NORTHEAST MICHIGAN
HEALTHY FOOD INITIATIVE

2026 NEMI Regional Food Summit

Rural Strategies for Food, Health, and Economic Vitality

Wednesday, September 9, 2026 • UAW Conference Center, Onaway, Michigan • 9:30 AM–6:30 PM

Wi-Fi: Black Lake A/V | Password: Saturn5501!

Morning

9:30–10:00 AM — **Registration, Coffee & Connections**

Arrival, check-in, networking, and time to explore resource tables.

10:00–10:15 AM — **Opening and Welcome**

10:15–11:10 AM — **Opening Panel: Rural Strategies for Food, Health, and Economic Vitality**

Facilitators / Panelists: Wendy Wieland, MSUE/ MSU Product Center; Anne Gentry, Alpena Downtown Development Association; Brent Mikkola, MyMichigan Health; Sam Bailey, Northern Lakes Economic Alliance; Kevin Donner, Mshko'Ode Farm; John Fisk, NEMI Healthy Food Initiative

Breakout Conversations • Morning

11:20 AM–12:20 PM — **Practical Applications of Regenerative Agriculture (Room G)**

Session Description: What is Regenerative Agriculture and how do I do it? Come see three different approaches to farming in a way that heals and protects the land while delivering more nutritious food to the community. From honey and chickens to tree crops to livestock management, you will learn how small changes can result in synergistic whole-farm solutions that support viable farm businesses while restoring health to the soil.

Facilitators / Panelists: Brook Alloway, B&B Farms; Cyndi Apsey, Crazy Lady Farm; Abby Johnson, OxHeights Farm; Laurie Szczesny, NEMI Regenerative Ag Network

11:20 AM–12:20 PM — **Good, Better, Best Practices in Season Extension (Room F)**

Session Description: Three industry representatives will share how growers are setting up hoophouses for specific crop optimization and the NMI climate; how to find the markets that work for your business and how to make the business work for you and your family; and how to scale accordingly and responsibly

Facilitators / Panelists: Erin Caudell, Farmer/Educator, The Flint Ingredient Company & The Local Grocer; Jeff McCabe, Founder, Nifty Hoops; Adam Montri, MDARD Farm to Family Market Development Specialist and former co-owner of Ten Hens Farm (Bath)

11:20 AM–12:20 PM — **Business Development Strategies for Local & Regional Food (Room E)**

Session Description: A strong local food economy can be created through cooperation and coordination between municipalities and state agencies working in support of food and farm entrepreneurs. In this session you will meet both sides of this partnership as they discuss strategies such as agri-tourism, value-added product development, diversifying market channels into schools/early childcare and the supportive business environment needed to make these successful.

Facilitators / Panelists: Wendy Wieland, MSU Extension / MSU Product Center; Cathy Bragg, Bragg Family Farm; David Coveyou, Coveyou Scenic Farm, Petoskey

11:20 AM–12:20 PM

Improving the Human Side of Businesses & Organizations (Room D)

Session Description: Understanding and utilizing a complete HR support system is an important management tool for our business and organizational leaders in NEMI. Within that system, work teams, committee members, volunteers, and their collective supervisors can all benefit from improved people-literacy including the capacity to read, understand, interpret, create connections, and communicate effectively together. Come learn the FUN-damentals of human relationships, sharpen your own interpersonal skills, and apply new ideas and knowledge to your unique situation.

Facilitator / Panelist: Kristine Ranger, HR Professional, NEMI Healthy Food Initiative

12:30–1:40 PM - Lunch & Networking

Enjoy a hot lunch including a range of locally grown products. Use this elongated lunch period for networking, visiting the Resource Tables, or a Curbside Consultant (sign up in advance online or at the registration table).

1:00–1:40 PM - Curbside Consulting

This format is an easy way to have a one-on-one visit with an expert in aspects of food, farming, business, and health. Sign up for a 20-minute session with the professional of your choice. Descriptions of each consultant's expertise are available in your packet and online: Curbside Consulting Sign-Up Sheet

1:00–1:40 PM - Resource Tables

Representatives will be at their Resource Table during this time to answer questions and tell you more about their programs and services. Resource Tables will be open all day.

Breakout Conversations • Afternoon

1:50–2:50 PM

Food as Medicine – Strategies & Local Food (Room G)

Session Description: This session will build a shared understanding of Food as Medicine, spotlight a successful rural program, and feature group discussions about work underway in Northeast Michigan. Participants will hear practical strategies, discuss opportunities and barriers, and connect across sectors to identify actionable next steps for expanding Food as Medicine throughout the region.

Panelists: Bella Pagogna, Produce Prescription Program Director, MI Farmers Market Association; Ruth Ammons, Program Coordinator, Upper Peninsula Commission for Area Progress (UPCAP)

1:50–2:50 PM

Tips and Tricks for Direct-to-Consumer Marketing of Fresh Produce and Value-Added Products (Room F)

Session Description: A panel of speakers will cover development, management, and promotion of Farmers Markets and farm stands including use of nutrition incentive programs (SNAP, Senior Project Fresh, Produce Connection), innovative community events, and effective technology.

Facilitators / Panelists: Dr. Jeff Shepherd, Bonz Beach Farms; Laurie Szczesny, Market Master, Harrisville Harbor Farmers Market & Lincoln Farmers Market; Ashley Hickel, Rogers City Farmers Market; Brianne Hickel, Rogers City Farmers Market

1:50–2:50 PM

Scaling Up a Small Farm-Focused Business (Room E)

Session Description: Growing a successful local food business takes more than making a great product. Co-Owner of Presque Isle Farm Cider, Dion Stepanski will be discussing building a brand, finding

This work is supported by the North Central Extension Risk Management Education Center, project award no. 2024-70027-42470 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture

markets, managing growth, accessing capital, and adapting to the realities of running a small farm-based business.

Facilitators / Panelists: Dion Stepanski, Presque Isle Farm / Presque Isle Farm Cider

Afternoon

3:00–3:50 PM

Closing Panel – Access to Capital, Grants and Technical Support for a Robust Local Food Economy

Description: This closing panel brings together experts in lending, grants, technical assistance, and economic development to help farmers, food producers, retailers, and entrepreneurs better understand the resources available to grow and strengthen their businesses. Panelists will discuss access to capital, challenges unique to rural businesses, common barriers to funding, and the technical assistance that can help turn an idea – or an existing enterprise – into a more resilient and successful business.

Facilitators / Panelists: Molly Stepanski, Presque Isle Farm, Alpena; RJ Archambo, Michigan Good Food Fund; Nate Engle, MI Dept. of Ag and Rural Dev.; Donald Mulson, USDA Rural Development; Colleen Duflo, Northern Initiatives, Molly Stepanski, Presque Isle Cider, Alpena

4:30–6:30 PM

Bonz Beach Farms Farm Tour and Celebration

20706 Bonz Beach Hwy, Onaway, MI 49765

Only 5 miles from the Conference Center, Bonz Beach Farms is a diversified farm with a sugarbush operation, hoophouse production, field grown vegetables and fruit, farm stand and other innovations you won't want to miss. Tour the farm and enjoy light food, beverages and good company!

Scan Here for Google Maps Directions

Thank You to Our Generous Sponsors

This work is supported by the North Central Extension Risk Management Education Center, project award no. 2024-70027-42470 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture

A Message From Our Harvest Sponsor:

United Way of Northeast Michigan

"MDARD's Farm to Family Program is working with partners across the state to create more opportunities for farmers to sell in their communities and to give Michiganders more access to nutritious, locally grown foods," said **MDARD Director Tim Boring**. "The Northeast Michigan Healthy Food Initiative shares that vision, bringing farmers and growers together to build small farm capacity, expand markets for locally grown food and promote policies that improve quality of life for Michiganders."

This work is supported by the North Central Extension Risk Management Education Center, project award no. 2024-70027-42470 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture