

A PROPOSAL FOR GROWING CONNECTICUT FARMS, FOOD & JOBS:

A White Paper Prepared by the Farms, Food & Jobs Working Group

December, 2011

Background

During the fall of 2011, agriculture and food leaders joined together to create a shared understanding of the major opportunities in, and challenges to, strengthening Connecticut's food system. This working group concentrated on prioritizing a set of recommended actions that, when implemented in a strategic and collaborative manner, will make a growing and robust local food economy part of Connecticut's sustainable future.

Intent

This proposal is intended to inform food system advocacy, elevate opportunities in community food initiatives, and guide research on food systems in the region, as well as to provide stakeholder input to the Governor's Council for Agricultural Development (Public Act 11-189). The Council's charge includes making recommendations on ways to increase the percentage of consumer dollars spent on Connecticut-grown fresh produce and farm products.

The Farms, Food & Jobs Working Group:

Billings Forge Community Works
CitySeed
Common Ground
Connecticut Department of Agriculture
Connecticut Farm Bureau Association
Connecticut Food Policy Council
CT Northeast Organic Farming Association
Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.
End Hunger CT!
Jones Family Farms
New Haven Food Policy Council
Sustainable Food Systems, LLC
University of Connecticut College of Agriculture & Natural Resources
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
Wholesome Wave
Working Lands Alliance

FOOD SYSTEM ECONOMY

Our food system in Connecticut includes all the resources and activities involved in providing food for our residents. This includes farmers and consumers, as well as a wide range of businesses that facilitate production, processing, packaging, marketing, selling, transporting, preparing and disposing of food.

Well managed food systems

- efficiently use land, water, energy, waste, nutrients, and human capital in a way that benefits our economic, environmental and human health;
- ensure access to adequate, affordable, and nutritious food for all of its residents;
- improve food security, helping the region to meet some of its needs in the advent of climate change, an energy crisis, or natural disaster.

Each of the food system components are job centers and economic drivers. Retail food purchases generated over \$14 billion in sales in 2010 ⁱⁱ. Our food system keeps residents working, including farmers, equipment suppliers, agricultural engineers, veterinarians, plant pathologists, soil scientists, lenders, warehouse managers, chefs, school food service directors, grocers, butchers, truck drivers, and many more.

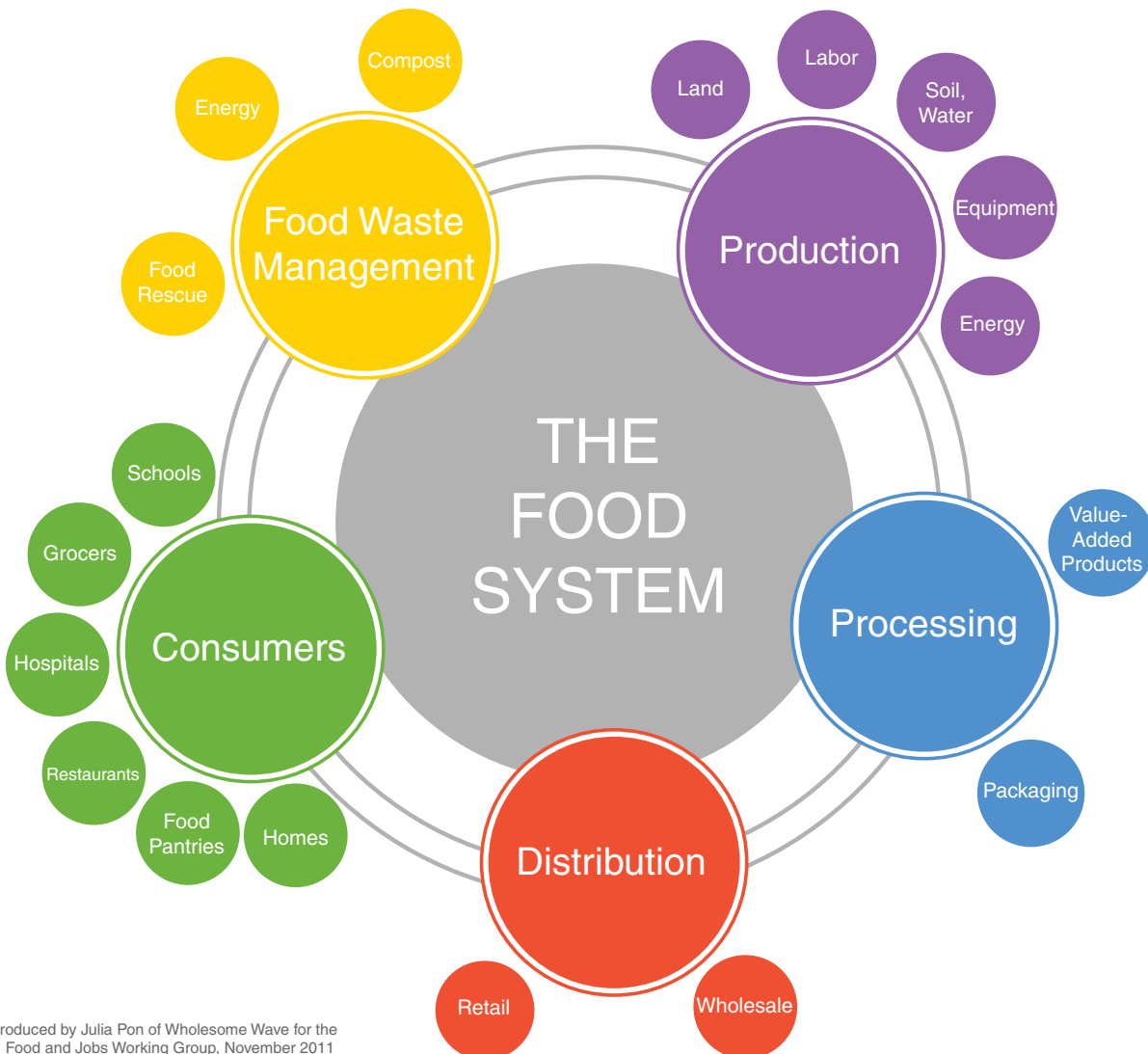


Diagram produced by Julia Pon of Wholesome Wave for the CT Farms, Food and Jobs Working Group, November 2011

AGRICULTURE'S ROLE IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

JOBS: Our agriculture sector contributes \$3.5 billion to the state's economy and has an impact of 20,000 jobs ⁱⁱⁱ. From 2002 to 2007, the number of farms in Connecticut increased by 17% to 4,916 farms ^{iv}.

ECONOMIC STABILITY: The unique business model of agriculture lends stability and minimizes risk to the state economy. Farms are not a portable industry. Farms are able to quickly diversify in order to adapt to changes in the market. Farms pay taxes and provide jobs. A viable agriculture industry effectively minimizes pressure to develop land outside inner core cities, helping to keep municipal costs of community services stable. Farmers markets, whether in urban or rural areas, contribute to economic and community development.

TOURISM: Agriculture plays a critical role in the state's tourism industry. Tourism relies on farming as its scenic backdrop. Farms have become destinations for u-pick activities, farm-to-plate dinner events, as well as weddings and harvest celebrations. Farms are also vital to outdoor recreation, from hunting and fishing to hiking and nature photography.

STEWARDSHIP: Our state's cropland, pasture and woodland are indispensable to the wellbeing of our watersheds and wildlife. Farmers and the lands they steward provide a variety of ecosystem services that would otherwise be very costly or impossible for the state to maintain, preserve, and protect. A typical Connecticut farm acts as a natural filter and storage for surface water, provides aquifer recharge, hosts habitat areas for local flora and fauna as well as stopovers for migratory species.

OPPORTUNITIES

Rising demand for "locally grown" food has been fueled by consumer perception that local food is safer, healthier, and better tasting. Local products may also be perceived as more environmentally friendly or sustainable. Local production and processing can reduce the use of fuel, decrease the need for packaging and resultant waste disposal, keep farmland in active use, support a greater diversity of crop, and have improved nutrient profiles^v. Restaurants are looking to purchase more local food for their menus that feature 'locally grown' and seasonal options for patrons. The development of high value CT branded products also creates opportunities for regional, national, and international export.

Meanwhile, **Federal nutrition guidelines are recommending that people "make half your plate fruits and vegetables"** in order to improve nutrient intake while limiting calories^{vi}. According to USDA, Connecticut has 733 vegetable growers and 499 fruit growers^{vii}. Connecticut leads southern New England, with 2.9 acres of vegetables and an acre of fruit harvested for every 1000 people^{viii}. School gardens, kitchen gardens and community gardens are an important source of local fruit and vegetables within walking distance and should not be underestimated in their productive capacity.

There is **growing national attention on how food system environments impact public health outcomes**. The American Public Health Association (APHA) and American Medical Association (AMA) have both passed resolutions concerning the linkage of a sustainable agriculture and food systems to the public health of our nation^{ix}. Cafeterias in schools and hospitals are in the spotlight for public health and diet reforms. Health care food services across the country are implementing new initiatives for their patients such as sourcing food and meat produced without the use of antibiotics, buying local produce, and sponsoring farmers markets and food boxes for staff. Farm to School programs connect schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers.

In recent years, producers have adapted their business model in order to reach new customers through direct sales via farmers markets, agri-tourism events, farm-to-school programs, and CSAs^x. In fact, USDA figures indicate that direct sales increased by 74% from 2002 to 2007^{xi}. Yet this type of direct marketing has limitations for significantly increasing consumption of local food. For most households, 90% of all food purchased for home consumption is acquired from retail venues (such as grocery stores)^{xii}. **Food retailers (grocery stores, superstores, discount clubs, etc) represent a crucial opportunity for increasing the flow of CT-Grown products to consumers^{xiii}.**

Connecticut residents receive over \$570 million in federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formally known as Food Stamps) funds during the last year. **These federal monies, and others including funding for school meals, summer feeding programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infant and Children (WIC) and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program for low-income seniors and WIC families, bring additional buying power to our communities.** Innovative programs that incentivize federal benefit recipients to shop at farmers markets are further able to capture a portion of those federal dollars locally. Increased use of EBT^{xiv} machines in farmers markets and expansion of farmers markets in traditional food deserts is helping economically disadvantaged residents locate and purchase CT-grown food.

Connecticut enjoys good soils and favorable climate conditions for food production. Its 862,822 acres of 'prime and important soils' represents 27% of all state land, although much of it is currently forested^{xv}. These soils have characteristics ideally suited for food production. Approximately 10% of the state is regarded as 'land in farms' (321,393 acres of cropland, woodland, and pasture) and there is an additional 70,000+ acres in the Long Island Sound available for aquaculture^{xvi}. **Recently, \$5 million in state bonding was set aside for the creation of a Farmland Restoration Program to be used for reclamation of grown over pastures and meadows, removal of invasive plants and timber, installation of fences, and improving water management systems** (Public Act 11-1). Producers

from the state's largest agriculture sector – the horticulture sector – who maintain over 46,000 acres in production^{xvii} are exploring opportunities of growing food crops in their fields and greenhouses. (So far the State of Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program has protected prime and important soils on 283 farms totaling 37,262 acres^{xviii}. Using estimates from practitioners, another 10,000 acres of farmland have been protected by land trusts and towns without the use of state funding^{xix}.)

The Connecticut Regional Market in Hartford is a state owned facility for farmers and wholesalers to sell and distribute food and other agricultural products. The Regional Market is centrally located near the crossroads of I-84 and I-91, covers 32 acres, and contains 230,386 square feet of warehouse space as well as an active railroad spur. It is the largest perishable food distribution facility between Boston and New York, with potable water, sewer, and a close proximity to labor and highways. This facility is currently not being used to its full potential for the local food system; not to mention the underutilized potential of food processing and distribution facilities at Long Wharf in New Haven.

A significant number of non-profits, quasi-government agencies and land trusts currently work on local food and agriculture issues, with an ever growing number of coalitions, food policy councils, producer associations, local non-profits, gardening clubs, and the like. Together these partners have a substantial impact on strengthening the food system of our state. These organizations provide technical assistance and training on a wide variety of subjects, including production, food access, nutrition, culinary training, farmers markets, value-added production, marketing, farmland access, business training, and gardening. Although these organizations span a wide range of issues, each in its own way is contributing to civic engagement and democratic discourse about food system reform.

MAJOR CHALLENGE AREAS

As is the case for most states, the proportion of fresh food imported into Connecticut each year has increased dramatically over the past 25 years. Although data on local food consumption in Connecticut is limited, we believe we can state unequivocally that the majority of fresh produce consumed is not produced here.

The path from farm to plate for locally grown products - whether that plate is in a household, a restaurant or an institution - has eroded and no longer functions adequately to meet the potential of our food system economy. This path needs to be redefined and strengthened in order to re-connect local food supply to the demand for local food. There are currently a number of significant obstacles that need to be cleared, and bridges that need to be built, in order for the path from farm to plate to become well traveled.

These include:

1) State procurement of CT-Grown products fails to model how to connect local food supply to demand for local food. Although policies exist (see text box to the right)^{xx} to encourage state procurement of CT-Grown food, there is little or no incentive to participate, nor is there any mechanism for tracking state procurement of locally grown products.

2) Coordination among food-related authorities in state agencies is lacking. Food is not a priority for planning by state decision makers. Food is not adequately considered in transportation and land use planning. There is a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities of the state, versus roles and responsibilities of Federal and town authorities.

3) No baseline data of local food consumption and purchasing makes it difficult to set goals or benchmarks for strengthening the food system. There is also no baseline of data of school gardens, kitchen gardens, or community gardens.

4) Aggregation and distribution systems are either missing entirely or are not designed to deliver local food from small growers to buyers. Without these systems food retailers (grocery stores, superstores, wholesale clubs and mass merchandisers) and food service providers rely heavily on conventional food instead of local food resources.

5) Processing infrastructure does not exist to meet needs of producers or buyers. This is particularly problematic for institutional buyers (i.e. schools, colleges, hospitals, etc) that are willing to serve local food year-round.

State Procurement Policy - CGS Sec 4a-51(b)

Duties of Administrative Services Commissioner re: purchases. (b) The Commissioner of Administrative Services, when purchasing or contracting for the purchase of dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, shall give preference to dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables grown or produced in this state, when such products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables are comparable in cost to other dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables being considered for purchase by the commissioner that have not been grown or produced in this state.

6) A complex and often burdensome mix of food safety regulations set by Federal, State, and Local authorities as well as industry requirements create barriers for producers and local food enterprises.

7) There are few training opportunities and technical assistance services for entrepreneurs throughout the food system (including young and beginning farmers and innovative food businesses)^{xxi}.

8) Food and nutrition education is inadequate. Several federally funded programs exist for low income families and children, but funding is minimal to reach this large audience. School-based nutrition education is recommended but often not implemented.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Each of the following will need to be examined by appropriate experts and stakeholders in order to develop a strategic plan to move forward.

STATE LEADERSHIP, PLANNING AND COORDINATION

Improve the state government's performance and capacity with regards to strengthening the food system.

A strategic plan for this priority might include:

- Establish a baseline of in-state consumption of CT-grown products
- Establish benchmarks and goals for increased CT-grown consumption
- Consider the creation of a state food action plan
- Improve coordination among state agencies with food-related authority
- Strengthen policies with regard to state procurement of local food and develop tracking systems to monitor local food purchases by the state and state-funded institutions
- Ensure there is structural capacity to improve communication between branches of government as well as across agencies and programs in state government that regulate, educate or provide support to local food businesses
- Explore opportunities for state policy (such as state POCD) to be utilized to encourage local land use regulations to be more supportive to agriculture enterprises

In response to Major Challenge Areas # 1, 2 & 3

FARM-TO-INSTITUTION

Increase access to an ample quantity and variety of CT-grown food in schools, health care facilities, colleges, state-run cafeterias, etc.

A strategic plan for this priority might include:

- Support the innovative creation of local food enterprises that can help expand farm-to-institution pathways (e.g. food center specializing in processing and preserving for food service buyers, farm-to-institution aggregation & delivery service)
- Develop training programs to ensure that farmers and food entrepreneurs have the skills to effectively bid for food service contracts, meet liability insurance requirements, supply safe food, and meet institutional food service needs for packaging and product uniformity.
- Increase processing and aggregation capacity through strategic financing for infrastructure construction and/or improvements.
- Facilitate matchmaking between institutional buyers and growers

In response to Major Challenge Areas # 4, 5, 6 & 7

KEY FOODS GROWTH STRATEGY

Expand the production and sale of certain key foods. A “key food” must have high consumer demand and can be grown locally, including fruit, vegetables, dairy, eggs, meat and poultry. Sales potential through all retail and wholesale distribution channels should be examined.

A strategic plan for this priority might include:

- Support the innovative creation of local food enterprises that can help expand the production and sale of key foods (e.g. regional food hub, processing facility, ct-grown retail center)
- Support producers interested in expanding and intensifying greenhouse production of food and encourage season extension for food crops
- Provide technical assistance for scaling up to growers interested in serving larger markets
- Develop an inventory of land suitable and available for agricultural use, including protected land, and land in urban and suburban areas. Use inventory to identify areas lacking in production of key foods. Use inventory to identify areas lacking protected lands in order to target new protection efforts.
- Develop a strategy specific to food deserts characterized by high rates of federal food benefit recipients to provide additional retail opportunities for producers of key foods while capturing federal funds locally.
- Develop a strategy specific to increasing key food production for farm-to-school program needs.

In response to Major Challenge Areas # 4, 5, 6 & 7

FOOD SYSTEM TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Strengthen educational programs that will improve the viability of farm businesses, attract a new generation of farmers, and increase public exposure to food system concepts.

A strategic plan for this priority might include:

- Improve coordination among institutions of higher learning to provide food system education and training (including University of Connecticut College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Cooperative Extension as well as other state colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges)
- Focus on k-12 students to increase their knowledge of gardening, nutrition, and cooking to match state Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) requirements.
- Augment curriculum about sustainable food production techniques (including organic) for students in the Agriculture Science & Technology programs (i.e. Vo-Ag). Also, create internship or mentoring programs to increase numbers of Vo-Ag students transitioning to jobs in farming, agricultural science, and local food business careers (farmers markets, food processing company, food product development etc).
- Support and expand training for growers and food entrepreneurs provided by Cooperative Extension System, nonprofit organizations, federal and state agencies on subjects of production techniques, food safety, transition planning, farmland access, business management, marketing strategies, land stewardship and protection.
- Support and expand educational programs for children and families provided by Cooperative Extension System, nonprofit organizations, and state agencies on subjects of nutrition, gardening, cooking, and safe food preparation.

In response to Major Challenge Areas # 6, 7 & 8

ENDNOTES

- i. Members of the Farms, Food & Jobs Working Group: Bill Duesing, CT Northeast Organic Farming Association; Bonnie Burr, University of Connecticut College of Agriculture & Natural Resources; Henry Talmage, Connecticut Farm Bureau Association; John Guszowski, Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.; John Turenne, Sustainable Food Systems, LLC; Julia Pon, Wholesome Wave; Kip Kolesinskas, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Leah Mayor, Working Lands Alliance; Linda Drake, Connecticut Food Policy Council; Lucy Nolan, Executive Director of End Hunger CT!; Melissa Spear, Executive Director of Common Ground; Nicole Berube, Executive Director of CitySeed; Rita Decker-Perry, Billings Forge Community Works; Steve Reviczky, Connecticut Department of Agriculture; Tagan Engel, New Haven Food Policy Council; Terry Jones, Jones Family Farms. The Farms, Food & Jobs Working Group and proposal development was facilitated by Jiff Martin, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System.
- ii. USDA, ERS. (2010). Food CPI and Expenditures
- iii. University of Connecticut Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, "Economic Impacts of Connecticut's Agricultural Industry," Sept 2010.
- iv. USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007.
- v. American Medical Association, Report of the Council on Science and Public Health, Report 8-A-09.
- vi. USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010
- vii. USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007.
- viii. According to the most recent census, Connecticut growers harvested 10,290 acres of vegetables, 3,672 acres of fruit, and 866 acres of berries. USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007.
- ix. Acres per 1000 people

	VEG	FRUIT
CT	2.9	1.0
MA	2.4	0.8
RI	2.3	0.6
VT	4.6	5.7
National	14.1	16.4

Source: USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007

- x. <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/475/refcomd.pdf>;
- xi. <http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1361>
- xii. CSA means Community Supported Agriculture; a CSA consists of a community of individuals or families who pledge support to a farmer at the beginning of the season with the understanding that the 'shareholders' will share the risks and benefits of that year's harvest. Typically, members of the CSA pay in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's harvest throughout the growing season.
- xiii. USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007. By 2007 the value of direct sales had reached reached \$29.7 million.
- xiv. USDA, ERS. (2010). Food CPI and Expenditures
- xv. To illustrate, a recent report on food systems in Northeast Ohio proposes that a 25% shift to local products could result in the creation of more than 27,000 jobs. "Scaling-up Connections between Regional Ohio Specialty Crop Producers and Local Markets: Distribution as the Missing Link," Clark, J., Inwood, S., Sharp, J, Ohio State University, Aug 2011.
- xvi. Electronic Benefit Transfer - an electronic system that automates the delivery, redemption, and reconciliation of issued public assistance benefits
- xvii. University of Connecticut, Center for Land Use Education and Research, Agricultural Fields and Soils in Connecticut, 2010.
- xviii. Connecticut has 163,686 acres of cropland, 32,832 acres of pasture and 124,875 acres of farm woodland. USDA NASS, 2007 Census of Agriculture, 2007.
- xix. Economic Impact Study 2009, CT Nursery & Landscape Association.
- xx. CT Department of Agriculture, reported in Connecticut Weekly Agricultural Report, April 20, 2011.
- xxi. Working Lands Alliance, "Plowing Ahead: Farmland Preservation in 2010 and Beyond," March 2010.
- xxii. Sec. 4a-51. (Formerly Sec. 4-110). Duties of Administrative Services Commissioner re purchases. (b) The Commissioner of Administrative Services, when purchasing or contracting for the purchase of dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, shall give preference to dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables grown or produced in this state, when such products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables are comparable in cost to other dairy products, poultry, eggs, fruits or vegetables being considered for purchase by the commissioner that have not been grown or produced in this state.
- xxiii. A recently released study by the National Young Farmers Coalition, "Building A Future With Farmers: Challenges Faced by Young, American Farmers and a National Strategy to Help Them Succeed," identified the major obstacles for beginning farmers are access to capital, farmland affordability and availability for long-term leasing, and health care affordability. Training ranked 7th as one of the biggest challenges faced by young and beginning farmers.