



The Big Apple Project: Strengthening Local Food Systems Across Northeast Wisconsin

From Orchard to Table

On a crisp fall morning, workers load bins of apples at the Door County Peninsular Agricultural Research Station (PARS), fruit that in prior years was sold for deer bait because the research station lacked staff, harvesting vests, and bins needed to collect and sort apples for human consumption. Thanks to local coordination led by FoodWise Coordinator Laura Apfelbeck, those apples found a new purpose.

Last winter, Apfelbeck began calling local growers to learn what they did with their unsold produce. That simple outreach sparked a new partnership. Working with FoodWise, the team connected PARS with food pantries, schools, and community meal programs across Northeast Wisconsin. FoodWise educators provided recipes and food safety information to accompany the deliveries, helping families make the most of the fresh fruit.

What began as a small pilot quickly became a regional success. The Big Apple Project aimed to bring locally grown apples to five food pantries. Interest grew far beyond that goal. Within weeks, the project included 12 food pantries, 3 school districts, and 5 nonprofits in Door, Kewaunee, Brown, and Manitowoc Counties.

The collaboration of Health & Well-Being programs like FoodWise, PARS researchers, and community organizations improved healthy food access and reduced waste. Apples that once baited deer now nourish families and children, fresh from the tree and full of flavor.



Eric from the Kewaunee Co Food Pantry



inside the Grow it Forward food pantry in Manitowoc

Looking Ahead

Now that PARS has the equipment and workforce needed to harvest its crops, including macrobins, bushel bins, and additional harvesting vests, and Grow it Forward has the bins to transport produce, the project can continue sustainably.

PARS sold the apples to pantries at the same price they once sold them for deer bait, allowing workers to be paid while keeping the fruit in the human food supply chain.

To sustain the effort, Grow it Forward is creating apple butter and other value-added products sold through its Harmony Café, reinvesting proceeds into community food access programs. This blend of practical problem-solving and local partnership represents the best of Wisconsin's community spirit, turning abundance into access and neighbors into collaborators.



Richard & Joan Swigert, pantry managers at Resurrection Lutheran Food Pantry in Brown Co



Mark Janiak from Kewaunee Co Food Pantry in Algoma

Building Local Food Connections

The Big Apple Project shows what can happen when communities connect their resources and creativity. Those refrigerated trucks carried more than fresh fruit; they carried a new approach to local food distribution.

Grow it Forward, a Manitowoc-based nonprofit, coordinated deliveries to multiple counties, while Sullivan Family Farm provided transport support. Pantries shared storage and coordinated pickup schedules, strengthening relationships that continue today.

“ There is so much appreciation for fresh produce and so little available in pantries.

— Laura Apfelbeck, FoodWise

By the Numbers

12,000+ pounds of apples distributed across **4** counties

12 food pantries **3** school districts & **5** nonprofits served

3x the partners originally planned

12 total delivery trips completed

800 apple bags donated by Manitowoc Festival Foods

\$8,000 contributed by The West Foundation



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What Partners Are Saying

“The students loved the Honeycrisp apples! With this program, we could afford them.

— Mary Breitlow, Algoma School District

“At the Y, we want to see all kids living healthy, happy, hopeful lives—and fresh food is such a critical ingredient to make that happen! We love partnerships that help us reinforce how important it is for us to see food as fuel to keep our bodies strong, healthy, and focused on being our best selves. The Big Apple Project was a great example of using our community resources and partnerships to make learning this lesson fun and memorable. Thank you!

—Julie Grossman Manitowoc-Two Rivers YMCA

“Fresh off the tree apples have a better taste. Our kids from elementary to high school have commented on how amazing the apples taste—and the size! It’s good to have the kids get some natural sugar rather than the added. I believe it’s been a healthier choice. My food staff and the students would rather have fresh over canned—they have enjoyed these apples from breakfast to lunch! I cannot thank you enough!

— Stacy Watzka, Food Service Director for Two Rivers School District, a low-income district in Manitowoc County

“Beyond providing nutritious food, the project has encouraged pantries to collaborate more closely, exploring ways to increase local participation. Initiatives like the Big Apple Project do more than put food on shelves, they help strengthen relationships with local partners and build locally sourced food networks.

— Adam Peronto, Door County Food Pantry Coalition Chair

“I wish you could see the number of children excited to receive and eat the apples. One little boy and one little girl couldn’t wait to get home to begin chomping on the apples. That’s the part that is so heartwarming for me. When I first went to a pantry 26 years ago, the produce offered to me was grocery waste...an apple heavily bruised with a fruit fly attached, an orange with mold. This program has provided fresh, local food with dignity, and for that I am grateful.

—Amber Daug, CEO at Grow it Forward

“People loved the apples. They were such good-looking apples and at such a reasonable price. We feel very good about providing the fresh produce to our recipients.

— Dan Balch, Lakeshore Community Pantry

“Thanks to support from the Big Apple Project, Boys & Girls Club members enjoyed healthy, nutritious snacks throughout the month. These snacks helped keep kids energized and focused during after-school activities while promoting healthy eating habits. We’re grateful for this partnership and the positive impact it has on the well-being of our youth!

— Connor Schultz, Boys and Girls Club of Manitowoc County Branch Director



Tracy at Peters Pantry with Apple Delivery