Farm2School Toolkit for Direct Purchasing from Farmers

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# Introduction

This toolkit is intended for use by school districts and child nutrition programs, as well as other types of institutional food service, for procurement of local food directly from farmers. The materials in this toolkit were developed in Aitkin County, Minnesota and tested in the Aitkin Public Schools, Hill City School, and Riverwood Healthcare Center in 2015 – 2016.

If you want to start sourcing local food from farmers in your area but aren’t sure how to start, this toolkit will help you do it. From forming a procurement committee to issuing contracts, this toolkit walks through the steps and provides the examples you need to successfully launch your own local food procurement program.

This toolkit does not discuss the reasons for local food procurement. It assumes that the decision has already been made to source local food. This toolkit also does not provide information about how to do publicity and promotion of local food programs. Publicity and promotion can be as individual as the people involved in the programs and there are many resources available for these activities. What this toolkit covers are the nuts and bolts of establishing a formal, legal, and workable process for local food procurement.

# Steps to a Local Food Procurement Program

## Establish a Procurement Committee

The procurement committee serves as the advisory committee for your farm-to-institution program. The procurement committee should consist of people willing to help adapt the Request for Proposals (RFPs) to your institution’s needs, to assist with making connections to farmer groups, and to be advocates for the program within the institution and within the community. The procurement committee will review, discuss and score the proposals received from farmers.

The procurement committee should include representatives from your organization as well as outside expertise. Potential sources of committee members:

* Board of directors of your organization
* Administration staff
* Food service staff
* Local and regional public health staff
* Your institution’s food inspector
* Clients or consumers of food at your institution
* Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) staff
* U of MN Extension educators
* Local farm organizations. In some cases, statewide organizations have local chapters and you can contact the state-level office to obtain local contact information.
  + Farmers’ markets
  + Farmer cooperatives
  + Sustainable Farming Association, www.sfa-mn.org
  + Minnesota Farm Bureau, www.fbmn.org
  + Minnesota Farmers Union, mfu.org
  + Minnesota Cattlemen’s Association, www.mnsca.org

## Develop Draft Menus

Menu development should begin very early in your process. Having an idea of what foods you want to serve will help you create an RFP that brings in proposals for the types of foods your program can really use. It will help avoid wasted effort in asking for proposals for food types you are not likely to use.

Consult with the farmer-members of your procurement committee to get an idea of what kinds of products are available locally, and roughly their season of availability.

Include the cooks in the menu-drafting process. Find out from the cooks which locally-available products they are familiar with, and which products they are interested in trying.

You can use the sample menu spreadsheet in Appendix A as the basis to start your menu planning. Create a draft menu for every local food meal you intend to offer during the period covered by your procurement process. You can change your draft as much as you need to later on.

Notice that the draft menus often contain a mix of locally-sourced and non-local foods. That’s okay. A 100% local food meal may be a goal, but it’s something to work toward and not necessarily something you should expect to achieve every time. This is Minnesota, after all – seasonality is a big issue!

## Adapt the sample RFP to your needs

The Request For Proposals (RFP) is the document that describes your program and provides farmers with information about what you want to purchase locally. Schedule a meeting of the Procurement Committee for at least two weeks before you intend to issue the RFP to farmers. Use the sample RFP provided in Appendix A of this toolkit as the basis for this meeting. The committee should go through the sample RFP and decide on changes needed to customize it to your institution’s needs and timeline. Areas you will need to change are highlighted in the sample document. Other changes are optional.

* Page 1A – Change the name to your institution’s program name. Change the due date.
* Page 2A - Change due dates in the timeline chart. Replace names and affiliations of procurement committee members.
* Page 3A - Replace sample text with background information about your program.
* Pages 3A & 4A – Decide whether to keep or alter the six considerations for the program:
  + Availability of the item in the area
  + Children’s (or clients’) food preferences
  + Foods representative of the local food economy
  + Foods commonly grown in area gardens
  + Nutrient-dense foods
  + Versatility of the food item
* Page 4A – Decide whether to keep or alter the specifications for produce.
* Pages 5A & 6A – You should not change the requirements for meat. All meat purchased by a food facility must be slaughtered and processed under inspection. In Minnesota, inspected slaughter and processing is offered at USDA plants and at Minnesota Equal-To plants.
  + See the Sourcing Local Meat section in Appendix B for more information about legal requirements for sourcing meat.
  + Update the list of Minnesota Equal-To plants. The current list can be found on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture website, and you can copy and paste it from there:  
    <http://www.mda.state.mn.us/licensing/inspections/meatpoultryegg/state-inspection/equal2plants.aspx>
* Pages 6A & 7A – Do not change the requirements for eggs.
  + See the Eggs fact sheet in Appendix B for more information about legal requirements for sourcing eggs.
* Pages 8A & 9A – Decide whether to keep or alter the scoring used to award points to farmers’ proposals.
  + Do not put a “No Hormones” option in the Pork/Poultry/Rabbit column for meat production practices. Growth hormone use is not allowed in any pork or poultry raised for meat in the United States. Farmers are not permitted to claim “no hormones” in the marketing of their pork or poultry products. That claim is considered deceptive and disparaging toward other pork and poultry, since none of these products in the U.S. are produced with growth hormones.
* Page 10A – Adjust the warnings against collusion as needed, and change wording to refer to your organization.
* Page 11A – Adjust contract terms as needed, and change wording to refer to your organization.
* Pages 12A – 16A – Adjust the chart of requested products to meet the needs of your program. Use the draft menus you created with the cooks, and request product types that fit into those menus. The Aitkin School District based their RFP on the quantities needed to serve approximately 600 meals to K-6 students.
  + See the USDA’s Child Nutrition Program Food Buying Guide for information about quantities of raw product needed to produce serving-ready quantities.  
    <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/food-buying-guide-school-meal-programs>
  + Consider including information about your willingness to accept “seconds.” Often, farmers have fruits or vegetables that are perfectly edible and wholesome; but either too small, too large, or with minor flaws that make them difficult to sell at retail. If the fruits and vegetables will be served peeled and sliced, or cooked and mashed, you can both save money and give the farmers a market for their seconds by accepting these cosmetically imperfect items.
* Page 17A – Change the information about where and when to submit the application.

## Issue and Advertise your RFP

Using the connections of people on your Procurement Committee and direct connections with farmer groups, get the RFP distributed out to farmers in your area. The RFP should be issued at least two weeks before the due date.

Advertising the RFP can happen in advance of issuing the RFP. It’s a good idea to communicate with farmer groups during the RFP revision process and keep farmer groups updated about the process, so that people are aware of the program and prepared to fill out the RFP as soon as they get it.

### Answer farmers’ questions about your RFP

The RFP should identify a designated person who will be available to answer farmers’ questions in between the time the RFP is issued and the deadline for questions. If you are in an area where there have not been similar projects in the past, you should expect to answer a lot of basic questions about the concept and the contractual obligations.

### Common questions from farmers:

* What happens if I have crop failure and can’t deliver on my contract?
* What happens if I don’t have my product ready at the specified time?
* How should I set my price?
  + Resources are available to help farmers figure out their pricing. Some resources you could refer them to:
    - Marketing Local Food. [www.misa.umn.edu/publications](http://www.misa.umn.edu/publications)
    - Extension enterprise budgets (from Iowa State University).  
      [www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/crops/html/a1-17.html](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/crops/html/a1-17.html)
    - USDA-Agricultural Marketing Service price reports.  
      [www.ams.usda.gov/market-news](http://www.ams.usda.gov/market-news)
    - Fearless Farm Finances. Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES). [www.mosesorganic.org](http://www.mosesorganic.org)
* How and where will I deliver my products?
* How can I demonstrate that I’m a good supplier if I haven’t had a contract before?
* What are the regulations for selling my product?
  + Refer farmers to the Local Food Sales Resources on the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture website:   
    <http://www.misa.umn.edu/resources/local-food-sales-resources>

## Receive proposals back from farmers

You may have proposals coming back via mail, email, and dropped off in person. Establish a system for recording receipt of proposals and have a secure place for storing them until it is time for scoring.

Download the Appendix C spreadsheet: Record of Farmer Proposals  
<http://misadocuments.info/AppendixC_Farm2School_record_farmer_proposals.xlsx>

Delete the example information from the spreadsheet and change column headings as needed for your program. As you receive proposals, enter information from them into this spreadsheet. Note there are separate tabs for Meat, Fruit & Veggies, and Other Products. You can put all product types on a single tab if you prefer. You will use this spreadsheet during the scoring of proposals, to keep track of which farms offered to supply which product types.

Because the meat production practices are a complex set of information, you might find it helpful to enter that data from proposals into a spreadsheet for ease of scoring.

Download the Appendix C spreadsheet: Meat Production Practices  
<http://misadocuments.info/AppendixC_Farm2School_meat_production_practices.xlsx>

Delete the example information and change column headings as needed for your program. Enter all the farms that offered to supply meat into this spreadsheet, and mark the production practices they claimed. Note that there are separate tabs labeled for Ruminants and for PoultryPorkRabbit. It is important to keep the separate tabs on this spreadsheet because ruminant and non-ruminant production practices are different, and it will get confusing to try to put everything on one sheet.

## Hold Procurement Committee Meeting to Discuss and Score Proposals

The school districts that developed this RFP process chose to make it very open and transparent, and the public – including all farmers who submitted proposals – were invited to attend and observe the committee’s work. Complete transparency of process had the advantage that farmers who were not selected understood the reasons why they were not. If you choose to have a closed-door process, consider providing written feedback to farmers who were not selected.

### Prepare for the Scoring of Proposals

Revise language in the following Appendix C documents so that it is specific to your program:

* Procurement Categories and Points Criteria  
  <http://misadocuments.info/AppendixC_Farm2School_procurement_categories_points_criteria.docx>
* Product Procurement Scoring Sheet  
  <http://misadocuments.info/AppendixC_Farm2School_product_procurement_scoring_sheet.docx>

For each product type that you will be scoring, create a worksheet that shows the farmers who offered to supply it.

* Use your AppendixC\_Farm2School\_record\_farmer\_proposals.xls spreadsheet file to find the information about which farmers can supply which product.
* Create a worksheet for each product type using the Minnesota Department of Education template in the “Informal Procurement Log Example” file:   
  http://misadocuments.info/ AppendixC\_MDE\_Informal\_Procurement\_Example.docx   
    
  This Informal Procurement Log will serve as your documentation that your program followed competitive bidding procedures for purchasing each type of local product.

Put as much information as you can in the “Discussion” column of the Informal Procurement Log. The information provided on the Informal Procurement Log should match, as much as possible, the Procurement Categories and Points Criteria.

### At the appointed day and time for the procurement committee meeting

* Provide each committee member with:
  + One copy of Procurement Categories and Points Criteria.
  + A complete set of Informal Procurement Log worksheets, one sheet for each product type, filled out with the information about the farmers who offered to supply the product.
  + One print copy of the meat production practices spreadsheet.
  + Product Procurement Scoring Sheets: one for each product type under consideration.
* Have an additional complete set of Informal Procurement Log worksheets on which to mark the farmers who are awarded the contracts for each product type. These will be your official Informal Procurement Logs.
* Have supplemental information handy:
  + The farmers’ applications, in case there’s a question about items such as their past performance on contracts or their use of approved meat processors.
  + The spreadsheet record of farmers’ applications, for cross-checking in case there’s a discrepancy in other paperwork.
* Have a whiteboard or flip-chart and markers, for quick compiling of scores.

### Score Product Types.

Here’s how the Aitkin Public Schools process worked. You can adjust this to fit your own needs and preferences.

* Announce a product type. Each committee member finds their Informal Procurement Log sheet for that product type.
* If a meat product, the committee members also refer to their copy of the meat production practices spreadsheet.
* Each committee member takes a Product Procurement Scoring Sheet and fills it in for the product under consideration. There is space to score three farms on each Product Procurement Scoring Sheet.
* Use a whiteboard or a flip chart to quickly tally scores from each committee member and calculate averages.
* Discuss the scores and the farms, and award the bid for the product.
* Mark the chosen farmer on the official Informal Procurement Log for that product.
* Move on to the next product and repeat the process.

# Meet with food service staff to establish viable menus based on accepted proposals.

Go back through the draft menus and make adjustments based on availability of product. You might find that seasonal availability is different than you anticipated, and you’ll need to adjust the timing of certain meals.

You might find there are more opportunities to use local products than you originally thought. In those cases, it might be possible to accept more than one of the bids for the product.

## Award contracts to farmers

Download the sample contract form in Appendix D and adjust wording for your program. Fill in a contract form with the information for each bid awarded. Send the contract forms to the farmers, with a request for them to sign and return the contract by a chosen date.

When signed contracts are received from the farmers, file those along with your Informal Procurement Logs.

At this point you can make a public announcement about contracts awarded.

## Monitor deliveries and deal with any difficulties

Inevitably, issues will arise. Most farmers will make a good faith effort to meet their obligations, but -- farmers may have crop failures, delayed ripening of a crop, or problems with insect or hail damage, to name a few potential issues. Livestock farmers may have trouble getting processing scheduled; butchers are often booked far in advance.

Flexibility on all sides will be helpful. Some options for dealing with delays, crop failures, and scheduling problems:

* Delay a planned local meal date by a week or two
* Contact a farmer who wasn’t awarded a contract to see if they can make up a shortfall in product
* Swap a planned local food menu with a different date’s local food menu
* Supplement with non-local product

Have a plan in place to deal with anything that looks like intentional breaking of contract, situations where quality is poor or other required standards are not met.

Meat deliveries require particular monitoring. All meat packages must have the USDA or Minnesota Equal-To inspection symbol. A good practice is to take photos of the packages to verify the presence of the inspection symbol. Any meat delivered without the inspection symbol on the package is not an approved source, and must be rejected.

## Document and celebrate success

School boards and other organization administrators want to know if the extra money and effort they have approved for local food procurement is worthwhile. Starting early to collect benchmark data and then documenting the program as it unfolds are useful activities for building a long-term program with strong support.

Some types of data to collect:

* Number of students choosing to eat the local food lunch
* Number of staff and faculty choosing to eat the local food lunch
* Income from the local food lunch (e.g. school staff or community members paying full price to eat a local food lunch at the school)
* Plate waste
* Surveys of eater satisfaction with the meal
* Cost of the meal
* Volunteer hours associated with sourcing and preparing local food
* Grant funds received
* Dollars returned to the community through payment for local food

See Appendix E for an example of some data collected early in the Rippleside Elementary Farm2School program in Aitkin, MN:

http://misadocuments.info/ AppendixE\_Farm2School\_data\_Sept-Dec2015\_Rippleside\_Elementary\_Aitkin\_MN.pdf

Report your data to your community. Ask farmers, parents, and other advocates to attend presentations of the data and speak to their experiences with the program. Make a video. Show a PowerPoint. Put up posters. Write an article for the local paper.

Congratulate and thank all involved!