

Citizen Panel on the Future of Food in New England

The Citizen Panel on the Future of Food in New England convened in April 2003. Comprised of fifteen citizens from the six New England states, the panel gathered information, engaged in reasoned discourse, reviewed expert testimony and deliberated findings and recommendations.

We are honored and humbled by our experience. We offer an informed perspective forged by a deeper understanding of ourselves as active, concerned citizens and by a commitment to a stronger regional food system.

We celebrate and salute the essential but largely unseen farmers and food producers who nourish our bodies, enrich our culture and connect us to the land. We are inspired to urge our fellow citizens to put a face on our food and get involved.

As residents of the six New England states, we believe individuals can influence and shape the future of the local food system. We believe citizen action, both individual and collective, can create a diverse, flexible and resilient food system—one that is more self-reliant and self-sufficient in the future.

Food is both universal and exquisitely personal. We address our report to all New England residents—every one of us has a stake in the future of our food.

Over the next two decades we envision a region characterized by entrepreneurial agriculture and active citizen involvement. Our report is comprised of findings and recommendations to achieve this vision, some of which require immediate attention and action.

Three essential components form the foundation of our recommendations:

1. A strong regional approach built on our collective strengths.
2. Programs to educate consumers and to provide farmers and food producers with essential support, effective management methodologies and technical services.

3. A recognition that policy considerations from both government and non-government organizations affect the entire region. A more collaborative approach to policy issues offers opportunities to bridge differences for the good of the region.

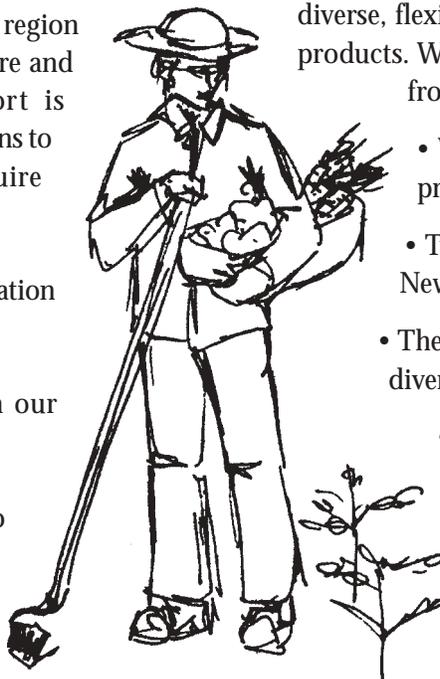
We view this report as a public policy statement. As such we urge our fellow citizens, as well as local, state and federal officials to take action on these recommendations.

Building a Regional Approach

The six New England states must move beyond individual state parochialism to build interstate strategies. A regional approach, by enabling greater diversity and integration of our food system, leads to stronger regional self-reliance. Increased self-sufficiency means more profitable, viable farms, a more secure food system with greater local and therefore regional economic growth.

Findings:

- Our New England character and landscape depend on agriculture.
- The New England states share important natural advantages, especially water and soil resources.
- Four hundred years of agricultural history demonstrate diverse, flexible and resilient farms, farmers and farm products. We enjoy many regional economic benefits from agriculture.
 - We enjoy relatively short distances between producers and markets.
 - Two key metropolitan markets—Boston and New York—anchor the region.
- The region embraces a culturally and ethnically diverse population.
 - Many non-government organizations and state government agencies already collaborate on food system issues.
 - The region does not receive a fair share of federal assistance.



CITIZEN PANEL ON THE FUTURE OF FOOD IN NEW ENGLAND

Recommendations:

- Create and expand regional 'buy local' campaigns.
- Make individual state regulations and statutes more uniform within the region.
- Encourage public universities and agricultural extension services to expand and strengthen regional collaboration.
- Investigate and establish regional branded labeling programs. Consider meat and specialty dairy products as pilot programs.
- Encourage states to reduce regulatory barriers to food processors, especially for milk plants and livestock processing facilities.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

To help build the regional food system and boost economic development, we propose educating consumers and encouraging producers to take advantage of local demand and regional successes.

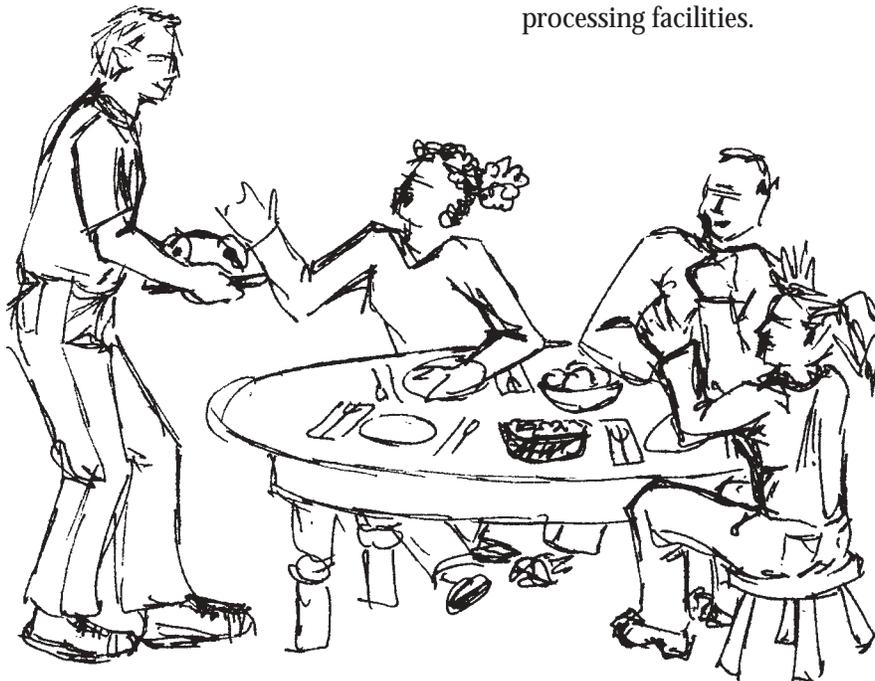
Findings:

- Consolidation continues within the national food system, particularly in the food processing and retailing industries.
- Globalization impacts all levels of the New England food system.

- Consolidation and globalization lessen the number of wholesale markets and weaken the support infrastructure for New England agriculture.
- Increasingly over the last decade consumers have demanded safer, high quality, local food.
- New England agricultural businesses have established successful local direct marketing ventures and niche markets.
- The number of small-scale processing facilities in the region is inadequate.

Recommendations:

- Educate consumers about:
 - buying locally grown and processed foods;
 - where food dollars go, and how locally-spent money strengthens the local community;
 - the impact on the local economy of globalization and consolidation.
- Build upon successful small-scale agricultural enterprises to expand the local economic base.
- Expand and enhance the agricultural service infrastructure: lending, financial planning and legal assistance.
- Enforce antitrust laws to protect consumers and producers.
- Support successful enterprises.
- Establish and support more small scale regional processing facilities.



FARM PROFITABILITY & LONG-TERM VIABILITY

Profitable farms are the foundation of a regional food system and necessary to maintaining a regional land, expertise and infrastructure base. To assure long term viability of local farms and the regional food system, necessary support must be developed and maintained.

Findings:

- Clear and present economic threats exist to dairy and orchard operations.
- Ongoing consolidation within the food processing industry decreases revenues below the cost of production for many New England farms.
- Loss of farms, farmland and services such as farm equipment suppliers, large animal vets and feed stores, jeopardize the viability of the farm economy.
- Farmers are experiencing low return on investment and declining farm incomes.
- Trends show a diminishing number of medium-sized farms, large farms growing bigger and small farms multiplying in number.
- Multi-generational farm succession presents challenges and opportunities.
- Farm labor costs are higher in New England compared to the rest of the nation.
- Farm labor availability is limited.
- High costs of health insurance and worker's compensation put some farms at risk.
- Federal agricultural subsidies favor Western and Midwest commodities over New England crops.
- A typical US farmer receives only nineteen cents of the consumer's total food dollar.

Recommendations:

- Take immediate regional action on milk pricing.
- Cultivate and support the essential services necessary to retain a diversified agricultural base.
- Develop support for farm entrepreneurship (diversification, niche and direct marketing, local farmer/consumer relationships).

- Support farmers' efforts to add value to their crops.
- Strengthen management and marketing training and education for farmers.
- Increase and support farmer cooperatives, trade groups and shared processing operations and facilities.
- Assign value to the positive environmental services provided by farming (open spaces, working landscapes, clean air and water).
- Foster and support new farmers, and encourage young people to consider careers in agriculture.
- Streamline federal foreign agricultural worker programs.

RESOURCE CONSERVATION

Land, soil, water and other natural resources are essential to a productive regional food system. These resources must be protected and maintained.

Findings:

- New England continues to lose prime and locally important farmland due to economic factors and development pressures.
- The demand for water of sufficient quality and quantity to satisfy New England's water resource needs continues to grow.
- Existing land and water conservation programs operating at all levels of government throughout New England are insufficient to offset the region's loss of farmland.

Recommendations:

- Make more effective and aggressive utilization of all available farmland preservation methods at all levels of government and by all appropriate conservation organizations.
- Where appropriate, all units and levels of government should develop and implement farmland preservation legislation and/or programs, especially where such programs are not currently available.
- In both of the above cases, all units of government should fully fund farmland protection programs.

FOOD SECURITY & FOOD SAFETY

“Traditional definitions of food security focus on the extent to which people have physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs.” (*Northeast Farms to Food*, Northeast Sustainable Agriculture working Group, 2002, p. 70). The report explains this issue further by stating:

The concept of community food security (CFS) goes beyond the issues of hunger and poverty. It emphasizes community-based (rather than individual- and family-based) solutions to the problems of food access, nutrition, and hunger. CFS embraces a systems approach that synthesizes disparate fields, from nutrition to public health to community economic development. It addresses the qualitative as well as quantitative aspects of diet, such as the nutritional content, safety, and cultural appropriateness of food. As a new movement, CFS focuses primarily on urban settings and on lower-income consumers, but stresses links with producers, rural communities, and the environment.

Food Security Findings:

- Community Food Security (CFS) is a growing movement.
- CFS and sustainable agriculture are companion movements.
- A growing number of citizens are committed to the availability of good nutritious food for all consumers and creating economic and transportation access to farmer’s markets, pick-your-own and roadside stands.
- Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and senior citizen food programs have a positive impact on farmer’s markets regionally.
- We see an increase in school-based programs about nutrition and diet, as well as the creation of edible school yards.
- Within the region we found an increasing number of farmer’s markets, school and community gardens and locally grown food to school and business cafeteria programs.

Food Security Recommendations:

- Inform and improve WIC, FMNP and seniors programs to include the same opportunities for roadside stands as for grocery stores.
- Support and expand ongoing education and outreach programs for nutrition and diet issues.
- Continue building relationships and connections between rural and urban communities.

Food Safety Findings:

- A diverse local food system is less vulnerable to bio-terrorism.
- The threat of bio-terrorism provides an opportunity for additional awareness and funding.
- Food safety is a continued concern for consumers.
- Consistent inspections of food processors are not a reality.
- Government inspectors and inspection programs are under funded.

Food Safety Recommendations:

- Increase government funding and commitment to inspections.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR & CITIZEN ACTION

We want to encourage consumer behavior that strengthens the New England food system. Citizen involvement is crucial for this to be effective. We need action by and for our fellow citizens.

Findings:

- Media and advertising, tradition, culture, economics, politics and access shape consumer behavior in the purchasing of food.
- Many consumers simply do not buy locally produced food.



CITIZEN PANEL ON THE FUTURE OF FOOD IN NEW ENGLAND

- Nationwide, many Americans eat a large proportion of highly processed foods. These habits have led to increased rates of diet-related diseases (e. g. diabetes, obesity).
- New England consumers are beginning to buy more food through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmer's markets, farm stands, pick-your-own and cooperatives.
- Some non-profits and governmental organizations have begun to promote local/regional products and help local farmers.
- Farm to school initiatives and institutional purchasing of local food are expanding.
- Federal and state grants encourage local production and consumer connections with the food system.

Recommendations:

- Support organizations that presently involve citizens in local food systems.
- Provide more support for CSAs, farmer's markets, farm stands, pick-your-own and consumer-producer connections.
- Urge municipalities and school boards to support relevant nutrition and health education (e.g. school gardens, local food promotion), increase the use of local products and decrease reliance on corporate funding in schools.
- Support municipal ordinances that support local food systems.
- Advocate at state and municipal levels for the subsidy of Community Supported Agriculture for appropriate recipients.
- Individuals and advocacy organizations should lobby local officials, and state and federal legislators and policy makers to support local food systems.

Additional Recommendation:

To fully understand the region's food system, we must address New England's rich maritime and fishing history and contemporary practices. We strongly recommend that the UNH Office of Sustainability Programs convene a panel on the Future of Fishing in New England.

–June 21, 2003

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