

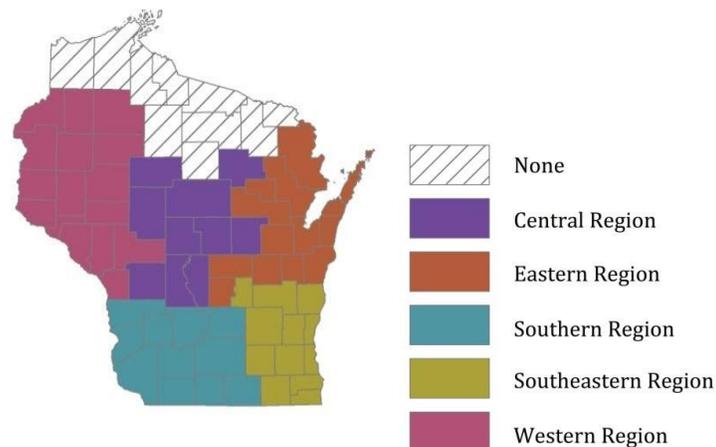


## Growing The Farm Fresh Atlas™ of Wisconsin

### History

Wisconsin has a wealth of farmers producing top-quality produce, meat, dairy products, herbs, flowers and other specialty foods that they market directly to consumers. Many of these farmers sell their wares through farmers' markets, while others market their products through approaches such as on-farm stores, pick-your-own operations and community supported agriculture (CSA). A growing number of these farmers also add value to their products and differentiate them in the marketplace through sustainable production practices such as organic farming and integrated pest management (IPM).

In 2001, REAP Food Group identified a need to increase farmer-to-consumer direct marketing of locally, sustainably grown food. REAP created the first Farm Fresh Atlas for the Dane County area in 2002. Based on the success of this project, other organizations around the state developed Atlases for their regions. The *Farm Fresh Atlas of Eastern Wisconsin* began in 2004, and the *Farm Fresh Atlas of Southeastern Wisconsin* in 2005. Central and Western Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlases debuted in 2006. In the 2016 editions, the five Atlases cumulatively showcased over 300 farms and 200 farmers' markets, and distribution exceeded 197,000 copies. Additionally, in 2019, the *Farm Fresh Atlas of Northern Wisconsin* was launched, completing the network's statewide coverage. Figure 1 below shows the geographical coverage of each of the Atlases as of 2016.



**Figure 1:** Regional Farm Fresh Atlas Coverage in Wisconsin (2016)

### About the Farm Fresh Atlas

The Farm Fresh Atlases are free-year round local food guides that provide consumers with listings of farms, farmers' markets, and businesses that sell locally, sustainably grown agricultural products in each region. Atlases also list organizations that promote value-added, direct marketing for farmers.

Consumers can locate farms geographically on a map, by products sold, growing practices used, or by name. They can locate farmers' markets by name, location, and days of the week they operate, and find information about which markets are equipped to accept EBT/FoodShare benefits, WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Vouchers, and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Vouchers. The Atlases also include educational information about the benefits of farmer-to-consumer direct sales and seasonality charts.

Each regional Atlas project is managed by a diverse team of partners. Farmers are key members of each Atlas project team, and their input ensures that the Atlases meet their marketing and promotion needs. Organizations working with the Atlases include nonprofit groups such as REAP Food Group and Central Rivers Farmshed, the Eastern Wisconsin Sustainable Farmers Network, the Dane County Farmers' Market, University of Wisconsin-Extension county offices, Resource Conservation and Development District (RC&D) offices, and University of Wisconsin campuses.

The print Atlases are distributed free-of-charge to consumers at farmers' markets, businesses, public libraries and other locations. While the regional Farm Fresh Atlases are still very popular, the age of print publications is changing. Over 90% of all media interactions in the United States are screen-based (2013, forbes.com). Smartphone ownership has almost doubled in the last five years, from 35% in 2011 to 68% at the end of 2015 (2015, pewinternet.org). Many consumers expect to be able to access information about local food easily on computers and mobile devices. In addition to the production of the regional print Atlases, there was a strong need from farmers for a statewide mobile-friendly website where consumers could access information about where to find local farm products they desire any time, from anywhere, and now they can do just that by visiting [farmfreshatlas.org](http://farmfreshatlas.org).

Prior to the launch of [farmfreshatlas.org](http://farmfreshatlas.org), there were no other statewide resources for consumers which emphasized unique, non-borrowed content generated by the farmers. One unified website existed under the URL [farmfreshatlas.org](http://farmfreshatlas.org); this site was housed within a department of the University of Wisconsin as a static site with links to each region's print Atlas PDF or individually managed websites. These sites ranged in their technological capacity, lacking searchability and mobile-friendly formatting. From 2003 to 2013, Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture hosted a statewide website database called Savor Wisconsin. It listed over 1,500 local farms and businesses and received more than 1.2 million annual views. The site was suspended due to the lack of capacity of the state government to commit to its upkeep which culminated in significant numbers of outdated listings. The Atlas regions have protocols to refresh the data presented in the regional publications annually. Creating a collective database of this information helped fill the information gap that was created when Savor Wisconsin was discontinued. Further, Farm Fresh Atlas protocols help guarantee that farm information is kept up to date. Accurate information is highly valued by consumers.

In 2016, REAP Food Group and regional Atlas partners began work to replicate the *Vermont Farm to Plate* website and create a single statewide, mobile-friendly searchable online database for consumers. REAP Food Group currently holds a trademark on the name Farm Fresh Atlas and has licensed each region to use the trademark. REAP led the effort to apply for a USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program Grant which was awarded in September 2016.

### **Project Summary and Objectives**

This project aimed to expand farmer-to-consumer marketing in Wisconsin and strengthen the regional Farm Fresh Atlas partner organizations by 1) creating one statewide mobile-friendly, searchable database and website of sustainable farms, farmers' markets and businesses, 2) launching a statewide marketing campaign to promote the website and printed Atlases, and 3) evaluating and improving the effectiveness of online and print Atlases for farmers, farmers' markets, and consumers.

Project Outcomes: 1) increased consumer knowledge and improved attitude towards local foods, 2) increased number of people who report buying more local foods, 3) increased sales tied directly to Atlas promotion, 4) increased producer-to-consumer market opportunities and 5) increased farmers' knowledge about effective ways to promote their products to buyers.

Objective 1: Develop a statewide farmer-to-consumer marketing platform. This will include creating a unified brand, standardizing the way information is collected from farms, markets and businesses, development of the website, and a far-reaching marketing campaign.

Objective 2: Increase consumer awareness of and use of Farm Fresh Atlas. This will be measured by the number of consumers who view the newly developed farmfreshatlas.org website and responses to online pop-up surveys on the site.

Objective 3: Increase revenue for local farmers by tracking sales attributable to the Atlas among sample segment of five new or beginning farmers from each region. (No baseline data available, but will be collected in year one of the project).

Objective 4: Increase revenue at farmers' markets attributable to the Atlas. The project will utilize an economic measurement tool called Farm 2 Facts.

## **The Process**

### Research

REAP Food Group searched for examples of local food guides and websites in other states. The *Vermont Farm to Plate* website was selected as the best example to follow, and helped provide a framework around how to create a single statewide, mobile-friendly searchable online database for consumers.

### Selecting Community Partners

Several contracts were included as part of this project proposal, including partnering on: 1) producer evaluations 2) producer marketing training 3) consumer surveys and 4) farmers market evaluations.

### Consumer Focus Groups

Focus groups were held in four of the five Atlas regions (Central, Eastern, Southeastern and Southern) in an effort to ensure data collection provided optimal representation of voices and perspectives from across the state.

Stakeholders were identified by each regional Atlas coordinator. A diverse range stakeholders were invited to attend a small focus group meeting in each region; participants represented a wide range of ages, backgrounds and roles within the food system. A total of 30 people participated in the focus groups. Three main categories of stakeholders were invited to participate:

- consumers
- farmers
- farmers' market managers

The focus group discussion questions were primarily developed by REAP Food Group staff. Regional coordinators for each Atlas in the state also reviewed the discussion questions and provided feedback. Topics discussed included a general local food discussion, ideal components for an online local food directory, discussion of a statewide resource guide, and also a discussion of each regional printed publication.

A survey was also issued at the beginning of each focus group to glean additional information from participants. The survey included questions covering the following topics: age and gender of primary food purchaser and number of members in household, whether or not participants had heard of the Farm Fresh Atlas prior to the focus group, current methods for finding local food products, preferred search criteria, important factors considered when making purchasing decisions, and interest in different types of products offered through Atlas producers. Participants also reviewed a copy of their regional printed Atlas and were asked about ease of use and their satisfaction with the publication.

### **Web Development and Beta Testing**

During the grant application process, REAP requested bids for farmfreshatlas.org website development and design, and contractors were selected upon receipt of the grant award. As part of the development process, Farm Fresh Atlas regional coordinators asked close to 30 contacts within their networks to beta test the website and provide feedback before the website was launched.

After the website was initially launched, a second round of website development was required to improve the user experience. The Farm Fresh Atlas audience was finding it too difficult to navigate search results on the map. A new landing/homepage was developed, search bars with basic search options were added, and a text-listing view was added so that consumers could view a list of results, rather than a map of results.

### **Project Evaluation**

States across the country have developed marketing guides for farmers. While there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence that these guides drive business to farms, there has not been research to quantify their impact. REAP included a strong evaluation component in this project, as data collection is the key to assessing our progress towards increased local foods sales and consumer awareness of sustainability. Farmers' markets are important players in the effort to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, while supporting diversified farms and new businesses. Despite their many benefits, the impacts that farmers markets have are largely undocumented. This project included three primary evaluation components: 1) consumers 2) Farm Fresh Atlas producers 3) Farm Fresh Atlas farmers markets. A summary of the process for each evaluation is included below. Additional details available by request.

#### **Consumer Evaluation**

Between late March and mid-June of 2018, 162 people completed an online survey developed in partnership with the UW River Falls Survey Center, asking about their awareness of the Farm Fresh Atlas (FFA), its impact on their purchase decisions, and on their future purchases. Respondents said they found out about the survey from FFA social media, emails, and other related publications. Because they self-selected to complete the survey, it is likely that these consumers have a higher level of interest in locally produced food products than the average Wisconsin consumer. REAP had initially planned to run a pop-up survey on farmfreshatlas.org as part of this project, however this was highly discouraged by the web development and marketing contractors, as pop-ups are likely to increase a site's bounce rate and discourage website visitors.

REAP added an additional consumer survey in spring 2019 targeting a broader group of organizations whose clientele and mailing lists were more diverse and represented a broader segment of the population (for example, YMCA network of WI and the WI Chapter of the American Heart Association). While total responses were lower than the initial survey outreach, they were more representative of the

Wisconsin consumer landscape. This was reflected in the proportion of survey participants who were familiar with the Atlas in 2019 (50%) versus in 2018 (78%).

Though the survey sample is almost certainly biased toward consumers who are more interested than average in local foods, users of the Atlas report outcomes that endorse the underlying purpose of the Farm Fresh Atlas. They report that they buy more local foods, know more about where to buy such products, and have patronized a local food producer they'd not previously used because of the Atlas. Most also indicated that they would likely purchase even more locally-produced vegetables in the future. And, finally, the type of products consumers anticipate buying more of in the future align well with the mix of products Farm Fresh Atlas farmers currently produce.

#### Farm/Producer Evaluation

The Survey Research Center (SRC) surveyed producers listing in the Farm Fresh Atlas (FFA) during the spring of 2017, 2018, and 2019. Over the years, responses from producers have been fairly robust with 146 completed surveys received in 2017 (41% response rate), 184 (50%) in 2018, and 155 (48%) in 2019. Because of the relatively high response rate and the consistency of the data over time, the Survey Research Center feels the estimates in this report should reflect producer opinions with reasonable accuracy. Surveys were primarily issued via email, with a limited number of farms receiving printed copies. Reminders were sent to non-respondents.

Focusing on producers' feedback about the Farm Fresh Atlas, there are a number of key take-aways from these surveys:

- More than half the respondents said that the FFA is an important or very important vehicle for advertising their business and only 3% said it was not important. This is a relatively strong endorsement of the Atlas.
- Slightly more than 80% of the respondents have listed their business in the FFA for multiple years. The fact that they generally list for multiple years suggests that the value they receive from the Atlas exceeds the cost of participating.
- Between two-thirds and three-quarters of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the cost of listing in the FFA. While only about one-third are satisfied or very satisfied with the Atlas in terms of its impact on sales, profits, their understanding of effective marketing strategies, and opening new markets for them, most of the rest were neutral with respect to the impact of the FFA on these factors.
- About 80% of the respondents said the FFA had increased their sales and 75% said it had increased their profits. Though most felt the increase in their sales and profits attributable to the FFA were relatively modest, these producer opinions are quite positive for the Atlas. There is a strong positive association between the degree to which a producer feels the FFA has increased his/her sales and profits and their satisfaction with the Atlas. The more the FFA can demonstrate a link between participation in the Atlas and producers' bottom line, the more support it will get from producers.
- The IMPLAN results indicate that the state-wide impact of the FFA is relatively modest in terms of job creation, but more significant in terms of total economic activity.

#### Farmers Market Evaluation

Metrics and Indicators for Impact (MIFI), a program under University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), was subcontracted on the grant to provide a 24-month membership to REAP and 11 markets selected by REAP and UW. As part of these memberships, MIFI provided users with metrics that collect data on

market activities. The MIFI team also provided guidance to collect, enter, and report this data. Assistance for data collection and entry was given through the Data Collection Package, as well as monthly office hours and individual troubleshooting. Lastly, MIFI was contracted to issue a summary of results. The following report includes an overview of market feedback and data, as well as a regional economic impact analysis.

MIFI was rebranded Farmv 2 Facts (F2F) in the middle of the contract. The Farm Fresh Atlas network produced the F2F's scope of work, which spanned central Wisconsin and Milwaukee county. The specified areas were selected with the goal of comparing rural and urban markets. One difference of note is the relative concern urban markets for affordability. Milwaukee county hosts many farmers markets, many serving low-income customers. Farmers markets in Milwaukee such as the Fondy Market provide incentive programs for SNAP participants. Central Wisconsin markets also offer SNAP incentive programs. However, the degree and variety of incentive varies across and within the two regions. In both areas the incentive programs vary in execution and overall, as such programs wax and wane in light of changing political support.

In 2018, 11 markets were invited to collect data, of these, two Milwaukee markets and two central Wisconsin markets entered data in 2018, and in 2019 two Milwaukee markets and six central Wisconsin markets entered data. However, in 2018 only one market provided sufficient data for analyses (South Milwaukee), and in 2019 four markets (two Milwaukee and two central Wisconsin) entered sufficient data for analyses. The Farm 2 Facts evaluation requirements require strong market staffing capacity. Some farmers markets struggled to collect data, many markets did not have the capacity to participate at all. Suggestions from market managers included additional support for data collection, such as stipends to increase staff capacity. Lack of market staff and volunteers, vendor sales slips, and concern for accuracy of data hindered data collection. The two markets which entered data in 2018 and 2019 both collected more complete and accurate data in the second year, indicating that allowance for a learning curve may be necessary to see results.

Compiled feedback from market managers led us to summarize the following: 1) Listing a market's information in the Farm Fresh Atlas increases traffic to markets; visitors often stop by a market to pick up the Atlas, 2) Farmers markets gain credibility by being listed in the Atlas and by having physical versions of the Atlases on hand at their market and 3) The Atlas is used as a recruiting tool for market managers searching for vendors.

### **Marketing**

The Farm Fresh Atlas network developed a unified, statewide brand and marketing presence as part of this project. A group logo was created, as well as a matching logo for each Farm Fresh Atlas region. Social media pages were launched on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. A marketing company was contracted to help acquire billboards, radio ads, printed posters, flyers, digital ads as well as develop a social media presence and issue press releases. Display stands for printed Farm Fresh Atlases were shared with each region, as well as printed flyers promoting the new mobile-friendly farmfreshatlas.org website. A photographer/videographer was also contracted to capture Wisconsin-based visuals which were incorporated into marketing materials and the social media campaign. Farm Fresh Atlas regional coordinators helped select farms and businesses to be featured.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we offer an overview of our lessons learned during this project. Please contact us with questions or for more information.

The Farm Fresh Atlas of Wisconsin website has become an immensely valuable asset a) for marketing the regional atlases more effectively and cohesively, b) for creating a digital asset for the regional atlases and c) for creating a more active network and communication structure for the regions. The work of collecting applications for atlas listings has been streamlined and farm, market and business listees have adapted to the digital version with relative ease. The creation of a digital database of products and farms on the backend of the website allows regions to assist their listees with sourcing either desired food items or potential markets.

This website has the potential to become a very important asset statewide for sustainable family farms in WI and represents a comprehensive network of growers, producers and markets committed to sustainable, WI-grown food and agritourism. We learned a lot about what makes a good website and one of the most valuable lessons learned is that website design needs to strike a balance between technological sophistication (mapping and geolocation) and ease of use for consumers, given the statewide reach of this site and the uneven broadband access across Wisconsin. This balance requires financial investment and in hindsight we could have allocated more funding to accomplish these big goals. This project can be readily adopted to other regions.

Evaluating the impact of the Farm Fresh Atlas on farmers markets was the most challenging aspect of this project. If future efforts use Farm 2 Facts structure to collect data, resources need to be allocated for labor to ensure that markets can consistently collect and record data, particularly in smaller, less resourced markets. The farmer evaluation revealed how many young farmers we have in the state and underscores the need for programs to support and nurture young and beginning farmers.