Minnesota Food Safety and Defense Task Force

Meeting Minutes

October 20, 2026

Today's meeting was held in Room B144 of the Orville L. Freeman Building, 625 Robert Street North, St. Paul, and via the Microsoft Teams Video Conferencing platform.

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 PM.

Members present included: Amy Johnston, Angie Wheeler, Steve Barthel, Erin Mertz, Carrie Rigdon, Stanley Osuagwu, Charlie Lucas, Patrice Bailey, and Luke Meier.

Visitors present included: Abigail Brinkmeier, Dan Opsahl, Kay Gruber, Julie Degn, Christina Connelly, Heidi Varberg, Nick Paris, Vonda Canaan, Jane Jewett, Charles Dierker, Sadie Gannett, Autumn Stoll, Katherine Simon, David Smith, Jodie Burke, Journey Gosselin, Jennifer Stephes, Meghan Melheim, Lillian Otieno, Matthew Gerths, Mariah Stinson, Megan Jansa, Keri Plude, Conner McLaughlin, Lisa Wetzel, Gabriel Wilson, Jill Herberg, David Boberg, and Natasha Hedin

1. **Dates and links**

    - Ask an AURI Expert - Agricultural Utilization Research Institute

2. **The minutes from the April 2026 meeting were accepted with no comments.**

3. **Member and Visitor Updates**

    Christina Connelly (Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA)): Christina is the MDA International Trade Supervisor. She is a new participant in the group.

    Jullie Degn (Hennepin County): Julie announced that Julia Selleys is now the Environmental Health (EH) Program Manager for Hennepin County.

    Angie Wheeler (Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)): Angie shared that planning is underway for the 2028 Conference for Food Protection (CFP) and they are considering hosting it in the Twin Cities area. She is working with the Local Arrangements Committee (LAC), which is responsible for name tags, swag bags, and fundraising activities. If your company is interested in sponsoring or has swag to provide, please reach out to Angie.

    Vonda Canaan (MDA): Vonda is a Retail Food Program Food Inspection Supervisor. She reported that the program is currently in the process of hiring two food inspectors.

Nick Paris (Coborn's Inc.): Nick is the Director of Food Safety and Quality Assurance (FSQA) and introduced himself as a new participant in the group.

Stanley Osuagwu (Lauridsen Group Inc.): Stanley shared that the North American Renderers Association annual conference is beginning in Tucson, AS. The conference will focus on global feed issues and sustainability initiatives.

Erin Mertz (Ecolab): Erin recently participated in a conference with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that focused on cleaning and sanitizing practices and their impact on DNA.

Jane Jewett (University of Minnesota (U of MN) Extension): Jane shared that she has transitioned to U of MN Extension and is no longer with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA).

4. **Food Safety Needs and Gaps for Minnesota's Small Food Businesses - Presenters: Charlie Lucas, Ben Swanson, and Jason Robinson, Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI)**

The presenters discussed the rapid growth of Minnesota's cottage food sector and noted that many cottage food producers are unlicensed and uninspected, creating potential gaps in public health protection. The discussion focused on identifying information and resource gaps that impact small food businesses.

Key areas where additional support is needed include access to technical expertise and training, laboratory testing services, funding for food safety improvements, and multilingual educational resources. Presenters highlighted the positive impact of the Food Safety Assessment Program and Cost Share Program in helping producers improve food safety practices.

A significant need was identified for additional Process Authority expertise in Minnesota and the broader Midwest region. Updates shared during the discussion noted that Minnesota currently has limited Process Authority resources available to small businesses. Participants also highlighted the appointment of Dr. Hanyu Chen as the University of Minnesota's new Associate Professor in Food Safety, with plans to pursue Process Authority certification in the future.

AURI reminded attendees that it offers free office hours for small food businesses seeking guidance on business structure and licensing, food processes, testing requirements, and scaling operations.

5. **Allergen Workshop Debrief - Amy Johnston, U of MN**
   Amy Johnston provided a summary of the Allergen Workshop held at Ecolab's Schuman Campus in Eagan. The workshop received positive participant feedback through post-event surveys. Topics covered included allergen identification, hidden allergens, prevention of cross-contamination, allergen control plans, case studies, and traceability. The workshop was viewed as a valuable educational opportunity for food industry professionals.

6. **Food Innovation Team Update – Jane Jewett, FIT Chair**
   Jane Jewett provided an update on the Food Innovation Team (FIT) subcommittee, noting recent membership changes. She emphasized that FIT serves in an advisory capacity and does not have a regulatory role. The group reviewed FIT's two primary objectives: assisting food business owners who encounter challenges navigating the food regulatory system and developing a library of case studies for future reference.

   A case study involving the sale of potentially hazardous food (PHF/TCS) items, including fresh apple cider and slushies from a mobile trailer operation, was discussed. The case highlighted regulatory complexities involving overlapping jurisdiction between the MDH and the MDA.

7. **Potential Items for January**
   - Improvements in MDA recall effectiveness checks
   - MDA Food Recalls
   - Food Safety at Convenience Stores (Kwik Trip, maybe Casey's)
   - Partnership for Food Traceability (PFT) – challenges in the distribution system
   - Bioterrorism
   - 2026 Food Code – Minnesota implications

Minnesota Food Safety and Defense Task Force

October 20, 2026

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agenda

1:00 p.m. – 1:20 p.m.	Welcome and Around the Room	FSDTF Members and Participants
1:20 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.	Food Safety Needs and Gaps for Minnesota's Small Food Businesses	Charlie Lucas, Ben Swanson, and Jason Robinson, Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI)
2:00 p.m. – 2:10 p.m.	Break - Networking	
2:10 p.m. – 2:25 p.m.	Allergen Workshop Debrief	Amy Johnston, University of Minnesota Extension
2:25 p.m. – 2:40 p.m.	Food Innovation Team (FIT) Updates • Meeting recap and recommendation report • FIT delegate agency vacancies still open	Jane Jewett, FIT Committee Chair
2:40 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	2026-2027 Terms of Reference	FSDTF Membership and Participants
2:50 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	Solicit Agenda Items for the Next Meeting	FSDTF Membership and Participants

Welcome and Around the Room

- Call for changes to the April Meeting Minutes
- Around the Room
  - Share any updates regarding your organization, conferences, or trainings you attended, job opportunities, etc.
  - Type your name into the meeting chat box
  - Call on the individual after you

Food Safety Needs and Gaps for Minnesota's Small Food Businesses

Agricultural Utilization Research Institute (AURI)

October 20th, 2026

Gemini Notebook

Validate Findings to Secure and Implement Funding

The Action

Backed by a one-time legislative appropriation, AURI convened a Thought Leader Group to evaluate the state of the state in food safety for Minnesota's small food businesses, ranging from Cottage Food Producers to small manufacturing operations.

The Findings

The investigation identified 48 existing resources but uncovered critical gaps in scalable infrastructure, technical training, and financial support that leave growing businesses vulnerable and public health at risk.

The Goal

Validate these findings directly with affected businesses and advocate for the funding of targeted implementation strategies that enhance business sustainability while protecting the citizens of Minnesota.

Gemini Notebook

The Paradox of Scale Between Economic Value and Unregulated Growth

> $29B

Annual contribution to state GDP by the Minnesota Food Industry. Small food businesses represent the lowest-barrier entry point to this massive economic engine, serving as vital incubators for agricultural utilization.

Source: DEED. Figure represents both Food and Production agriculture

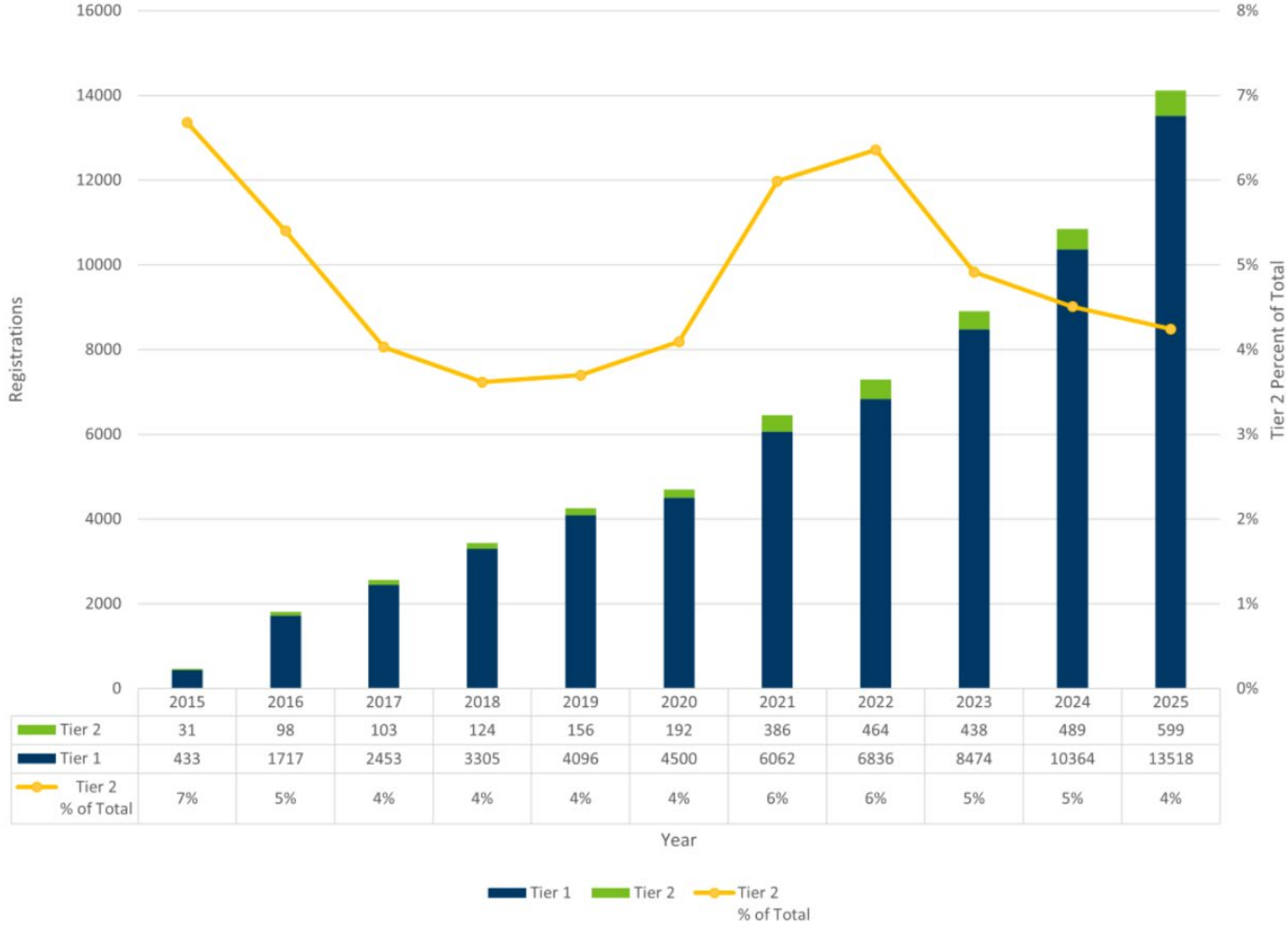
14,116

Registered Cottage Food Producers in Minnesota as of 2025.
Over 95% operate under Tier 1 (gross sales under $7,665/year).

The Paradox: This rapidly growing segment is unlicensed, uninspected, and serves smaller populations, creating a blind spot for public health where foodborne illnesses are likely underreported due to a lack of data.

Gemini Notebook

Tier 1 and Tier 2 CFP Registrations, by Year with Tier 2 % of All Registrations Trend Line



	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Tier 2	31	98	103	124	156	192	386	464	438	489	599
Tier 1	433	1717	2453	3305	4096	4500	6062	6836	8474	10364	13518
Tier 2 % of Total	7%	5%	4%	4%	4%	4%	6%	6%	5%	5%	4%

Translate Prioritized Needs into Funding Advocacy

Identify Current Resources & Gaps

Catalog existing food safety support systems, localized training resources, and precise operational gaps specific to the varying scales of small food businesses in Minnesota.

Prioritize Food Safety Needs

Filter the identified gaps to highlight the key areas that promise the most substantial, immediate improvements to food safety practices and long-term business success.

Support Funding Advocacy

Provide rigorous, expert-backed justifications for state and federal funding requests to build critical food safety infrastructure across Minnesota's small food business landscape.

Gemini Notebook

Grounding Findings in Real-World Expert Consensus

12 Industry Leaders

Representing diverse perspectives across Minnesota's food safety ecosystem: regulatory professionals, lab scientists, market directors, and small business owners.

Meeting Framework

Structured sessions conducted aggressively to capture the current state of small business operations and evolving regulatory realities.

48 Existing Resources

Cataloged food safety resources sourced from local, state, federal, public, and private sectors, ranging from startup guidance to specialized compliance.

Top 5 Priorities

Experts individually ranked the compiled list, selecting up to five priority items each to forge a clear, high-impact roadmap for AURI's advocacy efforts.

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Entry-Level Entrepreneurs Require Accessible, Scalable Interventions

Easy Access to Staged Expertise

Technical knowledge remains a barrier. Training must be staged to grow alongside a business's lifecycle, offering clear triggers for when specialized technical experts become necessary.

Funding Support for Food Safety Solutions

Small food manufacturers often lack funding for comprehensive safety programs and certification. Expanded funding access helps businesses meet industry requirements, enter larger markets, and grow responsibly.

Trusted Laboratory Testing Support

Producers require affordable access to trusted lab testing and equipment use standards. This infrastructure allows small producers to scientifically verify their products meet validated parameters.

Culturally Sensitive, Multilingual Information

Minnesota's Cottage Food Producers represent diverse cultural backgrounds. Critical food safety knowledge must be translated and tailored to specific cultural practices to ensure an equitable landscape.

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Proving the Concept Through Data Collection

Quantitative Surveys & Analysis

Deploying broad-sample surveys to quantify the most pressing food safety needs, current resources, and economic realities. This data will objectively prioritize recipe validation needs, training requirements, and consulting access.

Qualitative Focus Groups

Engaging directly with Cottage Food Producers, farm value-added businesses, and shared kitchen operators to capture in-depth feedback on the invisible regulatory and financial barriers obstructing their growth.

Comprehensive Impact Assessment

Synthesizing both data streams to evaluate exactly how identified food safety gaps impact business profitability versus public health risk, directly informing the final design of solutions.

Gemini Notebook

Food Safety Assessment Program

Scope of Intervention	Free, comprehensive food safety assessments deployed directly to 20-25 operational food businesses.
Expert Deployment	Utilizing 3-5 highly vetted, AURI-identified industry consultants.
Capital Allocation	Funded by $43,000 in new RFSI/MDA dollars distributed directly to the consulting experts.
Leadership	AURI Program Manager. The MDA and RFSI remained fully supportive of this operational rollout.

Gemini Notebook

Cost Share Program

Scope of Intervention	Targeted remediation for ~12 graduates of the Phase 1 assessment program to implement audit findings.
Capital Allocation Allocation	50% match up to $2,500 per business. Powered by $30,000 total from legislative project 25013.
Strict Compliance Requirements	Disbursement requires a formal cost-share agreement, active W9, and submitted proof of expense.
Leadership	AURI Program Manager (with MDA executional guidance). Finance and Contracts management remained fully supportive.

Gemini Notebook

Challenge: Food Safety Gaps for MN Small Businesses - Pilots

Food Safety Assessment Program

What: Free one-day assessment of existing food safety plan by vetted professional

When: Oct 2025 to Oct 2026 (Closed)

Outcome: Awareness of prioritized gaps and blind spots to improve your program

Funding: MN Dept of Ag Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program

Food Safety Cost-Share Program

What: Cost-share reimbursement for eligible, critical food safety investments

When: Jan to Apr 2026 (Closed)

Outcome: Reduced financial burden to improve your food safety program

Funding: AURI

Strengthening Minnesota's Food Ecosystem: The Impact of Food Safety Pilot Programs

Administered by AURI and funded by the MN Department of Agriculture, designed to bridge expertise and funding gaps for small-to-medium food enterprises, focusing on regulatory "blind spots" and critical safety control implementation.

Program Intent & Mechanics

The Food Safety Assessment Program

Provides free, one-day evaluations by professionals to create actionable roadmaps for regulatory compliance.

The Food Safety Cost-Share Program

Offers 50% reimbursement (up to $2,500) for critical safety investments like equipment and plans.

$23,000 Disbursed in Pilot Phase

Funding covered critical needs from digital thermometers to formal HACCP plan development.

Participant Impact & Survey Results

100% Support for Continued Investment

Every survey respondent supported the State of Minnesota continuing to fund these programs.

Improved Risk Management Confidence

Participants reported higher confidence in FSMA compliance and readiness for regulatory inspections.

"Saved Us from Walking Away"

One participant noted the cost-share program prevented them from closing their business before launch.

Pilot Initiatives: Scale & Immediate Outcomes

Metric	Assessment Program	Cost-Share Program
Participants	19 Completed/In-Progress	16 Businesses Approved
Primary Outcome	Identification of Regulatory Gaps	Implementation of Safety Upgrades
Participant Sentiment	Improved Food Safety Literacy	Reduced Financial Barrier to Compliance

NotebookLM

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION: INTEGRATION & EXPANSION

What's Next

Institutionalize via MDA AGRI Program

Transition Assessment and Cost-Share pilot models into permanent state programs by integrating them into the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) existing AGRI cost-share portfolio.

Implement Tiered Lifecycle Support

Establish a progressive training continuum that scales with business growth: Basic Required Training (Cottage Food) → FSMA Compliance Plans (Small Manufacturing) → GFSI/SQF Certification (Wholesale).

Expand Equity & Multilingual Outreach

Develop culturally sensitive, multilingual resources to eliminate technical barriers for Minnesota's diverse producers, where over 25% of cottage food entrepreneurs identify as non-white.

Invest in Process Authority Bandwidth

Fund specialized subject-matter expertise to address severe capacity gaps in product validation and process authority review, enabling safe product formulations and market entry.

Thank you!

AURI Virtual Office Hours

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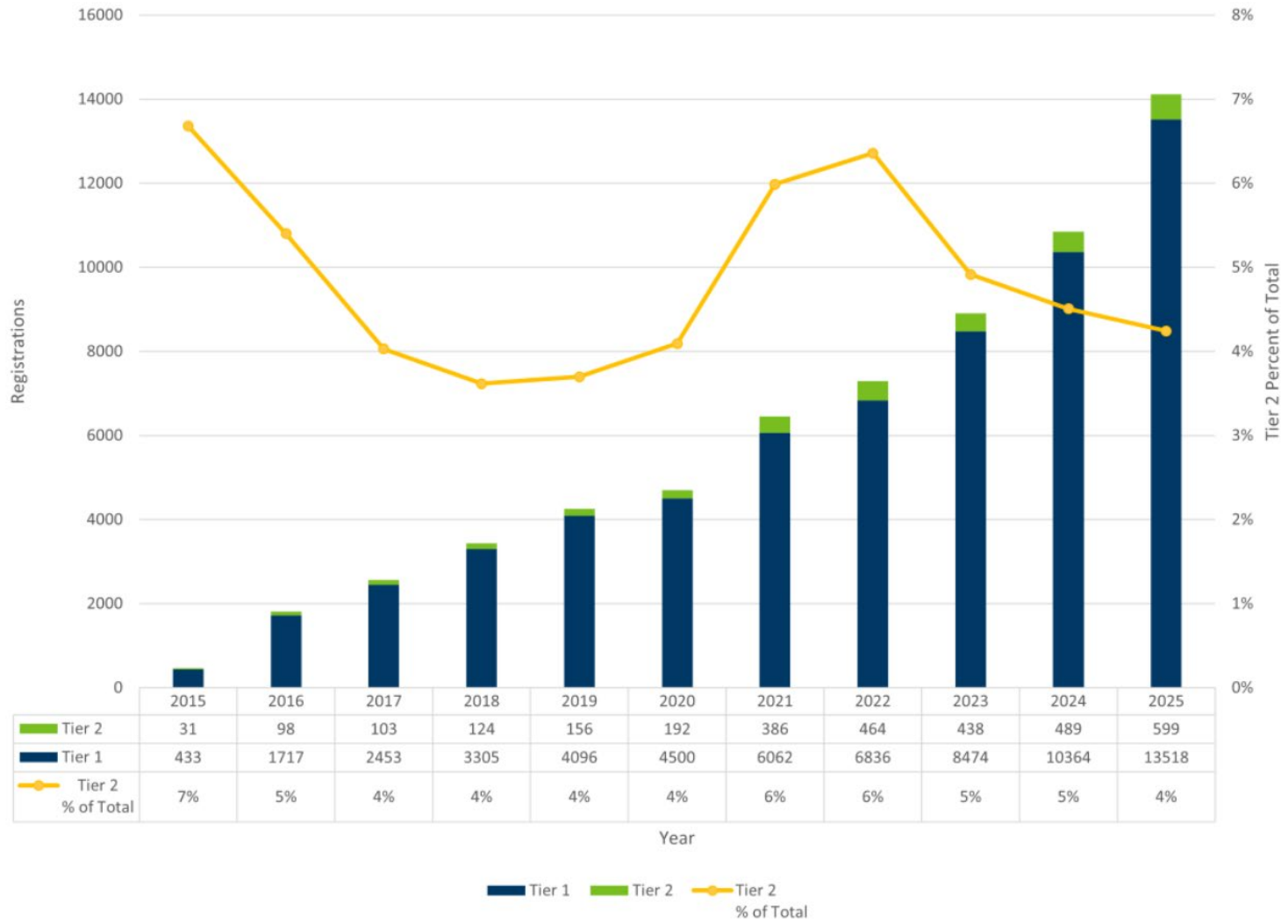
Tier 1 and Tier 2 CFP Registrations, by Year with Tier 2 % of All Registrations Trend Line



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AURI Virtual Office Hours

- Free office hours to connect with an AURI food scientist
  - Offered twice each month via Zoom
- Designed as an easy, low-barrier starting point for new or small businesses
  - Each session includes:
    - A short, prepared topic
    - Open Q&A
    - Opportunity to discuss current business or technical challenges
- Helps businesses identify practical next steps, resources, and additional AURI support when needed

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What topics will be covered?

- Starting or structuring a food business
- Product formulation or processing
- Food safety or regulatory requirements
- Nutrition labeling
- Packaging and shelf life
- Finding the right technical resource, expert, agency, or next step

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Who should attend?

- Targeted Participants
  - Startups and early-stage food businesses
  - Entrepreneurs that have an idea but aren't sure where to start
  - Agricultural producers developing value-added food products
  - Growing businesses that need initial technical direction

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Tortilla Business

- Makes homemade tortillas in their kitchen
  - Friends and family saying they should sell them to others or to local restaurants and grocery stores
- Unfamiliar with regulations and licensing and not sure where to start
  - Cottage food vs Wholesale
- Has the product formulation down but other details are less certain
- Has tremendous energy and passion but doesn't know where to point it

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Dipping Sauce Company

- Retiree who wants to sell sauce made from old family recipe
    - Background in marketing at big food company
- No technical experience besides making the sauce at home
- Understands product needs to be reliable batch-to-batch but not sure where to start
- Has a great foundation of how to sell the product but lacks technical knowledge to make a safe and consistent product

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Best practices for managing food allergens in a food processing space

Training summary

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Training details

- Tuesday, June 2, 2026
- Ecolab Schuman Campus in Eagan
- Agenda
  - 9:00-9:30 a.m.: Arrival, networking, light refreshments
  - 9:30-11:30 a.m.: Training (classroom instruction)
  - 11:30 a.m. -12:45 p.m.: Lunch & walking tour of Ecolab
  - 12:45-2:30 p.m.: Training (classroom instruction & case studies)
  - 2:30-2:45 p.m.: Break, afternoon refreshments
  - 2:45-3:45 p.m.: Kitchen tour & debrief
  - 3:45-4:00 p.m.: Wrap-up
- Approved for 3 hours of continuing education for Minnesota CFPM
- Cost $35

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Task Force members

- Erin Mertz, Ecolab
- Autumn Stoll, UMN Extension
- Amy Johnston, UMN Extension
- Alida Sorenson, MDA
- David Smith, MDA
- Natasha Hedin, MDA
- Wania F Espinoza Molina, Convergenza Consultora

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Attendees

- 18 registrants
- 15 able to attend
  - Licensed food handler businesses
    - Retail
    - Processor and manufacturers
  - Co-packer
  - Food hub
  - Cottage food producer

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Feedback survey results

- Qualtrics, 13 questions
- 60% survey completion rate
- 89% of respondents stated they would attend future MN Food Safety and Defense Task Force events.
- "*Appreciate the care shown for training people this content.*" - survey respondent

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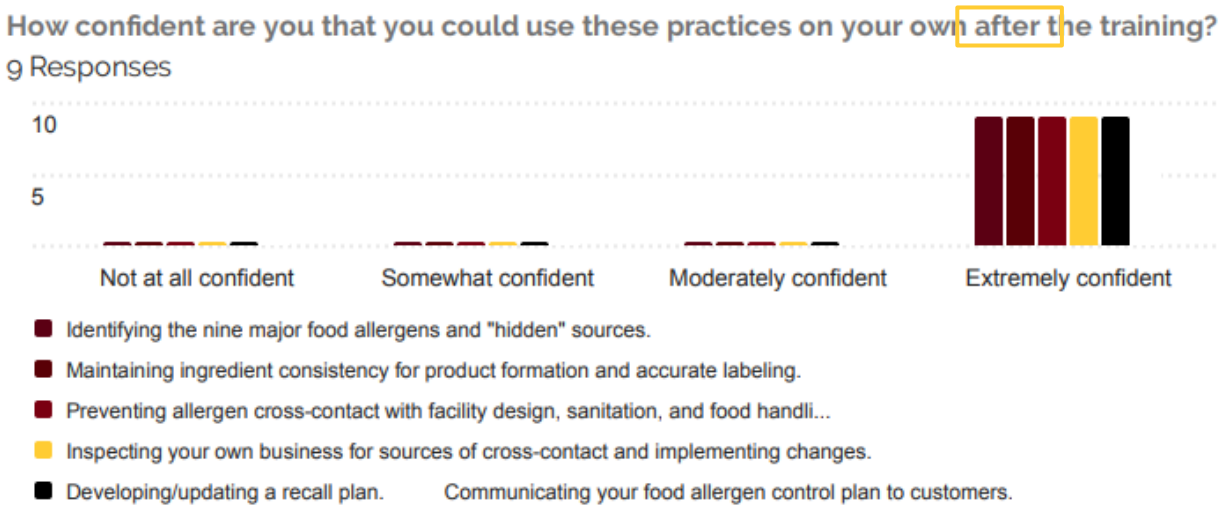
Attendee knowledge gains



100% survey respondents reported extremely confident after the training

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Feedback for program updates

- Classroom instruction and case studies were most useful
- Opportunity to reimagine the kitchen tour
- Incorporate hands-on practice of sanitation verification activities
- Software or technology recommendations for traceability systems

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Future food allergen training

- Request from individuals to host in the winter.
- Shared commercial kitchen space.
- Any interested Task Force members contact Amy at ajohn23@umn.edu

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Questions?

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Food Innovation Team (FIT)

Presentation to Food Safety & Defense Task Force
October 20, 2026

Minnesota
Food Safety & Defense Taskforce

FIT is a subcommittee of Minnesota's Food Safety & Defense Task Force.

mn.foodprotectiontaskforce.com/

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What does FIT do?

Two major responsibilities or tasks:

1. Assist Food Business Owners (FBOs) who have become stuck in the food regulatory system

2. Create a library of cases for system learning and improvement

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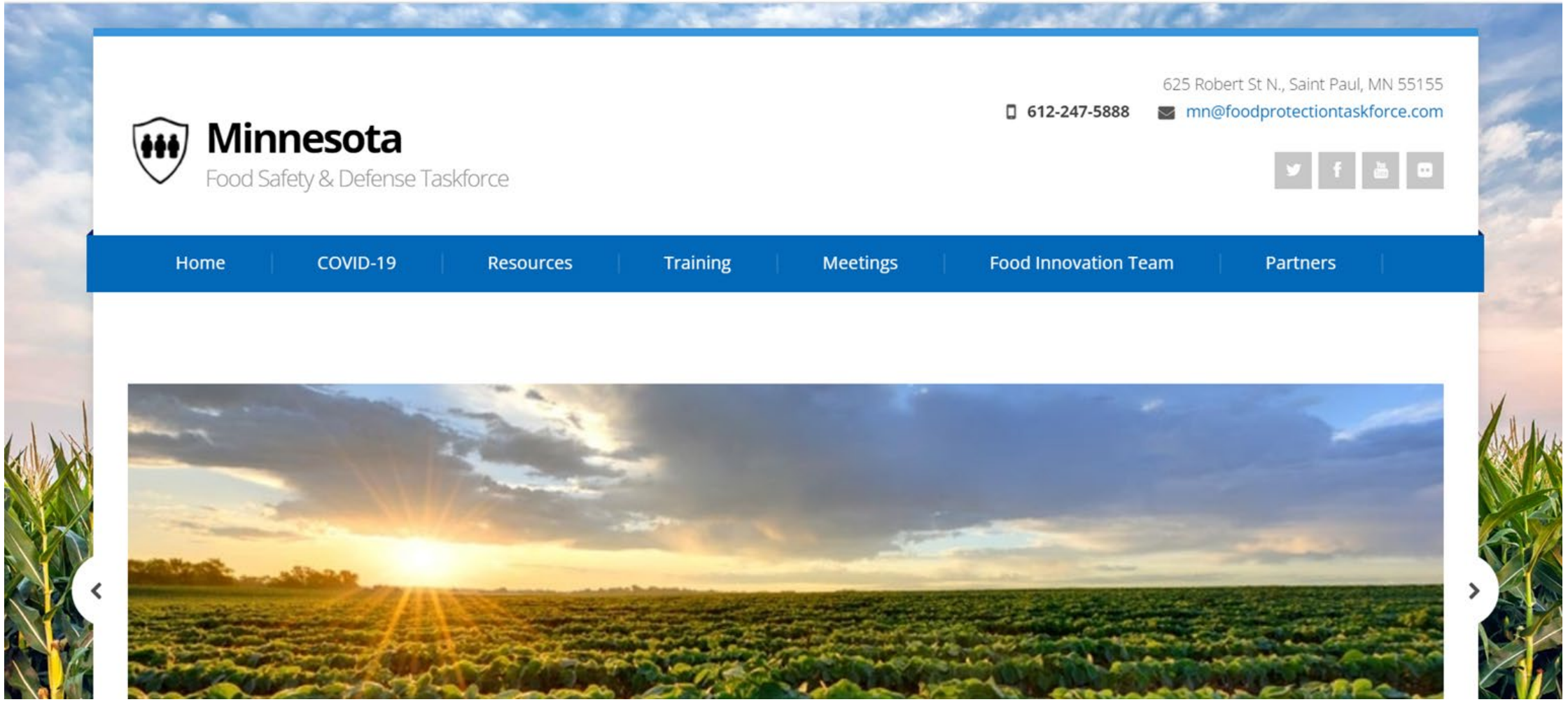

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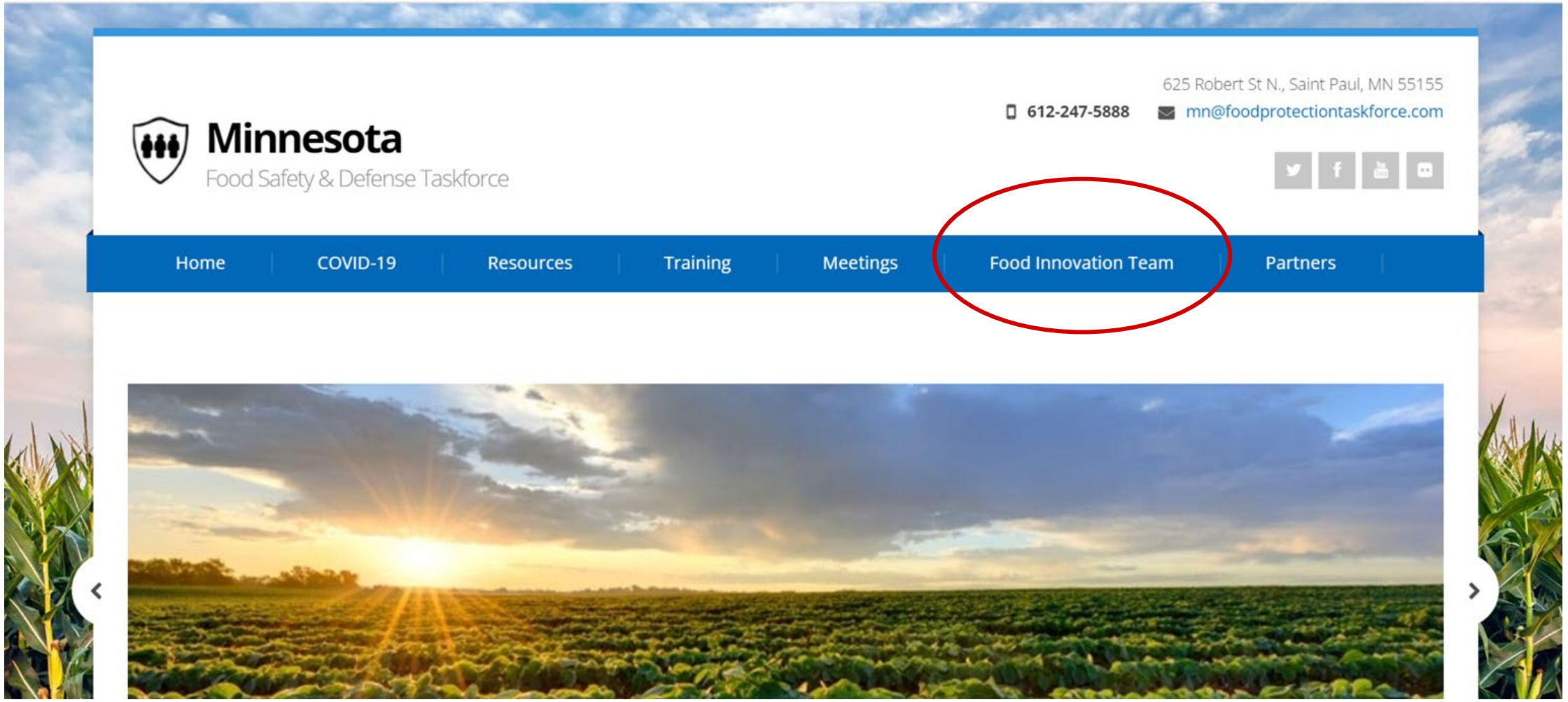

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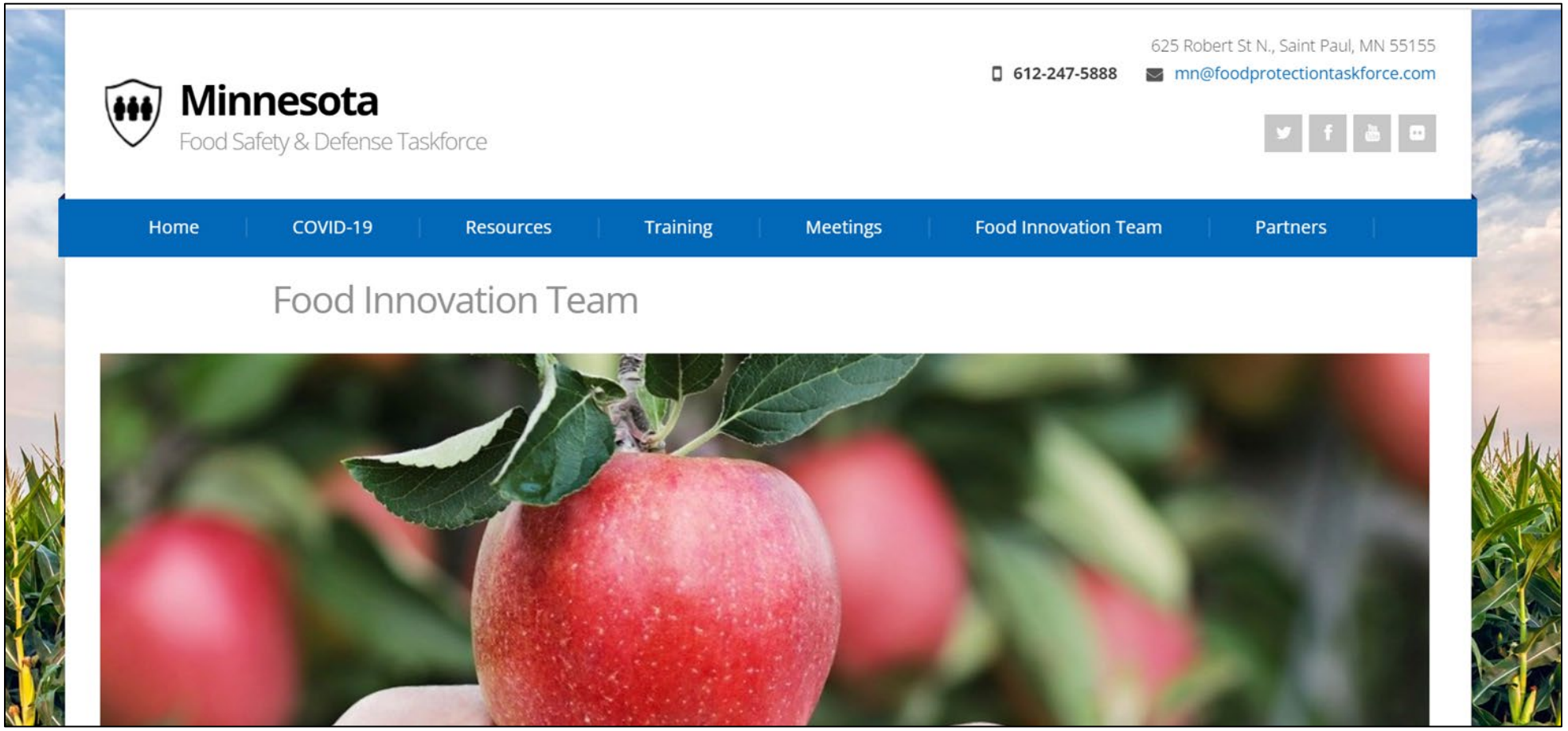

FIT case: July 14, 2026

- Emerald Acres, Theresa George
- Desired business model: Apple cider by the glass and apple cider slushies, served out of a trailer at fairs and festivals
- Product of the Farm (POTF) apple cider with no added ingredients

FIT case central issue:

Food & beverage service of a POTF item.

- MN Department of Health (MDH) regulates food & beverage service
- MDH does not have a POTF exemption in their statute, M.S. 157

Ms. George initially contacted the MN Department of Agriculture (MDA) in September 2025.

She was told MDA could not license food & beverage service, and was sent to MDH delegated authorities for two jurisdictions in which she indicated an intent to operate.

At that point Ms. George questioned why she could not operate as POTF.

Ms. George was referred to Stearns County Environmental Services in December 2025.

Stearns County offered options of a Special Event Food Stand license or a Seasonal Temporary Food Stand license.

In January, Ms. George began conversations with Kathy Zeman that ultimately led to submission of a FIT case.

Issues examined by FIT on 7/14/26:

1. Whether the product qualifies as POTF

2. Whether the POTF provision in the Minnesota Constitution applies to food and beverage service of items that are made solely from the farmer's own products

3. Agency jurisdiction over POTF food & beverage service

4. MDA's and MDH's desired level of involvement with a POTF operation manufacturing apple cider and serving apple cider slushies

1. Whether the product qualifies as POTF

MDH's main question was whether any ingredients were added to the apple cider, such as cinnamon.

Ms. George stated she adds nothing to the apple cider, and uses her own apples.

Therefore, FIT clarified that the apple cider product is POTF.

2. Whether the POTF provision in the Minnesota Constitution applies to food and beverage service of items that are made solely from the farmer's own products

MDH's statute, M.S. 157, does not have language excluding POTF from licensing.

The language in Article 13, Section 7 of the MN Constitution supersedes statute. POTF is excluded from licensing regardless of statutory language.

3. Agency jurisdiction over POTF food & beverage service

MDA's statutory authority includes authority to inspect food facilities that are not licensed. Therefore, MDA will take POTF food & beverage service in most cases.

MDA and MDH will work on updating their Memorandum of Agreement to cover POTF food & beverage services.

In the meantime, any similar situations will be handled on a case-by-case basis.

4. MDA's and MDH's desired level of involvement with a POTF operation manufacturing apple cider and serving apple cider slushies

MDA will work closely with Theresa George to ensure her operation meets CGMPs.

Epilogue: Are the apples POTF?

Three MDA inspectors visited Theresa George's operation in August 2026.

They determined she acquired her apples through a crop-sharing agreement with two orchards. Ms. George supplies labor to the orchards in return for a share of the apple crop.

They informed Ms. George that because she does not own the trees or the land, her apples were not POTF and she would need to get licenses for the cider manufacturing and for serving cider slushies.

Ms. George conveyed this issue to the FIT co-chairs, who sent it back to Jodie Burke, MDA Licensing Liaison.

MDA legal counsel determined that a crop-sharing agreement qualifies the crop as POTF.

Ms. George was directed to obtain written agreements with the orchards. Her prior agreements were verbal.

MDA Licensing Liaison Jodie Burke provided this decision to Theresa George on 9/29/26.

Ms. George was also provided information about the need to ensure that her facilities for both making and serving the cider meet CGMPs.

MDA will continue to work with Ms. George on development of her facilities and cider business.

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Food Innovation Team (FIT)

Thank you!

Co-chairs:
Jane Jewett, jewet006@umn.edu
Kathy Zeman, kzeman@mfma.org

Food Innovation Team Update

- Meeting on 7/15/2026
- Welcomed new members
  - MDA - Dan Opsahl
  - MDH - Blake Nordin
  - *MDA Delegated Agency Staff – Vacant*
  - MDH Delegated Agency Staff – Ryan Lee
  - Local Food Maker - Deeann Lufkin
  - Local Food Farming - Kathy Zeman (Co-Chair)
  - Local Food System Expert or College/University Based - Jane Jewet (Chair)
  - Non-Regulatory Agency Food Safety Expert - Charles Lucas
- Case discussion: Emerald Acers

2026 – 2027 Terms of Reference Updates

Updates:

- Meeting dates
  - October 20, 2026
  - January 19, 2027
  - April 20, 2027
  - July 20, 2027
- Added the Training Subcommittee as an active subcommittee of the task force

Call for Agenda Items

- MDA Food Recalls

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Thank you