

Serving New England Farmers

UNH researchers to study Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in New England

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The global pandemic upended how we work and live, and the same was true for America's farmers – especially those involved in direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales. Farmers' markets temporarily shut down, and farmers had to quickly pivot to online sales and delivery services. However, farmers and their many stakeholders began collaborating on exciting new DTC models, spurred by the necessity of keeping their operations – and their livelihoods – running, says [Analena Bruce](#), an assistant professor in the agriculture, nutrition, and food systems department at COLSA and a [New Hampshire Agricultural Experiment Station](#)-funded

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Shopping at the local farmers market may just seem like a good way to

researcher.

"The pandemic accelerated innovation in some of these food distribution models," said Bruce. "And now we're looking at what have we learned, how has consumer buying shifted in terms of DTC sales, and what are the lessons we need to carry forward to help New England's small and mid-sized farmers?"



From left, researchers Analena Bruce, Jess Carson, and Ike Leslie.

Bruce and her team including [Jess Carson](#) and [Isaac "Ike" Leslie](#) were recently awarded two major grants to study alternative food networks (AFNs) – food networks that more closely link farmers and consumers – with a goal of developing AFNs and identifying marketing models that help small- and mid-sized New England farmers. Funding for this research was awarded in 2022 through the [USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education \(SARE\) program](#), and NIFA's [Agriculture and Food Research Initiative \(AFRI\)](#).

"The pandemic accelerated innovation in some of these food distribution models. And now we're looking at what have we learned, how has consumer buying shifted in terms of DTC sales, and what are the lessons we

buy tasty, locally grown food and to meet your neighbors. But with help from the UNH Cooperative Extension, these markets are also sustaining New Hampshire's family farms, protecting land, and supporting the economy.

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What are AFNs and why are they important?

Classic examples of AFNs include farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and farm stands – all of which typically sell directly to consumers. However, newer innovative AFNs – like food hubs – take some of the burden off farmers and reduce the commitment required by consumers to participate. A local food hub example is the [Three River Farmers Alliance](#), a farmer-owned aggregate food hub based in New Hampshire that offers different ways for farmers and craft food businesses across northern New England and Massachusetts to distribute to consumers, as well as to restaurants, grocers, schools, and hospitals. These include home-delivery subscription plans; satellite pick-up locations across New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts; and an online wholesale marketplace with the option for a weekly delivery.

"Your typical direct-to-consumer model requires a lot of time and labor on behalf of farmers – both promoting and running these operations," says Bruce. "And they require a big commitment from consumers in the form of driving to these sites and shopping or picking up the food."

Other disadvantages of DTC food networks include a limited selection of food to choose from and often higher prices than what you find in the grocery store – mainly because farmers are doing most (if not all) their own marketing as part of the operation. AFNs that use more collaborative and centralized marketing provide a more farmer and consumer friendly version of DTC models by adding an intermediary that can aggregate products from multiple farms and help with marketing and outreach.

"Any type of system that aggregates products from multiple farms

need to carry forward to help New England's small and mid-sized farmers?"

and brings them together in an online, convenient, and accessible platform makes it easier for all," says Bruce. "Consumers can order what they want, choosing from various delivery or pick-up options."

And while these collaborative models help make fresh food more accessible, higher prices may continue to be a challenge, especially for smaller farmers who are having to compete with much larger, more mechanized farms and food producers and are hampered by the low prices set by large food aggregators and retailers.

What does the future of AFNs look like?

Analena Bruce discusses research into who shops at farmers' markets and Alternative Food Networks (AFNs)

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As part of her research, Bruce and her colleagues will assess and collect best practices and ideas for collaborative AFNs that overcome some of the logistical barriers of DTC models, such as consumers having to travel to farmers' markets or to pick up their CSA boxes in a limited and inflexible timeframe, limited selections of produce to choose from, and a larger overhead and more marketing work required on behalf of the farmers. Starting fall 2022, they will bring together New England farmers and stakeholders (such as businesses and nonprofits engaged in building collaborative or mediated marketing models) in interactive workshops to discuss challenges and opportunities, develop a shared understanding of best practices and create a community of practice.



Researchers Analena Bruce (foreground) and Ike Leslie (background left) and Jess Carson discussing an upcoming consumer survey on farmers' markets.

Bruce and her colleagues will also survey New England consumers to better understand some of the barriers to participating in DTC markets and the potential of collaborative AFNs for addressing these barriers. The results will build upon survey research conducted in 2021 and [published by the Carsey School of Public Policy](#), finding that more than half of New

Hampshire residents buy local farm food occasionally, but not as part of their regular shopping routine.

"Our earlier work on local farm food purchasing found that 40 percent of survey respondents said there is a 'type of person' who buys local farm foods," says Carson. "Whether people identified as that type was strongly linked to whether they reported buying local farm foods themselves."

Previous research identifies farmers' market shoppers as highly educated, upper middle class, and white. The new survey that Carson, Bruce, and Leslie will distribute further explores the link between identity and food purchasing habits, with a particular focus on folks who don't identify as the typical farmers' market attendees. The goal with this survey will be determining if shopping at farmers' markets just isn't convenient or if non-participants have a mental image of who shops at farmers' markets and that image doesn't match how they see themselves, Carson says.

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"Working to untangle the logistical barriers from mismatches of culture and identity will help us better understand who is missing from the customer base, and whether and how they might want to access local farm foods," she adds.

Bruce identifies those logistical barriers that impact who can and cannot shop at farmers' markets, barriers like higher prices and having to travel to and from the markets.

"But another aspect of farmers' markets that we don't tend to think

foods." about as much is that these venues are also cultural spaces," describes Bruce. "The vendors are typically white, and they have live music and other cultural elements that are reflective of the people who have led, designed, and patronize these markets."

Bruce and her colleagues believe that a typical farmers' market may not necessarily be welcoming or appealing for other demographic populations, like people of color, low-income residents, or LGBTQ+ people. With their survey, they hope to test if cultural identity plays into where people shop and determine if a more culturally diverse farmers' market setting might attract a more diverse clientele. They also want to identify people's perceptions of farmers' markets and other AFNs and whether the marketing messages used to promote AFNs plays a role in if people shop at them.

"There's so much research that's been done on the people who participate in these AFNs, like farmers' markets and community supported agriculture, but it's all focused on the values, attitudes and preferences of the people who shop there – and not of the people who don't," says Bruce. "Our goal is to increase public participation and engagement because that's what's really going to make these markets a viable option for New England farmers, so to do that we need to determine why the people who don't shop at these places choose alternatives. That's what we're hoping the survey can tell us."

Support for the team's collaboration and the 2021 survey questions came from an Interdisciplinary Working Group grant from [UNH's Collaborative Research Excellence \(CoRE\)](#) initiative. Bruce's work is also supported by the NH Agricultural Experiment Station, through joint funding of [USDA NIFA](#), under award number 1024406, and the state of New Hampshire.

[Learn more about Bruce's Food Systems Lab, visit her lab](#)

webpage.

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