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## It's Growing Season for Maine's Food System

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# It's Growing Season for Maine's Food System

by Deborah Felder

Everybody knows about food, but what exactly is a food system? Because we all have to eat, we all have personal stories and personal relationships with food. But a food system is not about individuals. It's a complex system of pathways, connections, and policies that determine not only the health of our citizenry, but the health of our planet and the fate of future generations. Like the transportation system, there are many entry and exit points, paved highways, back roads, tolls, and one-way streets in our current food system. For consumers, it may seem simple: buy food, cook it, serve it. Or if you're a backyard gardener: compost, plant, preserve. All of us can list some of the players in the food system: farmers, chefs, truckers, grocery store owners. But what about stockbrokers, genetic engineers, soil conservationists, cardiologists, legislators, or immigrant-rights organizations?

Decision-making about the kind of food system we have versus the kind of food system we might like to have happens in the corridors of government, in corporate boardrooms, on financial trading floors, in scientific laboratories, and through international trade agreements. With so many food choices and food options, we can be lulled into believing we are in control or that as consumers, we are "voting" with our pocketbooks and with our forks. But a food system isn't just about "what's for dinner?" It is also about what's not for dinner. A food system that leaves most of the world still hungry or placated with cheap, empty

calories is a system that leads nowhere. A food system that creates "dead" ecological zones, depletes freshwater, exploits workers, causes diabetes, or worst-case scenario, actually poisons people is not what we expect from a trip to the grocery store.

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## DECONSTRUCTING DINNER

With summer coming, we may be planning to regale out-of-state friends with a Maine shore dinner. Lobster, corn on the cob, baked potatoes, a side salad, blueberry pie and ice cream for dessert. Yum. Everything on the plate is from Maine. Also on the plate are the issues and challenges inherent in building a comprehensive food system for our state. Lobster is a Maine brand with worldwide recognition. Yet the industry confronts the loss of working waterfronts, the lack of processing facilities, the high cost of fuel, and fluctuating prices. With corn there's the question of organic versus local versus genetically modified; corn for food or corn for biofuel, animal feed, or high-fructose corn syrup? Potatoes are the symbol of Aroostook County and Maine's number one commodity crop. With potatoes, we come right up against the federal Farm Bill and how it defines large-scale versus small-scale farms, subsidies, and pricing. For larger farmers, there are challenges with consolidation and the loss of farmland, but there is also innovative research and development (e.g., potatoes to plastic), and value-added opportunities (e.g., vodka).

Salad is seasonal, but in Madison, Maine, they are growing tomatoes year-round. Smaller operations are doing the same with lettuce and salad greens. Consumers can support Maine farmers by purchasing community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares or visiting farmers' markets. More of these vendors now accept food stamps. Hannaford, Walmart, and other large food chains are adding more local food to their inventory. Whole Foods and Trader Joes are doing a vibrant business in Portland while smaller specialty markets are popping up all around Maine. Do we have sufficient transportation and distribution mechanisms in place, and are we growing enough to meet demand? Do wholesale prices support farmers' costs?

Regarding dessert, it's becoming possible again in Maine to use locally grown wheat ground in a Maine

gristmill for bread and piecrust. Blueberries are a recognized health food full of antioxidants. Maine-made ice cream, milk products, and cheeses are award winning and delicious. But even here there are behind the scene consequences. The majority of Maine blueberries are raked by migrant farm workers. Are their wages adequate and their working conditions safe? Are the migrant workers who harvest our crops equal partners in Maine's food system? For that matter, how many people working in the food system (farmers, fishermen, food preparers, processors, waitresses, dishwashers, sales clerks) make a living wage or have health insurance? As for eggs, should we choose brown, white, free-range, antibiotic-free, organic, or caged? Eggs, chickens, and poultry-processing plants used to be abundant in Maine. Saving Maine's dairy farmers is also high on the food-system agenda. Dairy farms face high land, infrastructure, and maintenance costs, plus a perishable product, fluctuating demand, cost controls, and uncertain supply chains. Cornerstone dairies and innovative partnerships are working against enormous odds to ensure a future for Maine's dairy industry.

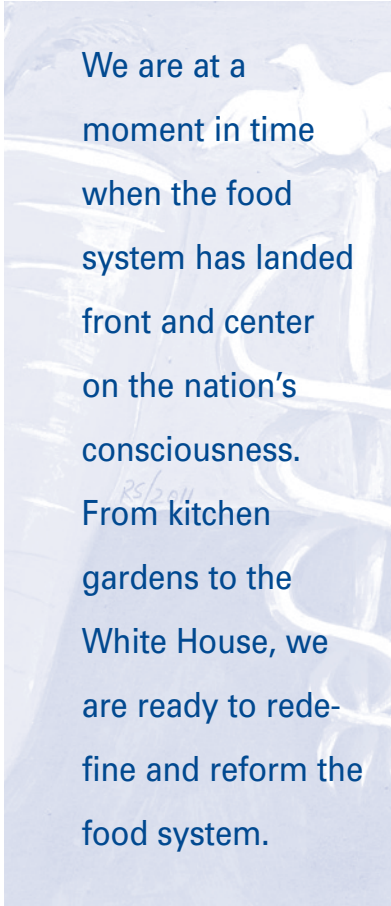
However you slice and dice it, Maine foods, whether haddock, chicken, beef, apples, clams, broccoli, maple syrup, or honey, are facing ecological, historical, economic, and man-made challenges. Even a committed locavore eating only Maine-grown or Maine-caught food can be detoured with difficult choices while navigating the food system. But most of us don't eat only local food. Estimates suggest that only 10 to 20 percent of consumers' food dollars are spent on Maine food. The rest of Mainers' diets are fraught with even more complex inputs and outcomes that have serious consequences to our health, the safety of our food supply, our environment, and even ultimately our global security. Agriculture is the number one producer of greenhouse gases and the foremost user of the world's freshwater supply. Pesticides, toxic run-off, and climate change are worrying food producers and consumers alike. The cheap food to which Americans have become accustomed is costing a good deal in terms of health and environmental consequences. Our dependence on fossil fuels as the primary engine in our food supply is unsustainable, and new models are demanded. We are at a moment in time when the food system has landed front and center on the nation's consciousness. From

kitchen gardens to the White House, we are ready to redefine and reform the food system.

#### MAINE HAS ALL THE INGREDIENTS

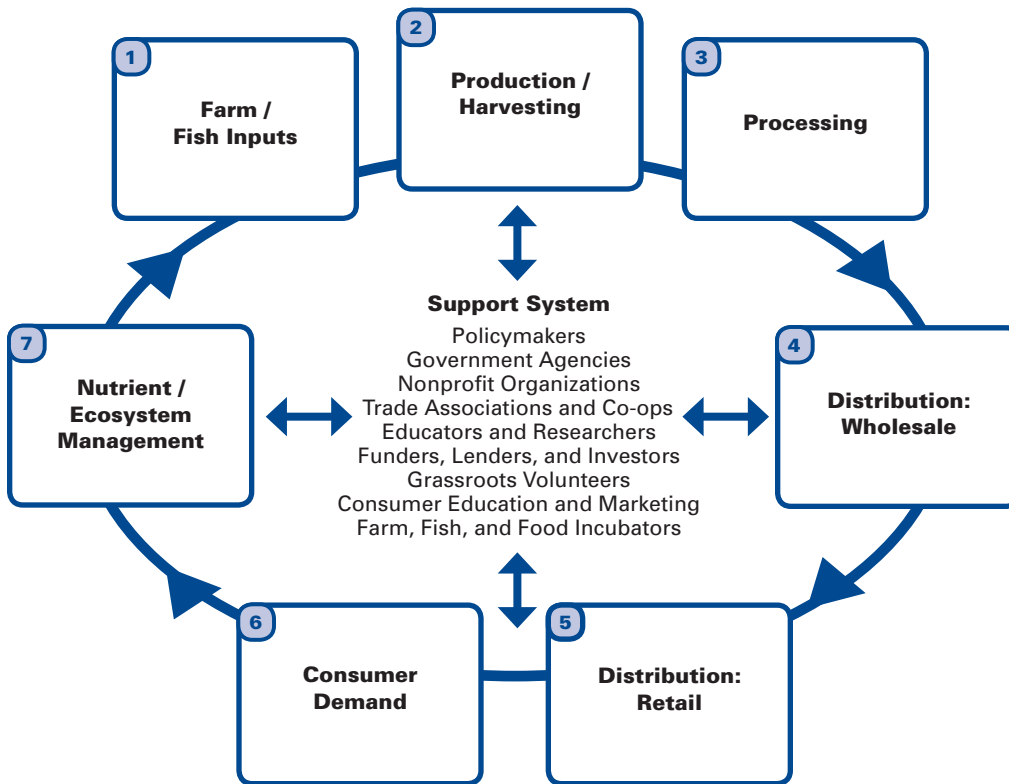
In 2010, Michael Pollan, often considered the guru of the food system, wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, "The Food Movement, Rising." It has been rising in Maine for quite some time. Across the state there are entrepreneurs, community groups, nonprofit organizations, research and development organizations, investors, trade associations, public policy leaders, foundations, advocates, educators, artists, chefs, physicians, nutritionists, state and federal agencies all working to build Maine's food-system highway.

Twelve years ago, when I was director of Maine Initiatives, we began a small grant program to support sustainable agriculture and community food systems called "The Harvest Fund." At that time, Coastal Enterprises, Inc., already had a strong Fisheries and Working Waterfront Program in place and had just begun the Maine Farms Program headed at that time by John Piotti. MOFGA (Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association), today the oldest and largest organic-farming-membership organization in the country, was already years into its thousands-of-people-a-day Common Ground Fair. A few restaurants, such as Fore Street in Portland, were local-sourcing their food. Entrepreneurs such as Des Fitzgerald (Ducktrap River Fish Farm), Jim Amaral (Borealis Breads), Jim Stott and Jonathan King (Stonewall Kitchens) were beginning to capitalize on the "natural goodness of Maine" at the same time that Oakhurst Dairy took a stand against corporate giant Monsanto and banned natural bovine growth hormone from its milk products. Visionaries such as Eliot Coleman were extending the Maine growing season, and



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FIGURE 1: Elements of a Food System



Source: Adapted from Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan

a few colleges and schools were experimenting with buying local, building greenhouses, or growing gardens. Protecting Maine’s wilderness was a strong value at that time, but farmland preservation was just beginning to receive attention. Organizations such as the Island Institute were moving away from a national fisheries management perspective and looking locally for expertise and cultural-preservation strategies. Ted Ames, a lobsterman and co-founder of the Penobscot East Resource Center, was awarded a McArthur genius award for his groundbreaking work fusing science and local fishermen’s knowledge to map and protect essential fish habitats. The Western Mountains Alliance published a local food tourist map. Johnny’s Selected Seeds and Fedco Seeds had strong consumer loyalty. Wolfe’s Neck Farm was raising organic beef. The food movement was rising.

Today in every corner of Maine, people are at work building a better food system for their communities.

The explosion of interest and action around the country in the past two decades for more humane, ecologically sustainable, safe, economical, and community-supported food systems has put Maine at the forefront of the food movement. Interest in Maine’s food system has created innovative collaborations and partnerships to address hunger, food access, working landscapes, marketing, distribution, job training, infrastructure, value-added products, and institutional buying. Organizations and communities are mapping the food system, addressing food equity, food deserts, and food destinations. Regions of our state such as Skowhegan are defining themselves as food hubs. Food-policy councils are taking root in towns such as Oxford and Lewiston/Auburn. Growth in consumer demand for local products has led to a spiraling growth

in farmers’ markets, CSAs/CSFs (farm/fish share programs), farm-to-school, farm-to-table, institutional buying, and cooperative ventures in Maine. Farm-to-school and farm-to-institution programs are both national and statewide in scope. Maine has become a food destination for tourists and locals alike. Our universities and community colleges are offering degree programs in sustainable agriculture and culinary arts. There is talk of a magnet agriculture high school. Innovative strategies to preserve farmland are in place. Investors and entrepreneurs are supporting and creating exciting new products with worldwide distribution.

The health care field is beginning to make the link between poverty, diet, obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. “Veggie prescriptions” are a new addition to the medical toolbox. Social service agencies are joining forces with farmers to grow and deliver fresh produce to homebound seniors, laid-off workers, and people in need. Immigrants and refugees are planting new

varieties of crops, opening markets, and expanding Maine's cuisine. A state that once had a slaughterhouse in every region, kitchen gardens in every yard, grist mills, fish- and poultry-processing plants, and a centuries-old tradition of "putting food by" is re-inventing a 21st-century version of what it means to be food self-reliant and food secure. The food system is a creative economy—creating jobs and redefining Maine.

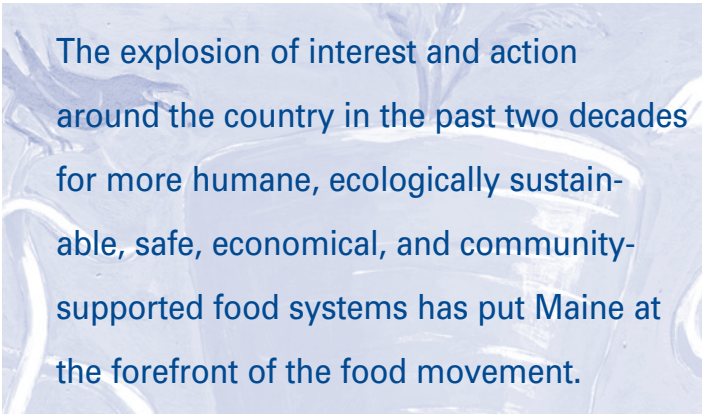
### A RECIPE FOR MAINE

In this issue of the *Maine Policy Review*, we delve into what a real food system for Maine would look like. There are many "good" news stories to tell, and we only cover a few. There are also many challenges. Use of food stamps and food pantries is up, as is food insecurity and hunger. We still have far to go to achieve good food for all. Commodity farmers and small farmers confront different obstacles as do the groundfishery, aquaculture, and lobster-fishing industries. Infrastructure, processing, and distribution systems are not up to scale. There are numerous economic challenges. While many of the necessary actors in the food system are in place, Maine is not yet operating with a single, unified vision. Like all states, we are part of a national and global food system subject to public policies and corporate interests that are not always in the state's best interests.

As public-policy initiatives at both the state and federal level heat up, the federal Farm Bill, food stamp re-authorization, climate change, green jobs, energy policy, transportation, food safety, preventative health, environmental protection, immigration reform, and trade policy can all be viewed through the lens of a sustainable food system. Maine is in a region of the country with a long history of agriculture and marine resources. We can use the current momentum to support policies that promote local economies and statewide growth. Additionally, Maine is part of a larger regional food system, and we need to continue to work collaboratively with our New England neighbors and learn from their endeavors.

As an example, over the past three years, Vermont has brought together stakeholders in the food system along with key legislators, the governor, and state agencies to create their "Farm to Plate" initiative, a comprehensive 10-year strategic plan for Vermont's

food system. The plan looks up and down Vermont's food chain and includes economic indicators, investment priorities, workforce-development strategies, increased consumer demand, targeted national and international markets, access to healthy food, nutrient management, education, policy, and regulation improvements. This effort was bipartisan and was carried out over two administrations. Other states are doing the same, for example the "Michigan Good Food Charter," Northeast Ohio's, "The 25% Shift," and the "Good Food for All Agenda" in Los Angeles. New York City has launched "FoodWorks," a vision to improve the city's food system, which sets out a "ground-to-garbage approach unprecedented in the history of our city" addressing agricultural production, processing, distribution, consumption, post-consumption, hunger, obesity, preserving regional farming, local food manufacturing, decreasing waste and energy usage.



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In 2007, the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Collaborative and the Urban Design Lab at Columbia—using architects and modelers, planners, academics, and other experts—sought answers to the childhood-obesity epidemic. Initially, they thought prevention and wellness programs might be the answer and were surprised to discover that the root cause lies in our current food system. They came to the conclusion that food and health are intricately linked and that to support programs addressing childhood obesity and the prevention of chronic diseases, there must be a national food system based on access, affordability, quality, and health.



Reforming and redesigning our food system so that it accurately weighs the true costs of cheap food and cheap labor, along with the high costs to the environment and human health, is the issue of our times. Current systems that treat food and water as commodities or individuals as mere consumers will not sustain us as we approach a world population of seven billion—twice as many people as there were in 1960. As the Beatles said, we need to “come together, right now.”

In 2005, the Maine legislature established the Maine Food Policy Council with 12 recommendations to ensure the availability of an adequate supply of safe, wholesome, and nutritious food to its citizens. These recommendations are an important first step, but just a first step. As public input around the 2012 federal Farm Bill gets underway and with a new state administration and new commissioners of the Department of Agriculture and Department of Marine Resources, Maine is poised to take this groundswell of interest in the food system to the next level. Together, the private, nonprofit, and public sectors can create good food, good jobs, and a good future for Maine. 🐟



**Deborah Felder** is a program consultant to the Broad Reach Fund, which has been supporting food-systems work in Maine for the past six years. She came to Maine from New York City in the 1970s as part of the back to the land movement and has been working for nonprofit organizations and philanthropy ever since. Her colleague at Broad Reach, Andrea Perry, was also a guest editor for this issue. Andrea grew up in Aroostook County and is a former program officer at the Maine Community Foundation.

