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A New England Food Vision

Conversations For Healthy Food and Thriving Communities

What is A New England Food Vision?



A New England Food Vision describes a future in which New England produces at least half of the region's food—and no one goes hungry. It looks ahead to 2060 and sees farming and fishing as important regional economic forces; soils, forests, and waterways cared for sustainably; healthy diets as a norm; and access to food valued as a basic human right.

This collaborative report examines the history of food production and distribution within New England – from Native people and the earliest European settlers to post-World War II industrial realities. It looks to a new future by proposing changes in food production, distribution, and consumption. *A New England Food Vision* calls for a dramatic increase in the region's food production. But heightened regional food production is just a means to an end: it is useful only if it delivers real social and environmental benefits.

The report outlines three scenarios: our current agricultural footprint, a well-balanced and achievable Omnivore's Delight footprint, and an aggressive but possible Regional Reliance footprint. *A New England Food Vision* delves into detail for how each of these scenarios are calculated, achievable, and capable of long-term, positive social impact.

Realizing this vision will reap large benefits for the region in economic well-being, health, and environmental quality. But it is ultimately a matter of choice: the choices of thousands of property owners about how to manage their land; millions of consumers about how to eat; and all New Englanders, collectively, about the policies that support an equitable and resilient food system.

Current Regional Agricultural Footprint: Challenges Abound... but so does Hope

Farming and fishing were once at the heart of the region. Today, service industries, technology, medicine, tourism, and education are driving economic forces, and development dominates a growing part of the landscape. Still, the enduring presence of dairy farms, vegetable stands, sugarhouses, and fishing boats testifies to the cultural heritage that underlies our landscape and economy.

The amount of land producing food in the New England region today is very small—only about 5% of a region with almost 15 million inhabitants. Commercial fishing, once a major industry, now struggles to survive.

About 90% of our food comes from outside the region, brought here by a global system that produces abundant food (and often displace populations where those engaged in farming and fishing are paid low wages) but also undermines the planet's soils, waters, and climate. Despite food abundance, as many as 10–15% of New England households regularly do not have enough to eat.

Collectively, these factors constitute a food-related crisis.

The decline of farms and farmland acreage has bottomed out since 1970, and there has been a recent upturn toward more (mostly small) farms. Many New Englanders strive to eat local seafood and support local farmers. The region's remaining farmers have shown skill, innovation, and determination, while a mix of individuals, nonprofit organizations and state programs work together to protect farmland and support local agriculture.

Omnivore's Delight Footprint: 50% Self-Reliant

A New England Food Vision envisions New Englanders in 2060 eating more diverse and healthier foods than today, with three times as much land (15% of the region, or 6 million acres) producing food: several hundred thousand acres in and around cities devoted to intensive production and several million acres of rural farmland supporting crops and livestock.

This expansion leaves 70% of the region forested, with adequate room remaining for clustered “smart growth” and green development. In this scenario, the region grows most of its vegetables, half of its fruits, and some of its grains, beans, and oils; all of its dairy, meat, and animal products come from animals raised in the region: sheep, goats, and cows mostly on pasture, and pigs and poultry with feed brought in.

Among other benefits, the Omnivore's Delight scenario would:

- Increase the value of food production in New England by more than three times
- Grow the farming industry and local jobs
- Increase commercial fisheries and related local jobs
- Reduce the use of current food system practices that put future generations at risk
- Promote health through more nutrient rich dietary practices
- Promote greater social justice and equity
- Build greater regional food security through enhanced capacity for food production

Regional Reliance Footprint: Planning for Scarcity

Described more fully in the full *A New England Food Vision* report, Regional Reliance is the scenario designed to address more severe economic and environmental conditions that would demand more food production and greater changes in food consumption. In this scenario, New England could produce more than two-thirds of the food required to support a population of nearly 17 million individuals.

Due to our large urban population, and cold climate, complete local food self-reliance is not a realistic goal: there is not enough prime cropland in New England to provide the needed grain, vegetable oil, sugar, and other basic commodities, and many desirable foods such as oranges, coffee, and cocoa cannot be grown here.

Although Regional Reliance is an option few would welcome, it is worth knowing that if pressed, New England could produce two-thirds of its own food.

New England's Current Agricultural Footprint

● Percentage land in New England ● Percentage land outside New England



Omnivore's Delight Agricultural Footprint

● Percentage land in New England ● Percentage land outside New England



Regional Reliance Agricultural Footprint

● Percentage land in New England ● Percentage land outside New England



Three “footprints” show land requirements inside and outside New England for five categories of food production: vegetables; fruits; grains, beans, and oils; animal products; and coffee, tea, chocolate, wine, sugar, and nuts. Our current footprint is almost 16 million acres, of which less than 2 million, or about 12%, is in New England. In the Omnivore’s Delight future, our footprint is just over 11 million acres, of which 6 million acres or 53% lies in New England. In the more plant-based Regional Reliance future, the footprint drops under 11 million acres, of which 7 million or 69% lie in New England.

Policy Changes Are Needed

This vision of New England’s food system is premised on the right to healthy, accessible food for all. This right cannot be realized without policy and programmatic changes that will create systems to support this vision becoming a reality. Suggested policy recommendations include:

- Secure a living wage for every person who is able to work and sufficient jobs for all
- Redirect federal agricultural subsidies to support sustainable fishing and farming
- Ensure that every household that wants to grow its own food is able to do so, either on its own property or in common space
- Subsidize consumption of healthy foods (especially fruits and vegetables) so that people will be encouraged to eat more nutrient-dense foods
- Expand farm-to-plate programs in schools, hospitals, and other institutions

- Protect farmland and forest through programs that purchase easements from landowners
- Promote farmland access and training programs for beginning farmers
- Pass and enforce strong environmental regulations that protect and preserve our natural environment, but combine these with incentive programs that help farmers and fishermen put environmental safeguards in place
- Invest in distribution networks and retail outlets that better connect farmers and fishermen with customers
- Adopt regulatory structures that encourage access to fishing rights for owner-operated fishing vessels
- Support the creation of community gardens, school gardening programs, and community and educational farms

Vision to action

A New England Food Vision is bold in aspiration—healthy food for all, sustainable farming and fishing amidst thriving communities; and bold in scope—a tripling of land in food production, vibrant working waterfronts, healthy ecosystems. A New England Food Vision does not offer a plan, but it does challenge us to design and engage in actions that will transform our food system.

The seeds of change necessary to make such a transformation are here in the present, but how will they grow to fruition?

Changing Food Policy

Policy changes will be necessary to align governance and market dynamics with the values that underpin this vision. It will also take new initiatives in all sectors and a sustained effort at all levels of the food system—household, local, state, regional, and national.

Keeping a Food System Framework in Mind

Many moving parts needs to be coordinated to achieve bold goals so we need to work with the big picture in mind. A food system framework continually reminds us that food access, healthy diets, and sustainable farming and fishing are all part of one interdependent system that promotes greater health and quality of life for all.

Thinking about Network Collaboration and Collective Impact

The success of this vision depends on collaborative action and collective impact, which require shared values that inform purposeful efforts to build networks and coalitions across race, gender, geographic, and economic divides.

Authors

A New England Food Vision incorporates more than three years of collaborative research and input from hundreds of voices from throughout New England. We would like to thank these contributors along with our lead authors.

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Core Values



A New England Food Vision is guided by four core values:

Rights to Food: All New England residents will have access to adequate, healthy, culturally appropriate food at all times, a basic human right.

Healthy Eating: New Englanders will move toward healthier eating patterns, including more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and both plant and animal sources of protein.

Sustainability: Regional food production, procurement, and access will be advanced embracing environmentally respective practices, economically just principles, and socially responsible behaviors.

Community Stability: Strong local and regional agriculture and sustainable fisheries will help New England communities thrive by providing a decent livelihood to farmers and fishermen, while creating and maintaining attractive communities for people to live in, work in, and visit.