

Paths towards Food Self- Reliance: *Community Food Councils*

by Ken Morse

Across the country, people are experimenting with new frameworks for rebuilding more self-reliant food systems. Ever since industrial food systems took over after World War II, some have understood the problems of such systems and have begun working on alternatives. Recent alternatives in Maine include community-supported agriculture (CSA), community gardens, shared-use kitchens, year-round greenhouses, gardening, scratch cooking, putting food by, and the farm-to-school movement. Meanwhile, fossil fuel dependence, and the rampant negative impacts of the dominant food system on our health, the economy, and the environment have been extensively documented and widely understood.

A growing number of people believe the answer is to expand local and regional food self-reliance. One such new approach is called “food policy councils.” These initiatives vary from place to place; some call themselves “community food councils,” intentionally omitting the word “policy” because their scope goes well beyond policy. This framework brings together people from diverse sectors to discuss rebuilding food systems closer to home. The range and diversity of stakeholders from all sectors, including production, processing, storage, distribution, consumption, and waste management, creates robust capacities and synergies to assess, plan, and implement road maps towards food self reliance.

Other sectors engaged in the process include health and community development organizations. We can’t solve problems in our health system without solving the problems with our food system. Bringing food systems home also brings food dollars home, strengthening local economies, creating jobs, and alleviating the economic woes so closely linked with public health.

In the Oxford Hills area of western Maine, building on 40 years of robust local food activism, we have created “Community Food Matters” as our local community food council. The Oxford Hills area includes about 25,000 people, and we eat about \$75 million worth of food every year. If we can implement 80 percent food self-reliance (the goal adopted for Maine by the legislature in 2006), we can bring \$60 million into our local economy. To do this, we want to understand how that \$75 million gets into our mouths and what we need to do take control of this food supply. We are beginning to map the current system, so we can identify projects that will leverage greater local control. For example, we are studying institutional procurement because we see readiness to shift buying patterns as soon as we can match supply and infrastructure to the demand. Our goal is to create a 20-year road map to guide the path towards food self-reliance for our area.

Our planning process is intentionally not academic and tidy. We realize that to reach such an ambitious goal, we need to engage expanding circles of citizens. Action mobilizes people better than planning, so we are trying to blend action and planning into effective evolutionary dialectics. We are also working closely with St Mary’s Nutrition Center and their Local Food for Lewiston project to create a network of activists involved in community food councils from across Maine. Our statewide group has met twice, and we determining ways to support each other as so many Maine communities embark on parallel food council projects. In May 2011, some of us attended a meeting to launch a national “Food Policy Council Network.” We like to joke that we can work more effectively by doing R & D (Ripoff and Duplicate) with fellow collaborators. This will allow us all to move much more quickly down common paths towards food self reliance. 🐉