

In the fields that feed the Brookline Farmers' Market, vendors feel effects of federal uncertainty

by Milena Fernsler <<https://brookline.news/author/mf-06236/>>
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Amber and Greg Pollock of Sunfox Farm are unsure if the Transition to Organic Partnership Program or TOPP, will continue under the Trump administration. Photo by Milena Fernsler

A long line of eager customers forms at Marie Romaje and Jean Brevette's tent before the Brookline Farmer's Market has even opened. Like the couple, many of their customers are Haitians looking to recreate a taste of home, crowding for the leafy, okra-like "lalo" or jute leaves that are a staple in Haitian cuisine.

Romaje, who owns a plot of land with Brevette at Mentor Flats Farm in Lancaster, says she's one of the few lalo suppliers in the region. She is worried

about maintaining her clientele amidst restrictions to SNAP, or food stamps, eligibility imposed by the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” passed by Congress and signed into law by President Donald Trump on July 4.

“It hurts us [farmers] too because we don’t sell as much as we would,” Romaje said, adding that most of her customers at the Roslindale Farmer’s Market, as well as many in Brookline, pay using SNAP benefits.

SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, provides food benefits to low-income families across the United States, with additional benefits offered to Massachusetts residents that buy local produce from participating farmers through the Healthy Initiatives Program.

At the Brookline Farmers Market, around 15 percent of customers use some form of SNAP or HIP benefits, estimates Isabelle Levy, the market manager.

The new restrictions recently passed by Congress, which increase work requirements, narrow parental exemptions, and eliminate eligibility for legally present asylum seekers and refugees, will affect an estimated 40,000 adults participating in the SNAP program in Greater Boston, according to a recent analysis by Boston Indicators.

The turmoil that has come along with the start of the Trump administration has been challenging for Massachusetts farmers, including many of those who are vendors at Brookline’s beloved farmer’s market.

Along with the SNAP changes, farmers this year have seen budget cuts, a lack of communication, and withdrawal of some federally funded grants and loans after a funding freeze in late January . While the large-scale impacts of these changes are still unfolding, some farmers are already seeing direct effects on an individual level.

Brookline.News spoke to four vendors at the Brookline Farmer’s Market about how changes at the federal level are impacting their businesses and causing uncertainty for the future.



Marie Romaje and Jean Brevette harvest the Haitian staple lalo, at one of their properties at Flats Mentor Farm.

Photo by Milena Fernsler

From Haiti to Brookline

In 1999, Romaje and Brevette, who are married, left Haiti in search of a better life and education for their children. Having kept a farm with her mother back home, Romaje hoped to continue cultivating crops like lalo, chayote, amaranth, and castor leaves.

When she first arrived, Romaje said she was impressed by the amount of open land in the US, and dumbfounded by how much the country relies on imported food.

“America has a lot of land, why do we have to take it from Mexico, Dominica? We can grow our own food to survive,” she said.

However, she and Brevette immediately found an obstacle: the cost of buying land. Expensive farmland, becoming increasingly scarce amid development, is one of the reasons farmers might turn to federal grants or loans for assistance.

After a brief stint in Canada, Romaje and Brevette eventually found their way to Mentor Flats Farm in Lancaster, Mass., run by the nonprofit, World Farmers. The organization provides land and support for small scale immigrant and refugee farmers.



Barnabas Forndia, originally from Liberia, made his way to Mentor Flats Farm in 2016. He is currently waiting on an FSA loan for a refrigerated van past the 60 day waiting period, even though his application was approved upon first submission. Photo by Milena Fernsler

The majority of the program's funding comes from federal grants, and the uncertainty of future funding weighs on the organization, according to its program and policy director Jessy Gill. She said Flats Mentor Farm has experienced an unprecedented delay in loans through the U.S Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, with two farmers still waiting for approval past the application waiting period.

While she emphasized the support World Farmers has received from USDA in the past, Gill said a recent lack of communication leaves them in the dark about the status of projects and loan applications.

A veteran vendor's view



Owner and operator Stephen Violette eats blueberries off the bush, surrounded by his expansive orchards at Dick's Market Gardens. Photo by Milena Fernsler

In Brookline on Thursdays, across the market aisle from Flats Mentor Farm are two large joined tents housing Dick's Market Gardens. Dick's has held a stand at the Brookline farmers market since right around the market's founding in 1979.

It is the "spunk" and direct rapport with buyers that has kept them returning to Brookline year after year.

Stephen Violette, son of the namesake Dick, is now the owner and operator of the farm's more than 260 acres in Lunenburg, Mass. Managing his employees and expansive property has become his primary occupation, but he says he prefers to have his hands in the field.

On a blistering day in July, he rolls his tractor over a tilled field, dispersing rows of bean seed back and forth across the soil. Beyond lay orchards, greenhouses, and a bustling farm stand. Despite the seemingly large-scale

operation he has established, Violette still considers himself a “small farm” relative to the corporate agricultural industry.



Stephen Violette plants rows of beans in his tractor at Dick’s Market Gardens. Photo by Milena Fernsler

His father began the business with a wheelbarrow and a picnic table underneath an apple tree in his front yard, working off only half an acre of land. Since, Violette has been able to expand in large part thanks to direct marketing over wholesale.

The farm has also profited from Massachusetts funded grants, loans and programs, including grants for greenhouses, solar panels, a two-room cooler, and expansion onto land protected by the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction program, farmland preserved at its fair market value.

“We’ve got a strong Department of Food and Agriculture that has been very supportive to farming, especially small farmers,” he said.

He has received federal help as well, but he said some federal grants, such

as REAP, a renewable energy program that would have helped him with his solar energy project, never returned after the funding freeze in January.

While he hopes loans and grant programs remain active, he warns small farmers not to rely on them.

“You don’t want them to be a crutch,” he said.

Pause in funding



A woman sifts through ears of corn at the Brookline Farmers Market on July 31, 2025. Photo by Milena Fernsler

For less established farmers, reliance on grants and loans is not always a choice.

Greg and Amber Pollock look out into their field of green sunflower buds in late July at Sunfox farm in Concord, New Hampshire. It is at this stage, Greg Pollock said, that they begin to feel anxious about whether they will bloom in time for their highly anticipated, week-long sunflower festival in August.

Throughout the rest of the year, they sell sunflower oil and products at

Brookline's market, and Amber Pollock, a chef, hosts farm-to-table dinners.

But the couple and business partners still have hopes to expand their production, applying for grants and working with a cover crop program through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), as well as the Transition to Organic Partnership Program known as TOPP.

However, after both the NRCS and TTOP programs were temporarily paused, the Pollocks echoed other farmers' uncertainty.

"It shook our trust in relations with government agencies," Greg Pollock said.

He is concerned the TTOP program will be shuttered entirely, which has been the fate of some other programs created under the Biden administration.

High certification fees, stringent rules, and a minimum three year waiting period are among the obstacles that have prevented the Pollocks from obtaining organic certification. While Greg Pollock said they are organic in practice, certification would allow them to demand higher prices for their products that match the cost difference of organic production.

In the meantime the TOPP program offers guidance and pairs transitioning and existing organic farmers like the Pollocks with a mentor. An end to the program would further hinder access to organic farming.

"We don't know if it will survive this administration," Greg Pollock said.

Non-produce vendors impacted, too





Tom Taylor, owner of Grateful Tastes, said craft and non-produce vendors have seen a greater impact on sales due to decreasing access to SNAP benefits. Photo by Milena Fernsler

Craft and non-produce vendors may not be affected by USDA grants and loans, but they can be disproportionately impacted by limitations to SNAP eligibility and reductions in monthly benefits.

The resulting decrease in sales using SNAP benefits has a direct impact on farmers, said Tom Taylor, a seventh generation beekeeper and owner of a Lowell-based family run business, Grateful Tastes. He said he's seen a 20 to 30% reduction in the amount spent using HIP, SNAP, and coupons in his sales this summer.

"I'm an end cap at the grocery store," he said. Selling jams, spreads, and preserves made from local fruit, he said his products aren't considered essential food items, and have a lower priority for those with limited funds to spend.

"Part of it is knowing your hierarchy with the product that you make," he said. "People are being stretched further and further and consequently buying less."

Taylor worries the decrease in access to local food offered through SNAP

and HIP programs will cause low-income customers to return to grocery stores for the sake of affordability. He said these recent changes are part of a broader, ongoing issue of sustaining local food production.

“How far will we go to destroy the earth, grow food as cheaply as possible for the profit of others and kill our own local economy?” he said.

Asking for community support

As federal support remains unpredictable, Stephen Violette from Dick’s Market Gardens said customers can help farms like his by continuing to offer their support and their business.

“Sometimes it’s a little extra effort, but it makes a difference if they can mark it on their calendar and try to be diligent on their part to make a little bit of time to make these farmers markets or go to a farm stand,” he said.

In addition to finding higher quality produce, Violette said, “customers will learn a lot if they go, about the seasons and what’s available. So in return they’re going to be educated by the farmers.”



Stephen Violette of Dick’s Market Gardens walks through grape vines and a peach orchard up to his favorite spot on the farm, the view of Lunenburg from the top of his hill. Photo by Milena Fernsler