



RHODE ISLAND
FOOD STRATEGY

AN ACTIONABLE VISION FOR FOOD IN RHODE ISLAND



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Food systems are complex, and the development of Rhode Island's first comprehensive Food Strategy is a credit to the leadership of Governor Gina M. Raimondo and to the many individuals and organizations who participated in meetings, provided written comment, and shared their expertise and ideas during the development process.

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A strong food system supports Rhode Island's economy, culture, and people.

As part of her efforts to grow Rhode Island's economy and support healthy families and communities, in spring 2016, Governor Gina M. Raimondo announced the hiring of the State's (and nation's) first director of food strategy to lead the development of Rhode Island's first comprehensive Food Strategy. With the support of many partners, this actionable vision was created, which builds on the state's momentum in growing its local food economy in a way that benefits all Rhode Islanders, enhances Rhode Island's environment, and celebrates the state's unique food cultures and landscape.

Rhode Island stands at an exceptional moment in time to release this Food Strategy. In addition to State-level leadership, there is a robust network of partners across business, government, and community who are engaged in and energized by this effort. Designed to be a five-year action plan, the Strategy takes a holistic view of the state's food system and is organized around three core themes: Health & Access, Economic Development, and Environmental Sustainability & Resiliency. It is further broken out into five integrated focus areas:

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREAS:



Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island

Enhance the Climate for Food & Beverage Businesses

Sustain & Create Markets for Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products

Ensure Food Security for all Rhode Islanders

Minimize Food Waste & Divert It from the Waste Stream



The **Rhode Island Food Strategy** envisions a sustainable, equitable food system that is uniquely Rhode Island; one that builds on our traditions, strengths, and history while encouraging innovation and supporting the regional goal of 50 percent of the food eaten in New England be produced in the region by 2060.

**EACH OF THE FIVE INTEGRATED FOCUS AREAS HAS
A SET OF RECOMMENDED NEAR-TERM ACTION STEPS:**

**Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries
Industries in Rhode Island**

- Expand preservation of active farmland
- Enhance technical assistance & improve coordination and communication about existing resources
- Strengthen job training opportunities for agriculture and fisheries industries
- Explore innovative funding and financing tools
- Support a robust DEM Division of Agriculture
- Continue to invest in critical infrastructure
- Support efforts of the Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative
- Promote recruitment efforts within fishery industries
- Support efforts of Rhode Island's Shellfish Initiative

**Sustain & Create Markets for
Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products**

- Expand direct-to-consumer sales opportunities, particularly within fisheries
- Connect Rhode Island products to institutional markets
- Support infrastructure investments
- Promote food tourism under a unified brand message

**Minimize Food Waste & Divert it
from the Waste Stream**

- Leverage opportunities to reduce food waste at the source
- Connect healthful, potentially wasted food to Rhode Islanders in need
- Provide technical assistance and needed resources to help divert organic waste from the landfill

**Enhance the Climate for Food &
Beverage Businesses**

- Identify, prioritize, and tackle regulatory challenges for food enterprises
- Assess and implement communications and engagement best practices for processes and regulations
- Address funding gaps and communicate funding opportunities
- Recognize and celebrate food-system partners
- Support key agencies and staff in fostering innovation

**Ensure Food Security for
All Rhode Islanders**

- Create a statewide hunger taskforce to lead efforts to reduce food insecurity in Rhode Island to below 10 percent by 2020
- Maximize participation in federal meal programs
- Reduce transportation barriers to food access
- Reduce the price and increase access to healthful foods across the state
- Support development of community gardens
- Continue to promote high levels of health and nutrition in public schools and daycare facilities
- Expand partnerships with public health advocates
- Encourage healthy workplaces



Rhode Island's Unique Food Culture & History



Food is central to Rhode Island's character: an integral part of its history, culture, and future. It's quahoggers and aquaculturists harvesting shellfish from Narragansett Bay and active ports where millions of pounds of sustainably caught seafood are landed; it's community farmers growing fresh fruits and vegetables on new and historic farmlands; and it's immigrant farmers growing their native foods in plots sprinkled across Rhode Island cities. It's popular farmers' markets, world-class eateries, food pantries, processors, and partnerships between local businesses and schools. It's the fusion of coffee milk and johnnycakes, hot weiners and stuffies – and so much more. It's Rhode Island, uniquely. And it's forged by a rich and diverse cultural tapestry.

The food story in Rhode Island is one of human-scale production and consumption. And Rhode Island's Food Strategy honors this history and prowess while encouraging growth and innovation. It envisions a sustainable, equitable food system that is uniquely Rhode Island; one that builds on its traditions and strengths to connect local consumers with local producers, support the economy, and move toward a regional goal of 50 percent of the food eaten in New England be produced in the region by 2060.

The Food Strategy supports a Rhode Island where no person goes hungry and where all residents have access to sufficient, healthful foods. It's a food system that supports healthful eating, with a population that understands how to prepare and access nutritional food. And as a result, healthcare-related spending is reduced and the economic potential of the workforce is realized.

This food system would support a sustainable environment and strengthen the state’s climate resilience in many ways, including by decreasing Rhode Island’s dependency on foods transported in from other states – and especially those states prone to drought or extreme weather.

The food system envisioned in this Strategy is strong – supporting a diverse mix of jobs and opportunities and nurturing innovation and entrepreneurship. And it ensures businesses of all sizes have access to the resources they need to thrive – in an environment shaped by smart regulation.

Food is nourishment, but also pleasure. Rhode Island’s food system is central to what makes it an attractive place to live, experience, and raise a family or business.

Foundation for the Food Strategy

The food system the Strategy envisions is not yet reality in Rhode Island. Right now, it is difficult to survive as a farmer or fisherman – whether seasoned or novice. And there is inadequate access to healthful food options, while rates of diet-related disease such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity remain high and disproportionately affect minority and low-income communities.

Right now, more than a third of the food produced in Rhode Island ends up in the landfill, while approximately 12 percent of Rhode Islanders are food insecure and unsure where their next meal will come from. Currently, it is difficult for food processors to use local ingredients in their products, and Rhode Island remains overly reliant on agriculture and production from areas that will be prone to drought and harsh weather conditions as we adjust to a changing climate.

The state continues to make progress toward a stronger system and stands at an exceptional moment – given leadership across government, business and community – to implement a Food Strategy that promotes a healthier, more competitive Rhode Island.

2011 – Today

In 2011, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) was established to “advocate for improvements to the local food system to increase and expand its capacity, visibility and sustainability.” That same year, the Council commissioned development of a Food Assessment that would ground their work in data and give context to Rhode Island’s food landscape. Over the last six years, the Council has grown into a large, active network involved in state and regional food-system work. Last year, to lay the groundwork for Rhode Island’s Food Strategy, the Council released an update to its earlier Food Assessment.

At the same time, in 2011, the Ag Partnership released a five-year strategic vision, which supported the growth of agriculture in Rhode Island. And over the last six years, the Partnership has been focused on achieving many of its stated goals.





In 2014, Food Solutions New England (FSNE) released a bold food vision for the region: By 2060, 50 percent of the food consumed in New England will be produced in the region. This aggressive, yet achievable goal sets us on the path to food sector business growth, innovation, and regional climate resilience.

Government agencies have also been critical partners. The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM), whose mission is to protect and promote the state's environment and natural resources, continues to support the viability of local agriculture and fisheries and promote sustainable management practices.

Rhode Island leads the nation in farm-to-school programs that ensure healthful, local foods are made available in schools throughout the state. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), along with DEM and community partners, has been critical to this success. And the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) continues to manage and support programs that keep our food safe, improve access for all Rhode Islanders, and promote healthier lifestyles.



In 2013, the Rhode Island General Assembly – which has been a strong supporter of food initiatives – created the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) as a way to ensure cooperation and coordination on food policy issues across state agencies. RIDOH and DEM have served as the backbone agencies for this Council, helping to grow its membership to seven agencies, including RIDE and the Departments of Administration and Human Services. Community partners such as RIFPC also regularly participate in Council meetings.

When Governor Raimondo took office in 2014, she commissioned an economic study of Rhode Island, exploring the sectors with greatest potential for growth. Food was highlighted as an area of particular strength. In 2016, the Governor announced the hiring of the State's, and nation's, first Director of Food Strategy to work cooperatively with food partners across the state to develop Rhode Island's first comprehensive Food Strategy.

In January 2017, an initial draft of the Strategy was released at the state's first Food System Summit, attended by more than 350 people and covering topics ranging from regulatory challenges faced by food businesses to new ideas for growing the state's commercial fishing industry.

Leading up to and through development of this initial draft, stakeholders from across the state were engaged. And following the Summit, the State partnered with RIFPC on a series of community workshops to solicit feedback for the final Strategy. In all, nearly 30 presentations were given and more than 40 separate pieces of public comment were received.

Integrated Vision of the Rhode Island Food System

The Rhode Island Food Strategy looks at the food system holistically, from an integrated systems perspective. The Strategy is organized around three core themes: Health and Access, Economic Development, and Environmental Sustainability and Resiliency. Each of these themes is interrelated and important to building a strong food system in Rhode Island.

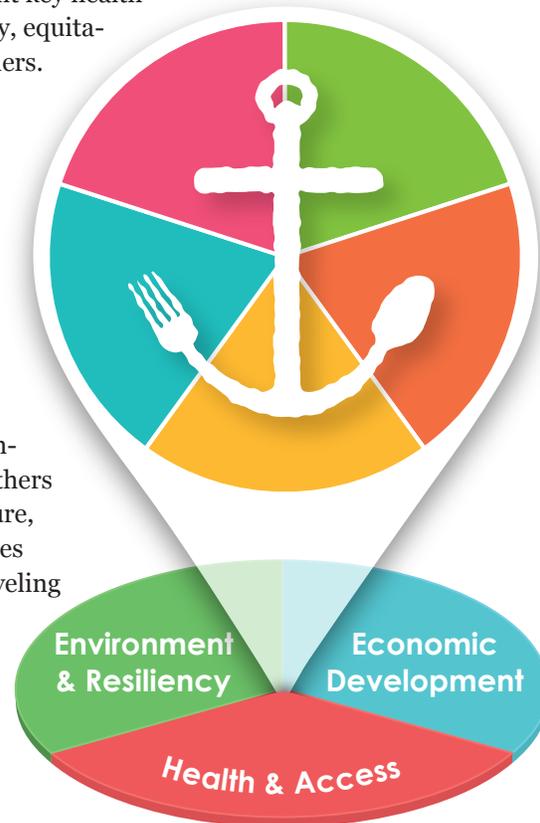
These elements are of equal importance, with the most potential for growth and innovation at the point of intersection. By focusing efforts at this point, Rhode Island stands to benefit from new tools, synergies, and broader thinking in confronting existing challenges and building the system envisioned in the Strategy.

HEALTH & ACCESS: All Rhode Islanders should have full and equitable access to safe and healthy food. The Food Strategy looks to ensure that the food system is developed in ways that are supportive of public health and health equity priorities – and takes into account key health issues such as diet-related disease, hunger, food insecurity, equitable access, physical infrastructure, food safety, among others.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Rhode Island seeks to be a state where food businesses thrive – and where they are recognized for the important roles they play in creating jobs and making Rhode Island an attractive place to live and visit.

ENVIRONMENT & RESILIENCY: Rhode Island has made strong commitments to environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and clean energy. The Food Strategy looks to support food system development in ways that respect and preserve natural resources. This includes managing water resources, encouraging development that furthers clean energy goals, managing chemical inputs to agriculture, considering ecosystem benefits, and more. It also addresses issues such as food waste ending up in the trash, food traveling unnecessarily long distances on fossil-fuel emitting transportation, and others.

The Strategy is further broken down into five focus areas, which are at the point of intersection.



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance the Climate for Food & Beverage Businesses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustain & Create Markets for RI Food, Beverage Products | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure Food Security for All Rhode Islanders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimize Food Waste & Divert it from the Waste Stream |
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INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA

Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island



Thriving farms, aquaculture, fisheries, and food businesses are at the very core of a local and regional food system.

Without prosperous farms and fisheries, there is no Rhode Island food system to build a strategy around, and no hope to achieve the ambitious goal for the region to produce 50 percent of the food it consumes by 2060. These activities are a bedrock of Rhode Island's culture and history. Rhode Island – without commercial fishing, farmland, and thriving food businesses – would not be the Rhode Island we all know and love. This Food Strategy supports growth of production that is environmentally sustainable, mutually supportive of other parts of the food system, and grows jobs.

Commercial Agriculture in Rhode Island

Rhode Island has a diverse and distinctive agricultural industry. Since the 1970s, Rhode Island's farms have decreased in size, but recently Rhode Island has emerged as one of the few states increasing the number of farms. While some of Rhode Island's farmland is in non-food crops (such as sod and nursery crops), the state also has substantial vegetable, fruit, milk, livestock, and feed crop production. Rhode Island's scale of agriculture allows it to offer high quality products – including high standards for humanely-raised livestock.

Over the last ten years, commercial-scale agricultural opportunities have grown in Rhode Island. Given the state's size and density, farms are generally close to potential customers, and Rhode Island has become a national leader in direct-to-retail sales as a percentage of overall sales for agriculture. Nearly all of the

agricultural products grown within the state are eaten by Rhode Islanders. With a push from organizations across the state, including DEM, farmers' markets and farm stands have blossomed across the state in the last decade, with most just within a short walk or drive for residents.

Rhode Island farmers also benefit from proximity to tremendous culinary innovation, with chefs from Johnson & Wales University and others demanding fresh, local products. Farm Fresh Rhode Island has created one of the premier food hubs in the country, including a distribution service from farmers to restaurants in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Other businesses and organizations are springing up to address increased demand for local products.

The last decade has also seen a strong focus on methods for season extension, with infrastructure such as hoop houses and greenhouses supported by state and federal government agencies. This has also been met with expanded wintertime sales opportunities through farmers markets, farm to institution wholesale opportunities, and others. A significant amount of land in Rhode Island has been permanently protected from development through conservation easements from the State as well as a strong network of land conservation organizations.

Further, Rhode Island leaders were some of the founders of the University Cooperative Extension Program. The current program at the University of Rhode Island continues to provide vital services to farmers across the state.



Rhode Island agriculture has also been regularly supported in many ways by the General Assembly and State agencies, including DEM. The General Assembly passed the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act (LASA) in 2013, which, among other things, created the LASA grants program to support small-scale agricultural and fisheries projects that otherwise would have difficulty accessing capital.

Despite this progress, challenges remain that must be addressed in the near term:

RETAIN & EXPAND LAND IN AGRICULTURE: Rhode Island is the second most densely populated state in the country. Competing potential land use drives up the cost of agricultural land in Rhode Island, creating the highest farmland prices in the nation. Rhode Island also continues to see the average age of farmers increase. Through both State investment and land trusts, Rhode Island has conserved substantial amounts of farmland from development. However, in order to meet the region-wide 50x60 goals and support Rhode Island farmers, the state must ensure current farmland remains in agriculture, expand the land in active production, and support farmers in accessing, retaining, and expanding their businesses.

EXPAND ON-FARM OPPORTUNITIES: Rhode Island has a seasonal climate that makes summer and autumn ideal times for growing most food products. To increase farm viability, farmers need more opportunities to generate income throughout the year. Over the last decade, the state and federal governments have partnered with farmers to invest in infrastructure for season expansion, such as hoop houses, greenhouses, and other innovative technologies. Rhode Island must continue to invest in year-round growing opportunities. This will necessitate continued work to expand markets and marketing opportunities for local food products.

Many farmers rely on non-farm income to retain their land in agriculture. This has been true throughout history, with farmers involved in farm-adjacent employment opportunities. In order to expand opportunities for farmers, Rhode Island must support appropriate, revenue-generating activities, such as appropriately sized and sited clean energy systems (solar, wind, anaerobic digesters), farm stands, on-farm food processing, among others.

ENCOURAGE NEW INNOVATIVE IDEAS TO EXPAND AGRICULTURE: Since agricultural lands are in great demand with rising costs, Rhode Island must plan for strategic expansion in agriculture through new innovative solutions on industrial or non-agricultural lands. Indoor agriculture can take many forms. The state is already home to companies such as the Rhode Island Mushroom Company, which distributes mushrooms across the Northeast. This company, however, can only locally grow approximately eight percent of what they distribute. Further, institutions and wholesale customers are challenged to get scale production for a single crop, such as salad greens, in Rhode Island.

Indoor agriculture is quite varied and can require new skill sets and innovations not seen in traditional agriculture; this creates a diverse mix of employment opportunities – from harvesters to system operators and engineers.

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: PRESERVE & GROW AGRICULTURE IN RHODE ISLAND

EXPAND PRESERVATION OF ACTIVE FARMLAND

Rhode Island should invest in land conservation programs that would retain land in agriculture, ensure aging farmers can sell their land in a way that allows them to retire, and allow existing and new farmers to purchase and lease land at affordable rates.

The State and land trusts currently have successful programs in place, such as conservation easement programs and DEM's 2017 Farmland Access Program. To conserve additional needed acres, funding should be explored to support both existing farmland preservation programs and pilot new programs that could give retiring farmers who have already sold development rights incentives to transition their farmland to new or expanding farms.

METRICS

- Acres of agricultural land preserved with conservation easements (DEM)
- Acres of agricultural land owned by the State (DEM)
- Acres of land in agriculture (USDA)
- Annual state funding budgeted for farmland preservation programs (DEM)
- Number of farms in the state (USDA)

ENHANCE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE & IMPROVE COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT EXISTING RESOURCES

Farms are businesses. And like the business sector at large, most Rhode Island farms are small businesses. Support services exist across the state for small business services – everything from business planning to accounting assistance and funding opportunities. However, many businesses do not know the breadth of the resources available to them – and farmers are no exception. Rhode Island must ensure that its farming community has access to the same business technical assistance as other small businesses in the state.

Farmers also need access to other forms of technical assistance specific to agriculture. This includes legal assistance, regulatory assistance, and farming/agriculture technical assistance. There are several organizations in the state providing these services to farmers – such as Conservation Law Foundation's Legal Food Hub and the University of Rhode Island's Cooperative Extension Services, which could be expanded and made available to more and different types of farmers.

Further, programs that help farmers with retirement and succession planning, such as those currently managed by the Rhode Island Land Trust Council, Land for Good, Young Farmers Network, the Rhode Island Farm Bureau and others should be supported and expanded. In surveys, many farmers across the region report that while they do not have a plan for retirement and land succession, they prefer their land stay in agriculture after retirement.

METRICS

- Acres of agricultural land preserved
- Utilization rates of existing technical assistance programs:
 - Number of participants and legal fees deferred through CLF Legal Food Hub
 - Number of participants in trainings
 - Number or percentage of farmers served by URI's Cooperative Extension

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA | PRIORITY ACTIONS: PRESERVE & GROW AGRICULTURE IN RHODE ISLAND

STRENGTHEN JOB TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURE INDUSTRIES

Farmers across the state report that qualified and well-trained employees are in short supply. Farming should be seen as a dignified and attractive career opportunity for young people finishing high school or college. The Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association has designed a program for apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs for new entrants into all aspects of agriculture (including nursery and non-food agriculture) in partnership with technical schools, employers, and others across the state. Programs such as this should be supported, as well as other new innovative approaches and partnerships to training and attracting workers to this field.

The State should also continue support for existing farm incubators, such as Snake Den Farm, which help new farmers gain access to land and experience before transitioning to their own farms.

METRICS

- Number of existing farmer training programs: number of participants, how many employed in agriculture

EXPLORE FINANCING AND OTHER TOOLS THAT SUPPORT INNOVATIVE FARM PRACTICES

Identify and expand financing mechanisms that are responsive to unique needs of the sector. To do so, Rhode Island should:

- Explore a permanent funding source for the LASA grants program, which has supported nearly 50 food business grants, each under \$20,000 through 2016.
- Examine and potentially design new financing tools that are responsive to agriculture-specific needs. There are many things that make financing farms and food businesses challenging: seasonal revenue, leased land that leaves farmers with no equity for traditional loans or incentives to make long-term investments to property they could lose, and an industry tendency for steady, not explosive growth, which can be less attractive to some traditional investors. In doing so, Rhode Island can leverage the experiences of programs like the Fair Food Fund and also explore whether financing models from other sectors – like Property Assessed Clean Energy – could be useful.

Ag and food “clusters” also offer the potential for increased food business development and lower costs for infrastructure development, while also creating increased connectivity between food system businesses, centralized R&D, and opportunities for engagement with the wider public (student research, public markets, etc). URI’s plan for an Agriculture and Aquaculture Innovation Campus at Peckham Farm and Farm Fresh Rhode Island’s development of a Food and Agriculture Campus in Providence are both exciting developments in the works, and could serve as anchor locations for increased cluster development in the agriculture and food sectors.

METRICS

- Annual budget for LASA grants: number of participants (DEM)
- Examples of finance and funding products available to RI farmers (Commerce)

SUPPORT A ROBUST DEM DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE

Owning a farm is more challenging today than ever before. Beyond the difficulties of day-to-day farm operations, farmers need assistance navigating complex issues, such as the Food Safety Modernization Act, policies to support thriving pollinator populations, how/whether to invest in onsite clean energy, and more. Across the country, state departments of Agriculture help guide farmers through these difficult questions. The Division of Agriculture, within DEM, is a respected and trusted resource for farmers and has consistently provided support to farming businesses of all types and sizes. Ensuring that the Division has the necessary support and resources to assist farmers will help ensure the long-term viability of agriculture in Rhode Island.

METRICS

- Number of programs supported by the Division of Agriculture (DEM)



Commercial fisheries are part of the fabric of Rhode Island and an economic and employment boon for the state.

Commercial fisheries in Rhode Island support thousands of jobs and over 100 million pounds in landings in 2016. The state also has an abundance of diverse fish species off of our coast and in the Bay.

Commercial fishing has benefited from DEM's ownership and management of commercial fishing ports. Because of this, the State can more easily balance water access needs among commercial fishing, tourism, and other recreational uses. DEM is able to make improvements in the ports that will benefit the industry as a whole and keep costs down for businesses looking to locate in Rhode Island ports.

However, while many Rhode Islanders assume the fish they eat was landed in state, Rhode Island fisheries currently export more than 90 percent of the fish landed in Rhode Island. This is largely due to:

CONSUMER DEMAND FOR RHODE ISLAND

PRODUCTS: Rhode Island has a reputation for high quality and high-value seafood, and there is demand for it across the country and the world. Further, Rhode Island lands a large percentage (more than 50 percent in 2016) of the east coast's squid, which is then shipped across the country. This export business is one of the state's successes and should continue to be encouraged.

CONSUMER PREFERENCES & MARKETING: The average consumer in New England is looking for seafood they recognize – cod, salmon, etc. – whether or not it is sustainable or landed locally. However, many Rhode Islanders are shocked when they learn that

most of the seafood they eat is imported into the state (while much of our seafood is exported) and report they would preferentially buy products landed in Rhode Island if they had the opportunity. The marine waters of southern New England and Narragansett Bay have an abundance of under-utilized fish species that could be landed by Rhode Island fishermen and sold within the state and region – if there was consumer demand to support the market. Chefs, Johnson & Wales, the Seafood Marketing Collaborative, organizations like Eating with the Ecosystem, and many others are working to educate consumers about new types of fish and their uses and create consumer demand for underutilized fish species in our region. Further, even once there is consumer demand, Rhode Islanders (individuals, restaurants, etc.) have a difficult time locating Rhode Island-caught seafood to purchase, even with the Rhode Island Seafood logo.

PROCESSING CAPACITY & INFRASTRUCTURE:

Many New Englanders (and Rhode Islanders) have a preference for purchasing fish that they do not need to fillet themselves. In order to connect with Rhode Island and regional consumers and institutions, fish processors would need to process fish landed in Rhode Island into forms that are recognizable and usable. Further, many of our fish processors currently process some of their catch in facilities outside of the state, and several have expressed an interest in increasing their processing capacity and hiring more staff within Rhode Island – but we currently lack the wastewater processing infrastructure that would allow for successful expansion.



REGULATORY HURDLES: For the safety of Rhode Islanders and the fishery industry, there are important food safety regulations on the books in Rhode Island. However, some of these regulations are confusing for fishermen, or regulations between agencies can be inconsistent –impeding fishermen’s ability to safely expand their direct-to-retail opportunities in Rhode Island the way other states have. RIDOH, DEM, Commerce, and the Office of Regulatory Reform (ORR) have all begun working on identifying and streamlining some of these regulations in coordination with the industry, but there is work left to be done.

Fishermen experience other barriers as they look to expand or enter the industry in Rhode Island. Additional obstacles include:

BARRIERS TO NEW ENTRANTS: DEM has been working with fishermen on a proposal to update licensing requirements so that they allow for additional new entrants to the field, while acknowledging that there will always be some level of constraint on licensing because controlled entry is important with numerous species managed through quotas to maintain environmental sustainability.

JOB TRAINING: Trained and qualified workers are increasingly difficult for ship captains to hire.

ACCESS TO CAPITAL: Fishermen experience difficulty accessing the capital necessary to buy boats and equipment. It can be even more difficult for fishermen than farmers to access capital, since they do not have the option to use land as collateral.

LAYERS OF REGULATION: Fishing is regulated by federal and state agencies. In addition to the number of different regulations, which tend to be species-by-species without consideration across ecosystems, the regulatory structure changes frequently to keep up with dynamic fish populations and environments. The regulatory structure is in place to create sustainable populations, but the magnitude of regulations and the frequency of change causes challenges for fishing businesses.



Aquaculture & Shellfish

While other forms of seafood are heavily managed by quotas to ensure environmental sustainability, aquaculture is a growth area for Rhode Island. In RI, oysters are the top aquaculture product – with nearly eight million sold in Rhode Island in 2016. The State has seen regular growth in the total number of farms and farmers in aquaculture – with 70 farms by the end of 2016, and more than 270 acres under cultivation. The state is also seeing an increase in new aquaculture products – such as kelp – which have the potential to increase farmers’ revenues during non-peak seasons.

The aquaculture industry is supported by organizations and agencies across the state, including (but not limited to) the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), DEM, RIDOH, universities like Roger Williams University and the University of Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Shellfisherman’s Association, the Coastal Resources Center, and Rhode Island Sea Grant. Responding to reported difficulty understanding the regulatory environment for shellfish, Rhode Island Sea Grant and the Coastal Resources Center at the University of Rhode Island partnered with RIDOH to create a Shellfish Marketing Guide, which was published in January 2017.

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: PRESERVE & GROW FISHERIES IN RHODE ISLAND

CONTINUE TO INVEST IN CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Rhode Island needs wastewater infrastructure that can accommodate growth in the industry, while protecting water quality. Government partners, including Commerce, DEM, the Director of Food Strategy, and others should collaborate with fishery industry players and others to undertake a needs and opportunities assessment for the expansion of wastewater treatment capacity in the state and innovative financing tools in a way that would benefit the industry as a whole. This group should also explore ancillary businesses – like composting and anaerobic digestion – that could utilize this ‘waste’ as a resource.

METRICS

- Tons of fish waste, wastewater diverted into compost or anaerobic digesters
- State, local private funds leveraged to invest in increased wastewater processing capacity

SUPPORT EFFORTS OF THE RHODE ISLAND SEAFOOD MARKETING COLLABORATIVE

The Collaborative – with membership from government, industry, academia, and community – needs additional funding to expand awareness of and markets for Rhode Island seafood. The Collaborative’s work is solely funded via a \$20,000 LASA grant, which is not sufficient to adequately market and grow the RI Seafood brand.

METRICS

- Total invested annually in seafood marketing efforts
- Number of Rhode Island restaurants, markets selling local seafood
- Number of licensed users of the RI Seafood logo

PROMOTE RECRUITMENT EFFORTS WITHIN FISHERY INDUSTRIES

The average age of fishermen in Rhode Island is steadily increasing toward retirement age, and new and young people are finding it difficult or unattractive to enter the field.

Licensing: In 2017, DEM has partnered with fishermen to craft changes to the licensing system, which if enacted, would increase access to new fishermen. DEM has shown its commitment to the fishing industry in many ways, and is making changes that continue to support sustainable fisheries, while also encouraging new fishermen to enter the field and allowing them to harvest and learn about multiple types of fish.

Job Training: Current fishermen report that in the past more training opportunities were available, for example at URI and technical schools. The State should partner with education institutions and training programs to ensure robust offerings that meet the needs of the industry.

METRICS

- Passage of legislation allowing for changes in commercial fishing licenses
- New training opportunities and programs to recruit new fishermen

SUPPORT EFFORTS OF RHODE ISLAND’S SHELLFISH INITIATIVE

The Rhode Island Shellfish Initiative was launched in April 2017 and is a partnership of the Governor’s Office, NOAA Fisheries, DEM, CRMC, Rhode Island Sea Grant, Coastal Resources Center, Rhode Island Shellfisherman’s Association, East Coast Grower’s Association, Ocean State Aquaculture Association, and others. The Food Strategy endorses this collaborative effort to support growth of shellfish industries and promote sustainable management practices.



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA

Sustain & Create Markets for RI Food, Beverage Products



The flip side to supporting sustained and increased food production in Rhode Island is creating, sustaining, and growing local and regional markets for Rhode Island food products.

Rhode Island already has many advantages to build on. The state currently leads the nation in direct-to-retail sales as a percentage of farm income, with over 50 farmers' markets annually. Almost all of the food grown in the state is consumed in the state. And Rhode Island is developing products that consumers want, from farm and seafood products to high quality processed and manufactured foods.

Rhode Island is also home to award-winning chefs and restaurants, who have been important partners in highlighting and creating demand for local foods. The state is also home to one of the nation's premier food hubs and local distribution centers at Farm Fresh Rhode Island. And it is a popular destination for food tourism. However, there are challenges as the state looks to expand marketing opportunities for food businesses:

SATURATION OF DIRECT-TO-RETAIL

OPPORTUNITIES: With farmers markets spread across the state's 39 cities and towns, as well as farm stands and roadside stands, new opportunities for farmers markets are beginning to run thin. If farms, fishermen, and food producers are going to expand production, new outlets will be needed for their products – such as institutional markets, distribution retail/grocery stores, and others.

LINKAGES TO INSTITUTIONAL MARKETS: Many of the dining facilities in institutions in Rhode Island are managed by food service companies, such as Sodexo, Chartwells, Aramark, and others. While

supplying those large institutional customers can be difficult for smaller-scale Rhode Island producers, there are statewide and regional efforts to connect local food resources with larger distribution systems. States like Vermont also provide good models, where Sodexo has staff dedicated to coordinating local purchasing.

Linkages to institutional markets also provide an opportunity to be strategic about which products best connect to these efforts, including Rhode Island's vast seafood resources. They also provide an opportunity to partner regionally and think about shared infrastructure and pooling of resources.

PROCESSING CAPACITY: Large institutional purchasers, such as universities and hospitals, often require food to be processed in specific ways to facilitate purchase. Fish might need to be filleted to certain specifications, carrots peeled, liquids individually bottled. Further, Rhode Island has seasonal agriculture and fisheries, extending the seasons to sell in line with when institutions have greatest demand might require freezing, canning, or preserving in some way.

COORDINATED FOOD NARRATIVES: Rhode Island has a wealth of food-related tourist attractions: wineries, breweries, farm-to-table restaurants, opportunities to harvest quahogs, fresh shellfish, and more. We should focus on opportunities to market our state's unique features in a coordinated way across tourism districts.

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: SUSTAIN & CREATE MARKETS FOR RI FOOD, BEVERAGE PRODUCTS

EXPAND DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER SALES OPPORTUNITIES, PARTICULARLY WITHIN FISHERIES

Farmers markets are an essential direct-to-retail opportunity. They provide producers with a higher price point as well as a physical marketplace to connect to potential customers. The direct contact also makes them a testing ground for food businesses experimenting with new products, which allows food businesses to grow inexpensively. And they are often consumers' first experience with local food, serving as important educational platforms for shoppers.

Many groups organize and provide market opportunities for farmers and other food producers across the state, including DEM, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, and myriad small organizations. Managing farmers markets is difficult work – physically and administratively - and many are managed by volunteers or staff wearing multiple hats within an organization. The volunteers and staff at these organizations have recently formed a farmers' market managers' organization to share resources, best practices, and other types of support.

Rhode Island needs to maintain farmers market opportunities across the state and leverage opportunities to share resources and best practices, such as through the newly created Farmers Market Manager Coalition.

In the same way that farmers' markets have created opportunities to both educate consumers about local farms and farming while supporting the industry, increased direct-to-retail sales could have a similar effect for seafood. There are currently regulatory requirements that present challenges for fishermen in pursuing direct-to-consumer sales, but Rhode Island can learn from other states that have updated laws and regulations to encourage and allow for seafood to be safely sold to consumers at fish markets and other direct-to-retail venues.

Further, there is both the supply and demand necessary for increased whole, unprocessed direct sales of fish within the state. Many immigrant communities in Rhode Island actively seek out opportunities to buy fresh whole fish and possess the knowledge to process it themselves. Fishermen see a market opportunity to sell unprocessed fish at lower price points to additional markets that aren't being tapped, especially for underappreciated species. Empowering these direct connections in a way that preserves food safety would have benefits across the spectrum – culturally, economically, and as it relates to food security.

METRICS

- Number of farmers markets and farm stands in the state (RIFPC)
- Farmers markets accepting SNAP and SNAP spent annually at farmers markets (Farm Fresh RI)
- Total value of seafood sold direct-to-consumer or restaurants in the state
- Direct sales – as percentage of total agriculture sales (USDA)

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: SUSTAIN & CREATE MARKETS FOR RI FOOD, BEVERAGE PRODUCTS

CONNECT RHODE ISLAND PRODUCTS TO INSTITUTIONAL MARKETS

Local food purchasing and farmers markets seem synonymous. However, to connect Rhode Island eaters to Rhode Island-grown food and Rhode Island producers to more opportunity, access to larger, more stable markets (beyond direct consumer sales) is needed.

Rhode Island currently leads the nation in Farm-to-School programs, with all of our state's K-12 school districts participating in related activities and purchasing local foods. There are also a number of organizations who have been leading the effort to connect Rhode Island foods to Rhode Island institutions, including DEM, RIDE, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, Farm to Institution New England, Healthcare without Harm, and others. These organizations are working with major healthcare and education institutions across the state and region to:

- Collect and disseminate data on current levels of local purchasing
- Connect producers with food service companies who manage institutional meal programs
- Partner with institutions who contract with food service companies to build local food requirements into the contracting process
- Share best practices across the region
- Work with producers to identify and address supply chain challenges

It is imperative that this work continue and grow. Rhode Island has an opportunity to lead in connecting our food products to institutional markets across the region. The Food Strategy further recommends including our fishery resources in this work. The Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation has led research with universities, tracking demand for seafood and assessing the viability of replacement with locally-harvested products.

METRICS

- Total spent by institutions on local food (Farm-to-Institution New England)
- Percent of sales by distributors spent on local food (Farm-to-Institution New England)
- Number of Rhode Island K-12 schools buying local food; percent of total budget spent (Farm-to-Institution New England / USDA)
- Total food sales broken down by category (U.S. Census)

SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS

In order to reach new markets and support expanded product offerings, additional processing and manufacturing infrastructure will be necessary within the state and region. Rhode Island is home to many food entrepreneurs. However, as small businesses 'graduate' from incubators and shared kitchens, they often lack a next-step-sized facility in which to operate. As a result, many of these successful ventures have relocated to neighboring states. Supporting the development of food clusters and step-up spaces is critical to cultivating and retaining food businesses in Rhode Island.

In partnership with regional organizations such as Food Solutions New England (FSNE) and Farm to Institution New England, Rhode Island should undertake a review of existing infrastructure and analyze gaps. Many states are grappling with similar infrastructure issues: the need for additional slaughterhouse capacity, bottling plants, IQF facilities, etc. The regional market cannot sustain individual states building competing or duplicative infrastructure. A regional scan, with an eye toward Rhode Island's unique strengths, is necessary and should take place in 2017 as part of the next phase of implementation for the 50x60 FSNE vision.

METRICS

- Completion of a regional scan for infrastructure needs
- Number of new Rhode Island-based food companies opening in Rhode Island annually
- Amount of public and private funds leveraged in new food manufacturing

PROMOTE FOOD TOURISM UNDER A UNIFIED BRAND MESSAGE

Tourists visit the Ocean State for its wealth of beaches and historic parks, unique culture, and delicious food. The opportunity exists to further this reach and attract more people and businesses to Rhode Island through a coordinated marketing effort. Specifically, effort should be taken to develop a unique voice, message and narrative for food in Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Commerce Corporation has been convening major food marketers, including DEM and others, around the state with the goal of developing Rhode Island's food "story" and coordinating activities.

METRICS

- Development of a unified brand message
- Development and dissemination of shared resources



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA

Enhance the Climate for Food & Beverage Businesses



Rhode Island is focused on how to empower food business growth in a way that ensures food safety, supports job creation & engages food partners.

The potential is there for Rhode Island to be “the” place to start, grow, and/or relocate food businesses.

To this end, the State should continue to explore opportunities to build on its unique strengths and capabilities and leverage the three core themes of the food strategy: health and access, economic development, and environmental sustainability. It should also begin to address the challenges new and existing food businesses face in Rhode Island, including:

REGULATORY HURDLES: Food businesses are complicated from a regulatory standpoint, and often involve several layers of regulations (federal, state, local) across multiple agencies. Regulations that impact food businesses should be smart and encourage innovation – while protecting the health and safety of consumers. Regulations are not always clearly communicated and coordinated, and businesses do not have access to sufficient resources to help them understand the rules.

ACCESS TO CAPITAL: As businesses go through various growth stages, they require different types of capital. Challenges include: ensuring that all Rhode Island businesses have equitable opportunity to access capital and other resources and ensuring access to the right types of capital to meet their needs to facilitate growth and innovation.

JOB TRAINING AND SKILLED WORKFORCE:

Jobs in the food system are diverse. Each of the integrated focus areas has highlighted the need for workforce development.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: While resources exist around the state for business planning, understanding finance, and other technical skills – there is no centralized coordination or communication of the resources to the businesses who would find them useful. Businesses across the food system – farmers, fishermen, distributors, processors, manufacturers, haulers, and others – could benefit from generalized and specialized technical assistance resources.

CELEBRATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Rhode Island is known for its food scene. The state boasts some of the best restaurants and high-quality food businesses in the country, as well as one of the premier culinary institutions. An amazing food scene attracts tourists, as well as maintains a high quality of life for residents. Public and private partners in the food ecosystem should consistently celebrate our food entrepreneurs and their contribution to Rhode Island. In a state where relocating across borders is trivial, making Rhode Island a place where businesses feel not only welcomed but celebrated and supported is key.



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENHANCE THE CLIMATE FOR FOOD & BEVERAGE BUSINESSES

IDENTIFY, PRIORITIZE, AND TACKLE REGULATORY CHALLENGES FOR FOOD ENTERPRISES

The State needs to address specific outdated or excessive regulations that unnecessarily hamper food business development. In developing the Food Strategy, the Director of Food Strategy – along with partners – surveyed food businesses regarding the regulatory hurdles they face, with the goal of surfacing and beginning to address major issues. The State should continue to prioritize addressing hurdles and regulating business in a way that facilitates and paves the way for innovation and growth.

METRICS

- Number of regulations updated to better reflect food system needs and food protection

ASSESS AND IMPLEMENT COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES FOR PROCESSES AND REGULATIONS

A common theme from the focus groups and outreach emerged: There are many practices that members of the community believed to be prohibited by regulations and legislation that are actually allowed. Improvements need to be made in how processes and requirements are communicated to Rhode Islanders, with an increased focus on inter-agency partnership. Rules should be designed and communicated with a customer-centric approach. RIDOH's Lean Restaurant Initiative, streamlining restaurant inspections, is an example of redesigning processes with this goal in mind. Improved communication should involve website improvements, enhanced technical assistance provided by the State or through partnerships with local universities, and streamlining processes across agencies, among others.

METRICS

- Updated web material
- Types and technical assistance materials developed to facilitate clearer communications with food businesses
- Qualitative reporting on Lean process improvements by departments
- Elapsed time to submit and receive decision on application

ADDRESS FUNDING GAPS AND COMMUNICATE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Rhode Island Commerce Corporation and Social Enterprise Greenhouse have already begun mapping out capital resources that exist for food businesses. This information needs to be evaluated to identify gaps and areas where we need to work in a coordinated way to attract or create new capital products to support different sectors of the food business. Helping Rhode Island companies connect to resources outside of the state is also important.

As this information is compiled, it should be made available to food entrepreneurs, along with technical assistance. For example, Social Enterprise Greenhouse has hosted capital access forums for the food community, along with a business accelerator program that provides information on financing. These are the types of programs and forums that should continue and be enhanced to meet community needs.

METRICS

- Capital resource map completed and posted in accessible web locations

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENHANCE THE CLIMATE FOR FOOD & BEVERAGE BUSINESSES

RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE FOOD-SYSTEM PARTNERS

To continue to build on Rhode Island's vibrant food scene and attract and retain top talent, food partners – chefs, restaurateurs, market owners, and processors – should be celebrated and engaged. For example, many of the fish harvested by Rhode Island fishermen – such as scup or dogfish – are delicious but not familiar to local consumers. Chefs play an important role in educating consumers on how to cook and enjoy these unique fish. Many of these chefs have also begun featuring these fish on their menus, helping to bring consumers along and create the demand and palate for these products.

SUPPORT KEY AGENCIES AND STAFF IN FOSTERING INNOVATION

There has been a great deal of important and effective work to streamline food related regulations in recent years within State agencies. For example, RIDOH has piloted and expanded new models for restaurant inspections aimed at increasing consistency, efficiency, and re-inspections. An initiative, managed by ORR and Rhode Island Commerce Corporation, brought together State agencies to streamline the process for opening a restaurant in Rhode Island.

Businesses are best able to innovate and operate in environments where regulations are smart, effective, and efficiently executed. In order to further support the development of local food businesses, the Food Strategy encourages continued collaboration between ORR, the Commerce Corporation, and the Center for Food Protection at RIDOH. The Food Strategy also supports making permanent the Director of Food Strategy position, which brings together agencies and acts as a catalyst for innovation.

METRICS

- Collaborative projects completed across RIDOH, ORR, and Commerce and other agencies





INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA

Ensure
Food
Security
for All
Rhode
Islanders



The Food Strategy envisions a Rhode Island in which no Rhode Islander struggles with hunger or worries about where their next meal will come from.

Food is an essential building block of life and is related to quality of life, health, family and cultural traditions. All Rhode Islanders deserve to access food in ways that reflect this.

This is not the Rhode Island in which we currently live. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, food insecurity is defined as a limited or uncertain access or availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and/or limited or uncertain ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways. In 2016, nearly 12 percent of Rhode Islanders were food insecure affecting approximately one out of every eight households. For households with children, that number is closer to one out of every four households.

In 2016, Rhode Island had approximately 198,000 people living at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. These Rhode Islanders missed a collective 33 million meals in 2016 or about three missed meals per week per person (although the number is not evenly distributed across the population).

These figures take into account all of the resources that are available to people in Rhode Island – individual families’ incomes, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - or food stamps), Women Infants and Children (WIC) programs, meals eaten at school (breakfast, lunch, and other meals and snacks), and emergency food (e.g. the food bank or pantries). There are large disparities in who is impacted: Rhode Islanders in the urban core and people of color are disproportionately affected by hunger.

Rhode Island has many resources and people who are engaged in combating hunger and food insecurity. Government assistance programs are helping to bridge gaps and elevate individuals out of poverty. These programs, such as SNAP and WIC, are the primary source of meals for Rhode Islanders experiencing poverty. And many people depend on these programs and the efficient, non-discriminatory management of them by the State.

Government programs also provide free and reduced price meal programs for students, which are administered and supported by schools across the state; they include breakfast, lunch, and afterschool meal programs. Many cities and towns have been expanding their summer and vacation meals programs to reach students throughout the year.

Rhode Island also benefits from an impressive array of emergency food-related organizations. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank served over 59,000 people per month in 2016. They are part of a large ecosystem of food pantries, meal sites, shelters, community agencies, and other organizations across the state. Committed faith-based communities in the state are also active in supporting hungry Rhode Islanders through food drives, operating meal sites and pantries, and advocating for the rights of those in need. Further, the University of Rhode Island houses the Feinstein Center for a Hunger-Free America and the SNAP Outreach Program, as well as SNAP-Ed, which educates Rhode Islanders on how to utilize healthful foods (and be physically active) while on a limited budget.



RIDOH has also created innovative programs to address food insecurity. They have partnered both federally and at the community level to develop the innovative Health Equity Zone Initiative (HEZ). Rhode Island's ten HEZs are geographic areas designed to achieve health equity by eliminating health disparities using place-based strategies to promote healthy communities. The HEZ's are a great example of "creative localism," partnering across community groups, which can include schools, health centers, WIC offices, universities, housing authorities, police departments, libraries, and many others to address serious local public health issues – including access to sufficient and healthful foods.

However, even with all of these resources, one in seven Rhode Islanders experience food insecurity. This is unacceptable. The crisis that food insecurity presents to individuals and families is exacerbated by the fact that at its root, food insecurity is driven by poverty. Oftentimes, those struggling with hunger are also making difficult decisions in other areas of their households, such as whether they can pay rent, afford to heat their homes, pay bills, seek preventative medical services, and purchase clothes and school supplies for their children. Each of these decisions leads to increased toxic stress, anxiety, malnutrition, increases in obesity and chronic disease, and reduced life expectancy. Poverty has a greater determination on an individual's life expectancy than almost any other measured factor, and the impacts of poverty can last for generations.

This Food Strategy presents an opportunity to look at food insecurity through a more expansive, systems-focused lens. Addressing food insecurity is a matter of economic development for our state. When people do not need to worry on a day-to-day basis about getting their next meal, their time and mental energy are available to productively contribute to society.

A growing body of research shows significant linkages between malnutrition and performance at school and work. In schools across America, increases in absenteeism and disciplinary problems– and decreases in test scores – correlate with the depletion of SNAP and family budgets at the end of the month. No one can be maximally innovative and productive if he or she is hungry or uncertain of where the next meal will come from.

The Food Strategy partnered with Rhode Islanders and experts across the state to identify some of the other major areas of focus in reducing food insecurity and noted these themes:

EXCLUSION. Certain populations are left out of current programs. For example, immigrants and refugees are not eligible for many federal benefits managed by the State, including SNAP.

STIGMA: Current programs to address food insecurity, like school and summer meal programs, are underutilized because of fear of stigma. No one wants to self-identify their needs to their peers, so services need to be provided in a way that allows access without identification.

PRICE: While in general, Americans spend a far smaller portion of their monthly budgets on food than our counterparts in other countries, those experiencing food insecurity are often juggling food budgets with other necessities, such as rent, heat, and transportation expenses. Affording adequate food – notwithstanding healthiness concerns – is a real challenge.

OPTIONS: Some Rhode Islanders, based solely on what neighborhood(s) they live and work in, lack access to safe, healthful, culturally appropriate food options. Many places in Rhode Island lack full grocery stores and just contain fast food and convenience stores. These stores tend to have a smaller variety of food (and often skewed toward less healthful options), and also tend to be more expensive. In addressing food insecurity, we need to look at what is physically available near where people live and work.

LOCATION AND TRANSPORTATION: Many stores with healthy options exist in the state, but Rhode Islanders cannot physically access them. If adequate stores are not within walking distance or located in certain neighborhoods, how does that intersect with car ownership? Is there a public transit option that is safe, convenient, efficient, and affordable?

TIME: Poverty can make time an incredibly expensive resource. For example, many Rhode Islanders rely on public transit to access grocery stores and pantries, which often require out of the way transfers. You are physically limited by what you can carry on public transportation, which necessitates multiple trips per week (which adds to monetary & time costs of transportation). Further, once ingredients are purchased, cooking healthfully on a budget can be time consuming.

COORDINATION: While there are many resources across the state, coordinating communications and information across agencies and service providers can be challenging for many reasons. Being able to leverage the work of others across the state would improve efficiency of services.

EMPOWERMENT: There are opportunities to empower communities and individuals to develop their own solutions. Many communities with high levels of food insecurity have built community gardens to help individuals grow their own food if they are able. Community gardens also create shared spaces and help build the character of neighborhoods – and many in our immigrant populations come to Rhode Island with farming and gardening knowledge. There is so much demand for community gardens that Southside Community Land Trust-managed gardens have a multi-year waiting list.

Given these themes, partnerships across the state, and the integrated lens through which we are looking, the initiatives on the following page are recommended for priority action.





INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

CREATE A HUNGER TASK FORCE TO LEAD EFFORTS TO REDUCE FOOD INSECURITY TO 10 PERCENT BY 2020

Food insecurity in Rhode Island is trending downward, currently better than pre-recession levels. Reducing it below 10 percent is an aggressive, but achievable goal that will prioritize families and children. A new Hunger Task Force will shine a spotlight on this important goal and bring a diverse mix of leaders across the public, private, and non-profit sectors together to solve this problem. The Task Force will be a forum for sharing resources and best practices, aligning and sharing goals, coordinating efforts, innovating solutions, recommending policy priorities, and strategizing as a state in the face of an uncertain federal climate. The Task Force should launch in Summer or Fall 2017.

METRICS

- Annual food insecurity levels (USDA)
- Creation of Hunger Task Force by Fall 2017
- Percentage of Rhode Islanders with limited access to healthy food (USDA)

MAXIMIZE PARTICIPATION IN FEDERAL MEAL PROGRAMS

Many children rely on federal meal programs as a primary source of daily nutrition. However, many who qualify do not take advantage of the programs. Childhood food insecurity holds kids back from achieving their full potential. To establish a healthier, stronger, more resilient workforce, it is recommended that the Task Force develop a strategy for increasing participation and utilization in existing assistance programs. The Food Strategy recommends exploring all solutions to maximize participation – which include community eligibility policies, experimenting with meal delivery models and locations, among others.

METRICS

- Percent of students eligible for free & reduced lunch that participate in the program (USDA)
- Percent of eligible schools participating in community eligibility programs
- Increase percentage of eligible families participating in WIC
- Participation rates for summer meal programs

REDUCE TRANSPORTATION BARRIERS TO FOOD ACCESS

Transportation is consistently raised as a key barrier to connecting hungry Rhode Islanders to resources. The Director of Food Strategy recently partnered with the HEZs and RIFPC to hire a consultant to create an interactive mapping tool for the entire state using granular data that drills down to the census tract or individual business addresses, depending on the data. The tool allows users to map data such as childhood poverty rates onto other data like car ownership rates, current RIPTA routes and stores that accept SNAP benefits. Resources like this need to be improved upon, shared, and utilized to develop creative and innovative solutions to transportation barriers.

Transportation system needs must be balanced with the needs of Rhode Islanders in need. It is recommended that the Task Force look at innovative solutions to provide transportation routes and options that connect food insecure Rhode Islanders to food resources and employment in a way that is efficient, safe and cost-effective. The Task Force should also actively participate in the State's long-term transportation planning.

METRICS

- Recommendations of Hunger Task Force & HEZ communities submitted as part of statewide long-term transportation planning process



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

REDUCE THE PRICE & INCREASE ACCESS TO HEALTHFUL FOODS ACROSS THE STATE

Food insecurity is intrinsically tied to malnutrition, and malnutrition to poverty. Empty-calorie foods are typically cheaper, and frequently include high quantities of preservatives, like salt and sugar, to increase shelf life. Lack of refrigeration, proper food preparation space and skill, limited time, and the prevalence of high-calorie, low-nutrient fast food options in low-income communities and Communities of Color further compound the impact of food insecurity, and drive health disparities.

There are currently two programs in the state that look to improve access by decreasing the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables for Rhode Islanders on SNAP, by increasing the buying power of these federal benefits at the point of sale. These programs provide additional SNAP dollars, which can only be spent on fresh fruits and vegetables.

Support Growth and Enhance Coordination of Existing Programs: Farm Fresh Rhode Island oversees a program called Bonus Bucks. SNAP participants who use SNAP at participating farmers markets receive an uncapped 40% additional bonus in money to spend on fruits and vegetables at those markets. This helps reduce the cost of fresh, local fruits and vegetables and ensures that local Rhode Island-grown products are available to all segments of our population.

The Rhode Island Public Health Institute created and manages a program called Rhody Food on the Move. They run mobile markets for fresh fruits and vegetables (not necessarily local, but with an additional focus on culturally appropriate selections) on site at public housing authorities, schools, and senior centers. Shoppers using SNAP can double their value, and they are piloting programs that allow any SNAP recipient to utilize the discount, regardless of whether there is cash remaining on their EBT card for the month. These markets help reduce the cost of healthy food, as well as time and transportation costs.

Both of these programs do important work to impact the accessibility and cost of healthful food items for Rhode Islanders – with ancillary benefits like supporting Rhode Island growers and reducing transportation and time barriers to access. Both of these programs should continue to be supported and enhanced, with a focus on coordination.

Although these programs are important and steps in the right direction, most food purchases happen at grocery stores, corner stores, and other retail outlets. Some states, including Massachusetts, have piloted programs that would expand programs like these to retail outlets – allowing consumers’ money to be stretched further. Rhode Island should explore the opportunity. Farm Fresh RI, RIDOH, the Director of Food Strategy, and the Public Health Institute have already begun conversations on what program design could look like for Rhode Island. Funding for these programs has come from a variety of sources, including the federal government, private foundations, state and local policies, and private donors. We should also look collectively at new, innovative, and sustainable financing mechanisms to support the creation and expansion of these programs, as well as partner with interested HEZ communities, community groups, and receptive neighborhood food stores to explore options for increasing healthy offerings at affordable prices where community members shop for food.

METRICS

- Annual incentives funds spent at markets across the state
- SNAP spent at farmers and mobile markets
- Funding leveraged to discount fruits and vegetables for SNAP users at mobile markets
- Federal and private funding leveraged to support expanded retail incentives
- Number of corner stores participating in healthy corner store initiative



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

There are currently nearly 80 community gardens in Rhode Island. Southside Community Land Trust which manages shared and urban garden facilities on the Southside of Providence, estimates that waiting lists for garden locations can be measured in years. Urban gardening provides residents with an opportunity to both grow food for themselves and their neighbors, and also potentially create small farm businesses. These opportunities can be empowering and also help build community, and the Food Strategy recommends exploring innovative and sustainable funding methods to support and grow this important work.

METRICS

- Number and location of community gardens





Food plays an important role in health, yet many Rhode Islanders don't eat healthfully.

Food in health & wellness is an incredibly complex issue with multiple causes and serious social and financial implications. When we eat too much or too little, or when we eat a diet of low nutritional value, our health is affected. Diabetes, heart disease, strokes, some cancers, dental issues, and obesity are all closely linked with what we eat. Improving the quality of Rhode Islanders' diets can help people live longer, healthier lives and be more productive workers and students, while saving our economy millions of dollars in healthcare-related costs. This Food Strategy is an opportunity to look at health through a broad, more inclusive lens of the food system.

Rhode Island fares well in terms of diet-related disease rates. In fact, the rates of some diet-related diseases – such as obesity and diabetes – are below national averages, and Rhode Island has made progress in the last decade on programs to educate Rhode Islanders and empower them to make healthy choices.

A good deal of attention has been paid to schools in the last decade as a place not only to improve the quality of food served on site, but educate students and their families about healthful eating. RIDE had led the nation in improving nutrition requirements for school meals. Rhode Island similarly leads the nation in Farm to School activities – all Rhode Island school districts participate in Farm to School in some manner. These programs could involve the purchase of local food for students, planting of school gardens, Harvest of the Month educational activities, and others. In this way, students across the state are exposed to healthier, local whole food options during the regular course of the school day.

There is also strong leadership from the community in school-based food education programs, with organizations like school wellness committees, Farm Fresh Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition.

Beyond the school setting, Rhode Island has strong organizations and work happening to involve Rhode Islanders in growing food and learning about healthy eating and cooking. The University of Rhode Island houses the Master Gardener program, empowering Rhode Islanders to learn to garden on their own, and URI's SNAP-Ed program helps educate Rhode Islanders on healthful cooking on a tight budget.

Rhode Island is also home to the country's premier culinary institute – Johnson & Wales – which is not only teaching their students, but involving community members. And new and unique partnerships continue to pop up around the state, such as the State's Health Equity Zones partnering with healthcare organizations to pilot new programs to encourage healthful eating, such as Fruit and Veggie prescriptions programs, or the Rhode Island Medical Society's Weight & Wellness Conference bringing together stakeholders across the state.

Government initiatives such as the Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council put a priority on ensuring all Rhode Islanders have access to opportunities for getting outside, healthy eating, and movement in their communities. But we still have room for improvement. While our rates of diet-related disease may be below national averages, they are still at unacceptably high rates – and show inequality across race, geography, and socioeconomic status.



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

CONTINUE TO PROMOTE HIGH LEVELS OF HEALTH AND NUTRITION IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS & DAYCARE FACILITIES.

Rhode Island should continue to lead the nation in health standards for meal programs and also ensure that students are not distracted by marketing for unhealthful products at school. To ensure that our students are enjoying the highest quality food and nutrition, Rhode Island should continue to be a national leader on Farm to School initiatives. This will involve expanded education opportunities for students in programs such as Farm Fresh Rhode Island's successful Harvest of the Month program. It could also involve expanded opportunities for school gardens or promulgation of model food-related wellness policies for each district's wellness committees to consider.

Most of our school districts contract their food service to food service companies, such as Sodexo, Aramark, or Compass Group. Municipalities can and should use their regular contract periods and requests for proposals to ensure that their students are receiving healthful wholesome food from local sources. The City of Providence Public School system has consistently been a leader in this arena, securing a wellness coordinator position as part of their contract and working directly with Pezza Farm in Johnston. They were recently selected to attend a nationwide Farm to School Institute in Summer 2017 and will be bringing back lessons learned and programs to pilot in Rhode Island.

Over the past generation, food education has decreased in schools, with home economics classes being replaced by other subjects. Promoting health and nutrition in schools should include improved hands-on opportunities for students – potentially in partnership with community members such as the faculty at Johnson & Wales.

METRICS

- Continue to lead nationally on health standards for school meal programs
- Number of schools participating in farm-to-school activities

EXPAND PARTNERSHIPS WITH PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCATES

Explore new and expanded partnerships with healthcare institutions. For example, Thundermist has piloted programs such as incorporating short food insecurity questions into their regular exam procedure and programs that provide prescriptions for fresh fruits and vegetables. In neighboring states, food pantries are co-located with clinics focused on diet-related disease. Given Rhode Island's leadership in healthcare, it should expand on innovative opportunities to partner with healthcare providers, doctors, dieticians, nurses, and others.

METRICS

- Development of new partnerships with healthcare providers



INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Healthy eating and healthy lifestyles should also be part of every Rhode Islander's workplace. RIDOH is currently piloting a program to ensure that all State workers have access to healthy options in the convenience stores, cafes, vending machines, and dining facilities located within State buildings. RIDOH has also created a healthy meeting policy, ensuring that Rhode Island State employees have access to healthful options if food is available at State-sponsored meetings. Many companies have adopted similar policies in recent years, to ensure the health and productivity of their employees – and more should join in this movement. Healthy meeting policies are not meant to dictate what Rhode Islanders can eat, but ensure that healthy options are available, abundant, and attractive options. While many workplace wellness policies are focused on office workers, the Strategy encourages these programs for all types of workers.

METRICS

- Number of state agencies adopting RIDOH's health meeting policy





INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA

Minimize Food Waste & Divert It From The Waste Stream



Thirty-five percent of the waste sent to the Central Landfill in Johnston is food or compostable material.

In 2014, the General Assembly passed legislation requiring organizations that produce large quantities of food waste to divert that waste if a commercial compost facility or anaerobic digester is available within a 15-mile radius. In 2017, Rhode Island's House of Representatives passed a resolution creating a study commission to investigate ways to reduce food waste.

Diverting food waste from the landfill presents opportunities – especially as it reaches capacity and the State pursues aggressive climate change and energy goals. Persistent problems with food insecurity and the need for additional organic inputs for soils are also factors. Rhode Island must think and plan holistically for waste reduction and work toward federal goals to reduce food loss and waste by 50 percent by 2030.

There are two major types of food waste:

WASTED FOOD: Food that is still safe and edible, but is thrown away before it becomes inedible. Wasted food could be connected with potential consumers. This could include leftovers from catered events or institutional dining halls, unsold food at grocery and other food retailers, etc.

FOOD WASTE: Food that is no longer safe or edible. This could include the inedible parts of food that are discarded during processing (e.g. fish scales), food that has potentially been exposed to pathogens, and food that has 'gone bad' or has become unsafe.

Rhode Island already has major resources in place to address both wasted food and food waste issues in the state. For example, Harvard Law School has partnered with the State and RIFPC to create legal factsheets detailing the State's rules governing the donation of wasted food to help business owners understand how they can safely and legally donate food. Universities and colleges have also come together to support food waste diversion – several campuses house a Food Recovery Network, and Roger Williams University recently organized a day-long conversation about wasted food with all of the other universities and colleges to encourage collective action. Further, Rhode Island already has food waste diversion legislation on the books, which helped spur development of the waste management industry in neighboring states.

INTEGRATED FOCUS AREA: MINIMIZE FOOD WASTE & DIVERT IT FROM THE WASTE STREAM

LEVERAGE OPPORTUNITIES TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE AT THE SOURCE

There are many options for food producers – restaurants, colleges, institutions, individual residents – to assess and reduce their food waste. Companies offer food waste audits, new and simple technology solutions are being developed, and the EPA offers simple tools through their Food Too Good to Waste program. Source reduction is the first – and often easiest step – to prevent food waste from entering the waste stream, and this Strategy seeks to maximize opportunities for source reduction.

CONNECT HEALTHFUL, POTENTIALLY WASTED FOOD TO RHODE ISLANDERS IN NEED

There are several major components preventing diversion toward people in need. The first is the need for clarity around the important food safety rules that regulate the donation of food. These rules must be appropriately and clearly communicated to facilitate the safe donation of food to those in need. This could take the form of information sheets, classes, seminars, information hotlines, and technical assistance.

Secondly, distribution of prepared foods can present logistical hurdles. Rhode Island should encourage innovation in organizations – and learn from surrounding states who are further along in facilitating these types of programs. The Rhode Island Innovation Lanes program has already been partnering with several such organizations, and the state's universities and colleges are beginning to organize into a collaborative, which should be encouraged and used as a model for other types of organizations producing wasted food. Further, some states have enacted state-level incentives to encourage and reward organizations for diverting healthful foods to those in need, and Rhode Island should investigate these opportunities.

PROVIDE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND NEEDED RESOURCES TO HELP DIVERT ORGANIC WASTE FROM THE LANDFILL

In implementing legislation similar to Rhode Island's food recycling mandate, Massachusetts spurred the growth of a new industry around waste diversion – creating over 900 jobs and generating millions of dollars in economic activity. Rhode Island should follow the successful path laid out by our neighbors by:

- Supporting technical assistance to connect the facilities that currently exist (such as anaerobic digesters and existing composting facilities) to producers of food waste. This could either be support for DEM to hire technical staff or for consultants/contractors with experience in other states to perform this service – as is done in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The technical assistance provider in Massachusetts – the Center for EcoTechnology – provides a suite of waste-related services, including source reduction, food donation resources, and food waste diversion. They have already begun a needs assessment for Rhode Island.
- Encouraging development and growth of innovative food waste infrastructure, for example, digesters or processors that specialize in utilizing fish by-product to co-locate with processing facilities.
- Partnering with leading-edge municipalities on new models for diverting household and small business compost from the waste stream, potentially by piloting curb-side pick-up programs for compost in residential neighborhoods. These programs can be modeled after successful programs that exist across the country.

METRICS

- Tons of food waste and organic material diverted from disposal
- Jobs created in organics waste management businesses
- Additional tons of potentially wasted food donated to shelters and food Banks
- Tonnage of food waste diverted to compost facilities or anaerobic digesters
- Additional jobs created in waste management/hauling/composting



MOVING FORWARD

The process to develop this Food Strategy has been stakeholder-driven. While it has been led by the State, it has included the input of hundreds of Rhode Islanders across the food system. As the focus turns to implementation, opportunities for continued collaboration will be sought.

For example, RIFPC, after reflecting on the growth of their network and food system successes over the last five years, will undertake a strategic planning initiative to further align their resources, goals, and network activity with Strategy implementation.

One area of particular interest for partnership is in improving ways to share resources and collaborate across the state. With such a vibrant and active food scene, it is not surprising that Rhode Island is awash in information about all aspects of food: resources to support food security, farmers' market data, calendars and events, information on food recovery, capital access and funding opportunities and more.

However, with so much going on, a consistent need across the Integrated Focus Areas has been to more effectively leverage and share information across the state. As a small, tightly-knit and collaborative state, we have an opportunity to model effective ways to leverage resources and improve coordination.

This theme of collaboration across focus areas and across sectors will continue to be at the center of the implementation of this Strategy.

To learn more

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