

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RHODE ISLAND'S FOOD SYSTEM 2023-2030

A briefing book for candidates
for elected offices in Rhode Island



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: 2023 - 2030

A briefing book for candidates for public office in Rhode Island

INTRODUCTION

Rhode Island's elected officials face many challenges related to our food system. Food insecurity remains significantly higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Rhode Island farmers and fishers struggle to stay economically viable due to high land, energy, and other costs and low state investment and support. Climate change threatens agricultural production, commercial fisheries, and supply chains for many food products. Generations of systemic racism have created wide gaps in access to food, jobs, land, and community empowerment over how we eat.

The state also has many bright spots related to the local food system, and the next crop of elected officials will have many opportunities to enhance it as well. Nearly 70,000 workers in Rhode Island have jobs related to the food system in all parts of the supply chain; from production and harvesting to processing, distributing, and serving food, to managing food waste and wasted food. Our state's food system accounts for close to 20% of the state's gross product (\$11.9B out of \$54B). 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. Attention must be paid to ensure that people are fed, farms and businesses are viable, the environment is protected, food security for all is ensured, and that all of these issues are addressed in ways that enhance the others.

The mission of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council is to create a more equitable, accessible, economically vibrant, and environmentally sustainable food system. **We offer this briefing book for candidates for elected office in Rhode Island to learn more about the state's local food system, and as an opportunity to begin discussing how each candidate would lead on these issues.** This document is not an exhaustive list of all food system issues, rather it reflects the policy priorities voiced by food system stakeholders over the past year and the priorities laid out in the state food strategy, *Relish Rhody*.

We welcome meetings with candidates to discuss these recommendations, and encourage candidates to talk with Rhode Island food system organizations to learn about their specific needs and priorities as well. Contact us at info@rifoodcouncil.org to schedule.

PRIORITY AREA: *Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land*

SUMMARY

Rhode Island farmers steward approximately 56,000 acres of farmland. Between 2001 and 2016, the state lost 4% of available farmland to development, with an estimated loss in annual farm revenue of \$3.7 million. Increased development pressure, the high cost of farmland, insufficient funding for farmland protection, and challenges to overall farm sustainability are among the factors that continue to threaten our farmland. This vital resource, once lost, is gone forever.

Agriculture plays an essential role in Rhode Island's food security, climate resilience, and economic development. Agricultural land that is managed with soil regenerative practices has the potential to sequester hundreds of thousands or even millions of tons of carbon, helping the state move towards its 2021 Act on Climate goals. Local farmers provide access to the freshest and healthiest food available to Rhode Islanders, and their output is available even when shocks to the global food supply chain cause disruptions in food availability. Local farmers are also an increasing source of food going into our state's emergency food shelters and pantries, and urban farms and community gardens are an increasing source of healthy food for urban communities struggling with food insecurity. Finally, our farming sector accounts for about \$790M in (direct and indirect) revenue and employs close to 3500 people.

Since 1981, the state's Farmland Preservation Program has permanently protected more than 8000 acres of land and over 120 farms. In total, the program has spent \$37 million in state funds, and leveraged each of these state dollars with \$1.70 in matching funds from federal, municipal, land trust and philanthropic sources. Unfortunately, spending on this program has gradually declined, and next year's Green Bond will be the first in many years that includes no investment for farmland preservation. With a backlog of over 50 farms that have been approved for protection, this is not the right time to stop investing in farmland protection. In addition to its existing Farmland Protection Program, the state must also begin to develop policies that support the growth of urban farms and community gardens, which currently are too small to qualify for any of the state's agricultural protection activities.

POLICY SOLUTIONS*

- Invest resources to significantly increase the pace of farmland protection through the Green Economy Bond
- Support food systems-related climate resilience projects as part of the RIIB Municipal Climate Resilience Program
- Establish an urban land access entity mirroring the structure of the ALPC
- Prioritize policies that increase access to farmland for historically disadvantaged farmers

PRIORITY AREA: *Ensure access to affordable, culturally-appropriate food for all people*

SUMMARY

One in six households in RI is currently experiencing food insecurity, a number that is double what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. That percentage rises to one four for households with children, and is higher for families of color. As high as it is, this number may actually be an underestimate – there are many food insecure families in RI who do not qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) because of their immigration status or because their income puts them above the federal poverty threshold limits set for eligibility (Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, 2022). Rising food prices due to inflation and higher fuel costs mean that food security will remain a pervasive issue for our state in the coming decade.

Food insecurity affects all aspects of an individual's life, from academic performance to mental health to incidence of chronic disease (Weinfield et al. 2014). Providing access to high quality nutrition at every life stage is critical, and can be accomplished by supporting food justice initiatives such as urban farms, universal school meals, and combining healthcare with nutrition security across our state.

Rhode Island has a robust network of food access providers, but long term partnerships and investment are needed to improve the coordination and effectiveness between the different providers. There are multiple opportunities to improve RI's food security infrastructure so that it better supports the immediate needs of vulnerable populations in our state and also improves the long term resiliency of our food system.

POLICY SOLUTIONS*

- Invest in food security infrastructure and programs that prioritize access to fresh, local, nourishing food including fresh produce prescriptions, as well as programs like Farm Fresh RI's Hope's Harvest, Commercial Fisheries' "Seafood for All", Hope & Main's "Nourish Our Neighbors," MEANS Database, and Rescuing Leftover Cuisine.
- Prioritize policies that improve the food delivery infrastructure for individuals without access to transportation, including for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to organizations they have walkable access to.
- Support fruit and vegetable incentives for SNAP participants in all retail settings
- Support programs that provide technical assistance for smaller retail outlets to accept SNAP
- Support programs and policies that advance food sovereignty in the state, such as community gardens, edible forests, small scale food businesses, food recovery & redistribution, etc.
- Support programs that allow individuals without proof of citizenship to access fresh, healthy food
- Support the state's food bank to use its infrastructure and connections to support a farm-to-community supply chain
- Support universal free lunches for all public school students

PRIORITY AREA: *Promote climate-smart, environmentally sustainable practices*

SUMMARY

Rhode Island has the opportunity to increase the climate mitigation benefits of its food system by promoting and investing in climate-smart practices in agriculture, coastal water and wetland management, food processing/transport/storage operations, and how we manage food and organic waste. Many programs that will improve the climate benefits of our food system will also improve its resilience and economic strength. As climate change increases the number and size of supply chain shocks in our global industrial food supply chain, the resilience and economic strength of our local food system will become more and more important to our residents' food security.

Appropriate management of agriculture is a critical piece of ensuring that our land and plants act as “carbon sinks”, absorbing more carbon from the atmosphere than they release. Sustainable crop and livestock management can greatly increase carbon sequestration in agricultural soils. In fact, if 100% of Rhode Island farms incorporated soil regenerative farming practices, it would remove 94,902 (MTCO₂e) from the atmosphere or be the equivalent of taking 20,500 cars off the road annually. Changing agricultural practices to be more climate friendly is not always easy, however, and improvements in this area will be slow unless targeted state policies and incentives are developed.

The 2021 Act on Climate provides an opportunity to make substantial changes to food system climate impacts. However, in order for this to happen, food systems need to be explicitly included in all climate plans and addressed explicitly in climate legislation.

POLICY SOLUTIONS*

- Develop metrics to capture emissions from the food system as a whole – not just from agricultural lands – and include this information in public metrics and the online public dashboard
- Include a quantification of carbon sequestration in natural and working lands as part of the state's GHG inventory
- Consider developing a standalone natural and working lands climate strategy that would identify the opportunities for nature-based climate solutions, including blue carbon
- Work with academic institutions to develop RI-relevant methodologies for assessing ‘blue carbon’ sequestration opportunities in the state
- Support updates to RI's food strategy, *Relish Rhody*, that center climate change risks and opportunities for food businesses and innovation
- Develop a comprehensive strategy for minimizing and diverting wasted food going into the landfill through policy and organizations such as Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, Hope's Harvest, MEANS Database, the RI Food Bank and other stakeholders
- Identify and support research priorities for improving environmental/business sustainability of food production, processing, transportation and distribution activities in the state
- Provide consistent state funding for farmland conservation
- Provide state financial incentives and regulatory support for farmers who adopt climate-friendly agricultural practices

PRIORITY AREA: *Support a vibrant and just local food economy*

SUMMARY

Rhode Island's local food economy has many strengths. The state has a strong network of farmers markets and high direct-to-consumer sales. Food entrepreneurs have access to a premier culinary college and a number of shared-use commercial kitchens, and are developing products that consumers want. Food tourism is a significant part of our important hospitality industry. Our food sector is an important economic driver, employing 63,900 people, or 11.7% of total state employment.

RI's economy is dominated by small businesses, which employ over half of the private sector workforce. Food businesses make up 13% of RI's small businesses and they are more likely than most to be employer businesses rather than sole proprietors. Like most small businesses, RI's small food businesses struggled to survive through the pandemic, and many are still struggling with labor shortages, inflation pressures, and the difficulty of business planning in a period of high market uncertainty.

RI has an opportunity to significantly improve its small business supports, especially for food businesses. While the state's FY 2022/23 budget includes some increased loan and grant funding for small businesses, and some targeted funding for BIPOC businesses, there are still many programs and policies that could leverage these funds by providing technical assistance and incentives for small business owners, especially historically disadvantaged business owners. A recent study identified the small business succession crisis in RI as a pressing need and an opportunity for entrepreneurship through acquisition. In addition, most RI second-stage food businesses (10-99 employees, \$1M-50M revenue) in the manufacturing sector account for 35%+ of net new job growth in the state. They represent an important area where investment incentives could support growth. Potential exists for RI to be an even better place to start, grow, and/or relocate food businesses. Impacts may include increased growth in BIPOC business ownership and employment, increased growth in overall food businesses, increased employment, and longer term strength of our local food system.

POLICY SOLUTIONS*

- Support enhanced business technical assistance to food sector businesses, including start-up/micro businesses and second-stage food businesses
- Increase access to capital, e.g., by supporting the Local Agriculture & Seafood Act Grant Program and exploring the creation of a Community Development Financial Institution
- A local investment tax credit (like [one proposed in Michigan](#) based on a [successful model in NB, Canada](#)) could stimulate investment by RI residents in small, local food businesses
- Promote local food and related tourism under a unified brand message
- Increase local food processing capacity and support related infrastructure investments (e.g. shared-use kitchens and co-packing facilities) through tax incentives, real estate and regulatory support services, and state bond and other investment programs
- Create incentives that connect Rhode Island products to institutional markets
- Invest in youth education, job training, and skilled workforce development for food sector careers

PRIORITY AREA: *Preserve and support commercial fisheries*

SUMMARY

Rhode Island's fisheries and commercial seafood sector, which includes commercial fishing and shellfishing as well as wholesale seafood dealers and other related businesses, includes close to 450 businesses, directly employs 3200 people, and generates close to \$540 million in annual revenues. Special care must be taken to protect and preserve this industry to ensure it continues to contribute to the culture and vitality of our state.. This sector faces unique challenges. They include complex regulatory strains and fragmentation, climate variability and warming waters that lead to habitat degradation, rising business expenses including the cost of gear, availability of permits and allocations, an aging fleet of boats and fishermen and women, uncertain markets, and a lack of understanding by the general public. In addition, fewer and fewer young people are aspiring to careers in fishing, so it is difficult for captains to find qualified crew.

Despite these challenges, Rhode Island has many opportunities to enhance and grow this critical sector of the state's economy. Demand for local food, including local seafood, is high and rising. There is a new, post-COVID realization that depending more heavily on locally produced and harvested food is an important aspect of food security in the face of crisis. Our fleet is extremely unique in its diversity of its catches, including emerging species that appreciate the warmer waters. We also have a state seafood branding campaign that has been gaining traction in recent years. Encouraging more local seafood consumption is a vital part of ensuring a healthy sector.

We have an opportunity to maximize the benefits of this important part of the Rhode Island economy by enhancing public understanding, increasing coordination among members of the industry and across industry, government, and nonprofit sectors, and workforce development to recruit, train, and support the next generation of RI fishermen.

POLICY SOLUTIONS*

- Enhance public understanding of the importance and benefits of local wild-caught seafood through public support of marketing and increased access initiatives
- Invest in training the next generation of RI fishermen and women
- Protect access to public infrastructure like piers and coastline for fishing activities
- Invest in increasing seafood wastewater processing capacity state-wide
- Increase public support for fisheries science and management at URI, RWU and other state institutions

**All suggested policy solutions in this document are based on promising programs that have already had a positive impact in the state. They just need policy changes and investment to scale up to help more Rhode Islanders*

OUR VISION

The RI Food Policy Council is a statewide statewide collaboration of diverse, committed and engaged stakeholders from all sectors of the food system. We create partnerships, develop policies, and advocate for improvements to the local food system to increase and expand its capacity, viability, and sustainability. Our vision is a Rhode Island with:

Increasing Production of, and Demand for, Local Food

A continuously increasing proportion of Rhode Island's food supply will be grown, raised, caught, processed, and distributed in Rhode Island.

A Thriving and Just Food Economy

The Rhode Island food system's contribution to the state's economy will increase and will equitably benefit all Rhode Island residents and Rhode Island food workers are assured healthy working conditions.

Access to Affordable, Healthful, Culturally Relevant Food for All Residents

Every Rhode Island resident will have access to safe, fresh, affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, regardless of income, race, and/or background.

Community Health for all Residents

Rhode Island's food system supports healthy eating behaviors and helps reduce the prevalence of, and disparities associated with, food-related diseases and conditions.

A Sustainable Environment

Rhode Island's food system will cultivate a healthy environment by striving for zero waste, and adopting ecologically sound practices that protect the climate and sequester greenhouse gas emissions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land

- [Relish Rhody](#)
- [Farms Under Threat: A New England Perspective](#)
- [National Agricultural Library urban agriculture resources](#)

Ensure access to affordable, culturally-appropriate food for all people

- Research Paper: [Household Food Insecurity is Associated with Adult Health Status](#)
- Research Paper: [Food Insecurity, Psychosocial Health and Academic Performance among College and University Students in Georgia, USA](#)
- Learn more about the [Hunger Elimination Task Force](#) and sign up for the monthly RI Food Access Bulletin
- Review the [RI Community Food Bank's Status Report on Hunger](#)
- Research Tool: [Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap Website](#)

Promote climate-smart, environmentally sustainable practices

- [IPCC Report](#): Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change
- [USDA Executive Summary](#): Climate Change, Global Food Security, and the U.S. Food System
- [RI's Climate Challenge](#): Impacts on Agriculture

Support a vibrant and just local food economy

- [Relish Rhody](#)
- [Rhode Island Innovates 2.0](#)
- [SBA State Small Business Profiles](#)
- <https://localreturn.org/arpa/>

Preserve and support commercial fisheries

- [2020 Blue Economy Report](#)
- [Economic Impact of Fisheries in Rhode Island](#)
- [Resilient Fisheries RI Blueprint](#)

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Support a vibrant and just local food economy

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2. "The Racial Gap in Commercial Real Estate Ownership." *Planetizen News*, July 2022, www.planetizen.com/news/2022/07/117895-racial-gap-commercial-real-estate-ownership

Preserve and support commercial fisheries

1. *Economic Impact of Fisheries in Rhode Island*, Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation. " *CFRF* <http://www.cfrfoundation.org/economic-impact-of-fisheries-in-rhode-island>
2. *Rhode Island Commercial Fisheries Blueprint for Resilience*. 2018, <http://resilientfisheriesri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Blueprint-for-Resilience-Executive-Summary.pdf>