



## Food System Policy Considerations: 2025-2027

*A briefing paper for candidates for Massachusetts General Court*

The legislature faces numerous challenges related to the Massachusetts food system. Food insecurity remains significantly higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Massachusetts farmers struggle to remain viable 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 food supply chain. And the generational impact of systemic racism has created wide gaps in access to food, jobs and land, and in the process of creating the policies that govern how we all eat.

The next Massachusetts 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 the innovative [Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program](#) (APR) that many other states now emulate. Seven years ago Massachusetts launched the [Healthy Incentive Program](#), (HIP), 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<sup>1</sup>. We have developed comprehensive plans for how we should invest in and regulate our food system, 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.

Approximately 8%<sup>2</sup> of workers in Massachusetts have jobs related to the food system; from growing food, to marketing, serving, and managing its disposal. Our state's food system accounts for approximately 5% of Massachusetts gross product. The local food system 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 are viable, the environment is protected, and that all of these issues are addressed in ways that enhance the others.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.buylocalfood.org/massachusetts-named-a-leader-in-farm-to-consumer-sales/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes\\_ma.htm#00-0000](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ma.htm#00-0000)



## **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 convener 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.



## Farming

There are more than 7,000 farms in Massachusetts. Agricultural production and processing generates goods with a market value of more than \$600 million<sup>3</sup> and close to 28,000<sup>4</sup> jobs in the Commonwealth. Massachusetts 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 only 95 cents. We are one of a handful of states in the US where farmers earn less from their crops than they spend growing them<sup>5</sup>. 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, which provides educational outreach opportunities and resources across the state relating to agriculture, nutrition, youth development, and renewable energy, 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) as well. The [Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program](#) (FSIG) has injected needed capital into farms as well as other food system enterprises, but has only been able to support 33% of applicants in 2023, the most recent round.

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. The 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 has also grown significantly in

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<sup>3</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Massachusetts/](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Massachusetts/)

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Massachusetts/](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Massachusetts/)

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Massachusetts/](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Massachusetts/)



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 for technical assistance.
- Implement the recommendations in the [Healthy Soils Action Plan](#) and support the MA Healthy Soils Program.
- Continue to fund the Food Security Infrastructure Grant (FSIG) program with \$25 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.
- Support MDAR's urban agriculture program by moving it to the annual budget so it can support staff time.
- Develop and implement a state meat inspection program to help grow Massachusetts' livestock production.
- Increase bond spending on MDAR grant programs that support climate adaptation for farmers and land protection.
- Incentivize management practices that build climate resilience and natural resource protection, such as low or no tilling, high tunnels, efficient irrigation, and more.
- 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.
- Support more farmers in benefitting from solar development on non-productive land.

### For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System and Climate Change: Opportunities for mutually supportive policy](#)
- [New England Feeding New England Massachusetts state brief](#)



## **Farmland**

Massachusetts farmers steward almost 465,000 acres of farmland, about 40% of it in cropland and pastureland. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, in just the last 5 years (2017-2022), 27,000 acres of farmland were lost, or fully 5.5% of our farmland. Abandonment, increased development, population growth, insufficient funding for farmland protection, and challenges to overall farm sustainability are among the factors that continue to threaten farmland. Farmland is a vital resource that, once lost, is gone forever.

Agriculture plays an essential role 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 cost severely limits access to that land for many, particularly farmers of color and beginning farmers. In addition, 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.

Massachusetts's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program has permanently protected more than 75,000 acres of land, but spending on this program has slowed significantly, from \$9 million in 2011 to \$3.8 million in fiscal year 2023. Tens of millions of dollars from the 2018 environmental bond bill 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. Significantly increased 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 state 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.
- Make more public land available for agriculture.
- Prioritize policies that increase access to farmland for historically disadvantaged farmers.
- Enforce Executive Order 193 and Article 99 of the state constitution to ensure no net loss of farmland
- Support the implementation of the Farmland Action Plan to the fullest extent possible.



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](#)
- [Massachusetts Farmland Action Plan 2023-2050](#)
- [Resilient Lands Initiative](#): Expanding Nature's Benefits Across the Commonwealth. A Vision and Strategy



## Food Security

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 8.9% of Massachusetts households with children were food insecure. Food insecurity still remains high - during 2023, 34% of households reported food insecurity. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color households are facing the problems of inflation at much higher rates than white households. According to recent research from the Greater Boston food Bank, in November 2023 - March 2024, 30% of white households were food insecure compared with 51% of Black households, 56% of Latine households, and 62% of Indigenous households. These stark statistics underscore not just a moral challenge but an economic one as well. By some estimates, hunger and food insecurity in the state increase health-related expenditures by as much as \$2.4 billion annually. 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. The Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) provides a dollar-for-dollar reimbursement when SNAP recipients 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 to operate year-round and add more farmers across Massachusetts, and partner with local organizations to promote the program so more SNAP households utilize their benefit.
- Increase funding for the Massachusetts Food Trust.
- Continue to support the implementation of the common application to increase SNAP usage and universal school meals.
- Fund a [state SNAP program](#) to provide food benefits for certain legally present immigrant households.
- Support the goals of the [Make Hunger History coalition](#).

### For more information

- [Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan](#)
- [Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery](#)
- [Food Equity and Access in Massachusetts: Voices And Solutions from Lived Experience](#)
- [An Avoidable \\$2.4 Billion Cost What If Massachusetts could eliminate food insecurity?](#)





## **Food Literacy**

In dozens of schools around the Commonwealth, students are learning essential lessons about nutrition, food production, culinary skills, food justice, 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 a food literacy framework into statewide standards for K-12 classrooms.
- Provide funding for professional development for teachers, and for state and district-level food system education coordinator positions.
- Provide funding for a local food incentive program for schools.
- Support the Farming Reinforces Education and Student Health (FRESH) grant.

### For more information

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



## Racial Equity in the local food system

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) make up 29% of the Commonwealth's population, yet only 3.2% of Massachusetts farmers identify as BIPOC. Food insecurity rates are higher among Black and Latine families with children, and workers of color are more represented in lower paying jobs. However, because of programs like HIP, more BIPOC farmers are growing culturally relevant crops for members of their community, which are not available in traditional retail stores. Organizations like the Boston Farms Community Land Trust, World Farmers, and the Urban Farming Institute enable new and beginning farmers to experiment and gain skills and graduate to larger plots of land and standalone businesses. The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources makes land available at lowered costs through the land leasing program, and has an environmental justice team that reaches communities that have not been well served before.

Each of these are important initiatives that deserve additional funding and continued monitoring to ensure equity is a throughline across the state's agricultural sector and food system.

### Policy Solutions

- 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.
- Make more public land available for farming.
- Ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion in all public processes, including in representation on commissions, grant review processes, and regulatory reviews.
- Pass pending legislation to create an Agricultural Equity Commission, that will develop recommendations to increase equity in state programming.

### For more information:

- [2023-24 Collaborative legislative white paper](#)



## 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, which in turn can support food production when applied to farm fields, or food waste 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 through increased grant funding and technical assistance.
- Support legislation 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 System

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

- Support legislation that would 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](#)
- [New England Feeding New England Massachusetts state brief](#)

**For more information on any of these topics, or connections to additional resources, organizations, or individuals in the food system, please contact Rebecca Miller, Policy Director, at [rebecca@mafoodsystem.org](mailto:rebecca@mafoodsystem.org).**