



Wholesale Readiness: Understanding Market Access and Technical Assistance Needs of Black, Hispanic, and Tribal Producers

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Introduction

Considering the growing demand for local and fresh foods, access to wholesale markets can provide major economic and social benefits to underserved agricultural producers (Aminetzah et al. 2021; Crook et al. 2023; SFI 2024). Wholesale buyers offer more stable demand and opportunities for sales growth compared to direct selling channels (Low et al. 2015; Zare Mehrjerdi and Woods 2024). This access can spur investment in branding, packaging, food hubs, and value-added products. It also connects producers to schools and government programs that buy local food (Cornelius and Tai 2024; Crook et al. 2023). However, small-scale and underserved producers face many barriers, like strict quality and volume demands, food safety rules, lack of strong buyer relationships, high startup costs, and limited access to land and credit (Callahan and Daniel 2022; Collins et al. 2024). These challenges underscore the need for targeted support to assist Black, Hispanic, and Tribal producers assess readiness and succeed in wholesale markets.

Because underserved producers have long faced discrimination and been structurally excluded from many farming support programs, they need both financial help and tailored technical assistance to address deep-rooted inequalities in agriculture, wealth, and access to resources (Asare-Baah, Zabawa, and Findlay 2018; SFI 2024; USDA Equity Commission 2024). As governments, universities, and organizations work to make the food system

more fair, targeted technical assistance will be key to helping these producers navigate complex systems, recover from land loss, and expand market opportunities. The purpose of this fact sheet is to identify the distinct technical assistance needs of underserved producers for selling to wholesale buyers, such as distributors, institutions, grocery stores, and food hubs.

Survey and Interviews to Understand Wholesale Readiness and Technical Assistance Needs

To better understand the extent of wholesale readiness, challenges in selling to wholesale buyers, and the associated technical assistance needs, the Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation at Virginia Tech, and the Food Systems Action Lab at the Illinois Institute of Technology conducted a survey and follow-up interviews with producers in the Southern, Southeastern, and Great-Lakes region states between December 2024 and March 2025.

This work is part of a larger study that included a review of the current programming available for underserved producers. Additionally, the team conducted interviews with technical assistance providers to examine this issue from a holistic perspective. The results of this work are presented in this fact sheet and aim to provide insight into the

efforts needed to support underserved producers in accessing wholesale markets.

Survey and Interview Findings

We conducted the survey online and received 31 complete and anonymous responses. Among the respondents, 55% were first-generation farmers, 67% identified as Black or African American, 14% as Hispanic, and 19% as Native American. A little over 90% of the respondents earned an annual income under \$50,000 from their farming operations, and it was the primary source of income for only 25% of them.

Figures 1-5 show responses from producers who were selling to wholesale buyers at the time of the survey: specifically, the main wholesale buyers, the proportion of sales, barriers to selling to wholesale buyers, barriers to accessing appropriate technical assistance, and specific programming needs, respectively. Additionally, producers reported having some access to technical assistance on land access and management, sales (e.g., buyer requirements, invoicing), business planning, and farm equipment.

Additionally, the producers reported seeking assistance related to their farm operations from peer farmers (12%), by accessing information online (11%), from local non-profits (11%), family and friends (10%), and university or college (9%). While a majority of respondents preferred to receive technical assistance in person through a trusted trainer or at group events (45%), they were also open to accessing resources online (33%).

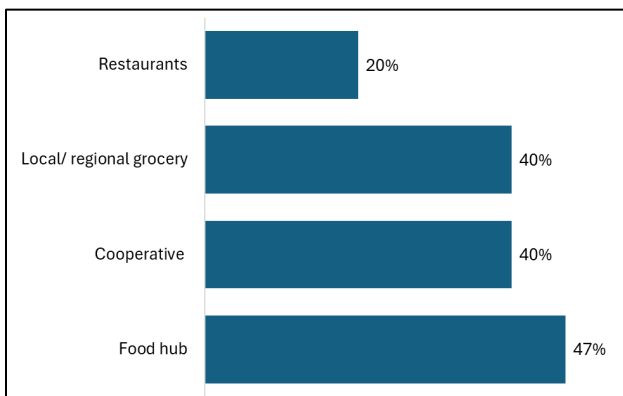


Figure 1. The main wholesale buyers reported on current sales.

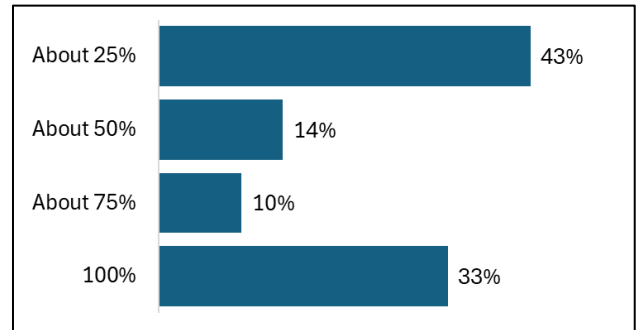


Figure 2. Wholesale as a proportion of total sales reported by producers selling to wholesale buyers.

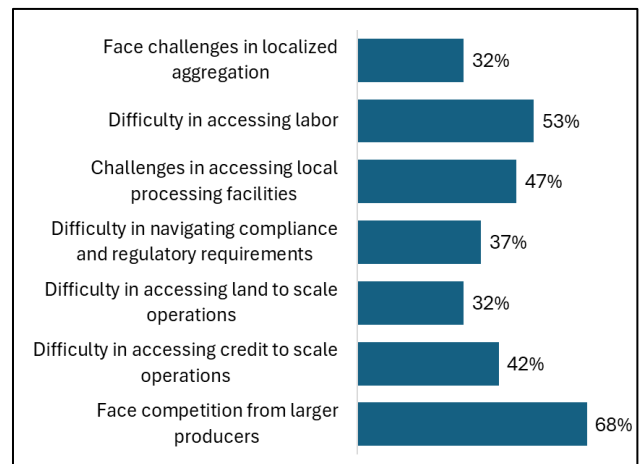


Figure 3. Major barriers to accessing wholesale markets.

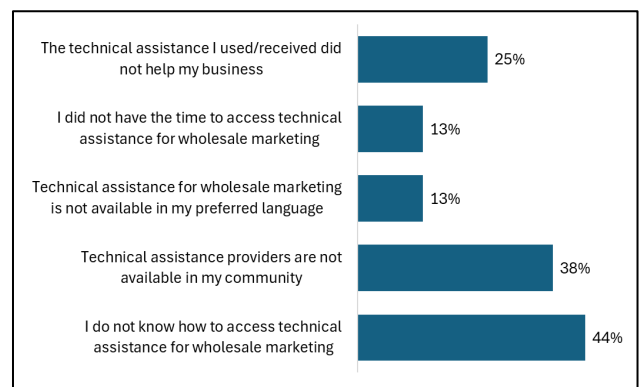


Figure 4. Major barriers in accessing technical assistance for wholesale marketing.



Figure 5. Technical assistance for wholesale marketing that producers would like to access.

In follow-up interviews with eight producers, some highlighted the lack of local processing facilities as a major hindrance to supplying schools (e.g., selling sliced fruit and chopped veggies instead of freshly harvested products). Many highlighted challenges in nailing down the specific requirements and protocols, including the certification requirements and process, the operations data they are required to collect, and contract development. Some producers reported never seeking formal technical assistance and relied on peer networks and farmer groups for knowledge sharing and troubleshooting.

Many producers set up Facebook and Instagram accounts, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, to expand their market reach and have found they can reach a relatively younger population through these channels. This encourages them to keep posting photographs of their operations and the products being sold. Many producers expressed their willingness to grow and sell products that are culturally relevant and environmentally sustainable, and prioritized the needs of community food and nutrition security over profit maximization. However, they often find it challenging to access loans, grants, and appropriate technical support, which adversely affects business viability.

Among producers who were not selling to wholesale buyers at the time of the survey, the major challenges they faced were access to additional finance, lack of transportation and storage facilities, access to additional labor, or uncertainty about the steps to access wholesale markets. Yet, about two-thirds of them expressed interest in expanding into wholesale markets in the future.

Interviews with Technical Assistance Providers

As part of this study, the research team also interviewed 20 technical assistance providers to gather their perspective on these issues, as well as their challenges and needs for better supporting underserved producers. They echoed many of the challenges raised by the producers – regulatory complexity in accessing federal support, limited access to land and finance, infrastructure limitations, and skepticism about federal programming. We list some of the major issues that emerged in the analysis of interview data.

- Wholesale market readiness is affected by operational limitations on leased land and a lack of access to additional land, limited access to operational capital, gaps in access to market data, barriers to navigating the regulatory environment, and insufficient infrastructure.
- Access to technical assistance was being adversely affected due to mistrust in federal agencies, skepticism about funding availability and continuity, little financial assistance that comes along with technical assistance, limited capacity to participate in the programs, and a lack of culturally appropriate material resources.
- Program delivery by the providers was being adversely affected by high workloads coupled with low staffing and financial support, limited availability of topic experts, uncertainty about advocating for certain programs, and cultural barriers that limit engagement.

The providers identified cultural competency, technical expertise, and communication skills as critical competencies for providers in working with underserved producers and for building trust and lasting relationships.

Recommendations

Based on the producer survey and interviews, analysis of technical assistance provider interviews, meetings with the project's advisory group, literature review, and stakeholder engagement, we identified recommendations for TA providers, agricultural support agencies, researchers, and community leaders.

- Tailored capacity building for producers to assess wholesale readiness, particularly

regarding entry points to wholesale markets, regulatory compliance, grant applications, and data requirements.

- Need to develop long-term contracts with producers and ensure a market for their products.
- Investment in regional supply chain infrastructure, like produce and meat processing facilities, packaging and storage facilities, rural broadband, and transportation.
- Support for models of aggregation like cooperatives and online marketplaces for collective sales, as well as options for accessing shared financial resources and land.
- Transparent federal program design, simpler application process for grants, and financial support for expenditures made on grants that involve reimbursement.
- Equitable funding for 1890 institutions, increasing representative staffing in federal agencies that provide agricultural support, and long-term project funding for providers to help them build relationships with underserved communities.

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