

Bringing Local Foods to the Farm Bill

by Chellie Pingree

I first moved to Maine as a teenager, and like many who came in the same era, I had a copy of Helen and Scott Nearing's *Living the Good Life* in hand. It was 1971 and big business (and big subsidies) was just starting to define American agriculture. I had chosen a different path, however, and with a degree in human ecology and the small and sustainable model the Nearings described in mind, I started an organic farm on the island of North Haven, Maine (population 381).

That early effort was a success—not only was I able to sell produce locally, but the sheep I raised supported a knitting and yarn business that created jobs in our tiny community and a product that was sold nationally.

At the same time, we were living in the era of Earl Butz, President Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture, who was telling American farmers to “get big or get out,” and our self-sustaining agriculture system was anything but mainstream.

Here we are 40 years later, and Maine has become an excellent example of how much the public has caught up. “Knowing where your food comes from” has become the subject of conversations everywhere. Parents, teachers, and grandparents are deciding they'd rather get the food for their family from a local farm where they can know the farmer.

With many measures, Maine is going against national trends. We have increasing numbers of younger farmers; the number of farms is growing; and more than half of Maine families report that they buy at farmers' markets, farm stands, or community-supported agriculture (CSAs) often. And, they are doing so for all of the right reasons: to support their local farmers and economy, to get fresh food and a good price. All good practices

for our economy, our health, and our environment—and we should encourage even more of it!

As a matter of national policy, the time has come to acknowledge this new attitude. The time has also come to acknowledge that some of the agriculture practices, particularly those supported and practiced nationally, are bad for the environment and public health and have become unsustainable. Congress will reauthorize the Farm Bill in the next two years, and I believe it's time to add a local foods title and begin to rebuild a real food system in the U.S.

Most of the Farm Bill will inevitably benefit big agribusinesses and giant production farms. But a local foods title would focus on consumers and small, local farmers, supporting them and breaking down the barriers they face.

A local foods title should make it easier for farmers to get their food to consumers. There is a lot that could be included in this including supporting infrastructure improvements such as local slaughterhouses or creating and encouraging distribution networks.

A Farm Bill written for the practices we want to encourage today would make it easier for EBT cards—the standard method for distributing food stamp benefits—to be used at farmers' markets, helping low-income families gain access to the kind of foods that will help them to stay healthy, and farmers to sell more. A local foods title could support the training and education of young farmers to help revitalize the local farming industry and provide technical assistance to implement common-sense food safety rules.

Perhaps one of the most important goals of a revised Farm Bill would be to finally make it easier for schools to

purchase and prepare real food in cafeterias—an incredibly fertile ground for changing food policy and eating habits. I’ve visited a number of schools in Maine that have built greenhouses and introduced fresh vegetables to their students. When you hear a middle school student gush about this new thing called “kale” that she has discovered, you begin to think that maybe we’ve been tricked into believing that all kids will eat are chicken fingers and Pop Tarts. There are better options, and a local foods title should include expanded flexibility to allow schools to spend more of their federal money on fresh, locally produced food. Schools also need help recreating the infrastructure that allows them to get back to cooking food—not just opening cans and heating them up on a stove.

Getting back to a real, sustainable food system in this country will take some work. But the desire among Maine people to have access to safe, healthy food and Maine farmers to provide it shouldn’t be underestimated. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, I speak with excitement about this topic to a lot of groups. Whether it’s the local banker, garage mechanic, teachers, or mothers and fathers, it is clear that wanting to know what you are eating and where it came from is a lot more mainstream today than it was in 1971. It will have been worth the wait if we can make the changes we need. 🐟

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