

SUSTAINABILITY



Alaska farmers Brandi Jo Nyberg and Zoë Fuller are the founders of the Matanuska Farmers Market in Palmer, Alaska. SAUNTERING ROOTS FARM

Food Secure

Alaska farms create innovative ways to feed their communities

By Kit Bernardi

Alaska farmers grow world record-size produce despite its short summer of roughly 105 growing days. The state's pumpkins, for instance, have been known to weigh more than the resident 1,600-pound moose. Equally impressive is the state's prolific commercial fishing industry, which harvests 60% of the seafood for the continental U.S.



High tunnels help protect produce. TOM BOL

Despite this farming might, Alaska is a food insecure state. "Approximately 77% of Alaskans live along roads while 23% live off the road system, and most remote communities depend upon air transport to fly food in," says Mike Jones, assistant professor of economics at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. Jones,

who specializes in food security and how transportation impacts food systems, says that food and goods are barged in then trucked into communities along the state's limited road network.

Small disruptions in the state's already tenuous food system's supply chain create shocks for its citizens. Shocks can include severe

weather delaying distribution, which increases food spoilage.

"Even in Anchorage, costs are already 30 to 35% higher than the national average," Jones says.

CULTIVATING FOOD SECURITY

In the fertile Matanuska-Susitna Valley, known as The Mat-Su, a growing crop of new and young Alaskan farmers are stepping up to feed their communities. Palmer, the region's largest town located 42 miles northeast of Anchorage, is the state's agricultural hub. It has the only nutrient-rich Class 2 soils.

In 1935 under the New Deal resettlement Colony Project, Palmer was established by 203 transplanted destitute Midwest White farmers who built an experimental farm community called the Matanuska Colony. The move displaced thousands of Dena'ina Athabascan people from their lands and resources.

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Farm in the Mat-Su Valley

TOM BOL (2)



Matanuska Community Farmers Market in Palmer, Alaska

KIT BERNARDI

Today, Palmer is a hotbed of innovative food security initiatives. According to the 2022 Department of Agriculture Census, more than 47% of the Matanuska-Susitna-Anchorage County Agricultural District's farmers are women, many working small operations under 10 acres.

Four years ago, farmers Brandi Jo Nyberg, 38, and Zoë Fuller, 33, created the seasonal, food-focused Matanuska Community Farmers Market. The weekly market held in the parking lot of the town's log church functions like a pop-up grocery store. On Wednesdays, 18 regional farmers and food purveyors sell vegetables, fruits, fish, jams, honey, baked goods and locally produced foods. The average

attendance grew from 150 to 450 shoppers. In 2025, the market donated \$15,000 worth of food to the MatSu Food Bank and other regional anti-hunger organizations.

"We need to continue growing a decentralized food system," says Nyberg, who grows 30 different vegetables on her 2-acre Sauntering Roots Farm. "By increasing the number of small food-producing farms that are able to store their products and sell directly to Alaskans, we can feed ourselves no matter what challenging circumstances we face."

At Singing Nettle Farm, Fuller's regenerative farming practices "steward local ecology." She grows vegetables, flowers and herbs on the 1-acre

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Brandi Jo Nyberg
Sauntering Roots Farm



Colony Farm in Palmer, Alaska

no-till farm. The Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service EQIP High Tunnel Initiative reimbursed her on a square-foot basis and covered the shipping costs for two high tunnels at approximately \$19,000 each.

"By choosing to farm with our hands, we immediately know our intense connection to the food and environment that produces it, which fosters care of the land, not mastery over it," she says.

DIVERSIFY TO THRIVE

Janet Dinwiddie, 51, and her husband Joe, 52, own 227-acre Pyrah's Pioneer Peak Farm, made up of four Colony Project land tracts. The U-pick farm grows more than 35 vegetables.

"We operate on a diversified, seasonal business plan to ensure we survive the year and can manage realities should weather deteriorate, crops fail and moose eat crops like

By the numbers

39% of Alaska's producers are new farmers, compared to 30% in the rest of the country

48% of Alaska's farmers are women, compared to the national average of 36%

The number of farms in Alaska has increased by 18% since 2017

SOURCE: USDA

they are their private salad bar," Dinwiddie says.

They produce seasonally themed festivals, hosts weddings and sell Community Supported Agriculture boxes. They also run a subscriber-based hot meal service using stored farm products in ready-to-eat dinners.

A USDA Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program grant of \$492,842 is partially paying for the renovation of Pyrah's 12,528-square-foot food storage-processing building. The goal is to store and redistribute product produced by other farmers, or "process it in our on-site kitchen, like making mashed potatoes, for our community's stores and schools."

Installation of the farm's new irrigation system is supported by a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service EQIP program grant providing \$200,022 in funding assistance. Scheduled for completion this year, Pyrah's drip system will be Alaska's largest.

"This will be a game changer, giving us a chance to grow better quality products that will become more consistently available in our food system," Dinwiddie says.