

New England deserves a regional food plan

Better coordination would cut down on duplicative efforts and inefficiencies.



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FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By The Editorial Board
www.bostonglobe.com

IN 1974, MASSACHUSETTS' food supply was in crisis: The state had lost more than half of its farmland in the previous three decades. Several local fish species risked extinction due to overfishing. Add in high energy costs, inflation, and a lackluster harvest, and New Englanders were paying over 10 per cent more for their food than the national average. Then-Governor Francis Sargent established an emergency panel to evaluate the food system and make policy recommendations, producing the nation's first comprehensive state food plan.

It is tough to imagine a similar crisis today. Food is relatively cheap, the number of farmers is on the rise, and consumers want local food on their tables. Yet there's still an acute need for a systematic,

sustainable approach that matches the growing demand with the potential supply. Fishing and farming remain capital-intensive and financially risky at all but the industrial level. Roads needed to get product promptly to market are crumbling. Access to fresh, healthy food remains elusive in poorer communities, exacerbating public health concerns like diabetes and obesity. Indeed, if the local-food movement is going to be more than a high-priced hobby, it is going to take regional coordination.

To start, there is the obvious strength in numbers. Most agriculture policy in the United States continues to be set at the federal level. But what New England's food system needs — its ecology, demographics, infrastructure — is decidedly different from growers and distributors in the Corn Belt or California's Central Valley. A century ago, New England farms lost the battle for agricultural economies of scale to Midwestern behemoths. Today, a collective New England voice in Congress, plugging away on a common agenda, is the most effective way to advocate for the region's smaller food producers.

The benefits of a regionally integrated food chain are already understood. In recent years, all six New England states have embarked on developing their own individual food plans. Vermont's is the most advanced, having been released in 2011. Rhode Island followed soon after. New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts are expected to issue draft plans this year. Better coordination would cut down on duplicative efforts and inefficiencies. Consider slaughterhouses. Unlike fresh vegetables, meat needs extensive processing and requires heavy equipment to keep it cool in transit. The number of meatpacking plants in the United States has fallen by half over the past 30 years, and New England is no exception. That means most small cattle, pork, and chicken farmers have to send their goods a long distance just to get them ready for sale, which can be financially crippling. Businesses like Dorchester's new Commonwealth Kitchen food production facility helps relieve some of this pressure, but does it make sense for each state to break ground on new slaughterhouses? Probably not.

The economic upside of a robust, integrated food system is well documented. Since Vermont passed its farm-to-plate bill in 2009, the state has added 665 new food businesses. Local food accounts for \$8.6 billion in annual economic output (up 24 percent since 2007), and the state added 5,500 food system jobs from 2002 to 2013. Public health and child development advocates see the benefits of making affordable fresh food widely available as even more promising.

Still, any regional food strategy would need to be both expansive and creative. Some goals could include preserving farmland; connecting aspiring farmers to financing and educational opportunities; establishing more food hubs, local groups that help farms sell to the public, restaurants, grocery stores, and distributors, as well as to farm-to-school programs; and advocating for better roads and rail networks. Food transportation costs are expected to as much as double over the next decade, due mostly to a truck driver shortage and increasing intermodal rates. Shortening supply chains will be critical to keeping the region competitive.

No progress, however, will come without leadership. In Massachusetts, a vocal champion in the Baker administration for even the modern statewide food plan hasn't stepped forward. Fortunately, some in the academic and philanthropic communities, such as the Henry P. Kendall Foundation and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, have picked up the mantle. Perhaps most ambitious is a vision put forth by a group called Food Solutions New England, which calls for 50 percent of the food New Englanders consume to be produced in the region by 2060.

That may sound fantastical, but many of the seeds of today's flourishing food economy in New England were planted during the 1974 crisis. After all, the region can only reap what it sows.