

Panel 3: Regional Implications: Threats, Opportunities, Adaptive Capacity and Managing Vulnerability: How Do We Prepare for an Uncertain Future?

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As the coordinator of a regional food systems network, I work with many organizations, projects and other networks. Thus, my perspective is broad and eclectic. While NESAWG partners with land grant institutions and agriculture agencies, I am neither an academic nor a researcher. So my points of reference for this discussion may vary from others. From my perspective, the four broad indicators for food system sustainability for the Northeast region (12 states from Maine to West Virginia) center on:

1. Organizing food systems at the regional level
2. Building agricultural capacity
3. Strengthening regionally focused supply chains
4. Engaging citizens

1. Organizing food systems at the regional level

As a framework for food system analysis and action, regionalism has distinct advantages.

- a. What is regionalism? A framework that:
 - i. Addresses regional characteristics and needs
 - ii. Fosters regional approaches and solutions
 - iii. Enables responsive policy solutions
- b. Why is a regionalism framework important for food systems?
 - i. “Regions matter”
 - ii. Agriculture is place-based (compare to other sectors)
 - iii. Beyond local and direct (the “local trap”)
 - iv. Enables thinking about nested and linked
 - v. Regional level may be the most efficient
- c. Indicators
 - i. Growth in regional identity (branding, organizations)
 - ii. Political capacity (presence in Congress; state level)
 - iii. Number and character of regional policy and market initiatives
- d. Data sources and knowledge
 - i. Census (Ag and Commerce)
 - ii. Studies of food capacity and sufficiency (by state or region)
 - iii. *Northeast Farms to Food and Updates*; collected from various sources
 - iv. Research (e.g., Pirog’s)
 - v. Organizations (e.g., NSAAS, NEMWI, AFT, NEASDA, NESAWG)
- e. What we don’t know (or know enough)
 - i. Not enough attention to regions as units of organizing for food system capacity building
 - ii. Examination of nested regions and inter-regional cooperation
 - iii. Tracking and measurement of region-level initiatives

2. Agricultural capacity

Agricultural capacity has to do with the structure of agriculture and the natural, physical and service resource base. In the Northeast, we are very concerned about farm entry and exit, land access and affordability, farm viability, and support services. Many Northeast states have experienced a dramatic decline in support infrastructure and services.

- a. Land and natural resources
 - i. Land availability, suitability, cost and competition
 - ii. Regionally appropriate energy generation and use
 - iii. Conservation (appropriate practices, attitudes, programs)
- b. Structure, entry and exit
 - i. Size and distribution of farms in the region
 - ii. Ownership/tenancy
 - iii. Succession
 - iv. Challenges to entry
- c. Infrastructure
 - i. Physical (e.g., slaughterhouses, processing plants, distribution and storage)
 - ii. Service (financing, Extension, agencies, inputs/vets etc., research/appropriate technology; other professional services)
- d. Indicators
 - i. Trends in size, type and number of farms (USDA typology)
 - ii. Land in production; land lost; farmland values
 - iii. Numbers of entrants; age distribution of farmers
 - iv. Tenure patterns and trends; landlords
 - v. Numbers and trends in service providers (lenders, Extension, etc.)
- e. Sources of data and knowledge
 - i. Ag Census/NASS
 - ii. AELOS
 - iii. Other USDA: ERS, NRCS, FSA
 - iv. State records
 - v. Land grant research (e.g., ISU on exiting farmers; land tenure)
 - vi. Private sector research and reports (e.g., Glynwood Center on slaughterhouses)
- f. What we don't know (or know enough)
 - i. Entry and land tenure patterns (e.g., land rental rates)
 - ii. Non-farming/absentee landowners
 - iii. Processing and distribution infrastructure

3. Regional food value chains (RVC)

A resilient regional food system depends on supply chains that aggregate, process and distribute significant volumes of regionally produced product to retail and institutional markets. While the Northeast leads in farm-direct sales, most of our farms do not direct-market, and most do not compete in global commodity markets.

- a. Premise:
 - i. Scale up from local and direct → regionally focused supply chains

1. <4% N.E. sales are food direct to consumer
2. Aggregation and distribution are key
3. Dollars circulated; economic development
- ii. Differentiated product: regional identity?
- iii. Different business model → sustainability (“smart and right”)
- b. Indicators
 - i. Increase in interest and numbers of RVCs
 - ii. Growth in individual initiatives; satisfaction
 - iii. Success and sustainability; individual farm and chain levels
 - iv. Better food?
 - v. More efficient?
- c. Sources of data and knowledge
 - i. RLT inventory
 - ii. Organizations and projects (AOTM, NGFN, Leopold Center, etc.)
 - iii. Public policy
- d. What we don’t know (or know enough)
 - i. Well-enough formed concepts and terms
 - ii. Measures of success (indicators and over time)

4. Citizenry

With over one-fifth of the nation’s population, at four times the average national density, one-third non-White, and higher food costs, the Northeast has both challenges and opportunities in reaching, serving and engaging its population in food system issues..

- a. Demographics
 - i. Density and distribution (urban, peri-urban, rural)
 - ii. Ethnicity and race
 - iii. Class and income: focus on the “missing class” (up to 200% of poverty)
 - iv. Health and nutrition
- b. Food access
 - i. Physical
 - ii. Informational
 - iii. Economic
- c. Engagement
 - i. Cultural awareness
 - ii. Beyond the direct-market experience
- d. Indicators
 - i. Patterns and trends in food purchasing
 - ii. Health trends (obesity, etc.)
 - iii. Citizen participation: civil society and social action
- e. Sources of data and knowledge
 - i. Organizations, projects, reports
 - ii. Research studies
 - iii. Census data

- iv. Advocacy organizing data (e.g., participation in advocacy activities)
- f. What we don't know (or know enough)
 - i. Food issues for the "missing class"
 - ii. Rural food deserts
 - iii. Participation in civic food change-related activities