



RURAL GROCERY INITIATIVE
JUNE 2025

CASE STUDY

FARM TO FREEZER



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	03
Executive Summary	04
Introduction	06
Historical, Geographic, and Economic Context	07
Origins of Farm to Freezer	08
Growth and Evolution	10
Operations	12
Diagram of Model	14
Impact Summary	15
Overcoming Challenges	16
Key Findings and Lessons Learned	17
Conclusion	19
About the Project	20
References	21

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was developed through a collaboration between the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University (RGI) and USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). It is part of a larger research project, “Local Sourcing Innovation in Independent and Locally-Owned Groceries.” Funding was provided through USDA Cooperative Agreement No. 23-TMLRF-KS-0021.

This case study was researched and written by Jacob Miller-Klugesherz and Erica Blair with RGI. Review and editing were provided by the research project team: Rial Carver, Clara Misenhelter, and Samuel Baumer (RGI); and Maria Graziani, Americo Vega-Labiosa, Evan Rakshys, and Danielle Barber (AMS). Design services were provided by Natalie MacDonald with Acevox.

We would like to give special heartfelt thanks to the individuals who agreed to speak with us so that we could share the story of Farm to Freezer. We also would like to thank members of the project advisory committee for their thoughtful feedback throughout the larger research project: Bill Brinkerhoff, Argus Farm Stop; Charlie Michel, Mission West Community Development; Deborah Rausch, USDA Rural Development; Diana Endicott, Good Natured Family Farms; Kameko Nichols, Common Market Southeast; Lauren Horning, FreshPoint; Liz Abunaw, 40 Acres Fresh Market; Margaret Bau, USDA Rural Development; Mary Hendrickson, University of Missouri; Meegan Moriarty, USDA Rural Development; Nikki Seibert Kelly, Growing Local South Carolina; Roberto Mesa, East Denver Food Hub; and Robi Fauser Fink, USDA Rural Development.

Photos throughout the case study are courtesy of Farm to Freezer.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Established in 2014, Farm to Freezer is a for-profit processing company that freezes organic and conventional fruits and vegetables grown in the Great Lakes region in order to extend the availability of local food year-round. The company's products are sold throughout the year at various outlets, including grocery stores, restaurants, schools, and hospitals.

This case study demonstrates how midsize processing infrastructure enables greater availability of local food in grocery stores and other outlets, therefore bolstering the local food economy. By sharing the evolution of Farm to Freezer and lessons learned along the way, other businesses and organizations will be better equipped to implement similar projects in their own communities.

OVERVIEW OF FARM TO FREEZER

LOCATIONS — Traverse City, Detroit, and Grand Rapids, Michigan

OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE — For-profit corporation

YEAR ESTABLISHED — 2014

KEY PARTNERS — Eastern Market, USDA, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, small and midsize local producers, processors

PROBLEM — Michigan has a short growing season that produces a bounty of fruits and vegetables, but there are few midsize processing and freezing facilities to extend the availability of local food

SOLUTION — Farm to Freezer was established to freeze local produce that can be sold to grocery stores, restaurants, and schools throughout the year

KEY OPERATIONS — Local food processing and freezing

INCOME SOURCES — Sales to wholesale customers

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Business Model and Operations: Farm to Freezer is a formerly nonprofit-turned-for-profit business that sources and freezes locally grown fruits and vegetables for distribution to grocery stores, schools, universities, and hospitals. The initial concept was developed to improve a local school lunch program. It then became a workforce development initiative of a nonprofit organization and began selling to wholesale accounts. From there, the initiative transitioned into a for-profit company so that it could expand across the state of Michigan.

Financial Strategy: Grants have allowed Farm to Freezer to remain a midsized processing company. Without this support, the company would have been required to invest in much larger infrastructure to achieve economies of scale, leaving small and midsized farmers behind. By 2024, the company had \$1.5 million in gross sales. Farm to Freezer products were sold to more than 300 grocery stores and 200 institutions, including schools, universities, and hospitals.

Equipment, Technology, and Infrastructure: Farm to Freezer can process between 500 and 2,000 pounds in a single run, which is a relatively small volume in this industry. The scale of Farm to Freezer's equipment enables partnership with specialty crop farmers who produce quantities that are too small for larger processors to accommodate.

Product Offerings: Michigan farmers produce more than 300 commodities, providing Farm to Freezer with easy access to a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. In 2024, the company processed over 500,000 pounds of produce. The company currently offers 21 frozen product varieties, both organic and conventional.

Partnerships and Community Engagement: Farm to Freezer maintains direct relationships with wholesale customers, not just the distributors who pick up product from their facilities. This makes the company more resilient to shocks in the supply chain. Independent retailers are important partners because of their consistent demand and willingness to be flexible and try new products.



INTRODUCTION

Farm to Freezer was established in 2014 to extend the availability of locally grown fruits and vegetables in northwest Michigan. Ten years later, its products can be found in grocery stores, schools, universities, and hospitals across the entire state.

Originally a workforce development initiative of a nonprofit organization in Traverse City, the frozen food processor transitioned to a for-profit company so that it could expand and meet the growing demand for local food. As of 2024, the business had facilities in Traverse City, Detroit, and Grand Rapids, and it started expanding into the Great Lakes region.

Many areas of the country, like Michigan, have short growing seasons. To keep local food available for independent grocery stores and other outlets year-round, food preservation methods – like canning, drying, and freezing – are needed. However, there is often a lack of processing infrastructure designed to support smaller volumes of specialty crops. Farm to Freezer is one example of a company that fills this critical gap.

This case study examines how Farm to Freezer scaled to meet the growing demand for local food and the impact it has had on regional food systems. It provides an overview of how the company was established, how it evolved over time, key business operations, challenges, and lessons learned along the way. By sharing the story of Farm to Freezer, other businesses and organizations will be more equipped to implement similar processing initiatives that increase the availability of local food in independent grocery stores and other outlets.



HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHIC, AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The state of Michigan is located in the Upper Midwest and touches four of the five Great Lakes. As of 2024, it had a total population of roughly 10 million people.¹ The Detroit metro is the most populated area, followed by the cities of Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, and Lansing.²

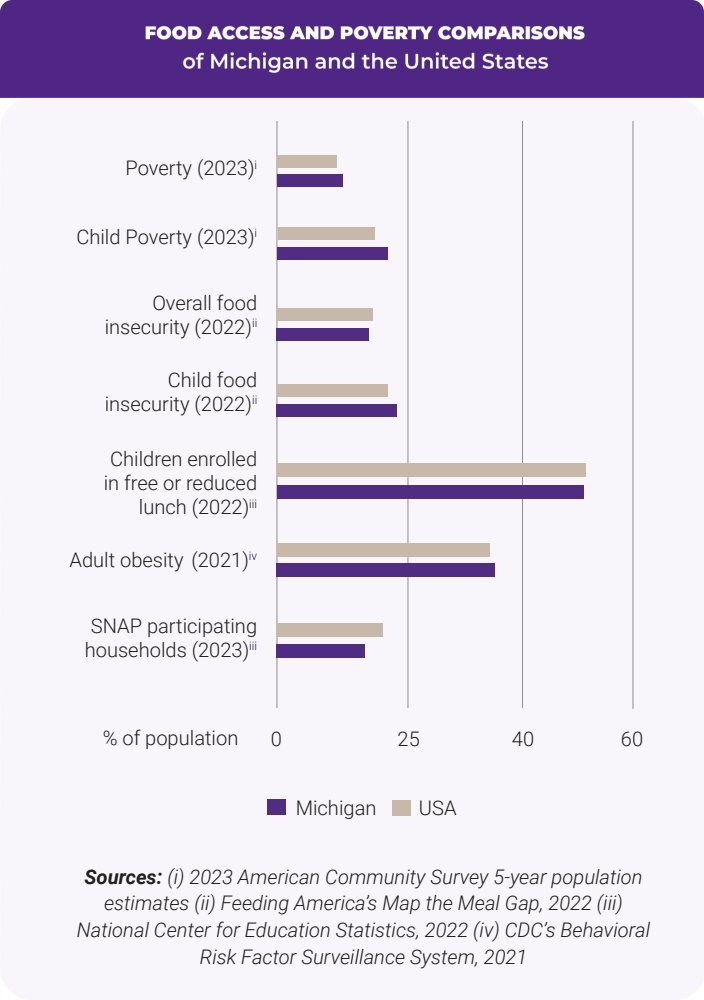
In 2023, the median household income in the Michigan was \$71,149. When compared to the rest of the United States, Michigan has a slightly lower median household income, a slightly higher poverty rate, and a lower rate of people who have obtained their bachelor's degree.¹ The state has a long history of being a national leader in manufacturing across a wide range of industries, including automotive, food and beverage, bioscience, defense, and more. As Michigan's largest economic sector, manufacturing

employs over 613,000 people.³ The majority of U.S. auto production occurs in the state.⁴

Michigan also boasts being the second-most agriculturally diverse state in the country, producing more than 300 commodities.⁵ Almost 10 million acres are used for farming, with corn and soybean crops dominating.⁶ The state grows more tart cherries, asparagus, cucumbers, squash, and dry beans than anywhere else in the country. It is also a leader in the production of blueberries, apples, and pumpkins.⁷ Connecting to the state's robust manufacturing legacy, more than 2,000 food processors operated in Michigan in 2016.⁵ The Michigan Good Food Fund, a statewide financing program, has invested over \$22 million in food and farm entrepreneurs since 2015 to help grow the state's food economy.⁸

DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS of Michigan and the United States		
VARIABLE	MICHIGAN	USA
Population	10,051,595	332,387,540
Median household income (in 2023 inflation-adjusted \$)	\$71,149	\$78,538
Median age in years	40.5	39.2
% of population under 18, over 65	21.4, 18.2	22.2, 16.8
% of population 25 & older who earned a bachelor's degree or higher	31.8	35.0
Race/ethnicity, as a percentage of the population:		
White	74.78	63.44
Black	13.40	12.36
Asian	3.28	5.82
American Indian and Alaskan Native	0.46	0.88
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander	0.03	0.19
Two or more races	6.30	10.71
Some other race	1.80	6.60
Hispanic or Latino	5.70	19.00

Source: 2023 American Community Survey 5-year estimates





ORIGINS OF FARM TO FREEZER

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In 2011, Brandon Seng was managing a farm-to-school lunch program for a private Catholic school in Manistee, a rural town in northwest Michigan. Between June and August, when school was out for the summer, farmers had an abundance of produce to sell. When school was in session, however, local sourcing was more challenging due to Michigan's short growing season: on average, there are only about 140 days between spring frost and fall frost, when most plants grow.⁹ Northern Michigan has an even shorter growing season due to its long, cold winters.¹⁰

To extend the availability of local food year-round, Seng began freezing produce using the school cafeteria freezer.¹¹ News of the farm-to-school lunch program spread, and soon other school districts began calling to ask if they could buy frozen Michigan produce for their lunch programs, too. Since the school was processing as an end user and not as a wholesaler, they could not fulfill these requests. Still, there was obvious demand for frozen Michigan produce, and expanding into the wholesale space was the next logical step.

FIRST STEPS

Through the farm-to-school lunch program, Seng met Mark Coe, a local farmer who managed a 1,400-acre diverse specialty crop farm. Seng and Coe shared a vision for creating a frozen product line of Michigan grown fruits and vegetables, and they began working together to make it a reality. In 2013, they pitched the idea to Goodwill Industries of Northern Michigan, whose 4,000 square foot manufacturing facility in Traverse City contained a commercial kitchen with a small refrigerator-style blast freezer and cold storage. This space would allow them to expand capacity and fulfill wholesale orders. Goodwill also managed a workforce development training program for individuals with barriers to employment, and this could be another opportunity to provide hands-on training in the food industry.

Goodwill liked the concept, and "Michigan Farm to Freezer" was born as an initiative sponsored by the nonprofit. Additional equipment was purchased using a \$100,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD), and Rotary Charities of Traverse City provided a \$250,000 low-interest loan to purchase product from local farmers.¹²

“While Michigan is an agricultural powerhouse in terms of diversity of crops, our growing season is very short. So to eat year-round Michigan product, we need season extension initiatives. And that’s what Farm to Freezer is. It’s less food manufacturing and more season extension, providing folks the opportunity to eat local in the wintertime when there are no Michigan crops available.”

Brandon Seng

Co-Founder of Farm To Freezer

Farm to Freezer started partnering with a handful of farmers to purchase their oversupply and “seconds” – produce that did not pass visual standards for the retail market. Often, Coe traveled across Michigan to pick up products and bring them back to the facility in Traverse City. Other times, farmers dropped off their own product. Employees then chopped, blanched, and froze produce to maintain ideal shape, color, and taste. As wholesale orders were received, they packaged product into transparent plastic bags. Initially, Coe and Seng handled deliveries on their own. Eventually, as operations scaled, distribution companies also picked up from the facility and delivered to their network. Typically, 4-6 employees staffed the facility at any given time, although roughly 20 trainees graduated from the workforce development program each year.

Farm to Freezer’s first large institutional contract was to provide Grand Traverse Area Public Schools with 40,000 pounds of frozen asparagus. Seng knew firsthand the challenge of serving high quality, nutritious meals using the limited federal reimbursement rate, so he wanted to sell Farm to Freezer products at a price these customers could afford.¹³ To help minimize what they charged to schools, Farm to Freezer began selling to grocery stores and restaurants with a higher price point. Those higher margins helped subsidize school lunch budgets, so that districts with fewer resources could still offer high quality local produce.

The first grocer Farm to Freezer approached was Oleson’s Foods, whose five grocery stores in Northwest Michigan were known for promoting and selling local produce. The owner agreed to pilot their products in two stores. A few weeks later, the retailer called back, saying Farm to Freezer products were “moving like crazy” and he wanted them in all five stores. Additional equipment would be needed to accommodate this request, however. The Oleson Foundation generously gifted \$20,000 so that Farm to Freezer could purchase another truck and roll-in blast freezer.

Farm to Freezer’s sales increased year over year, seeing the greatest growth after expanding into organic produce. They had \$9,000 in gross sales in 2014, which rose to \$450,000 in 2017. By then, they were working with roughly 30 small- to mid-sized Michigan farmers, and their products were available in nearly every school and grocery store across northwest Michigan. Seng and Coe realized that if they wanted to accommodate increasing demand from producers and customers, they would need to expand.





GROWTH & EVOLUTION

In 2017, Seng and Coe attended a Pure Michigan Business Connect event that brings together buyers and producers. There, the two connected with Eastern Market Corporation in Detroit. Since 1891, this historic six-block commercial district has featured one of the largest public markets in the country and supports hundreds of food businesses in wholesale, retail, processing, and distribution.¹⁴ Eastern Market was excited by the Farm to Freezer model and wanted to replicate it. After touring the Traverse City facility several times, the corporation received an \$800,000 Community Economic Development Healthy Food Financing Initiative federal grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and offered part of it to entice Farm to Freezer to the district.

Given that 80% of Farm to Freezer's potential customer base lived outside of northern Michigan, with the greatest population density surrounding Detroit, Seng and Coe agreed.

They identified a 14,000-square-foot warehouse in Eastern Market that had been vacant for a decade, retrofitting it with a processing area, packaging room, and storage freezer that holds over 500 pallets at -10°F. The facility uses a 500-square-foot Individual Quick Freezing (IQF) technology that can process 1,500 pounds per hour.

Farm to Freezer officially moved to Detroit in 2018, though they maintain offices and some storage space in Northwest Michigan. distribution still occurs at a facility in Northwest Michigan. Seng purchased the brand and transitioned it to a for-profit LLC. Coe became Farm to Freezer's general manager.

Because this business model requires that all inventory for the entire year is purchased during the short growing season, the company faced substantial upfront costs each year. Purchase of inventory was financed through bank loans, which were repaid through sales revenue. As the business grew, so did the size of these loans. So, in 2021, Seng sold the Farm to Freezer brand to Tamarack Holdings, a holding company that owns various food and beverage businesses, which had larger cash reserves to support the seasonal demands of the business. Coe continued serving as general manager, while Seng now leads Eastern Market's project to build additional infrastructure for wholesaling, processing, and distributing Michigan-grown products.

Demand continues to grow, and the company recently rebranded to "Great Lakes Farm to Freezer" as it begins to source and distribute more in the surrounding region. Now that the Eastern Market facility

has reached full capacity, the company is currently working on an expansion into Western Michigan. By building out a 40,000-square-foot manufacturing space in Grand Rapids, they will have greater access to other states and farms in the Great Lakes region. This processing facility became fully operational in November 2024.



TIMELINE OF

Farm to Freezer

2013

Brandon Seng and Mark Coe develop the concept of Farm to Freezer to extend the availability of local food throughout the year. They pitch the idea to Goodwill Industries of Northern Michigan as a workforce development program.

2014

Farm to Freezer begins operating out of an incubator facility in Travers City.

2017

Farm to Freezer products are sold in nearly every grocery store and school in northwest Michigan. After reaching capacity at the Traverse City facility, Eastern Market Corporation offers financial support to bring Farm to Freezer to Detroit.

2018

After rehabbing a 14,000-square-foot warehouse and acquiring equipment, Farm to Freezer officially moves to the Eastern Market commercial district in Detroit. It transitions from a nonprofit program to a for-profit business.

2021

Tamarack Holdings purchases the Farm to Freezer brand.

2023

Farm to Freezer begins the process of building another processing center in Grand Rapids.

2024

Processing center in Grand Rapids becomes fully operational in November 2024.

OPERATIONS

CONTRACTING WITH PRODUCERS

Farm to Freezer relies on strong relationships with farmers. The majority of their produce is procured through long-term contracts, or occasionally when farmers have a surplus. Coe spreads these contracts across the state's growing regions so that if one region has a weather event that limits production, he can still acquire product in other regions.

When it comes to price negotiations, Coe reminds producers that selling to Farm to Freezer has its advantages. For instance, farmers can save on distribution costs, packing labor, and other expenses. They might not get as high of a price per pound, but that is because Farm to Freezer incurs those costs and purchases a larger volume. Smaller scale farmers may not benefit as much from selling to Farm to Freezer, however, because they lack economies of scale to take lower prices. Farm to Freezer will consider contracting with smaller producers who grow high demand crops, like strawberries. Farm to Freezer also purchases lower volumes of specialty items – like Saskatoon berries, rhubarb, and pawpaw fruit – to keep people excited and talking about the brand.

PROCESSING PRODUCT

Farm to Freezer buys everything they will process and sell throughout the entire year during Michigan's four-month growing season. Products arrive at their Eastern Market facility in one of two ways: either farmers deliver, or Farm to Freezer picks up. Farm to Freezer is more likely to pick up products that are in high demand. Shortly after products are received, Farm to Freezer processes and stores them. As wholesale customers place orders throughout the year, employees pack the produce down into either two-pound bags (12 bags per case) or five-pound bags (4 bags per case).



Using a large-scale blast tray freezing system, Farm to Freezer can process between 500 and 2,000 pounds in a single run. This is a relatively small volume compared to larger processors with nitrogen tunnels that can process 100,000 to 200,000 pounds per run. The Eastern Market facility, then, supports producers who grow smaller volumes of specialty items. This also means Farm to Freezer outsources much larger volumes to other processors who have the infrastructure to chop, blanch, and freeze more efficiently. Once processed, Farm to Freezer buys and stores this product until it is ready to be repackaged for wholesale customers.

DISTRIBUTING PRODUCT

Farm to Freezer currently partners with over ten distributors who deliver their product to grocery stores, restaurants, schools, and hospitals. Distributors arrive at the Eastern Market facility to pick up orders and then deliver to their accounts. Farm to Freezer still does a limited amount of distribution themselves on a case-by-case basis.

Most food manufacturers treat distributors as their primary customers and may have no direct connection to outlets where their product ultimately lands. Farm to Freezer built their model differently, as they maintain direct relationships with wholesale customers ordering their product. Each customer may have different delivery needs or preferences, so they tell Farm to Freezer which distributor they want to work with.

WHOLESALE TO RETAILERS

Seng emphasized that Farm to Freezer must be able to continually supply product throughout the year to hold shelf space at grocery stores. If they suddenly run out of a certain product, “the retailer is taking the tag off the shelf, and we’ve lost that slot...They need consistency.”

When adding a new retailer, Farm to Freezer provides a product list that only includes staples – like blueberries, cherries, and apples – that will always be available. Once Farm to Freezer has a better idea of how their products perform at the new location, they may

offer additional items, like organic sweet potatoes or root vegetable mix. This is part of Farm to Freezer’s ongoing process of balancing supply and demand.

Farm to Freezer provides independent grocery stores with a small merchandizing freezer that is wrapped to look like an orchard box and displays the company logo. Rather than marketing in the freezer section, Farm to Freezer products are located in the produce section. Stores must sell at least \$1,000 worth of product a month to retain the freezers.

According to Coe, Farm to Freezer’s partnership with independent retailers helped the business scale because they are “more willing to work with a new guy” compared to larger chains. Smaller stores are more familiar with specialty products and see greater customer demand for them, too. This means independent retailers tend to be more flexible and willing to adjust. In contrast, larger chains can be more rigid and have more requirements. Farm to Freezer ships little product to the chain’s distribution center, where it can take hours to be received. Payments and reorders take longer, too, which strains cash flow.



GREAT LAKES FARM TO FREEZER

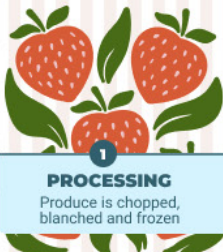
FARMERS

Farmers deliver to Farm to Freezer Eastern Market facility; Farm to Freezer will also sometimes pick up from farmers

GROWING SEASON
Farm to Freezer buys product

Farmers deliver to other processing facilities that partner with Farm to Freezer

EASTERN MARKET FACILITY



1 PROCESSING
Produce is chopped, blanched and frozen

2 STORAGE
Processed product is stored

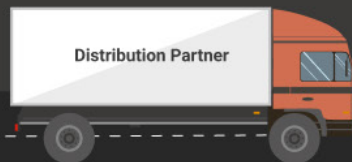
3 PACKAGING
Product is packaged as orders come in throughout the year

GREAT LAKES
FARM
TO FREEZER

Processed product is stored

PROCESSING PARTNERS

REST OF THE YEAR
Farm to Freezer packages products as orders come in



Farm to Freezer does a limited amount of distribution to wholesale customers. **Most often, other distribution companies pick up orders at the facility and then deliver to their wholesale customers.**

DISTRIBUTORS DELIVER PRODUCT
to customers (grocery stores, schools, restaurants, etc.)



RESTAURANT



GROCERY STORE



CHAIN DISTRIBUTION CENTER



GROCERY STORE CHAIN



GROCERY STORE CHAIN



GROCERY STORE CHAIN

2024 IMPACT SUMMARY



\$1.5 MILLION

IN LOCAL FOOD SALES TO
WHOLESALE CUSTOMERS



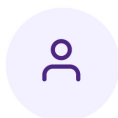
**40+ LOCAL
PRODUCERS**

SUPPLYING TO FARM TO FREEZER



\$1 MILLION

PAID TO LOCAL PRODUCERS



**18 FULL-TIME STAFF
EMPLOYED**



**500+ WHOLESALE
CUSTOMERS SERVED,**

INCLUDING GROCERY STORES, RESTAURANTS,
SCHOOLS, AND HOSPITALS

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Retaining labor has been a challenge for Farm to Freezer. The work is demanding, with temperatures of -10°F in the freezer. The company has developed a process of acclimating new employees to the cold environment, which has helped to reduce turnover, but still the work is not for everyone.

Because this business model is so inventory heavy, cash flow is another challenge. To achieve its mission of extending the availability of locally grown produce, Farm to Freezer must secure and process all product within a very short window. That product is then gradually sold throughout the year until the next growing season. This means a substantial amount of capital is tied up in inventory over a long period of time. While some processors turn over their entire inventory once per week, Farm to Freezer's inventory turns over just once per year. The high upfront costs and slow turnover rate is ultimately why the brand was sold to a larger like-minded company that could financially support Farm to Freezer's growth.





KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

BUSINESS MODEL AND OPERATIONS

Farm to Freezer's organizational structure has evolved over time: what started as a nonprofit workforce development program transitioned to a for-profit entity, which was then sold to another private company. While the ownership model has changed, Farm to Freezer's fundamental mission has remained the same: to make high quality and fresh fruits and vegetables available year-round. Given the enormous customer demand for their product and the capital required to fulfill it, these structural transitions were needed to sustain the company's mission over the long term.

FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Throughout its existence, Farm to Freezer has used several financial mechanisms to grow, including loans and grants. Philanthropic and government support is especially important in maintaining the company's position "in the middle." Without it, the company would need to invest in much larger infrastructure to achieve economies of scale, leaving small and midsized farmers behind. As Seng explains, **"We're able to stay in the middle by having some subsidy on the manufacturing space itself. If we had to build it ourselves, we would have to be very small or very big."** Various strategic partnerships have made it possible for Farm to Freezer to access key financial support, from its early days as an initiative of Goodwill to its ongoing collaboration with Eastern Market Corporation.

KEY FUNDING SOURCES FOR ESTABLISHING THE EASTERN MARKET FACILITY

DATE	FUNDING TYPE	USE OF FUNDS	AMOUNT
2017	Community Economic Development Healthy Food Financing Initiative Grant, Department of Health and Human Services	Warehouse renovation and equipment	\$400,000 ¹⁵
2018	People's Choice Grant, Quicken Loans Detroit Demo Day Contest	Warehouse renovation and equipment	\$25,000 ¹⁶
2018	Convertible Note, Quicken Loans Detroit Demo Day Contest	Warehouse renovation and equipment	\$300,000 ¹⁶
2018	Value-Added and Regional Food System Grant, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development	Equipment	\$125,000 ¹⁷

EQUIPMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The scale of Farm to Freezer's Eastern Market processing facility enables partnership with farmers who grow smaller volumes of specialty items. According to Seng, **"Michigan has a lot of infrastructure for frozen, but it's big infrastructure. What doesn't exist is something in the middle – something very small and in the middle – which is what Farm to Freezer provides."** For example, garlic scapes are difficult to process and have a relatively small load size of a few thousand pounds. This is not a large enough volume for large processors to accommodate, but Farm to Freezer will. As a result, midsized farmers gain access to new market channels like grocery stores, restaurants, schools, and hospitals.

EQUIPMENT & SPACE BREAKDOWN of Eastern Market Facility

USE OF SPACE	SQUARE FEET
Loading Dock	1,100
Processing Room (for washing, chopping, cutting blanching)	2,500
Individual Quick Freezing (IQF) Room	500
Packaging Room	2,500
Holding Freezer	7,000

PRODUCT OFFERINGS

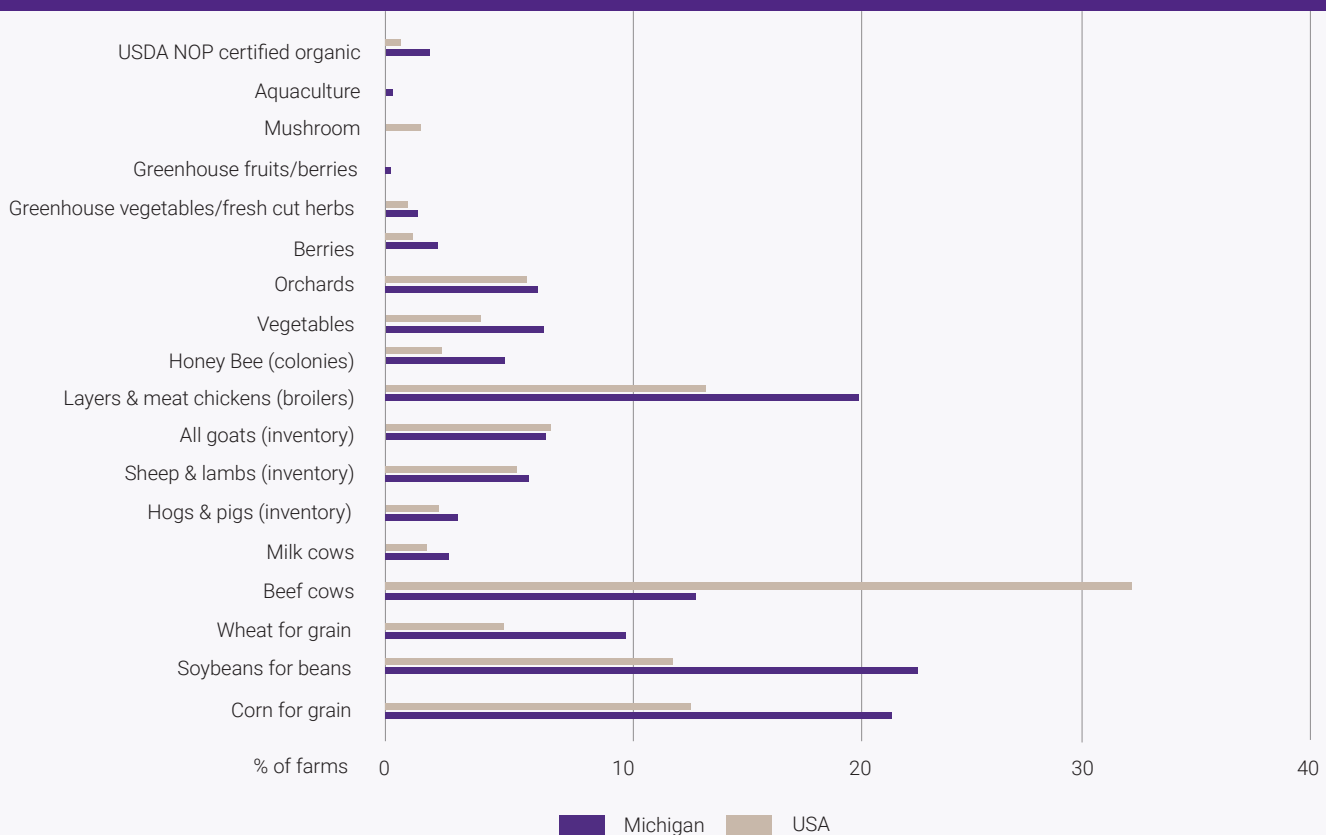
With Michigan farmers producing more than 300 commodities, the state ranks second nationally in terms of agricultural diversity.⁵ The state grows more tart cherries, asparagus, cucumbers, squash, and dry beans than anywhere else in the country. It is also a leader in the production of blueberries, apples, and pumpkins.⁷ Given this agricultural landscape, Farm to Freezer has access to a wealth of fruits and vegetables. As it grows, the company will be able to source

products from neighboring states and share this abundance with customers across the Great Lakes region. Farm to Freezer currently offers 21 frozen product varieties, both organic and conventional.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Unlike many food manufacturing companies, Farm to Freezer maintains direct relationships with wholesale customers, including grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, and schools – not just distributors. While this may take more time and effort, the approach has proven advantageous. For instance, when a large local food distributor, Cherry Capital Foods, closed in 2023, Farm to Freezer was able to swiftly adapt because Farm to Freezer knew where its product went. The company was able to connect with wholesale customers and arrange for another distribution partner to seamlessly reroute their product back into the market. If those relationships hadn't existed, Farm to Freezer could have lost more sales. A customer-first mentality and diversity of partners has made Farm to Freezer more resilient, keeping their product on the shelves.

FOOD ENVIRONMENT COMPARISONS of Michigan and the United States



Source: USDA NASS 2022 Census of Agriculture

CONCLUSION

Farm to Freezer demonstrates the enormous demand and potential for local food systems. While the company underwent numerous transitions over the years to meet that demand, it stayed true to its original mission and maintained its commitment to partnering with small and mid-sized farmers. Collaboration and strong relationships with organizational

partners, farmers, wholesale customers, and distributors have supported the growth and success of this business. The lessons learned from Farm to Freezer aim to provide useful insights to others who are wishing to bolster the local food economy and expand year-round access to local foods in their communities.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This case study is part of a larger research project that highlights innovative models for increasing access to local foods in independent and locally owned grocery stores. Through in-depth explorations of businesses and organizations that are leading the way, we sought to answer the following research question: What lessons can be learned from innovative local sourcing models that could help locally owned, independent, and rural groceries become better integrated into local and regional supply chains? To read other innovative local sourcing case studies in this project, visit www.ruralgrocery.org.

PROJECT TEAM

This research project was carried out through a Cooperative Agreement between the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Funding was provided through USDA Cooperative Agreement No. 23-TMLRF-KS-0021. The Rural Grocery Initiative aims to sustain locally owned rural grocery stores to enhance community vitality and improve access to healthy foods. It does so by identifying, developing, and sharing resources that support grocers and rural communities. The Agricultural Marketing Service administers programs that create domestic and international marketing opportunities for U.S. producers of food, fiber, and specialty crops. It also provides the agriculture industry with valuable services to ensure the quality and availability of wholesome food for consumers across the country and around the world.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was broken into four phases:

PHASE ONE –

In Phase 1, the project team developed a Project Advisory Committee to confirm project goals. The Project Advisory Committee was made up of key stakeholders who convened virtually four times over the course of the project to provide feedback and direction.

PHASE TWO –

In Phase 2, the project team solicited examples of innovative local sourcing models from across the country. As examples were received, the project team conducted preliminary research using secondary sources and saved this data in a catalog. This preliminary research allowed the research team to categorize models and determine which five examples to interview.

PHASE THREE –

In Phase 3, the project team conducted interviews with two to four stakeholders (e.g. grocers, producers, distributors, community organizations, etc.) from each of the five distinct local sourcing models selected.

PHASE FOUR –

In Phase 4, the team drafted in-depth case studies about each model and worked with a graphic designer to develop visuals. These resources were then promoted to partners and stakeholders.

REFERENCES

1. U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Michigan Profile*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/profile/Michigan?g=040XX00US26>
2. Carney, K. (2024, December 17). *Michigan Cities by Population (2025)*. Michigan Demographics. Retrieved from https://www.michigan-demographics.com/cities_by_population
3. Whitmer, G. (2024, October 4). *October 4–11, 2024: Manufacturing Week*. State of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/proclamations/2024/10/04/october-4-11-2024-manufacturing-week>
4. Michigan Economic Development Corporation. (n.d.). *Mobility and Automotive Manufacturing*. Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Retrieved from <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/industries/mobility-and-automotive-manufacturing>
5. Michigan Economic Development Corporation. (n.d.). *Agribusiness*. Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Retrieved from <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/industries/agribusiness>
6. Knudson, W. (2023, June 30). *Farmland Use in Michigan*. Michigan State University College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Retrieved from <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/farmland-use-in-michigan>
7. Pohl, S. (2025, February 27). *Michigan: The Hands That Feed You*. Michigan Economic Development Corporation. <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/news/2022/03/michigan-the-hands-that-feed-you>
8. Michigan Good Food Fund. (n.d.). *A Lending Network for Michigan's Food and Farm Entrepreneurs*. Retrieved from <https://migoodfoodfund.org>
9. Urban Farmer. (n.d.). *Michigan vegetable planting calendar*. Retrieved from <https://www.ufseeds.com/michigan-vegetable-planting-calendar.html>
10. U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2023). *2023 USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map*. Retrieved from <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>
11. Gibbons, K. (2018, January 19). *Value-added processing helps Farm to Freezer create new customers*. Fruit Growers News. Retrieved from <https://fruitgrowersnews.com/article/value-added-processing-helps-michigan-farm-to-freezer-create-new-customers/>
12. Lane, A. (2015, September 13). *Farm to Freezer program reaps income, plants core skills*. Crain's Detroit Business. Retrieved from <https://www.crainsdetroit.com/article/20150913/NEWS/309139989/farm-to-freezer-program-reaps-income-plants-core-skills>



13. USDA FNS. (2013, August 5). *National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates (July 1, 2013–June 30, 2014)*. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/reimbursement-rates>
14. Detroit Historical Society. (n.d.). *Eastern Market Historic District*. Retrieved from <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/eastern-market-historic-district>
15. NEI. (2020). *Farm to Freezer: How this Eastern Market Firm is Freezing Produce to Offer Year-Round Fresh Fruits and Veggies*. New Economy Initiative. <https://neweconomyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NEI-2019-Annual-Report.pdf>
16. Hicks, M. (2018, June 23). *Businesses win \$1.2M in Quicken Loans Detroit Demo Day*. The Detroit News. Retrieved from <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/2018/06/22/businesses-win-1-2-m-quicken-loans-detroit-demo-day/725568002/>
17. Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. (2018). *Agriculture Development Division legislative report: Fiscal year 2018*. Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mdard/documents/boilerplate-reports/fy2018/fy_2018_agriculture_development_division_legislative_report.pdf





Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service
K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.