Compliance Director, Title IX Coordinator or Equal Opportunity Coordinator, Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount, Wichita, KS 67260, telephone (316) 978-3187.

### Special Accommodations

Wichita State University is committed to making programs accessible to people with disabilities. If you wish to volunteer information regarding any special assistance you may need, please contact the Office of University Conferences at (316) 978-6493.

### Right of Termination for Cause

This agreement and the University's obligations hereunder regarding this conference and the presentation of any or all associated sessions and optional entertainment events are subject to acts of God, war, terrorism, government regulations, disaster, fire, strikes, civil disorder, curtailment of transportation facilities, or other similar cause beyond the control of the parties making it inadvisable, illegal, or impossible to hold the event or provide the facility. If the conference or any associated event is canceled due to one of the aforementioned occurrences, the liability of the University shall be limited to refunding the conference registration fee or a portion thereof. The University shall not be responsible for consequential damages, including, but not limited to, any losses incurred by registrants including, but not limited to, airline cancellation charges, hotel deposits and other associated travel costs.

# PRE-CONFERENCE BUS TOURS

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## 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 Mahnomen. 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 - 3:45 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. While on the bus, participants will have the unique opportunity to hear from North Dakota State University's Center for Social Research Director Nancy Hodur who will further detail the processes undertaken to establish the cooperative and identify key elements for achieving success in similar collaborations. The group will then travel to Hillsboro for a tour of Miller's Food Pride, one of 10+ Miller's Fresh Foods stores in North Dakota and 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 | 12:45 PM - 5:15 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.

# 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
- 5:00 PM** Welcome Reception

## Wednesday, May 6

- 7:00 - 8:30 AM** Light Continental Breakfast and Registration
- 8:30 - 10:00 AM** Welcome and Opening Keynote
- 10:00 - 10:30 AM** Break
- 10:30 - 11:30 AM** Breakout Session #1

Making the Case for Rural Grocery through Mapping and Data	Connecting Rural Grocers, Healthcare and Community Nutrition Access	Community Co-op Conversions: An Exit Strategy That Preserves Local Grocery Access	Local Connections: A Grocery Store at the Heart of Rural Community
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- 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM** Lunch and Afternoon Keynote
- 1:00 - 1:30 PM** Break
- 1:00 - 2:45 PM** Poster Session
- 1:30 - 2:30 PM** Breakout Session #2

Battling Bigness: How Federal and State Officials Can Fight for Fairness in the Grocery Industry	A Scalable Model for Local Food Production and Rural Grocery Integration	Cold Chain Wholesale Distribution: Results from a Northern Wisconsin Study	Expanding GusNIP Impact Through Statewide Collaboration: Centralized Models for Advancing Rural Grocery Access
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- 2:30 - 3:00 PM** Break and Exhibitor Fair
- 3:00 - 4:00 PM** Breakout Session #3

Grocery Retail for All: Strengthening Independent Operators in Underserved Communities	Basics of Shared Governance for Community-supported Rural Grocery Stores	Energy is NOT a fixed cost: Tips and Resources	Farm Stops - A Novel Retail Store Model to Grow Local Food Economies
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- 6:00 - 8:00 PM** Evening Reception

# Thursday, May 7

**7:00 - 8:30 AM**      **Light Continental Breakfast**

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

State-Supported Tools for Rural Grocery: Examples from Three State Programs	Real World Solutions for Today's Retail Challenges	Connecting Capital to Rural Communities: How HFFI Programs and the FARE Fund Support Rural Retailers	Surviving and Thriving in Today's Grocery Landscape: Strategies to Build Sales and Loyalty
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**10:00 - 10:30 AM**      **Break**

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

Connecting Capital to Rural Communities: How HFFI Programs and the FARE Fund Support Rural Retailers	Independent Retailers: Overcoming Today's Hurdles with Smart Excess Inventory Solutions - confirm with NCF	Innovative Partnerships in GusNIP: How Grocers are Using Nutrition Incentives to Boost Sales and Support Local Agriculture	From Corner Aisles to Community Health: Low-Lift Wins for Rural Stores
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**11:30 AM - 12:30 PM**      **Lunch and Award Ceremony**

**12:30 - 1:30 PM**      **Afternoon Keynote**

**1:30 - 2:00 PM**      **Break**

**2:00 - 3:00 PM**      **Breakout Session #6**

Food Waste Prevention: A Boon for Rural Grocer Bottom Lines, Communities, and Climate	Session TBD	The 24-Hour Rural Grocery: The Future Model for Community Sustainability and Small-Town Growth	From Aisles to Action: How Rural Grocery Stores Can Play a Significant Role in the Growing Food is Medicine Movement
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**3:00 - 3:15 PM**      **Snack Break**

**3:15 - 4:30 PM**      **Closing Keynote**

# KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

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## 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.



## 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.

## More Keynote Speakers To Be Announced

# 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*

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; Hannah Thornton, Senior Director of Food Access and Education, Sustainable Food Center; Jazzmine Brooks, Healthy Incentives Director, Iowa Healthiest State Initiative; Sam Hedges, Director of Operations, Local Environmental Agriculture Project*

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.

### **Energy is NOT a fixed cost: Tips and Resources**

*Joel Haskard, Clean Energy Resource Teams Co-Director, University of Minnesota*

You have a million things to think about other than how to reduce your store's energy costs... But Joel apparently doesn't! Put him to work assisting you (for free) with quick consultations on how to potentially upgrade some of your equipment while saving money at the same time.

### **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; Adonai Cuevas, Grants Specialist, Colorado Department of Agriculture; Lisa Bates, Assistant Director Community and Economic Development, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach; Courtney Long, Food Systems Program Manager and AgMRC Director, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach*

This session introduces a statewide initiative and legislation that strengthens Iowa's independent grocery sector through assessments, technical assistance, and peer learning. Participants will explore a new grocery self-audit toolkit, consulting methods, and quarterly learning circles designed to support store operations, procurement, and local sourcing. 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.

## 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

*Marisol Zavaleta Martin, Senior Manager, Healthy Food Financing Initiatives, 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

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

*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**

*Kimberly Jones, Director of Growth, 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; Additional presenters to be confirmed*

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.

### **From Corner Aisles to Community Health: Low-Lift Wins for Rural Stores**

*Shaniaya Griffin, MLS, Founder and Executive Director, Nourish the Future Foundation, Inc.*

Rural grocers run on thin margins and thinner staffing. This session hands you a 30-day, low-cost activation you can run with the team you already have: clear ingredient-transparency shelf tags, a local-producer endcap, and two youth-led tastings that build trust and move product. You'll leave with print-ready files, a simple KPI sheet, and a step-by-step timeline you can start next month.

## 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.

### **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**

*Mary Keena, Extension specialist/ Livestock Environmental Management, North Dakota State University Extension*

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.

## **Ohio Rural Grocery Survey Results**

*Gwynn Stewart, Assistant Professor of Community Development, Ohio State University Extension*

The poster will present the key findings from a survey of rural grocers completed by Ohio State University Extension and issues facing these critical partners in the fabric of rural communities.