



# Profile from the Field

Contact: Marie Flanagan, NCR SARE Communications Specialist  
120 BAE, Univ. of Minnesota | 1390 Eckles Ave. | St. Paul, MN 55108  
ph. 612.625.7027 | f. 612.626.3132 | mart1817@umn.edu

## Supporting a Rural, Regional Food System with an Online Food Hub

**Project Titles:** Supporting a Rural, Regional Food System with an Online Food Hub

**Coordinators:** Christian Flickinger

**Location:** Howell, Michigan

**SARE Grants:** \$7,442

**Duration:** 2016-2018

To read the full project reports, go to <https://projects.sare.org/> and search for project number FNC16-1033.

When a farmers market isn't the answer, what are the options for direct marketing farm products in a rural community? Jacquelyn Zita works with the Women's Environmental Institute (WEI), a nonprofit organization located in east central Minnesota and lives in the small town of North Branch. Back in 2016, WEI had a booth at an area farmer's market, selling a variety of products from local farmers, but they weren't meeting their goals with the booth. They wanted a different way to bring local, sustainably produced food to the surrounding communities, including North Branch. Zita and WEI wondered whether an online farmers market could work in their area. They applied for, and received a SARE grant to develop and implement the idea.

"The specific problem we wanted to address in our two-year grant period was how to put in place a foundation for building an online regional food system with local customers and small scale local farms committed to organic and/or sustainable growing practices," said Zita. "This required an effective increase in rural consumer motivation to buy organic or sustainably grown produce from local farmers through an online service."

WEI recruited farmers interested in online sales, built the website, identified a staff member to coordinate the effort, amplified their social media and promotion



With support from SARE, Jacquelyn Zita (left) and the North Circle Food Hub distributes produce to local consumers, health providers, food-related businesses, and other markets in Minnesota using an online ordering system

activities, and built a customer base, among other activities.

Today, the North Circle Online Farmers Market has more than 22 small local farmers and producers and has 7 drop sites from June-October. Farmers identify and describe their offerings, WEI puts the information online, and customers place their orders from Saturday to Wednesday. On Wednesday, sales close and WEI notifies the farmers about what they have sold, collects the produce at the WEI packing barn, and arranges deliveries of customized boxes to their drop-sites. All

[www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org)

# NORTH CENTRAL SARE

told, they increased sales and more than doubled the revenue generated by and for farmers since 2016.

“One clear and gratifying mark of our success...was amassing the cooperation and dedication of all of these farms working together as North Circle farmers,” said Zita. “This resulted in the creation of a new kind of local farming community.”

---

North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education strengthens rural communities, increases farmer / rancher profitability, and improves the environment by supporting research and education. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed within this product do not necessarily reflect the view of the SARE program or the U.S. Department of Agriculture. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

