



# Building Critical Food System Infrastructure for Farmers and Communities

The Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative (WFHC) is a farmer-led cooperative owned by the producers and the Wisconsin Farmers Union. The Co-op started sales in 2013 with 11 founding members and now has over 50 farm members across the state. The WFHC is dedicated to securing profitable markets and reducing costs for our farmer-members. The Co-op makes it easy for the retail, institutional, and foodservice sectors to buy locally.



## Aggregation & Refrigerated Storage

The Co-op operates a 9,000 ft<sup>2</sup>+ refrigerated warehouse outside of Waupaca that is used for aggregation and distribution of both member and non-member products.



## Refrigerated Transportation

In 2018, due to increasing difficulty in finding available and affordable refrigerated transport for our member product, WFHC founded a transportation enterprise to run our own leased trucks. In addition to transporting member product to buyers we are also able to provide contracted services to move non-member product to buyers and into other outlets, such as the food bank and food pantry system.



## Strengthening Our Food System

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic disruptions showed us clearly the brittle nature of our food system. WFHC has been able to work collaboratively with emergency food system partners to engage the warehouse and transportation infrastructure that the co-op members have built to distribute dairy products, as well as proteins and fresh produce as part of the U.S. federal and state initiatives and allocations.

## Products & Services

**WFHC provides the following services for farmer members:**

- Marketing & Sales
- Accounts Payable/Accounts Receivable Management
- Post-Harvest Cooling @ Waupaca Warehouse
- Logistics and Transportation Services
- Guidelines & Training for Food Safety Certification (GAP, FSMA, etc.)
- Assistance with Wholesale Retail & Foodservice Specifications
- \$10 Million Umbrella Liability Insurance Coverage for member product

The WFHC works as a group of farmers to access wholesale markets they could not easily access alone. The WFHC sells over 50 different products, both conventional and certified organic. Member-product sold by the WFHC is harvested and packed according to U.S.D.A. grade #1 specifications, unless otherwise specified by the buyer. Farmer-members receive assistance in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification in line with buyer requirements. Farm identity is maintained from the farm to the end buyer.

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## Background Information on WFHC Activities in Food Access and the Emergency Food System

In addition to the services that WFHC provides for its farmer members to sell and move product from farms to more standard market channels (grocery retail, distributors like Sysco and Heartland, direct sales to business cafeterias), WFHC has stepped up as a key partner and collaborator in a number of state-wide programs to build a more robust food system, supporting farmers to get their products into wholesale markets, including food assistance programs. This has resulted in national and regional recognition for the important work of the Cooperative. Highlights include:

- Tara Roberts-Turner, founding farmer and General Manager, received a special invitation to present WFHC's work at the September 2022 **White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health** (Conference videos, <https://sustainability.virginia.edu/blog/white-house-strategy-end-hunger>, Charlie Berens Cripecast Episode 121 on White House Conf. on Hunger and Nutrition.)
- WFHC's position as key infrastructure for local food system development was featured in a recent **Ambrook news report**, "A co-op of Wisconsin farmers now has its own trucking company — which could be one small way to shore up America's ailing food supply chain."
- The **Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Local Food for Schools (LFS) program**. WFHC has become a trusted partner for schools in connecting farmers to school food service programs, getting local, nutritious food to students. LFS funding continues and also WFHC is building relationships for schools to buy directly outside of the LFS funding as well.
- Pilot program with the **Wisconsin Early Childhood Education (WECA) program to get boxes of local, nutritious food to pre-schools and nursery schools**. A USDA Value Added Producer Planning Grant has allowed WFHC to work closely with Kitchen Table Consultants and their transport logistics consultant to do route optimization for this box program. This allows the co-op to fully understand the true costs of a box program, with small orders and small transportation drops. The plan is to apply for a full VAPG grant in May 2024 to further support this work.
- WFHC has been a **key coordination and logistics partner, along with Marbleseed, WFU, and DATCP in the USDA funded DATCP Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program**. The LFPA is focused on BIPOC and historically underserved farmer populations and supporting these farmers in getting local food to the food assistance programs across the state (food banks and food pantries). (LFPA website maintained by WFU, WisPolitics story)
- **Tribal Elder Food Box Program** getting culturally appropriate and fresh local food to tribal elders through a household box program. WFHC is a foundational partner and provides the key aggregation and distribution services for this collaboration with all 11 tribes of Wisconsin, Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin and other partners. WFHC has also been providing advice to the tribes as they investigate a tribal cooperative entity. <https://greatlakesintertribalfood.org/>, <https://feedingamericawi.org/tribal-food-security/>
- WFHC is a **partner in a FairShare CSA Coalition Local Food Promotion Program grant** to support CSA farmers, especially HMoob and other BIPOC farmers, as they examine CSA and wholesale markets. WFHC staff participated in a technical assistance field day for HMoob farmers in Wausau in August, providing information for farmers on tips and tricks for projecting fresh produce production from field to box to market.

*Please join us at the table*

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