



URBAN *Agriculture* LEGISLATIVE NEWSLETTER

Farm Bureau Advocates for Increased Food Access

Locally, food insecurity appears to be trending above U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2023 figures. From January through June of this year, the Greater Chicago Food Depository's network of food pantries and grocery programs averaged more than 200,000 household visits each month, an increase of more than 24% compared to the same period in 2023 (according to a September 4, 2024 statement on the release of the USDA's Household Food Security Report of 2023).

To address food insecurity, in 2022 Cook County Farm Bureau® (Cook CFB) leaders drafted, and Farm Bureau delegates from throughout Illinois approved, Farm Bureau's first ever food access policy.

Generally, the policy supports incentives, including offering tax credits to grocery stores in underserved areas as well as calling for the simplification of permitting and launching new grocery stores.

Cook County Farm Bureau and Illinois Farm Bureau® (IFB) remain actively engaged in conversations and legislation

related to food access. Recently, Farm Bureau has advocated on the following issues:

Property Tax Incentives for Cook County Grocery Stores Located in Food Deserts

Ordinance 22-5345 and follow-up ordinance amendments created a special tax incentive for grocery stores located in food deserts, as well as expansion, renovation, new construction, or re-use of vacant commercial space for grocery stores located in food deserts.

A *food desert* is defined as an area lacking access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy whole foods, due in part to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, or healthy food providers.

In order to be eligible for the incentive, at least 55% of a grocery store's workforce must be employed on a full-time basis.

The ordinance provided for a **property tax reduction for 10 years**. If the incentive is not renewed, it increases to a 15% reduction in year 11 and a 20% reduction in year 12.

Cook CFB actively supported the ordinance, which was approved in October of 2022.



FARM BUREAU:

Empowering
FARMERS,
Strengthening
COMMUNITIES

Food is Medicine

Resolution 23-5456 recognized that access to high-quality food is important in the management and prevention of chronic disease and obesity. The resolution also:

- Created the “Food is Medicine” advertising campaign.
- Built upon existing healthy food programs throughout the Cook County Health System.
- Created a Food Security Program Manager within the Cook County Health System to prioritize equitable food security impact on health outcomes.
- Engaged organizations to provide fresh produce for “Food is Medicine” programming.
- Created a “Food is Medicine” educational interactive website.
- Created a “Food Passport” program in partnership with local restaurants.

Cook CFB actively supported the resolution, which was approved in November of 2023.

Expanded Access to Fresh Locally Grown Foods

P.A. 103-0412 created the Farm to Food Bank Program, which established a permanent market opportunity for surplus products for farmers and expanded food access for communities. Farm Bureau not only assisted with drafting the legislation but also served as a partner for the pilot program, which P.A. 103-0412 was based on.

This program created new pathways for food banks to acquire and distribute fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and poultry, dairy, and eggs to organizations providing free food for those in need, sourced directly from the farmer. Learn more about the program below:

Overview of program



The Food Banks



The Farmers



Statewide Standards for Farmers’ Markets

IFB, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, and the Illinois Farmers Market Association joined together in support of P.A. 102-0862, which created a statewide permitting process for farmers’ markets.



The process provided cost controls for farmers who wished to sell meat, dairy, poultry, and certain pre-frozen meals at farmers’ markets in counties that require a permit.

Prior to this legislation, each county had a unique regulatory framework and varying fees which made it difficult for farmers to participate in farmers’ markets in different counties. By creating uniformity statewide, the legislation encourages participation in local farmers’ markets.

Statewide Grocery Store Initiative

P.A. 103-0561 created the grocery store initiative, which calls on the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to study food insecurity in urban and rural areas and to develop a grant program to assist small and local grocery stores to open in these areas.

The Public Act also created the equipment upgrades grant program and the new stores in food deserts grant program.

The equipment upgrades grant program provided grants for energy-efficient equipment upgrades for existing independently owned for-profit, cooperative, or non-profit grocery stores.

The new stores in food deserts grant program combats food insecurity by offering competitive grants to support the establishment of new grocery stores in food deserts. Farm Bureau supported the Statewide Grocery Store initiative.

Enhanced Donation to Food Banks

P.A. 103-0990 amended the Wildlife Code to allow for the donation of deer meat to a charity or food bank. It provided that if a properly tagged deer is processed at a licensed meat processing facility and if the owner of the deer fails to claim the processed deer within a reasonable time or notifies the licensed meat processing facility that the owner no longer wants the processed deer or wishes to donate the deer, then the deer meat may be given away by the licensed meat processor to another person or donated to a charitable organization or community food bank that receives wild game meat.

Meat processors who donate deer meat or community food bank that receives the meat are required to keep written records of all deer received. Farm Bureau supported P.A. 103-0990.

Agritourism

Farm Bureau recognizes that agricultural tourism serves as an important marketing strategy and also helps to educate the public about where and how food and farm products are grown.

Farm Bureau policy supports:

- Recognizing agricultural tourism as an economic development tool for rural areas and supports public policy that encourages the growth of agricultural tourism.

- Developing and implementing a statewide strategic plan for agricultural tourism with industry input and support.
- Promoting collaborative projects to raise awareness of agricultural tourism to the state's economy and to expand growth opportunities in agricultural tourism for Illinois farms.
- Establishing broader protections for agritourism operators and agritourism facilities or grounds.
- Encouraging the insurance industry to offer insurance policies for agricultural tourism farms to provide farm owners with coverage for nuisance lawsuits, property damage, and liability, including liability for injuries to visitors invited to the farm.

Legislature Eases Liability Insurance Cost for Agritourism

In 2022, IFB and partners worked to give Illinois agritourism businesses some relief on liability insurance costs. Lawmakers passed legislation providing agribusinesses with a \$1,000 state income tax credit for liability insurance premiums.



This pilot program ran for the tax filings of 2022 and 2023 but it has not been renewed for 2024 filings at this time. **IFB continues to work with legislators to establish this program beyond the pilot program. This remains a priority issue for the organization.**

Data from USDA reports indicate that over 50% of agritourism businesses earn less than \$25,000 of income. Yet, according to operators, insurance costs are in the multiple thousands of dollars per year.

The legislation defines agritourism businesses that would be eligible for the liability insurance tax credit and specifies services that would not meet the law's criteria.

Eligible agritourism businesses include those providing historic, cultural, and on-site educational programs, tours, animal exhibitions and petting zoos, crop mazes, U-pick harvesting, horse rides, hayrides, and sleighrides. Under the law, ineligible businesses include those solely offering hunting, fishing, rodeos, amusement rides, off-road biking or motorized activities, outdoor recreation, and serving as wedding and concert venues.

Agricultural Experiences Permitting

P.A. 102-049 prohibited counties from requiring a special permit for agricultural experiences on a farm, as long as the activity is open to the public with the intended purpose of promoting or educating the public about agriculture's benefits to health, economy, and balance of trade.

Agricultural experiences are defined as any agriculture-related activity, as a secondary use in conjunction with agricultural production, on a farm which activity is open to the public with the intended purpose of promoting or educating the public about agriculture, agricultural practices, agricultural activities, or agricultural products. Farm Bureau supported P.A. 102-0492.

Farm Bureau Supports Urban Agriculturalists in Cook County and Illinois

Urban agriculture generally refers to the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban settings. Urban agriculture is an important community resource that improves healthy food access and literacy; offers recreation, education, and economic development opportunities; builds social connections; and provides community revitalization, open space, individual health, and a sense of empowerment in urban settings.

Urban farming has grown by more than **30%** in the U.S. in the last 30 years.

Urban agriculturalists face a unique set of problems largely because of their farm's location on the perimeters of urban and suburban surroundings.

In 2021, Cook CFB proposed, and Farm Bureau delegates approved the Farm Bureau's first urban agriculture policy, which was subsequently incorporated into the American Farm Bureau Federation® policy book and is now national Farm Bureau policy.

Generally, the policy supports:

- Farm Bureau working with units of government to develop agriculture-friendly policies.
- Using land management tools such as land banks, land trusts, conservation easements, and long-term leases on public and private lands so urban agriculture can flourish.
- Ensuring that urban agricultural sites have access to affordable clean water sources.
- Using raised beds or hydroponics to address soil-quality concerns.
- Using season extension tools such as indoor facilities and high tunnels.
- Providing job training and skills development to beginning farmers and garden managers.

Farm Bureau works to build a resilient food system

Farm Bureau understands that food access is vital in communities and that agriculture has a key role in this work. For over a decade, IFB has invested over **\$2.5 million** dollars in developing the Illinois food system.

To assist niche markets, specialty crops, and urban growers, IFB (in partnership with Illinois Farmers Market Association and the Illinois Specialty Growers Association and with assistance from University of Illinois Extension) hosts From Food to Flowers: Everything Local conference every January to connect attendees with educational sessions on production, business development, funding opportunities, risk management, regulation, and more. In addition, attendees have access to a vendor tradeshow.

To further develop market opportunities IFB is the lead organization for the official statewide local food and farm directory, which provides marketing direct to consumers and wholesale businesses.

Farm Bureau also strives to assist urban growers to establish connections and relationships across Illinois. In January 2024, IFB formally launched the Illinois Urban Growers Network. This is a free cohort for all urban growers in Illinois focused on connecting, sharing, and gaining access to resources. IFB provides this service at no cost.

Water District Opens Land Leases to Urban Agriculture

Resolution 24-0817 supported urban agriculture and called on other local units of government to apply for Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) programs to expand and support urban agriculture opportunities.

District programs include:

- Green Infrastructure Partnership Program, which can be a potential funding source for urban agriculture projects that meet MWRD's stormwater criteria.
- Real Estate Program, which makes vacant District real estate available for lease to both commercial and governmental entities, including urban agriculture and community gardens.



“A recent report indicates that approximately 16% of Cook County households experienced food insecurity at some point. Urban agriculture has the potential to connect families with fresh, culturally relevant local produce. By encouraging urban agriculture on suitable MWRD property, the District is helping to move local families down the path

to food security,” said Bona Heinsohn, CAE, Cook County Farm Bureau Director of Governmental Affairs and Public Relations.

Cook CFB supported Resolution 24-0817, which was approved in September of 2024.

Farm Bureau Negotiates Changes to the ‘Farm’ Special Tax Incentive In Cook County

Cook CFB is routinely asked to assist farmers concerned about their property tax assessments. For numerous years, in order for farm property to receive the special tax designation of ‘farm’ the property had to be a minimum of five acres without a homestead, six acres with a homestead. In recognition that farming can occur on less than five acres, Farm Bureau was able to negotiate a reduction in the acreage requirement.

In addition to a change to the acreage requirement, Farm Bureau worked with the Cook County Assessor's Office to revise and modernize the annual farmland affidavit, which is required for property owners to receive the special tax designation. Farm Bureau also worked with the Assessor's Office to ensure that information regarding the special tax designation process was readily available for farmers seeking the designation.

While modernizing and simplifying the tax designation process is beneficial to all farmers, **the reduction in minimum acreage benefits primarily urban and small-scale farmers within Cook County.**



Fields Apart: Rooted Together

This three-part series by Farm Bureau's award-winning video team highlights the diversity of agriculture in our state. Whether it's an entrepreneur bringing fresh produce to a local neighborhood or a large downstate row crop operation working to feed the world, *Fields Apart: Rooted Together* lends faces and inspirational stories to food in Illinois.

To view all three episodes, scan the QR code below.



Chicago Issues Licenses for Urban Growers

Urban growers raising and selling produce in Chicago may be required to obtain one or more City business licenses depending on their business activities.

To sell produce on-site to communities across Chicago, urban growers may need to obtain a Mobile Food License. Produce stand requirements include the following:

- Only produce may be sold from a produce stand.
- Community gardens may only sell produce grown on-site.
- Produce sold from a produce stand on an urban farm or in a community garden must be grown in raised beds or engineered barriers separating the growing media from the naturally formed or deposited soil.
- No urban farm or community garden may have a produce stand if there is also a dwelling unit on the property.

Licenses are available through the Chicago office of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection (BACP). Cook CFB worked with BACP to ensure a smooth licensing process and staff availability to assist growers.

Farm Bureau Supports the Cottage Food Industry in Illinois

P.A. 102-0633 granted cottage food operations access to farmers' markets, fairs or festivals, and other venues to sell their goods. Cottage food operations are vendors that prepare products in a home kitchen. Any time food is taken from raw form to another product there can be risk for food

safety. Given the risk, many products had to be processed in commercial kitchens which adds cost and limits production if a commercial kitchen isn't available for use in a producer's area.



Since 2012, IFB has been working to improve cottage food production through legislation and collaboration with state agencies. In the initial regulation, cottage food production was limited to a small list of items. P.A. 103-0412 expanded cottage food production and created a uniform framework for cottage food businesses to follow.

The legislation also directed the Illinois Department of Public Health to provide statewide guidance for local health departments on the regulation of cottage foods.

Cook County Resolution Supporting Agriculture

In celebration of its agricultural community, the Cook County Board of Commissioners unanimously passed a resolution acknowledging the industry's role in the local economy.

Cook County commissioner Scott Britton, who sponsored the resolution, said that it is the first step in supporting the agriculture community.

"I understand the challenge that comes particularly with family farms," said Britton, who grew up on his family's farm in Central Illinois. He added that the resolution helps "build an understanding of the challenges of modern agriculture" while recognizing the "incredible work that is done through our farmers in Cook County and the state of Illinois."

Illinois is home to more than 71,000 farms, 96% of which are family owned. Agriculture and related industries support nearly 482,000 jobs in Illinois, generating nearly \$51 billion per year.



In addition to traditional row crop farming, there are numerous examples of urban agriculture throughout the county, such as the raising, cultivating, processing, marketing, and distributing of food in urban and suburban settings. Urban agriculture also involves outdoor and indoor vertical farming, indoor warehouse farms, greenhouses, rooftop farms, and hydroponic and aquaponic facilities.

"I think most people don't believe that there is agriculture in Cook County," said Josina Morita, Cook County commissioner. "I think it's important for the Cook County board to recognize that agriculture exists and use our platform to educate residents about agriculture in Cook County, but to me this is just the beginning."

She added, "To me, what comes next is setting goals about how Cook County government can help support agriculture, can help support our local farmers, and help grow the agriculture industry across Cook County."

Adopt-a-Legislator®

Cook CFB is a supportive partner in IFB's Adopt-A-Legislator® program, an educational exchange that seeks to build connections between rural Illinois farmers and Chicago area state legislators. The program matches one legislator with one of our "downstate" county Farm Bureaus for the purpose of building a relationship, helping the urban legislator learn more about agriculture and educate rural members about issues important to those living in an urban area. Through urban district visits, rural farm tours, and other get-togethers, the Adopt-A-Legislator program fosters conversation and understanding on both urban and rural issues. To date, over **75 urban legislators** have participated in this program.



It is vitally important that legislators participating in the Adopt-A-Legislator program have strong relationships with their local county Farm Bureau as well. Cook CFB actively participates in Adopt-A-Legislator visits and partners with our "adopted" state legislators and rural county Farm Bureaus in community give-back programs such as food donations, youth agricultural education activities, constituent farm tours, and more.

For more information on the Adopt-A-Legislator program, please contact Christina Nourie, IFB Northeast Legislative Coordinator, at cnourie@ifb.org or 309-532-2954.

Farm Bureau Partners Through the Adopt-A-Legislator Program To Create Pollinator Habitat



Cook CFB has been working in partnership with Lee County Farm Bureau (Lee CFB), IFB, and Niles Township to convert wasted green space owned by Niles Township into a pollinator rain garden. This garden will increase pollinator habitat in northern Cook County. Recent garden success include:

- Removal of invasive species
- Removal of damaged or diseased trees
- Clearing area for new plants
- Site grading
- Perennial planting
- Installation of temporary educational signs at the site
- Volunteer days

This project is the result of relationships built through Farm Bureau's Adopt-a-Legislator program. State Representative Jennifer Gong-Gershowitz, a Cook County legislator who is "adopted" by Lee CFB, brought the project forward and has been integral to the project's success.

Farm Bureau has made over a **\$20,000 commitment** between financial and in-kind serves in the first year.

Environmental Stewardship

For several years, IFB has made it an organizational priority to lead on environmental issues, continually committing significant resources to support the efforts. In addition to advocacy, policy development, and leadership efforts, IFB works diligently to support farmer and county Farm Bureau-led projects that contribute to the priority areas. The cornerstone of the voluntary efforts is the Environmental Stewardship Grant Programs, including the Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program and the Pollinator Conservation Grant Program. These programs support

member engagement in a wide array of environmental topics, as well as give Farm Bureau many opportunities for connection and collaboration with external partners.

Nutrient Stewardship

Developed in 2015, the Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program engages Farm Bureau in the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. **Through this grant Farm Bureau has committed \$1,150,000 to over 138 projects in Illinois.**



Local efforts include research support and building relationships with local wastewater treatment facilities, including the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.

Research by the Margenot group at the University of Illinois has established that struvite- a slow-release, recycled fertilizer- is a viable phosphorus source for specialty crops, including vegetables. Struvite can meet crop needs while offering a 'double dipping' of phosphorus loss reductions: first at the point source and when re-used as a phosphorus fertilizer. A portion of this research is being conducted on Cook County farms.

Farm Bureau has **invested over \$45,000 in nutrient reduction education and research projects in Cook County since 2021.**



To learn more about agriculture and point source partnerships, scan the QR code.

Pollinator Habitat

For the past four years, Cook CFB through the support of IFB has been engaged in efforts to preserve, protect, and expand its pollinator habitat. In 2021, Farm Bureau installed a community-facing pollinator garden in Countryside. The garden features purple coneflower, swamp milkweed, cosmos, butterfly weed, and zinnia. Recent garden successes include:

- Installation of an educational sign.
- Designation as a Monarch Waystation (waystations are places that provide necessary resources for monarchs).

- Designation as a Monarch City USA to raise awareness of pollinators.



Education & Outreach

Cook CFB with the support of IFB has increased public awareness of pollinators and their importance to agriculture through education initiatives. These initiatives illustrate how Illinois farmers support and protect pollinators.



- Low-cost pollinator seeds to Farm Bureau members.
- Education and promotion event held in partnership with Lincoln Park Zoo, Brookfield Zoo, and additional community partners.
- Education and promotion of farmers' contributions to pollinator habitats through social media and Farm Bureau's member only publication, *Co-Operator*.
- Community outreach programs to expand individuals' awareness of pollinators and the importance of pollinator habitats.

Since 2022, Farm Bureau has invested over **\$14,000 in pollinator projects in Cook County.**

The Healthy Soils Initiative and Saving Tomorrow's Agricultural Resources (STAR)

P.A. 102-0494 called for the Illinois Department of Agriculture to administer and support the Healthy Soils Initiative, meant to guide voluntary strategies to improve the

ability of Illinois farms to increase use of cover crops, strip till, no till, and erosion and sediment control practices. This is another step forward in encouraging agriculture partners to capitalize on conservation practices.

As part of the process, Soil and Water Conservation Districts will assess current cropping systems, best practices, and the funding, staffing, and technical assistance necessary to support farmers across the state as they adopt healthy soil practices.

Additionally, the Department of Agriculture established the STAR program. According to the governor's office, Saving Tomorrow's Agricultural Resources (STAR) is a model program started in Illinois by the Champaign County Soil & Water Conservation District. It provides a free tool for farmers and landowners and encourages the use of best practices and decisions that will reduce nutrient and soil loss on their fields. Farmers are evaluated on their crop rotation, tillage, nutrient applications, and use of conservation practices to generate their overall field score. Farm Bureau worked with stakeholders and supported P.A. 103-0494.

Agriculture's Contributions To The Economy

Illinois is home to more than **71,000 farms, 93% of which are family owned**. Agriculture and related industries support nearly **482,000 jobs in Illinois**, generating nearly **\$51 billion** per year.

Cook County agriculture contributes nearly **\$27 billion to the local economy**, and more than 5% of the county's total workforce is employed by an agricultural-related job, including food handling and processing.

The county's agriculture is also diverse, including vegetable, floriculture, grain, nursery, and row crop production.



Cook County Farm Bureau® and Partners Raise Cash and Food Donations for Local Food Pantries as part of Food Checkout Day

Together with various partners, Cook CFB donated much needed food to Cook County food pantries. Donations were raised in celebration of Food Checkout Day which celebrates the healthy and nutritious food local farmers grow and raise by providing food or cash donations to people in need.

Over **\$31,000 has been donated to local Cook County pantries** in celebration of Food Checkout Day and the healthy and nutritious food grown and raised by local farmers. The donations directly benefited the one in seven individuals in Cook County who are hungry.

"Cook County and Illinois farmers are committed to growing safe and nutritious food for our families and for others," said Janet McCabe, President of Cook CFB. "Food Checkout Day allows us to recognize the importance of healthy, nutritious food while supporting local families in need, especially during this time of elevated food prices."



For 20 years prior, Cook CFB partnered with Ronald McDonald House Charities® of Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana. Through the generosity of partners for nearly two decades, **Farm Bureau donated over \$145,000 and nearly 100,000 pounds of food to Ronald McDonald House Charities®**.

In 2012, and again in 2021, Farm Bureau's food pantry efforts were named a Summit Award winner by the American Society of Association Executives. The Summit Award recognizes the positive impact that non-profit associations have on their community.

CONTACT US

Illinois Farm Bureau | State Legislative Team | 309-532-2954 | statelegislation@ilfb.org
Cook County Farm Bureau | Governmental Affairs Department | 708-354-3276 | bona@cookcfb.org