



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: Project Management & Coordination Services For Pilot North Central Regional Grocery & Local Food Initiative

Responses Requested by Sept. 15, 2025

The North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives and Rural Development Finance Corporation seek proposals from qualified individuals or organizations for professional project management and coordination services to support a regional grocery and local food systems initiative.

We invite proposals from contractors (organizations, professional service firms or individuals) able to commit to a one- to two-year engagement, beginning approximately Oct. 1, 2025, or as soon as possible.

Based on qualifications, capacity and availability, interested parties may apply to help with all or any components. For example, grocery and local foods components could be split. Other approaches may be considered for dividing the work into manageable tasks or phases.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Aimed at fostering a healthier, more sustainable food system with improved access for small towns, this pilot initiative seeks to reduce wholesale grocery costs and expand markets for local food producers. The planned approach is to facilitate development of cooperative or non-profit aggregation and distribution systems. The work involves cross-sector collaboration, business planning, and systems design that can be tested, refined, and replicated.

The selected contractor(s), consultant(s) or consulting firm(s) will provide professional project management and coordination services to support the development, implementation and early operations of a pilot grocery aggregation and re-distribution and local food hub serving rural communities in an approximate 100-mile radius of Minot.

I. Scope of Work & Key Responsibilities

- A. Rural Grocery Systems Development: To further explore formation of one or more aggregation and re-distribution cooperatives or non-profit organizations to serve rural grocers and communities in north central (and potentially northwestern) North Dakota. The contractor will coordinate efforts to develop shared purchasing and distribution services for rural grocers, including:
 - 1. Confirming interest and readiness among rural grocers.
 - 2. Convening grocers, major distributors, and direct-to-store distributors to evaluate potential collaboration models.
 - 3. Coordinating regular meetings with stakeholders including rural grocers as well as other potential partners.
 - 4. Work with technical consultants on:
 - a) Developing a shared services business plan, including income/expense projections and pro forma financials.
 - b) Identifying potential aggregation sites, necessary infrastructure, equipment and technology (e.g., warehouse or hub-and-spoke configurations, vehicle needs).
 - c) Supporting a financial model and operational cost analysis.
 - d) Facilitating go/no-go decisions among stakeholders and assisting with cooperative or non-profit organizational formation if warranted.
- B. Local Food Aggregation & Distribution: To further explore a local food aggregation, warehouse and distribution co-op or non-profit entity to expand local food access in north central North Dakota by wholesaling foods to area grocery stores, restaurants, schools, hospitals, nursing homes and other food service institutions.

The contractor will support planning for a cooperative or non-profit food hub serving the Minot region and potentially beyond. This includes:

1. Identifying and engaging producers (and processors as appropriate) of locally raised fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy, grains and eggs, and other specialty items such as herbs and honey. This also includes engagement with associated trade organizations and regulatory entities.
2. Determining levels of interest, readiness, and needs in a food hub (e.g. picking up produce from farm and delivering to customers, sales, washing, packaging, light processing, commercial kitchen, training, retail) that related to the facility size, configuration, equipment and other services.
3. Coordinating steering and subcommittee meetings involving producers as well as other local food buyers such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, non-profit partners, and tribal representatives.
4. Coordinating inspirational and informational webinars, tours and a forum featuring co-op models with features that producers may wish to replicate. Ideas include, but are not limited to: Mont. Western Growers, Missoula; Montana Food Hub, Great Falls; Manna in Detroit Lakes, MN; Sprout; Fireweed in Winnipeg, SD Value Added Agricultural Development Center Specialty Crop Aggregation & Distribution Project (vegetable uber).
5. Coordinating local food buyer outreach to grocers, restaurants, schools, healthcare.
6. Identifying food safety and training needs and coordinating relevant technical assistance (e.g., Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Certification, the creation of farm safety plans, and determining any related equipment needs or procedures.
7. Coordinating stakeholder input and planning for cooperative or non-profit organization governance and formation.
8. Work with technical consultants on:
 - a) Supporting volume and market analyses for co-op viability and to inform business planning.

C. Integrated Food Systems Planning & Coordination

The contractor(s) will help align efforts across grocery and local food sectors, including:

1. Developing integrated business models and a shared vision for regional food system transformation.
2. Conducting site analyses for shared-use grocery warehouse and food hub.
3. Overseeing transportation/logistics planning (e.g. optimizing regional local foods aggregation plus distribution routes for both groceries and local foods).
4. Exploring the role of potential owners and/or anchor institutions to support long-term viability.

II. Contractor Requirements & Deliverables

A. Contractors will be expected to:

1. Participate in regular planning and coordination meetings.
2. Connect in person or virtually at least weekly on project activities and progress as well as to receive direction.
3. Provide written monthly activity and progress reports.
4. Schedule and support logistics for stakeholder involvement including stipends and travel for producers and grocers, when appropriate.
5. Maintain documentation of key findings, stakeholder input, and proposed models.
6. Assist with stakeholder engagement and communications.
7. Support NDAREC and collaborators with presentations, reports, and educational sessions as needed.
8. Contribute to identifying risks, gaps, and opportunities across project phases and components.

B. Preferred Qualifications

1. Proven experience managing complex, multi-year, multi-stakeholder community or food system initiatives
2. Knowledge of cooperative and/or non-profit and small business development, rural grocery challenges, and local food systems.
3. Strong communication, facilitation and project management skills.
4. Familiarity with North Dakota's rural landscape and stakeholder ecosystem.
5. Ability to meet in person with various stakeholders frequently throughout the development and implementation phases of the projects.

C. Estimated Commitment

1. Equivalent to 1-1.5 FTEs over a 3-5 year period (2025-2030), with the majority of hours concentrated in the first two years.
2. Flexibility to scale involvement as project shifts from development to active operations.

III. RDFC Roles & Responsibilities

The RDFC is contracting with the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives – Rural Development Center for overall project administration. As such, the NDAREC will:

1. Provide oversight and coordination of all project consultants and collaborators.
2. Manage additional studies (e.g., optimizing truck routes, grocery fair pricing, local food impact, consumer demand/behaviors).
3. Support cooperative education, governance, and formation processes.
4. Lead communications, reporting, and funding strategy as needed.
5. Serve as the fiscal and administrative lead for the initiative.

IV. Timeline & Submission Information

Submit the following by Sept. 15, 2025 to NDAREC Rural Development Director Ellen Huber via email to ehuber@ndarec.com.

1. Summary of qualifications and experience
2. Description of proposed scope, approach and work plan
3. Availability and timeline
4. Desired fee structure including rate per hour and/or total amount for selected scope
5. References

V. Future Project Phases & Anticipated Timeline (for reference)

Implementation: Years 1 to 4

1. Incorporate cooperative(s) or non-profit organization(s) and finalize stakeholder collaboration for joint purchasing, collection, and distribution.

Steering committee, co-ops and/or anchor tenant/organization responsibilities

2. Collaborate with architects to create detailed building plans for construction or renovation.
3. Acquire or lease a facility; design, build, or renovate it.
4. Hire staff or contract services, including management, sales, marketing, and logistics personnel.
5. Implement software and IT solutions for inventory, logistics, and online sales.

Testing (years 4-7)

6. Launch operations of shared-use cooperatives.
7. Evaluate and refine operations to ensure financial sustainability.
8. Develop a replicable regional model for other areas in North Dakota and beyond.
9. Evaluating and sharing impacts, storytelling

See project overview and update for additional information. Questions? Call NDAREC Rural Development Director Ellen Huber, 701-667-6444 or email ehuber@ndarec.com.