

Local farmers, food organizations in limbo after federal food grant program ends



A strawberry patch at Eastie Farms. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

A few years ago, Eastie Farm started giving away boxes of food sourced entirely from New England farmers. At first, roughly 50 people showed up to the East Boston lot each week. But soon word got out, and the number of families lining up quadrupled.

“A lot of people were arriving early, like before we even started, to get a spot in line so that they could access the produce,” food distribution coordinator Michael Zayas said.

The nonprofit paid for the food boxes using federal grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, through a program called the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement, or LFPA. The program gave money to community organizations to buy food from local farmers

and producers, and then distribute that food to people who need it.

The Trump administration cut the program this spring, along with a similar program that sourced fresh food from farms for local schools. The last round of grant funding for LFPA ended in May.

Now without that federal money at the start of the summer harvest season, farmers and food organizations are worried about how businesses will survive and how residents in need will access fresh food.

“There doesn’t seem to be a strategy, it’s just cutting,” said Usha Thakrar, executive director of the Boston Area Gleaners, a food rescue organization. “The cumulative impact of that is yet to be realized.”

Massachusetts organizations bought more than \$10 million of food from local producers and growers with LFPA money since 2022, according to the state’s Department of Agricultural Resources.

The program was initially funded through the American Rescue Plan — the 2021 stimulus plan passed in reaction to economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. In Massachusetts, funds were distributed by the state’s Department of Agricultural Resources.

Officials expanded the program in 2023, calling the second round of funding LFPA Plus. According to the USDA, LFPA was meant to build a more resilient food system that’s dependent on local farmers and producers, while increasing availability of fresh food to those who need it.

In Massachusetts, one in three adults say their household has experienced food insecurity, according to the Greater Boston Food Bank’s latest data from 2023 — a slight increase from the year prior.

Thakrar says the Boston Area Gleaners noticed this increase demand in a survey of the pantries they work with — and worries the demand is going to grow if food benefits, like SNAP, get cut.

“We’re still not even seeing the impact of everything that’s coming,” Thakrar said.

‘A real step back’

For the regulars who visit Eastie Farm, it’s not easy to get to a full service grocery store to get fresh produce.

“It’s not affordable to buy produce [in East Boston] and it’s not easy to get the produce in the first place if you can’t afford it,” food distribution coordinator Michael Zayas said.

Eastie Farm got a little more than half a million dollars in the first round of LFPA funding. They

used it to buy food from nearly five dozen New England farms, a third of which were in Massachusetts. The goal was to get food into people's hands. They also found that food was a way to build trust and connect residents to other services like heating and housing assistance.

“When we have people who reach us through one channel then we engage with them about other things that they may be able to benefit from,” said Kannan Thiruvengadam, director of Eastie Farm.



Eastie Farm founder and director Kannan Thiruvengadam greets local community members during the opening of the new greenhouse in 2022. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Building connections is also part of the mission of Cape Abilities Farm, a nonprofit that employs people with disabilities.

Cape Abilities used LFPA money to pack and distribute boxes of food on Cape Cod. David Valente is the food programs manager at the farm. With the program ending, he's worried the organization will have to cut staff.

“We scaled up because this grant was in place,” he said. “We're getting better and more efficient at handling the need. And so this is a real step back.”

Cape Abilities was distributing about 100 boxes of food a week at nearly half a dozen different

locations, like food pantries and farmer's markets.

Among the items in their boxes was fish stew and chowder from the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance. The soups were made with fish caught locally and processed in Massachusetts.

Seth Rolbein, a senior policy advisor with the Alliance, says the chowders and stews were a win-win, a way to support the fishing community and the wider community in need of food. He says the Alliance will continue to make the soups, but he's not exactly sure what the future looks like right now.

"Other community organizations and foundations have stepped in to say, 'Can we continue to help?' Rolbein said. "But the amount of funding that we stand to lose is significant enough that it puts us in jeopardy."

Erik Jewett, of Fat Daddy's Apiary in Sterling, said the money that Cape Abilities paid him for mushrooms, microgreens and lettuce via LFPA made up 75% of his income.

"The money's been integral in me expanding the farm," Jewett said.

He installed a new growing system, and built a bigger greenhouse and processing facility. Jewett says he went from growing about 72 heads of lettuce per month before LFPA, to roughly 6,000.

However, Jewett agrees with cutting the program. He wants to see the government reduce its spending and doesn't consider the program "necessary."

"So I'm kind of torn because I can see why they did it and I hate the fact that they did, but they should have," Jewett said.

'Bootstraps energy'

LFPA funding was a small piece of the state's food ecosystem — but advocates say without it, some smaller farms might not make it.

World Farmers in Lancaster is a nonprofit that owns seven farm sites that support nearly 300 farmers. The organization has received more than a million dollars in LFPA money to help farmers sell their crops in a guaranteed market.

Founder and interim executive director Maria Moreira, a farmer herself, says farmers spent the winter planning for the next growing season. By the spring, when the administration cut the program, many had already started planting.

"Now what are they gonna do?" Moreira asked. "Someone can always wait to purchase. A farmer cannot wait to sell."



A worker carries kale harvested in Dracut that is bound for the Greater Boston Food Bank in 2022. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Finding markets to sell your produce is one of the biggest hurdles for new or small farmers.

Tim Offei-Addo, owner of Abrantie Farms on the Boxborough line, says not having that LFPA program guarantee will have an impact.

“You might not be so confident in growing,” Offei-Addo said. “You might reduce how much you grow because you don’t know if you can sell it.”

Offei-Addo grows a lot of onions, garlic and carrots on his farm. He also grows some produce not typically seen in major grocery stores like African and Brazilian eggplants.

“It allowed me to scale my production over the years,” Offei-Addo said

Offei-Addo says farming requires a lot of resources — something he doesn’t have a lot of as a new farmer.

“There’s a lot of like, ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ energy going around,” Offei-Addo said. “But the thing is that if you don’t got bootstraps to pull yourself up by, you can’t do that.”

He started this work three seasons ago, and says the LFPA money during his second season of farming enabled him to grow new produce like ginger because the funds provided a guaranteed market, and income. That's why, he said, losing this grant money is devastating.

But he plans to do whatever it takes to make his farm successful this season.

"I'm gonna go and pound the pavement and find those markets," Offei-Addo said.

