

Outreach Efforts at Standardizing Farm to Institution Reporting Metrics

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Abstract

The National Farm to Institution Metrics Collaborative launched an outreach project to develop standardized metrics for tracking the farm impacts of farm-to-institution purchases in 2019. This report describes the project's objectives, outreach efforts, and future direction.

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An Effort to Create Standard Reporting Metrics

In recent decades, practitioners have identified anchor institutions in the United States as strategically important purchasers of local foods. These institutions include K-12 schools, colleges/universities, health care facilities, workplace cafeterias, correctional facilities, food banks, and senior care facilities. While stakeholders refer to such sourcing efforts as “farm-to-institution” (FTI) programs, 1) institutions typically use intermediaries to buy local foods and 2) not all food that institutions consider “local” use ingredients from proximate farms. Standard metrics can increase the consistency and transparency in FTI program reporting. They are preferable to ad hoc approaches because they can 1) support the comparison, aggregation, and evaluation of FTI programs across sectors and regions and 2) reduce the transaction costs of distributors in tracking product attributes.

To address this issue, the National Farm to Institution Metrics Collaborative (the Collaborative) launched an initiative to develop standardized metrics for classifying the farm impacts of FTI purchases. The Collaborative consists of nearly 100 FTI organizations, institutions, and agencies from across the United States that share information on data collection efforts, emerging market trends, and evaluation techniques. The project commenced in 2019 via a cooperative agreement supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service. The project was guided by a Pilot Steering Committee of 11 members representing government agencies, universities, and nonprofit FTI organizations with wide-reaching networks.¹

The project’s goal was to create an integrated suite of farm impact indicators that can provide greater details about local food purchases than a “local/non-local” binary indicator variable. The Committee designed the metrics so they can be applied to item-level invoice data. For each food purchase, the metrics provide insight into 1) the supplier’s business type and ownership structure, 2) whether the food product used ingredients from local farms and whether they can be traced to specific farms, 3) the product type, and 4) the market channel that the institution used. The Committee did not propose standard definitions for “local food” or values-based criteria, like “good food” or “real food,” so that the metrics can be used as widely as possible.

Outreach Strategy and Next Steps

The project’s first outreach presentation occurred at the 2020 National Good Food Network Conference on March 10. While attendees provided positive feedback at the workshop, the pandemic began abruptly disrupting FTI markets as the week progressed. However, despite the distress that the pandemic imposed on FTI markets, the project has remained relevant due to the

¹The Pilot Steering Committee members include Lilian Brislen (Food Connection at the University of Kentucky), Julie Brewer (USDA Food and Nutrition Service), Ashley Chaifetz (USDA Food and Nutrition Service), Hannah Leighton (Farm to Institution New England), Colleen Matts (Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems), Colleen McKinney (Center for Good Food Purchasing), Jeffrey O’Hara (USDA AMS), Emma Sirois (Health Care Without Harm), Lacy Stephens (National Farm to School Network), Nora Stewart (Community Health Improvement Project), and Tina White (Real Food Generation).

continued demand of consumers for local foods and increased interest in improving traceability in the food supply chain.

To support the dissemination of the metrics, the committee created a website that includes the following: 1) two video tutorials, 2) a summary document of the metrics, 3) a question-and-answer section for background context, 4) a guide that helps institutions implement the metrics, 5) a tracking template and reporting calculator, and 6) a background report that describes how the committee developed the metrics (Brewer et al. 2020). Committee members presented the metrics at virtual workshops and webinars throughout the fall of 2020, and plan to continue doing so in 2021. USDA staff has presented the project findings to active Local Food Promotion Program grantees and also plan to do so with Farm to School grantees.

The project committee has received feedback from dining service providers expressing interest in developing standard metrics for local food purchases. So, the project committee is seeking institutions and distributors that will pilot and ground-truth the metrics in order to assess whether they can be deployed more widely. This step is important because institutions need to demonstrate a commitment to these proposed metrics before intermediaries implement tracking systems. In this vein, the metrics may assist the “Anchors in Action” national cross-sector collaboration between Health Care Without Harm, the Real Food Challenge, and Center for Good Food Purchasing. This multiyear collaboration is seeking to align standards and food tracking systems for numerous criteria across municipal governments, hospitals, schools, and universities.

Reference

Brewer, J., L. Brislen, A. Chaifetz, E. Sirois, H. Leighton, C. Matts, C. McKinney, J. O’Hara, L. Stephens, N. Stewart, and T. White. 2020. *Establishing Standard Farm to Institution Reporting Metrics*. Minneapolis, MN: Terra Soma LLC. Available online: <https://ftimetrics.localfoodeconomics.com/>.