

Food Solutions New England

**Collaborative
Submission to the
Rockefeller Food
Vision Prize**

2020

Introduction.

This document is a distilled version of the collaborative submission that Food Solutions New England (FSNE) and its network partners created in 2020 as part of participating in the Rockefeller Food Vision Prize process. While not chosen as one of the “final ten,” the FSNE submission made it to the semi-final round as one of 72 proposals chosen from more than 1,000 submitted.

The highly participatory process of crafting this submission created an opportunity to connect with network participants new and old, and generated passion and energy for an aspirational vision of New England’s food future. Taken in tandem with the *New England Food Vision*, this document paints a compelling picture of where we can go together.

We look forward to more collaborative visioning and collective action as our network becomes a movement for food system transformation in our region.

Collaborators on the creation of this submission included Farm to Institution New England (FINE), Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry, Oasis on Ballou Urban Farm, Southern New England Farmers of Color Collaborative, OpenTEAM, Wildlands & Woodlands, Brandeis University, Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, National Family Farm Coalition, Cooperative Development Institute, Harvard Forest, Wolfe’s Neck Center, Vermont Farm to Plate & Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, Stonyfield, Interaction Institute for Social Change, American Farmland Trust, Urban Farming Institute, and New England State Food System Planners Partnership. Readers and reviewers included the above as well as Schumacher Institute, Henry P. Kendall Foundation, John Merck Fund, and several other food system experts and funders.

Imagine. It's 2035.

A young woman named Amina leaves her Springfield, Mass. apartment in a restored mill building which is heated, cooled, and powered without any carbon emissions. In fact, the building produces more energy than it consumes. She's taking the morning off from her job as quality control manager for the state's largest cooperatively owned mushroom producer, also housed in a former industrial building on the Connecticut River and powered by the sun.

Amina hops on her bike and heads west across the river and is soon passing rows of hoop houses where greens of all kinds are already lush in the early spring. She's headed to her first meeting as an elected member of the New England Food and Forest Policy Council. Her nomination recognized her leadership in the community as a parent, helping organize a nature-based elementary school, and her role in helping form a cooperative food hub housed in a repurposed shopping mall.

Seeing those hoop houses, Amina always thinks of her father, a first-generation Jamaican immigrant and ER nurse who succumbed to COVID-19 in 2020. Her mother raised her and her brothers, and she has vivid memories of community gardening as a vital part of making it through their devastating loss.

Growing food got in her blood, and in 2030, Amina entered the Network Leadership Institute of Food Solutions New England. She then went on to apprentice in a regenerative agriculture program sponsored by the Policy Council. In 2030, she, her partner, and their infant daughter left their home in Boston for Springfield, where she joined fellow apprenticeship graduates in establishing the cooperative food hub.

Memories of her father invariably turn her mind to other effects of the pandemic. Ironically, it brought her to where she is today. Springfield had strong community organizing that enabled communities to weather the storm of COVID-19 and subsequent disruptions. The city's democratically-governed network of cooperative gardens was critical to its resilience. Springfield had become one of the leaders in the movement toward solving food insecurity and establishing systems of community food sovereignty and self-determination, all within the framework of ecological integrity, climate resilience and democratic empowerment. In the late '20s, Springfield had emerged as a hub in the central New England agricultural belt, a band of valuable soils and woodlands stretching from Vermont to Connecticut.

It wasn't just the food system that had transformed...

It's 2035, continued.

With the deep chasms driven into American culture after the 2020 presidential election, citizens across New England had organized to reinvent democracy. Realizing that the enormous impact of COVID required new ways of tackling problems, people started collaborating among their towns, in their states, and across New England. Their actions were inclusive, creative, and tailored to on-the-ground needs. Robust, participatory and direct democratic governance became a prominent feature of state and local governance as well as business enterprises. This trend contributed to more operationalized values of relationships built on trust, racial equity and justice, and social solidarity. Community-level resource-sharing, mutual aid and reciprocity became standard. Democracy evolved from a concept associated mainly with voting into a daily lived experience for many through cooperative garden groups, pop-up food banks, local and regional currencies, and mutual support networks. Food policy councils proliferated from the neighborhood to the state, and ultimately to the New England Food and Forest Policy Council informing federal policy and practices.

The aroma of fresh bread and frying onions greet Amina as she nears the Springfield Community Farm, site of the Food Council meeting. A crowd is already gathered for the community breakfast. You are what you eat, she smiles to herself as she parks her bike. As a result of all that work by so many, not only are folks eating much better and are much healthier, kids are learning better, parents aren't as stressed, and people are simply happier and more fulfilled.



What we do now matters.

We believe that Amina's Springfield of 2035 is possible. Indeed, it's a necessity. We must take on the great challenges facing our country, region, and states and create a democratically determined future. We believe that efforts by ordinary people working in their towns, states, region - in alliance with others working in their towns, states, and region - can and will make a difference.

We can all agree with the first principal - we need to eat. We must also acknowledge that not everyone is able. That's why food is such a core sustainability issue; it's where so many aspects of our culture, economy, ecology, and politics overlap. By democratizing our food system, we will transform our political economy, public health, and launch a cascading positive effect through all aspects of life.

This prize submission lays out some of our shared regional aspirations. It is meant as a call to action, an invitation to imagine and envision, as a way to seed conversations, and support the many efforts already underway that are building the food movement now. The *New England Food Vision* is ready for updating, with a new draft document estimated for 2023 publication. We offer this document as a catalyst toward that process.

The Food Solutions New England Network (2020)

The Vision.

We envision a **democratized food system that provides healthy food for all**, is ecologically and economically sustainable, and is financially rewarding for people involved at all levels of production and distribution from farm and sea to plate. Simply put, a powerful food movement transforms New England into a culture, economy, and civic life that centers democracy, sustainability and resilience.

This vision is rooted in a sustainability perspective that recognizes that the food system can and should be a driver of societal and ecological change. The vision encompasses a range of values-based, systemic perspectives including these:

Democratic Empowerment.

We value and celebrate the political power of all people in New England and continually ask: How can we recognize our interdependence and mobilize our collective power to democratically shape our food future? How can we translate our collective power to drive local, state, and federal policies that serve our shared values and aspirations?

Racial Equity and Dignity for All.

We value racial equity and dignity for all people in New England. We continually ask how our regional food system can dismantle racism and social injustice? How do we reshape political and economic systems to address historical injustices and create core sustainability and resilience strategies?

Landscapes and Seascapes.

From this perspective we continually ask how our regional food system can both nurture and be nurtured by thriving rural, urban, and maritime communities that contribute to and benefit from sustainable farming and fishing and healthy food for all? How can our regional food system drive health and integrity across the connected lands and waters of our region?

Sustainability.

Sustainability means sustaining what enables humans (and the ecosystems upon which they rely) to flourish - ecologically, politically, socially, and culturally. It embraces a diversity of cultural and social systems and values, as well as the larger community of life on earth.

Sustainability provides a perspective that recognizes that our food system is interconnected with environmental and public health, our democratic systems, and our economy. It recognizes that sustaining independence and diversity requires interdependence, solidarity, and unity and continually asks: How can we evolve a culture of trust, solidarity, respect, and integrity that supports our political, economic, and ecological relationships?

Along with others around the world, we see the next ten years as a pivotal decade in which the movement for transformational change must successfully shift the patterns of our food system towards justice, sustainability, and resilience. Because the food system is interconnected with other issues including justice, energy, health, housing, education, transportation, economics, and politics, our approach must be intersectional. We will build diverse, cross-cutting networks. We will build relationships, processes, structures, and norms that address these interrelated challenges. Through these practices and initiatives, we will collaboratively strengthen the conditions for emergence around power-building, sharing and shifting.

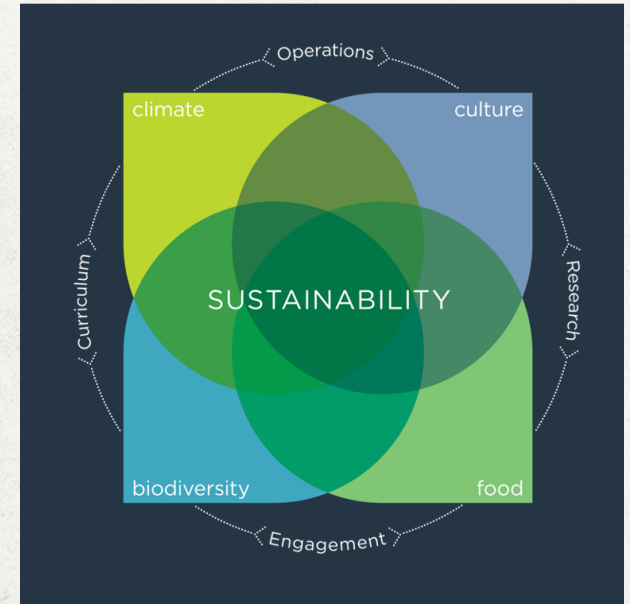


Image: UNH Sustainability Institute

Challenges abound.

To be clear, democratically reshaping our food system presents significant challenges.

New England's food system is driven by **forces operating at national and global scales** - a condition of dependence we suffer in common with most other parts of the world. We consume excessive amounts of hyper processed grains, fats, and sugars and too few fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and other food-related health problems shorten lives. The system is driven by public policies and subsidies that exacerbate corporate consolidation and control and diet-related disease. Benefits and costs of this system are experienced in an unequal and unfair way.

Many distrust the safety of our food and feel disconnected from its sources. **About 90% of New England's food comes from outside the region.** Our food is brought here by a global system that produces abundant commodities but also undermines the planet's soils, waters, and climate, and **exploits people and communities** all along the supply chain. Despite food abundance, as many as 10 -15 percent of **people in our region regularly go hungry** even prior to COVID-19. Meanwhile, farmland and fisheries disappear, and farmers and fishers are driven from the land and the sea by economic **policies favoring corporate consolidation.** Collectively, these factors constitute a food system crisis.

Bold action is needed to confront this crisis. Unless we act boldly now, the climate crisis will dramatically worsen, almost certainly making food less abundant and more expensive to import. **Risks and vulnerabilities will grow,** driven by a range of climate shifts including increasing rainfall, flooding, droughts, fires, storm intensity, ocean temperature, acidification and sea level rise. Our region's distinct seasonality is already shifting and disrupting land and sea ecosystems, biodiversity, and human communities. And unless trends shift, continued corporate consolidation and wealth concentration will exacerbate already crippling racial, ethnic, and economic disparities.

COVID-19 has made the contours of this crisis even more visible. Combined with the deepening climate crisis, there is a growing shadow of unease over our region and our food system as more and more people begin to imagine the real possibility of ongoing disruptions, instability, and widespread food insecurity.

The actions we take over the next few years will determine our resilience and adaptive capacity for decades.

The foundation is strong.

New England once provided for itself. Our agricultural soils are rich, our woodlands provide a huge diversity of forest products including renewable raw materials for energy and construction, and our coastal waters have the potential to produce a great abundance of seafood for the region in a sustainable fashion. Our indigenous neighbors met their food needs from this place from time immemorial.

There is hope and movement-building underway. The decline of farms and farmland acreage has bottomed out since 1970, and there is now continued growth in new family farms, community farms, and agricultural “commons,” as well as in urban agriculture and permaculture activities. Many in New England are able to eat local seafood and support local farmers. The region’s farmers and fishing people have shown skill, innovation, and determination, while NGOs, agencies, and food system planning networks and councils work together to protect farmland and support local food access, agriculture and fishing.

Seeds of a democratic and resilient food system have already taken root across New England.

Over a decade ago, a group of practitioners came together to ask, “what can we do better together as a region than we can do as individual states to transition towards a sustainable, resilient food system?” FSNE was born. Since then, food system networks have developed in each of the New England states, and thousands of diverse network participants have built collaborative relationships, many germinated at the **six annual New England Food Summits**.

The *New England Food Vision*, published in 2014, has informed policy planning and economic development efforts across the region.

Other network initiatives include regular Network Health Assessments, a 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge, the FSNE Pledge, the Food System Communicators Circle of Practice, and the annual FSNE Network Leadership Institute. As the network is growing and evolving, it continues to align around a shared vision and values that include racial equity and food justice, sustainable farming and fishing, healthy food for all, thriving communities, and democratic empowerment.

Food Solutions New England

Food Solutions New England (FSNE) is the six-state network that unites the regional food system community around a shared set of values - democratic empowerment, racial equity and dignity for all, sustainability, and trust. Active and evolving since 2010, FSNE envisions a powerful food movement that democratically transforms New England's food system so that it is sustainable, just, and resilient.

We are focused in **four overlapping impact areas** in order to achieve our collective vision.

- **Network Building & Strengthening** || We will expand to better connect and align allied stakeholder groups in common cause and continue movement building for achieving shared goals.
- **Racial Equity & Values Leadership** || We will connect and support diverse leaders to build skill and power capable of uniting disparate communities of interest and movement building networks at the intersection of food justice, sustainability, and resilience.
- **Strategic Narrative & Communications** || We will cultivate and steward a shared narrative to tell an inspiring story of democratically transforming the New England food system to sustainability and resilience. This includes developing focused framing and messaging to support values-aligned food system transformation.
- **Visionary Policy** || We will convene food system participants and policy makers to align around a set of public priorities that will support regional food system transformation in line with our network's shared vision and values.



We must act now.

Our efforts will need to multiply dramatically and connect around values of **justice and equity** that transcend differences to constitute a **coherent and durable food movement** capable of overcoming opposing forces.

In the face of powerful global and national counter forces, including corporate consolidation of power and wealth in the food system, our **movement needs to scale up** in breath, depth, and strategic focus.

The dominant food system continues to fail our region's farmers, fishing people, and eaters. We need to build larger and deeper **intersectional coalitions** capable of shifting the influencers of the existing system towards sustainability and resilience.

Specific policy steps are needed. We present **policy proposals** here as both seeds to start conversations, and as measures we believe will create critical infrastructure needed to support public policy change.

Policy proposals for food system transformation.

- 1. New England Food System Resilience Act** || We call upon the six New England states to pass a Food System Resilience Act. Through this, they commit to collaboratively upholding and financially investing in the vision and values of a regional food system rooted in racial equity and dignity for all, democratic process, regenerative ecosystems, and thriving rural, urban, and maritime communities. Among the first actions/initiatives:
- 2. Establish a New England Food and Forest Policy Council** || Composed of gubernatorially appointed representatives from each state, its mission is to develop and promote state and regional policies and a single, annual policy and funding agenda, including suggested ballot initiatives for municipalities and states in public elections, and help coordinate and lead the work at the regional scale.
- 3. Develop a New England Food, Farm, Fisheries, and Forest Resilience Index** || Track key trends within and beyond our food system that provide a shared reference point as we adaptively manage and govern our food future. The Index is created through a collaborative effort of the region's public and private universities and diverse food system stakeholders. It informs the policy and funding objectives of the Council and serves as a tool for transparency in the governance of the Council.
- 4. Develop a Food Supply Chain Resiliency Plan** || Ensures that food production, harvesting, processing, distribution, and waste/nutrient management is environmentally sustainable and equitably meets the needs of all consumers in the region for affordable and nutritious food.
- 5. Create a six-state farmland, forest, and coastal waters protection agreement** || The agreement sets landscape level land protection goals, strategies, and funding consistent with the New England Food Vision and the New England Wildlands and Woodlands of protecting forest cover across the region to retain natural and social benefits, while increasing farmland. It strengthens regulations to reduce land-based, non-point source pollution of near-shore fisheries habitat, and promotes incubator programs and business development incentives for both land- and sea-based enterprises.

From “What is” to “What if.”

What will the policy initiatives we describe accomplish? Amina’s story illustrates some of the cultural changes we believe can happen when the dominant narratives around our food system are dismantled and we invest in a practical, people-powered vision of what we can achieve together.

Here are some future-casting scenarios to consider:

Built and Natural Environment || Policies based on ecological integrity result in a transformation in how we relate to the land and sea. For instance, landowners are paid for ecosystem services including building soil health, protecting and retaining water, sequestering carbon, and protecting biodiverse habitat. Sociocultural and agroecological innovations extend across the landscape, from intensive urban farming, to expansive regenerative agriculture. Farmers of all kinds continually adapt with strategies ranging from traditional indigenous growing systems and cultural practices of newer immigrants to agroecological innovations.

Cities rebuild themselves to accommodate worsening flooding, using increasingly available regional wood products. They expand green spaces, including parks, community gardens, food forests, and urban forests for cooling, rainfall infiltration, food, and recreation. Efficient and accessible options for transportation within and beyond the city include public transit, bicycle and walking paths. Fewer and fewer people own automobiles and rideshares are prevalent.

Along the coasts, managed population due to sea level rise results in reconstructed healthy coastal wetlands and oyster reefs. Integrated multi-trophic aquaculture by small enterprises and cooperatives provide food, fertilizer, and feed while improving the health of the ecosystem. Networks of family and tribal owner-operator enterprises are organized into cooperatives which manage many aspects of the fisheries as local community commons.

From “What is” to “What if.”

Diet and Health || As a result of living wage policies, secure health care and housing, and widely available regional food whose price reflects its true social and environmental costs and benefits, people have the means to eat in healthy ways that reflect their social and cultural heritage. People adopt more plant-based diets and seasonal foods produced within New England and the majority of people’s food needs are actually met from within the region. Livestock is raised humanely and using regenerative practices that improve the soil. Additional sources of protein include more wild-harvested seafood, as well as regionally-grown legumes, soy, and nuts. The shift in diets toward lower meat consumption and toward more plant proteins contributes to a more affordable cost of eating for everyone.

Empowering more people, especially children, with some part of growing their own food and learning culinary skills translates into healthier eating and less food waste. Tools like community land trusts and reparation funds expand land access for indigenous and people of color and help in accessing culturally-desired foods and increase community food sovereignty and security. Decreases in diet-related chronic disease reduce health care costs and enhance well-being regionally.

Economy and Technology || In food, housing, education, health care, political voice, and other essentials of living, the region is following the “donut economics” model. This concept, embraced in the aftermath of COVID-19 and growing climate crisis, means that social needs and the needs of the planet’s life-supporting systems are mutually addressed. Poverty is diminished by policies dedicated to meeting social foundational needs. Because everyone receives a living wage, and is able to accumulate wealth, individuals and families can afford healthy food. Cooperatives and other forms of employee or community-owned enterprises are thriving all along the food supply chain, from seed to compost. Consumers enjoy fair prices and workers fair wages. Widespread access to education, training, technical assistance, and appropriate forms of financing underly the success of a new generation of diverse food entrepreneurs and practitioners engaging with the regional food system.

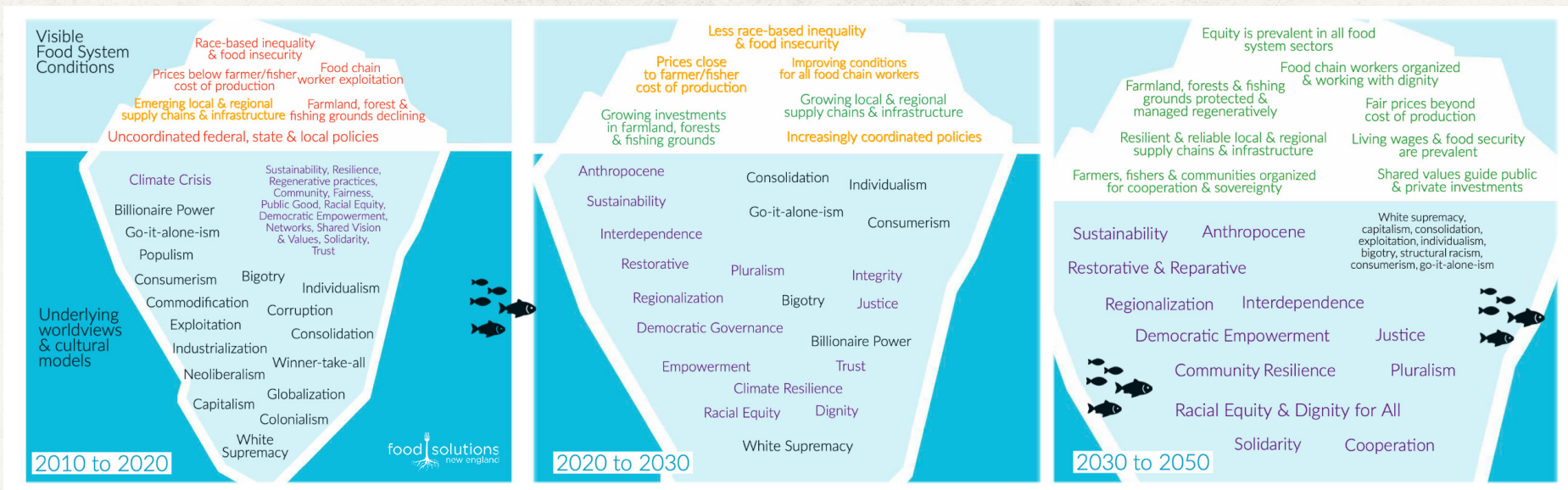
A blend of traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge and novel technologies enables the food system to continuously shift toward sustainability and resilience. The development and application of technology is governed by a robust civic culture dedicated to ensuring an adequate, sustainable output of food that also maximizes social and environmental benefits in the process.

The "cultural iceberg."

Food system change is culture change.

We've laid out a vision for a democratic food movement with transformative impact on the rest of life. Achieving it will take an evolution in our region's culture – no small task. But the roots of a democratic food system have been firmly established and constitute a coherent and durable food movement.

These foundational elements can be seen as the part of the "cultural iceberg." Below the surface, often out of sight, is where worldviews, core values, and patterns of thought shape outlooks and actions. The dominant culture is reflected in many of these elements. **But it's from here that real change begins.**



Food system change = culture change.

Join us.

We are already witnessing and living into alternative patterns and values that relate to power structures, norms, and processes that can re-shape the food system and our vision for a democratized food future in new England.

The “cultural iceberg” shows how this is an evolution in progress. **It shows the vibrant and powerful seeds of fundamental change. Consistent, collective action applied over time will continue to yield results.**

Food Solutions New England network partners, and the network as a whole, are already collaborating with many other values-based organizations, community groups, businesses, agencies, and coalitions across our region to create a **robust, just, sustainable and resilient food future for all.**

Visit the [FSNE website](#) or email fsne.info@unh.edu to find out how you can be part of our shared movement for food system transformation in New England.

The Food Solutions New England network is hosted and coordinated by the University of New Hampshire Sustainability Institute based in Durham, New Hampshire, USA.



Food Solutions New England (FSNE) is a six-state network made up of many different organizations, agencies, businesses, and people.

FSNE envisions a powerful food movement that democratically transforms New England's food system so that it is sustainable, just, and resilient.