
Retail Food Program Annual Report

2025 Annual Report

01/31/2026

Minnesota Department of Agriculture
625 Robert Street North
Saint Paul, MN 55155

www.mda.state.mn.us

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this information is available in alternative forms of communication upon request by calling 651-201-6000. TTY users can call the Minnesota Relay Service at 711. The MDA is an equal opportunity employer and provider.

Contents

- Program Purpose 2
- Program Goals and Objectives 2
- Program Impact 3
 - Increased inspection and enforcement activity 3
 - Identified contaminated food 3
 - Supported industry trends 3
 - Strengthened regulatory consistency 3
 - Improved training and education 4
 - Enhanced staff mentorship 4
- Program Outputs 4
 - Inspections 4
 - Plan Review and HACCP approvals 4
 - Outreach and engagement 6
- Program Inputs 7
 - Staffing 7
 - Program funding 7
 - Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (VNRFPS) 7
- Future Goals / Objectives 8
 - Implement food license modernization: 8
 - Hiring inspectors and restructuring inspection territories: 8
 - Complete mobile license inventory improvements: 8
 - Modernize delegation agreements: 8
- Acknowledgments 9

Program Purpose

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Retail Food Program (RFP) protects public health by ensuring that food sold at retail is safe, wholesome, and accurately represented. The program fulfills this mission by reducing risks associated with foodborne illness through oversight of retail food establishments and by promoting sound food safety practices statewide.

Retail food establishments include businesses that sell food directly to consumers or indirectly through delivery or online platforms. Examples include grocery stores, meat markets, convenience stores, bakeries, mobile food units, wineries and taprooms, vending machines, micro markets, and farmers' market stands. These businesses serve as the primary point of contact between consumers and the food supply, making effective regulation essential to prevent illness and maintain consumer confidence.

To meet these needs, the program conducts risk-based inspections and provides education to operators, ensuring compliance with state and federal food safety requirements. Additional activities include construction plan reviews for new or remodeled facilities, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan reviews for specialized food processes, and Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) reviews under a cooperative agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The program also oversees delegated local health agencies and participates in the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards to continuously improve regulatory practices.

Through these efforts, the RFP supports a safe and reliable food system, aligning with the MDA's broader vision to protect public health and strengthen consumer trust in Minnesota's food supply.

Program Goals and Objectives

In Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25), RFP activities were focused on goals that support timely service, consistent regulation, and preparation for future modernization:

- Complete licensing inspections on time so new and expanding businesses can open promptly once food safety requirements are met.
- Respond quickly to serious public health complaints to stop unsafe food handling before it harms the public.
- Process plan reviews, HACCP submissions, and variance requests efficiently to give industry partners predictable timelines.
- Conduct routine inspections to maintain consistent oversight and compliance statewide.
- Audit all seven delegated agencies to ensure Minnesota's retail food safety standards are applied uniformly.
- Prepare for statewide license modernization in fiscal year 2026 (FY26) by aligning processes and resources with upcoming system changes.
- Hire and retain plan review officers and inspectors to keep staffing levels strong and support timely service delivery.

Program Impact

In FY25, the RFP delivered significant outcomes that strengthened food safety, enhanced regulatory consistency, and supported public health across Minnesota.

Increased inspection and enforcement activity

Inspection and enforcement activity increased due to increased staffing and more efficient work planning in FY25. Key growth areas from FY24 included licensing inspections (up 5.6%), routine inspections (up 12%), complaint inspections (up 14.3%), re-inspections (up 25.5%), and follow-up inspections (up 19.9%). Associated review of retail inspections for further compliance actions also increased (up 11.9%). These increases indicate the RFP supported public health by spending more time interacting with the food establishments we regulate, identifying food safety risks, and providing additional regulatory oversight for businesses with critical violations to promote compliance with food safety regulations.

Identified contaminated food

During routine surveillance sampling in January 2025, inspectors collected a food product that tested positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*, a type of bacteria that can cause significant illness or death. This resulted in a multi-state recall that removed contaminated food from commerce and prevented potential illness among vulnerable populations.

Supported industry trends

The RFP navigated changes in the retail food industry and worked with partners to establish uniform standards for emerging trends. The Plan Review team identified increased interest in agritourism food models, the use of temporary or portable structures intended for permanent use, and continued interest in business models that allow dogs in customer areas of food establishments.

The RFP's HACCP team developed greater proficiency in evaluating less common specialized processes, such as canning, fermentation, and freeze drying. Additionally, the HACCP team noted significant increases in requests to review custom recipes and processes from smaller food producers interested in growing their business.

Both the Plan Review and HACCP teams participated with regulatory partners in Minnesota-based community of practice meetings, which streamlined plan review procedures and aligned statute interpretations, reducing delays and improving clarity for industry partners. These efforts ensured innovative practices could grow while maintaining strong protections for public health.

Strengthened regulatory consistency

The RFP evaluated seven delegated local health agencies to ensure uniform application of food safety standards during FY25. These periodic audits serve to ensure a consistent regulatory approach across jurisdictions in Minnesota, enhance food safety, and eliminate duplication of work across jurisdictions. Assessment of these audits continues into FY26, when preliminary results and any necessary corrective actions will be completed.

Improved training and education

Using a National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) FDA Retail Flexible Funding Model grant, the program developed two new online training modules on inspecting mobile food units and retail meat and seafood operations. These modules intend to improve food safety and inspection quality by serving as refresher training for inspectors ahead of complex or uncommon inspections. These resources are accessible to inspectors from the MDA, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), and local health departments across Minnesota. Five modules are currently available, and additional topics are planned for FY26.

Enhanced staff mentorship

The RFP implemented a structured mentorship initiative to support new employee onboarding and professional growth. New guidance materials and an electronic training module were introduced, along with a pre-mentorship role to help new hires connect with potential mentors. This initiative directly impacted the RFP's ability to support new staff, share institutional knowledge more efficiently, and increased job satisfaction for new and experienced staff who participated.

Program Outputs

Inspections

In FY25, the RFP conducted different inspection types to reduce food safety risks in food establishments, both before and after licensing.

- Before licensing approval: Inspectors reviewed and verified facility design, equipment, and planned food production met safety standards.
- After licensing: Once approved, establishments received regular routine inspections. How often these happened depended on how complex the operation was and its level of risk. Routine inspections make up most of the inspections RFP inspectors conduct each year.

Inspectors also completed a range of additional inspection activities, including follow-up and re-inspections to address violations identified during previous inspections; complaint and investigation inspections to address specific issues; sampling inspections to collect samples for laboratory analysis; and plan review inspections to verify that remodels or operational changes complied with food code standards. The RFP also conducted COOL inspections under contract with the USDA to evaluate federal labeling requirements of specific foods.

Plan Review and HACCP approvals

The MDA's Plan Review and HACCP teams sustained high productivity throughout FY25, advancing food safety oversight through collaboration, engagement, and responsiveness to industry trends.

The Plan Review team processed a substantial volume of submissions related to new construction, major remodels, and significant changes in food handling operations. Despite the retirement of two senior officers, the team maintained high levels of service and rebuilt capacity with the hiring of two

new Plan Review Officer. In the past 18 months, helping restore institutional knowledge and meet growing industry demand. FY25 saw increases in small-scale remodels and increased interest in food businesses related to agritourism, contributing to a higher overall volume of plan reviews.

The HACCP team adapted to staffing changes by shifting two inspectors to part-time HACCP review roles, expanding internal expertise, and improving response times. The team continued to support food operators navigating specialized processes and regulatory requirements.

Table 1: Types of inspections completed in 2025

Type of Inspections	Inspection Description	Total Number in 2025
Routine	Risk-based inspections conducted at a scheduled frequency to ensure compliance with applicable food safety standards	3,462
Licensing / Plan Review	Assess facilities and equipment to ensure changes in business ownership and food production meet food safety standards	447
Follow-up / Re-inspection	Assess and determine if previously issued observations have been corrected	385
Complaint	Conducted in response to a food or facility complaint	120
Investigations & Consultations	Targeted assessment addressing a specific possible concern	140
County of Origin Labeling (COOL)	Assess compliance with federal labeling requirements	65
Sampling	Collection of food products for 180 total lab analyses	40
Total Inspections Completed	All inspections from FY25	4,659

Table 2: Plan Review and HACCP Activities

Activity	Description	FY25 Totals
Plan Review Approvals	Assessments of newly licensed and remodeled food establishments	409
HACCP Plan Approvals	Approvals of plans that establish safe practices for complex food processes	62
Inquiries	Questions from industry, academic, and regulatory partners	8,000

Outreach and engagement

In FY25, RFP staff actively engaged with industry, regulatory agencies, and service organizations to strengthen partnerships and share expertise. Outreach efforts ranged from local collaborations to presentations for international audiences. These activities fostered the exchange of new ideas and strategies, improved communication between regulators and the retail food industry, and enhanced the program’s ability to support safe food practices statewide.

Table 3: Outreach and Engagement Activities

Outreach Type	Description or Location
Presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minnesota Environmental Health Association (MEHA) Spring and Winter conferences • North Dakota Environmental Health Association Conference • FDA Retail Food Protection Seminar • National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) Annual Education Conference • NEHA/World Health Organization World Food Safety Day • MDA Delegated Agency Training Day • Podcasts, industry conferences, and local events at the request of the organizers
Newsletters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarterly publications to food establishments licensed by the RFP
Other Outreach and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary Retail Food Program Standard Workshops • Meetings with industry partners • Educational career days • Industry training before special events • Community of Practice meetings • Participation in the Local Food Advisory Committee and Minnesota Food Safety and Defense Task Force

Outreach Type	Description or Location
Professional Organization Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27/29 staff were members of at least one professional organization • 2 staff served on the Minnesota Environmental Health Association (MEHA) Board of Directors • 2 staff served on the MEHA committees • 1 staff served on the NEHA Board of Directors

Program Inputs

Staffing

The Retail Food Program relies on a highly trained workforce to deliver food safety oversight across Minnesota. Inspectors apply a risk-based approach during inspections to evaluate hazards in food processing and storage, helping establishments identify practical solutions for compliance and prioritizing education at every visit.

Staffing resources continued to be a critical input in FY25. The program experienced turnover among inspectors, requiring ongoing recruitment and training. Of 22 inspection territories, 17 were filled with fully trained inspectors, while two territories had inspectors in training and three remained vacant. Two inspectors completed initial training during FY25.

Professional development is another key investment. Retail Food inspectors work toward the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential, a nationally recognized standard demonstrating competency in food safety and related environmental health disciplines. In FY25, three inspectors earned the REHS credential, and 13 of 19 inspectors currently hold this certification.

Program funding

RFP operations are supported through a combination of funds from state appropriations, dedicated license fees, and a contract with the USDA. This enables inspections, training, and provides the RFP with a level of flexibility to plan program improvements and therefore to support public health. The estimated RFP budget for the state fiscal year 2025 was \$4,365,135 total, with \$3,064,605 (70%) coming from dedicated fees, \$1,242,530 (28%) from the general fund, and \$58,000 from special revenue (federal contract).

Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards (VNRFPS)

The RFP follows the VNRFPS, which are standards designed to help food regulatory programs enhance the quality of services they provide to both the industry and public. These standards also act as an internal quality assurance program, ensuring that services are delivered consistently and equitably across the state. The MDA is approaching the end of a five-year assessment cycle and is currently conducting a self-assessment to determine if the program still meets all standards, which will continue

into FY26. This effort is guided by the program manager and conducted by the retail program standards & network coordinator, who may be assisted by RFP staff.

Future Goals/Objectives

The RFP has identified several priorities for FY26 to ensure the integrity of the food supply in Minnesota. These goals focus on adapting to food license modernization, strengthening workforce capacity, improving operational efficiency, and increasing oversight of mobile food establishments.

Implement food license modernization

The MDA began a food licensing modernization project in 2024 to improve how licenses are issued and better reflect the state's evolving food business landscape. Revisions to the MDA food licensing law were signed into law by the Governor Tim Walz on May 23, 2025, and went into effect on August 1, 2025. As a part of this project, the RFP will develop training and communication strategies for staff and stakeholders, create standard operating procedures for the new licensing process, and hire a dedicated position to manage licensing applications efficiently and equitably.

Hiring inspectors and restructuring inspection territories

At the close of FY25, three inspector positions remained vacant. Filling these positions is a priority for FY26. Once hiring is complete, the program will redistribute inspection territories based on staff home locations to reduce travel time and improve efficiency. Inspectors currently spend more than 70% of their time in the field, so restructuring territories will help lower costs and increase productivity.

Complete mobile license inventory improvements

Many mobile food establishments have not been regularly inspected since they were initially licensed. The RFP plans to increase our awareness of mobile food handling activities by completing a project to update the risk classifications of these facilities. This will ensure businesses are classified at the appropriate risk level and improve the RFP's understanding of their food handling activities and locations they operate at, which will enable efficient use of RFP inspection resources.

Modernize delegation agreements

Given that the delegation contracts have been in place for over two decades, now is a fitting time to revisit and ensure it supports the current food industry and regulatory approach. Several key developments support this need, including the implementation of the Biosecurity and Food Safety Modernization Acts, the development of national regulatory program standards, and recent changes to the MDA food licensing law. Updating the agreement will enhance operational clarity, align with current best practices, and strengthen our shared commitment to continuous improvement in food safety.

In the coming months, the MDA will begin a collaborative process to modernize the delegation agreement. We will engage our delegated agencies throughout this effort to ensure that updates reflect shared priorities, operational realities, and best practices.

Acknowledgments

The MDA's RFP extends its sincere appreciation to our inspection team for their dedication to protecting public health and ensuring a safe food supply across the state. Their professionalism and commitment to education, compliance, and consumer confidence form the foundation of our program's success.

We also thank our leadership, administrative staff, and partners, including local health agencies, industry stakeholders, and retail operators, for their collaboration and shared commitment to food safety. Together, we strengthen Minnesota's food system and uphold the high standards that keep our communities safe.