

Food System Policy Considerations: 2023-2025

A briefing paper for candidates for Massachusetts General Court



The legislature faces numerous challenges related to Massachusetts' food system. Food insecurity remains significantly higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Massachusetts farmers struggle to remain sustainable due to high land, energy, equipment, and other costs and low state investment in research and scalable infrastructure. Climate change threatens agricultural production as well as the broader supply chain. And generations of systemic racism have created wide gaps in access to food, jobs, land, and the process of creating the policies that govern how we all eat.



The next General Court will have numerous opportunities to enhance Massachusetts' food system as well, building upon recent successes and forging new solutions to ongoing challenges. Massachusetts pioneered farmland protection programs decades ago with a model that many other states now emulate. Five years ago we launched an innovative program that both incentivizes healthy eating for low-income households and boosts sales for local farmers. We are a national leader in direct-to-consumer sales, which allows farmers to capture more of the retail dollar to sustain their operations. We have developed a comprehensive plan for how we should invest in and regulate our food system, and are in the process of completing other plans for related issues, like farmland, soil health, and climate resilience. Our track record is solid, and the Commonwealth can make great strides if the legislature commits to do so.



Nearly 1 in 10 workers in Massachusetts have jobs related to the food system in all parts of the supply chain; from growing food, to marketing it, to serving it, to managing its disposal. Our state's food system accounts for close to 5% of the state's gross product. It is an economic engine, and also a critical part of our environment, our culture, and our public health. But it is too often overlooked in policymaking, both as an asset that benefits everyone in the Commonwealth, and as a resource that needs support. Attention must be paid to ensure that people are fed, farms and businesses are viable, the environment is protected, and that all of these issues are addressed in ways that enhance the others.



The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative

One of the best assets of the Commonwealth's local food system is the wide range of stakeholder organizations that represent and support farms, businesses, institutions, and eaters, and that advocate for strong food system policy. The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is a network of many of those organizations. We count as allies groups that work on issues including agriculture, public health, food insecurity, climate change, education, and others. These organizations help us set our priorities for policy advocacy.

The Collaborative supports collective action toward an equitable, sustainable, resilient, and connected local food system in Massachusetts. The organization was created in 2015 following the completion of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, which was developed for the state's Food Policy Council, a multi-sectoral body with representatives of the administration, the legislature, and the private stakeholder community. The Collaborative seeks to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Plan, as encompassed by its four main goals:

- Increase production, sales and consumption of Massachusetts-grown foods.
- Create jobs and economic opportunity in food, farming and fishing, and improve the wages and skills of food system workers.
- Protect the land and water needed to produce food, maximize environmental benefits from agriculture and fishing, and ensure food safety.
- Reduce hunger and food insecurity, increase the availability of healthy food to all residents, and reduce food waste.



The Collaborative's Vision

The Collaborative envisions a local food system where everyone has access to healthy food, to land to grow food, to good jobs, and to the systems where policy decisions are made.

We envision a network of local food system stakeholders that collaborate with each other in ways that connect them to other sectors of the food system, and support each other's mutual progress.

We envision a set of informed, engaged stakeholders that actively support policies that promote equity, sustainability, resiliency, and connectivity in the local food system.

We envision a policy-setting process where the individuals and communities most impacted by the policies under consideration are meaningfully involved.

We envision policymakers who understand and recognize the value, breadth, and interconnectivity of the local food system and who champion, implement, and enforce supportive policies.

We envision public policies and investments that support equity, sustainability, resiliency, and connectivity in the local food system.

We envision state policy that considers the assets and needs of the food system in all issues, including land use, the environment, health care, transportation, housing, income inequality, and others, and that in turn, consider these issues in making food system policy decisions.

Toward those goals and visions, the Collaborative offers this briefing paper for candidates to begin to learn more about the Commonwealth's local food system, and as an opportunity to begin the discussion about how each candidate would lead on these issues. This is not an exhaustive list of all food system issues, but a selection of pressing needs that reflect the Collaborative's priorities and address recommendations in the Plan. We have included links to publications that can provide deeper background and analysis, and we encourage candidates to talk with other food system organizations to learn about their priorities as well.

We appreciate your interest in these issues, and look forward to further conversation with you as you develop your policy positions that support a sustainable, equitable, and resilient local food system.

Farm Sustainability

There are more than 7,200 farms in Massachusetts. Agricultural production and processing generates \$7.1 billion in state economic impact and supports more than 36,000 jobs in the Commonwealth. These farms contribute significantly to food security and public health, and their management practices help capture and store carbon, contributing to the state's climate change mitigation goals.

But for every dollar that Massachusetts farms spend on producing food, they earn 94 cents. We are one of only four states in the US where farmers earn less from their crops than they spend growing them. In order to compete in the marketplace, local farms must match prices set by the global market, despite the fact that energy, land, labor, and other input prices are significantly higher here.

Droughts, floods, dramatic temperature fluctuations, invasive species, and other results of climate change impact food production here each year, and threaten to become more disruptive in the near future. Disinvestment in education and technical assistance services at UMass Extension has reduced that institution to 1/3 of the capacity it had just 30 years ago despite growth in demand for support in the face of environmental, management, and regulatory concerns. The growth of and rapid changes in agriculture have meant significant growth in demand and responsibilities for the Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), without commensurate investment by the state to allow the department to meet those needs. The Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program has injected needed capital into farms as well as other food system enterprises, but has only been able to support 17% of applicants.

Despite these challenges, Massachusetts farmers stepped up during the pandemic, in some cases becoming the most consistent source of food for their communities at a time when national and global supply chains broke down. That mutually supportive relationship between farmers and consumers has been building in the Commonwealth for decades, and the state is a national leader in direct-to-consumer sales. Urban agriculture, too, has grown significantly in recent years, as city residents and supportive organizations turn vacant parcels into vibrant projects that build community, teach valuable skills and lessons, and provide nutritious food in neighborhoods where access is often limited.

Policy solutions

- Increase funding for UMass Extension to meet demand.
- Implement the soon-to-be-released Healthy Soils Action Plan and support the MA Healthy Soils Program.
- Fund the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program with \$30 million per year and prioritize funding for farms.
- Accommodate smaller farms and businesses in grant programs by allowing upfront awards, the purchase of used equipment, and more flexible timelines for project completion.
- Develop and implement policies to ensure equitable distribution of resources and services, including access to land, especially for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and systematically disadvantaged farmers and aspiring farmers.
- Support and expand MDAR's urban agriculture program.
- Develop a state meat inspection program to help grow Massachusetts' livestock production.
- Increase bond spending on MDAR grant programs that support climate adaptation for farmers.
- Incentivize management practices that build climate resilience and natural resource protection.
- Compensate farmers for the ecosystem services they provide, such as carbon sequestration, water filtration and retention, and wildlife habitat creation and protection.



- Ensure that the needs and assets of agriculture are represented in all climate planning efforts.
- Allow farmers to benefit from solar development on non-productive land.
- Ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion in all public processes, such as commissions and regulatory reviews.

For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System and Climate Change: Opportunities for mutually supportive policy](#)
- [Massachusetts' Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program: Summary, analysis, and recommendations](#)

Farmland

Massachusetts farmers steward nearly 500,000 acres of farmland, about half of it in cropland and pastureland. In just the 20 years from 1997-2017, 85,984 acres of farmland were lost, or nearly 12 acres each day. Increased development, population growth, insufficient funding for farmland protection, and challenges to overall farm sustainability are among the factors that continue to threaten farmland. This vital resource, once lost, is gone forever, and with it the essential role that agriculture plays in food security, climate resilience, and economic development.

These pressures have driven costs higher - Massachusetts farmland is the 3rd most expensive in the country. This severely limits access to that land for many, particularly farmers of color and beginning farmers. In addition, those higher costs have played a role in the growth of farms smaller than five acres, but these farms are currently unable to benefit from tax reductions or farmland protection programs.

The state's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program has permanently protected more than 74,000 acres of land, but spending on this program has slowed significantly, from \$9 million in 2011 to \$4.8 million in 2021. Tens of millions of dollars from the last several environmental bond bills for this purpose have gone unspent, and at the current rate of spending it would take hundreds of years to protect all currently active farmland. Significant investment is needed to increase the pace of farmland protection, and policies that govern how protected land is managed must be updated to reflect changes in agricultural practices and give farms opportunities to capitalize on opportunities that allow them to remain sustainable, while still producing food.

Policy solutions

- Invest resources to significantly increase the pace of farmland protection through APR and other conservation restriction programs.
- Extend farmland protection policies to farms smaller than the current 5-acre threshold by amending Article 99 of the state constitution.
- Build greater flexibility into APR and other conservation restrictions to accommodate the changing agricultural landscape and allow farms to remain sustainable.
- Make more public land available for agriculture.
- Prioritize policies that increase access to farmland for historically disadvantaged farmers.
- Support the recommendations of the state's Resilient Lands Initiative and Farmland Action Plan, both of which will be released in 2022.
- Enforce Executive Order 193 and Article 99 of the state constitution to ensure no net loss of farmland.

For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective](#)
- [Small Parcel Agriculture: Policies for the changing face of Massachusetts agriculture](#)

Food Access

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic 8.9% of Massachusetts households with children were food insecure. While the pandemic may be easing, many impacts remain - as of March 2022, 21% of households with children faced food insecurity. BIPOC households are recovering from the pandemic significantly slower than white households. In October 2021-March 2022, 15.3% of white households with children were food insecure compared with more than 33% of Black households with children and 27.6% of Latino/a households with children.

These stark statistics underscore not just a moral challenge but an economic one as well. Hunger and food insecurity in the state increase health-related expenditures by as much as \$2.4 billion annually, by some estimates. Nutritious food is available, but physical, economic, and other barriers limit access for many, and the impacts are felt by all.



Massachusetts has developed innovative, systemic responses to food insecurity in recent years. The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) provides a dollar-for-dollar reimbursement when SNAP users buy fresh, healthy, local food directly from Massachusetts farmers. The Massachusetts Food Trust provides loans, grants, and business assistance for increasing access to healthy, affordable food in low-income, underserved areas. These programs have shown that systemic solutions can have a positive impact, but need significantly more support in order to address the growing challenges.

Policy solutions

- Fully fund HIP and partner with local organizations to promote the program.
- Increase funding for the Massachusetts Food Trust.
- Expedite implementation of the common application to increase SNAP usage.
- Support universal school meals.

For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery](#)
- [Hunger & Food Insecurity in Massachusetts](#)

Food Literacy

In dozens of schools around the Commonwealth, students are learning essential lessons about nutrition, food production, culinary skills, and other elements of the food system. Those lessons help them lead healthier lives, connect with their culture and the cultures of their friends and neighbors, and consider and prepare for careers in the food system. In addition, those learnings help local agriculture and other local businesses, as students learn the value of supporting the local food system.

But this patchwork of efforts doesn't serve all students equitably, and the educators who lead these local projects are often unsupported in their efforts. To better serve all students and families - and in doing so help support public health, local agriculture, and the state's economy - Massachusetts should make a statewide commitment to food system education in schools.

Policy solutions

- Integrate food literacy curriculum into statewide standards for K-12 classrooms.
- Provide funding for professional development for teachers, for new food education coordinator positions, and for needed materials for school gardens and other lessons.

For more information

- [Food Literacy in Massachusetts: Local Successes, Statewide Opportunities](#)



Food waste

Food waste and other organic material make up approximately 21 percent of the total waste stream in Massachusetts - 950 thousand tons in 2019. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents are food insecure, making the disposal of edible food a missed opportunity to better synthesize and strengthen multiple sectors of the food system. Food waste poses an environmental hazard as well, as discarded organic materials in landfills create methane, a greenhouse gas which contributes to climate change. And landfilling or incinerating food waste is expensive for municipalities and has public health and environmental impacts.

Excess edible food should be diverted to programs that provide food for people in need. Food waste that is inedible should be composted, where it can create soil amendments which in turn support food production when applied to farm fields, or it should be sent to anaerobic digesters, which turn organic waste into electricity, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. The state's Commercial Food Material Disposal Ban, one of the first in the nation to be implemented, has met with some success in accomplishing these objectives, helping divert waste from large producers, but all food waste should be removed from the waste stream.

Policy solutions:

- Ban all food scraps from disposal and provide educational, technical, and financial support for diversion.
- Support on-farm composting operations.
- Support laws that would provide tax benefits and reduce liability concerns for food donors.

For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Reducing Food Waste in Massachusetts: Local Successes Informing Statewide Solutions](#)
- [2021 White Paper on Food Waste Reduction](#)



Food Systems

The food system is extremely complex and fragile. As we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly vulnerable during crises, when supply chain disruptions can impact not just food availability, but also public health, businesses, jobs, and the broader economy. State food policy is complex as well, and deserves holistic consideration to ensure that each law, regulation, program, and investment is supportive of and supported by the others, to ensure a truly sustainable system.

Administration agency representatives, legislators, and industry stakeholders have participated in the state's Food Policy Council for more than 10 years, meeting regularly to foster plans, build relationships, and learn collectively about challenges and successes in the state's food system. But this body does not have adequate staff support, nor is it directly connected to any decision-making authority. Strengthening the Council could be a first step toward a more integrated and comprehensive approach to state food system policy.

Policy Solutions

- Add a cabinet-level position to coordinate food system planning and development, connect the work of multiple agencies, ensure that interventions are effective and efficient, and support agencies in taking a systemic approach to food by considering the economic, environmental, and cultural impacts of their decisions related to food system programs, regulations, and funding.
- Clarify the role of the state Food Policy Council, allowing it to play an active role in proposing and supporting policy solutions.
- Ensure that the food system is considered in statewide planning efforts in all sectors, including economic development, transportation, land use, education, and others.

For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery](#)



For more information on any of these topics, or connections to additional resources, organizations, or individuals in the food system, please contact Winton Pitcoff, Executive Director, at 508-304-1043 or winton@mafoodsystem.org.