

Action Brief

Five Ways to Strengthen Rural Food Distribution in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

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MICHIGAN GOOD FOOD CHARTER Recommendation Number Four:

Invest in regional food distribution, processing, and manufacturing infrastructure to address the priorities of small- and mid-scale local/ regional farm and food businesses.

THE CHALLENGE

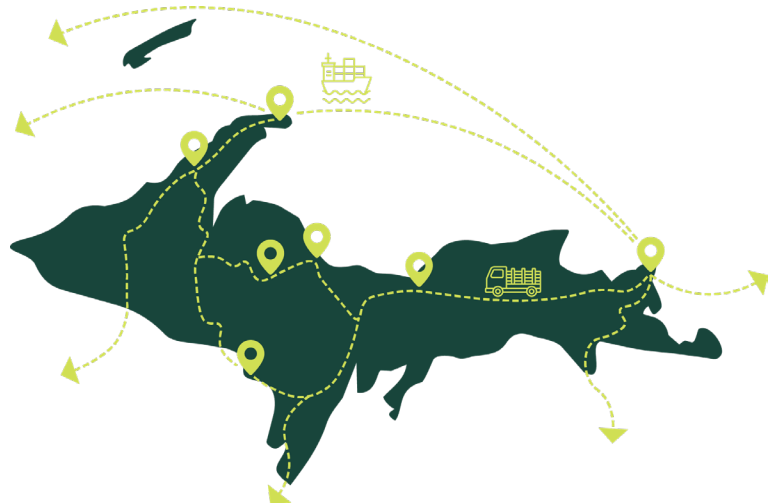
Rural food distribution in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (U.P.) is strained by long distances, a sparse population, and limited infrastructure. The U.P. faces challenges similar to other rural regions across the U.S., including limited processing capacity, inconsistent delivery routes, and difficulty generating demand for local products.

THE IMPACT

When a statewide local food distributor ceased operations in 2023, it left a critical gap, forcing many small business owners to transport products themselves—sometimes driving 800 miles roundtrip for basic inventory. The lack of consistent, affordable distribution threatens farm viability, institutional purchasing, and access to healthy foods in rural communities.

Investment in collaboration and innovation through community-led solutions supports farmers, small businesses, schools, and residents seeking equitable access to Michigan-grown foods. With stronger regional food systems:

- ✓ Michigan residents have better access to fresh, affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant foods.
- ✓ Institutions (and retailers) are able to source more Michigan food and farm products.
- ✓ Food and farm businesses are thriving.
- ✓ Michigan schools are meeting Michigan Nutrition Standards and serving more Michigan-grown products.
- ✓ Distributors, educators, and agencies in the U.P. have ample opportunities for collaboration with downstate partners.



WHAT CAN SUPPORTERS DO? RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIELD



1. Build on existing regional assets, such as cold storage “nodes” that can be managed by hubs to increase efficiency and reliability.



2. Establish a value chain coordinator position for the U.P. to connect farms, hubs, buyers, and logistics partners in collaboration with existing assistance efforts.



3. Support hub-to-hub collaboration models that allow food hubs, farmers and other regional distribution partners to coordinate with each other directly (e.g. shared cross-docking), inspired by [similar systems in Iowa](#).



4. Expand technology adoption and cohesion to streamline ordering, aggregation, and hub-to-hub networks.



5. Create opportunities for statewide collaboration between U.P. partners and downstate distributors, educators, and agencies.

RELATED STATE AND FEDERAL POLICIES

Michigan

- MDARD Value-Added, Food Systems, and Supply Chain Grant Program (Annual)
- Michigan Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) and LFPA+ Programs (ending December 2022 - 2026)
- MDARD “Last Food Mile” Grant Program (2026)

Federal

- The U.S. Farm Bill (2018, 2024–2026 reauthorization cycle)
- USDA Local and Regional Food System Programs (within the Farm Bill)
- Rural Development Title (infrastructure, business development, value chain growth)
- Nutrition Title Policies (SNAP and related programs)

RELATED NETWORKS/ORGANIZATIONS

- [Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems \(CRFS\)](#)
- [Michigan Food Hub Network](#)
- [MSU Product Center](#)
- [MSU Extension](#)
- [Fair Food Network](#)
- [Michigan Economic Development Corporation \(MEDC\)](#)
- [Northwoods Test Kitchen](#)
- [Local Food Marketplace](#)
- [Iowa Food Hub Network \(via Iowa State University Extension\)](#)
- [Michigan Tech University](#)

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