

NESAWG

NORTHEAST SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE WORKING GROUP

THE REGION'S FOOD AND FARM NETWORK

Our region includes CT, DE, MA,
ME, MD, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT,
WV, and Washington D.C.



WHO ARE WE?

NESAWG is a 12 state network of farm and food systems stakeholders seeking to harness regional power to catalyze meaningful change towards a sustainable and just food system.

Our goals are to:

- **Cultivate a robust network** that spans across sectors and the region
- **Embody and shepherd equity**
- **Advance regional interests, sustainability, and equity in food policy**

HOW TO GET INVOLVED?

- Join our **mailing list**
- Join the **NESAWG Community Listserv**
- **Donate** to support our work
- Follow us on Facebook and Twitter **@NESAWG**

Visit nesawg.org to learn more!

SAVE THE DATE! 2022 IT TAKES A REGION NESAWG CONFERENCE: November 3-5, Providence, RI



A REGIONAL IMPERATIVE:

THE CASE FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

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About the authors

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Appreciations

- **Editors**—Duncan Hilchey, editor in chief, & Amy Christian, managing editor, *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems & Community Development*; contributing editor, Stephen Christian
- **Subject experts and reviewers**—Dave Fleisher, Kathy Lawrence, Teresa Mares, Michelle Miller, Christian Peters, & Debra Tropp
- **Funders**—Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, John Merck Fund, Lawson Valentine Foundation, & Merck Family Fund
- **Colleagues** across the country
- **NESAWG**
- **Community Food Funders**



Why this Update?

- ‘Regional’ thinking has expanded across the world, & across sectors & disciplines.
- Still understudied & not sufficiently understood.
- Time for an update: 25 pages in 2010 to over 200 pages in 2022!

More focus on:

- Race, equity, & social justice
- Climate change & adaptation
- Land use, availability, protection, & access
- Economic development
- Supply chain infrastructure

The arguments in favor of regional approaches & explorations apply to all regions. Embracing them could not be more imperative to address contemporary conditions.



Goals of the Report

- Offer findings from recent projects & writings; many examples & references.
- Provide more history on regional food system-related topics.
- Apply a decade of observations & analyses.
- Emphasize the importance of scale & systems thinking.
- Set a stage for region-scale planning & collaborations.
- Expand the relevance of the concepts to practitioners, academics, advocacy networks, & policymakers.
- Offer suggestions for action.



Approach

- Overarching themes: resilience, diversity, sustainability, & systems thinking.
- *More than thirty topics.*
- Focus on the Northeast, but applicable to all regions.
- *Local scale validated, but strong advocacy for more regional thinking & action.*
- Stressing language & definitions matter.

What's in it?

- Information
 - Data
 - History
 - Many examples, Northeast & beyond
- Observations
- Core concepts
- Analyses
- What is needed



Report Contents

Executive Summary

I. Introduction

II. Language & concept conundrums

III. Regionalism & regional thinking

IV. The Northeast region

V. RFS attributes

VI. RFS dimensions

VII. Constraints & challenges

VIII. Conclusion: core concepts & what is needed

Dimensions

1. Food needs & supply
2. Natural resources
3. Economic development
4. Infrastructure
5. Social & economic justice
6. Human & political capacity



Premise and Caveats

The premise of this report is that regionalism is not only an appropriate framework for food systems work, but is also necessary for the food systems changes we seek.

The report focuses on how structural food system issues manifest at the regional scale & how regionalism can contribute to positive food system change.

- Many food system issues transcend regionalism.
- Regional food systems are not “the answer” & not an alternative to local or national.
- A regionally focused food system is not inherently more socially just or ecologically principled.
- Much more in the report; what we did not address or answer.



Language and Concepts

- Conflation of ‘local’ & ‘regional’
 - Ubiquitous.
 - They are not the same & not interchangeable.
 - If not distinguished, cannot describe either on respective merits.
- ‘Local’ meaning & uses
 - No formal or legal definitions.
 - Multiple definitions using spatial boundary reference (city, county, state) and/or mileage distance.
 - No agreement among retailers, consumers, government agencies, etc.



Language and Concept Issues

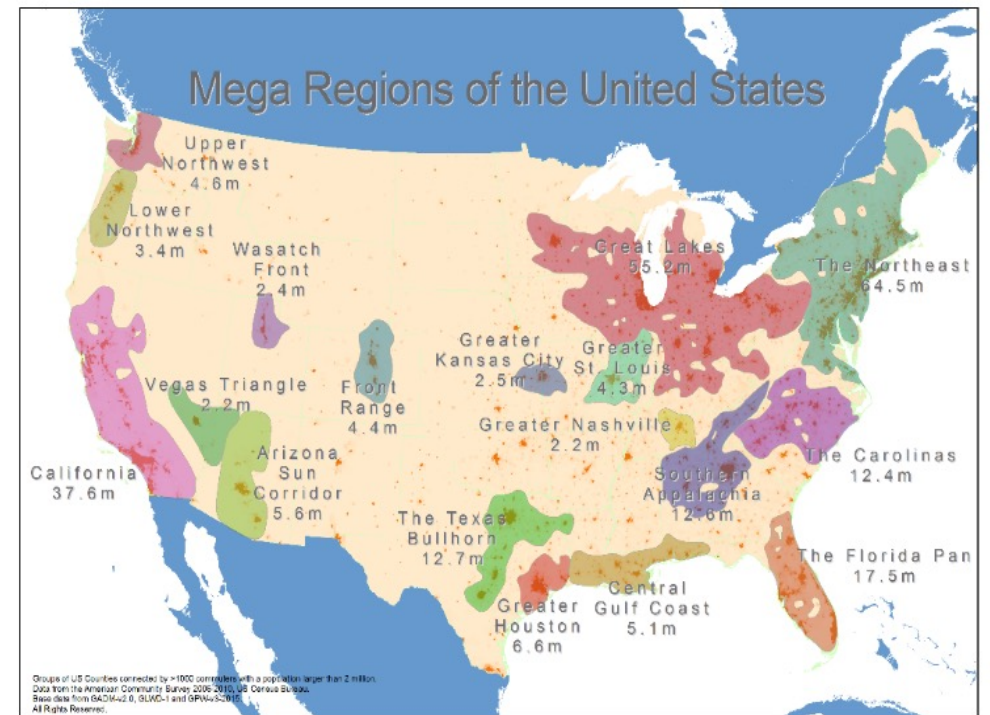
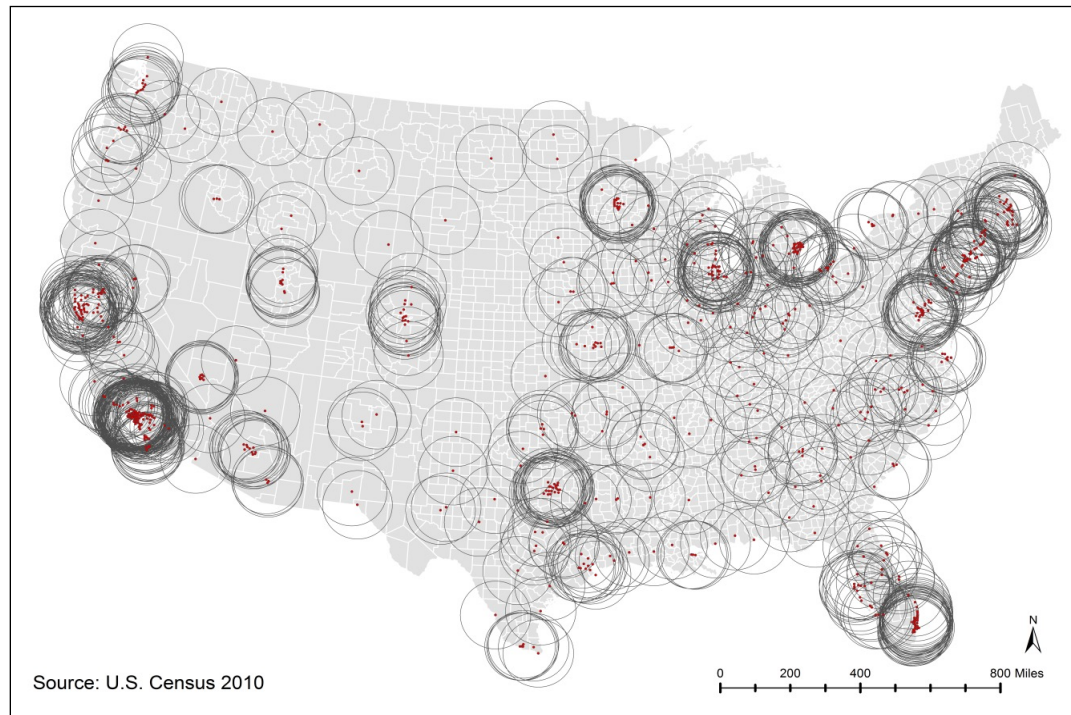
- Claims about ‘local’ tend to miss the scope of the food needs of a population & fail to appreciate multiple regional underpinnings.
- Shortcomings of other terms:
 - *Community food systems*: predominantly ‘local.’
 - *Foodshed*: does not distinguish between ‘local’ & ‘regional.’
 - *Place-based*: not defined or distinguished as to scale.



Meanings of ‘Regional’

- Simply: larger than local.
- Multi-county, multistate, city regions, mega-regions.
- Food “produced in my state, or within 300 miles” (consumer research, 2010).
- Composed *in part* of multiple local food systems but more than the sum of those parts.

100-mile Radius “Foodsheds” & Mega-regions





Describing a Region

- Political or administrative borders
- Natural resource features (*bioregion, watershed*)
- Socio-cultural (*demographics, cultural identity*)
- Land use (*agricultural/ other*)
- Economic (*supply chains, markets*)

- Regions “nest” w/in larger regions. Boundaries may be fluid.
- Borders vary depending on the objective.



Regionalism and “Thinking Regionally”

What is regionalism? A framework that:

- Responds to regional differences & needs.
 - Encourages regional approaches & solutions.
 - Compels consideration of scale.
-
- Regions can be located & described; they are special references.
 - ‘Thinking regionally’ is an approach to food systems change.
 - Both *place* & *approach* are essential.

Regionalism can—and should—be applied to a range of public & private sector food system challenges.



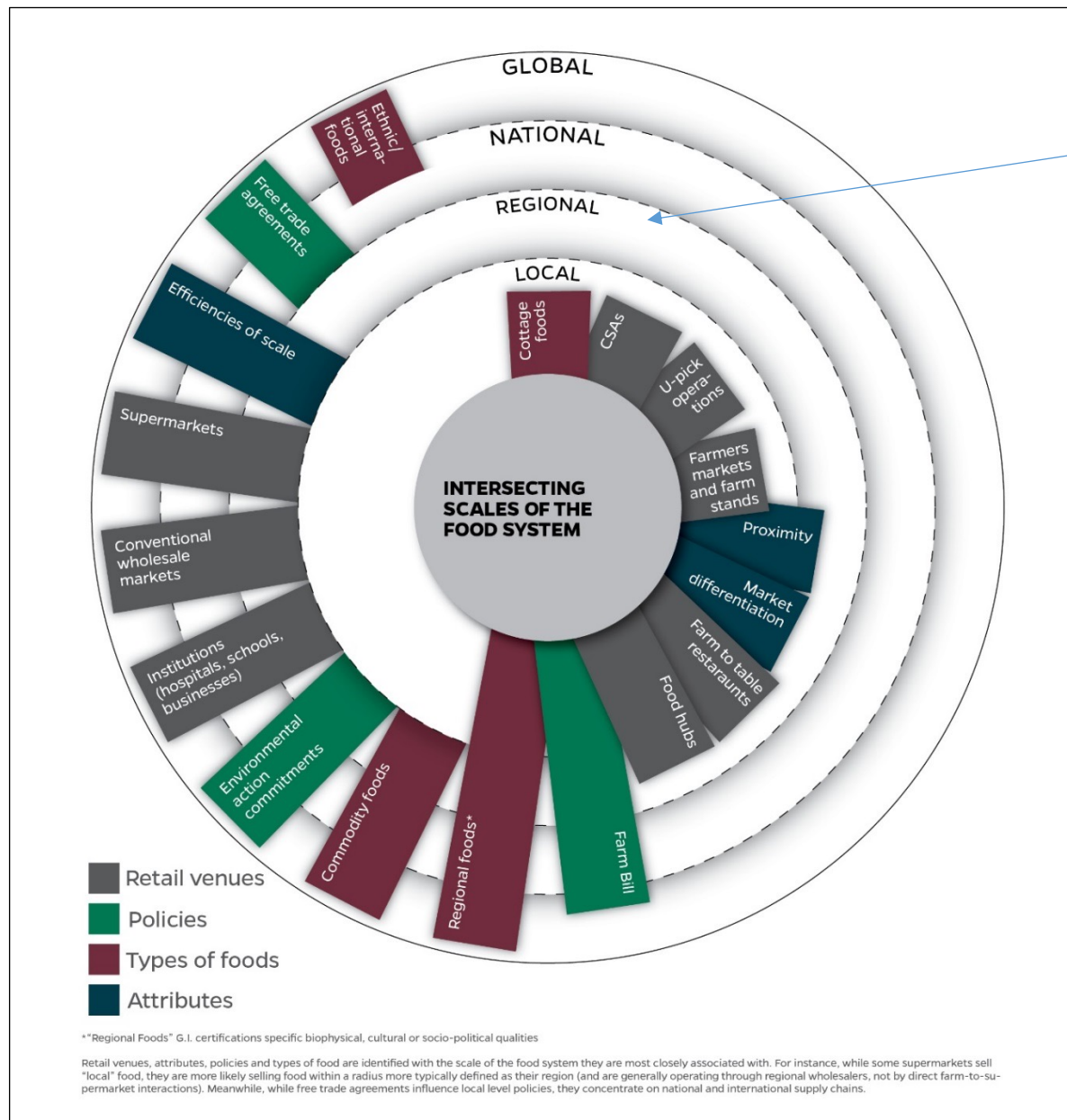
Regionalism and “Thinking Regionally”

Address complicated, border-transcending food system problems

- Planning, incl. land use & water mgt.
- Climate change & weather events
- Energy generation & use
- Transportation
- Structure of agriculture
- Trade
- Food supply: quantity, variety, & access
- Supply chains
- Infrastructure
- Social & economic inequities

Challenges

- Defining a region
- Parochialism
- Ingrained preference for local (food, governance, identity)
- Organizing regionally, including structures & networks
- Detailed in Chapter VII



Regional scale between local and national

Source: Figure created by Michael Milli and Raychel Santo, from Palmer et al., 2017.



Regions and the “Rural-urban Divide”

- Regions may be based on urbanized & adjacent areas.
- Concept of ‘city region.’
- Regionalism encourages both confronting & taking advantage of the inextricable relationships between urban & rural.
 - Urban-rural continuum with different perspectives & needs along it.
 - Much food system activity in “peri-urban” zones.
 - Regionally focused policies can support both rural & urban development goals.



Systems Thinking

- Provides a valuable framework to describe complex systems with multiple factors internal & external to a systems' boundaries.
- Tools such as systems dynamics models, concept mapping, causal loop diagrams help identify points of change.
- Helps achieve a comprehensive understanding of what takes place in reality.
- Helps identify areas where synergies are possible.
- Exposes contradictions & difficult trade-offs.



Resilience

“The ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events.” (NRC, 2012)

Characteristics of resilience in food systems

- *Awareness*, e.g., ag census, weather tracking, research
- *Diversity*, e.g., storage & space capacity, financial & natural capital, redundant components
- *Integration*, e.g., coordination among gov’t. bodies, integration of regional economies
- *Self-regulation*, e.g., capacity for governance, access to financing, supply chain traceability
- *Adaptability*, e.g., agricultural systems diversification
- *Inclusivity*, e.g., consultative planning, equitable land access



Resilience

- Some of the qualities of resilience are redundancy, openness, connections between & integration of social & ecological systems.
- Challenge is to assess a region's capacity to develop food systems with these characteristics & qualities.
- Attainment requires keeping in mind scales above & below the focal scale.
- Regions spread risk across larger-than-local geographic areas.



Diversity

Some ways food systems should be diverse

Types

- Biological
- Social
- Economic
- Agricultural
- Cultural
- Industrial
- Institutional

- Scales
- Products
- Production strategies
- Food producers
- Markets & business models
- Food access
- Soils
- Climates



Diversity

- Biodiversity significantly contributes to resilience; critical to climate change mitigation & adaptation.
- A regional production base offers more types of farms, soils, climates & crops than smaller areas.
- Greater diversity provides options, flexibility, back-ups.
- It can better serve regional markets & members of supply chains.



Diversity

- Much is known about building biodiversity in agriculture; less in manufacturing & wholesaling.
- Apparent diversity in food choices hides lack of diversity in raw ingredients.
- Diversity in population, economics & governance contributes to resilience but raises tensions.
- Institutional diversity at the regional scale; separate bodies with overlapping jurisdictions will provide resilience when solving complex problems.



Sustainability

- A complex, dynamic concept & process with hundreds of definitions, goals & applications.
- Must always be clearly defined in any type of project.
- More research needed on sustainability at a regional scale; data are sparse.
- Food systems have many characteristics of ecosystems, but their sustainability has not been studied by interdisciplinary teams.



Resilience, Diversity, Sustainability and Regional Food Systems

- Resilience, diversity & sustainability are important for regional food systems *AND* vice versa.
- Resilient systems require multiple assets, redundancy, & flexibility. All exist importantly at a regional scale.
- Diversity is a core element of resilience; there is more diversity at a regional scale.
- To adapt to & mitigate climate changes, & maintain soil & farmland, producers need to use sustainable practices across whole regions.



Why Regional Food Systems?

- Regionalism is a powerful and necessary construct for developing sustainable & resilient food systems.
- Regional food systems are not “alternatives” to local or global; ‘regional’ is an essential layer.
- Important political & biophysical dimensions play out at regional (often multi-state) levels.
- Regional population demographics directly affect food supply & demand.
- A regional approach to structuring food systems offers environmental, economic, & cultural resource advantages.



The Northeast Region

Why focus on the Northeast?

- It contains all the complex elements of food systems & regionalism; an ideal laboratory.
- A relatively small & threatened land base, & large population brings urgency. Less land to feed more people than other regions.
- History of “thinking regionally.”

Regional thinking can be applied anywhere, & lessons shared.

History of Thinking Regionally

- 1991: N.E. Network for Food, Agriculture & Health
- 1992-present: NESAWG & its “It Takes a Region” conference
- 1995: N.E. Leadership Congress
- 1998: NESAWG White Papers
- 2007: Northeast Ag Works! Project → regional agenda for the farm bill
- 2010: NESAWG RFS working paper
- 2011-2017: EFSNE Project



Northeast Region Characteristics

- **Composition:** 12 states from Maine to West Virginia & D.C. (& regions within)
- **Population:** 21% of the U.S.
 - Rich cultural, ethnic & racial diversity (13% Black, 14% Hispanic; many other)
 - Stark poverty rates among Black, Hispanic & some rural white communities.
 - Food insecurity ranges from 6.6% to 15.4% among Northeast states.
- **Land:** 37% suitable for cultivation (compare 64% in North Central region); farm size (in acres) = 1/3 U.S. average. Most of the arable land in 3 states.
- **Production:** 4.7% of total U.S. ag market value.
 - 100 different crops; food crops = 8% of land in production.
 - 67% of value of ag products are in metropolitan counties.
- **Fisheries** significant contribution; 200 species of fish and shellfish.



History of the Northeast Food System

- Early history: Indigenous Peoples, settler colonization, land dispossession, & slavery.
- Farmers movement away from the Northeast's limited land base to the "frontier."
- Shift from subsistence to specialization & export crops.
- Conversion of farmland to forest or development, especially urban.
- The Great Migration: two waves of Blacks to Northern urban centers.
- Reliance on migrant & permanent farmworkers from Latin America.
- Increasing reliance on food imported from outside the region.



12 Regional Food System Attributes

1. Produce volume & variety of foods.
2. Do not claim or seek self-sufficiency.
3. Are “beyond local.”
4. Emphasize differentiated products.
5. Have attributes of conventional and alternative systems.
6. Connect with both local and national/global levels.
7. Reject one-size-fits-all policies.
8. Are not just about geography.
9. Provide more good food options & access.
10. Encourage decentralization where appropriate.
11. Build regional solutions around equity, justice & stewardship.
12. Develop new institutions and forms of governance.



Ideal Regional Food System

An ideal regional food system is one in which as much food as possible to meet the population's food needs is produced, processed, distributed, and purchased at multiple levels and scales within the region, resulting in maximum resilience, minimum importation, and significant economic and social return to everyone in the region.



Food Needs and Supply

- For planning & programmatic purposes, need to examine food needs & supply simultaneously in a region.
- Results in measures of regional self-reliance & production capacity.
- Studies (1980s to 2017) showed 14-28% of food needs in the Northeast can be met depending on the type of diet.
- Other regions can meet larger proportions of food needs.
- Many urban boundaries overlap, so it is smarter to focus on regions.



Food Needs and Supply

- Most studies don't include food supplied by urban agriculture.
- Overall, studies suggest a modest but important role for urban ag.
 - Many benefits, but not many economic or health effects.
 - Vertical farms have significant drawbacks.



Natural Resources: Climate

- Climate change is not experienced in the same way across the U.S.
 - Since the 1990s, the Northeast has experienced a 70% increase in the frequency of extreme precipitation events—more than any other U.S. region.
- *Variable impacts from heat, drought, flood, & extreme weather events.*
- Research on climate adaptation
 - Must be based on bioregions.
 - Inadequate & insufficiently funded to date.
- *Climate variability may also affect human migration patterns & structure of agriculture.*



Natural Resources: Land & Water

- Land base & characteristics for production.
- Farmland retention, protection & access.
 - What is needed? What is “enough” land? What priorities for protection?
 - Regional perspective on land dispossession & discrimination. Land for whom?
 - Trade-offs with solar & wind energy production.
- Water resources & management, especially under climate change.
- These require regional analyses & strategies.

Regional Examples

- Chesapeake Bay Watershed Action Plan
- Farm Transfer Network of New England
- Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance
- Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust
- New England Farm Link Collaborative



Economic Development

Topics

- Economic development in regions
- Economic impact analyses
- Food systems planning
- Regional supply chains

- Much economic development occurs at a regional scale.
- **Analyses must separate 'local' from 'regional' to be useful.**
- A regional, integrated planning framework can link multiple issues, e.g., water, climate, food & land access.
- **Regions are critical for mapping land use.**
- Regional supply chains balance diversity & efficiency with midsized farms.
- **Regional chains not appropriate or useful for all businesses.**



Economic Development

Topics

- Trade & commerce
- Workforce & labor

- Trade at all scales is essential with import substitution & exports.
- Can be more emphasis on interregional trade to enhance economies.
- Policies need to balance ‘local’ & ‘regional’ preference.
- Relatively few food systems efforts address foodservice workers & farm workers.
- Many barriers to labor procurement.



Economic Development

Topics

- Business models
- Access to capital

- Nontraditional models (clusters, VBSCs, etc.) assist supply chains to increase product lines & viability.
- These models are well suited to regional scale.
- Challenges include management, expectations.
- Paucity of funds for regional food systems.
 - Conventional & alternative funding sources.
 - Poor understanding of their importance.
- Economic development agencies must cross boundaries to cooperate.



Infrastructure

Topics

- Processing & manufacturing
- Wholesale & distribution

- Insufficient supply chain infrastructure biggest barrier to building regional food systems.
- Need more public & private investment in infrastructure.
- Processing sector may be promising in terms of economic returns.
- Need to review siting of processing plants.
- Wholesalers & retailers best to advance regional food availability.
- Models such as regional food hubs & cluster networks hold promise.



Infrastructure

Topics

- Transportation
- Purchasing

- Improvements (e.g., roads, rail lines, broadband) critical.
- With optimized logistics & fuel efficiency, regional distribution may be able to compete.
- Need purchasing power of public & private agencies & institutions to expand regional sourcing.
- More public education & branding about benefits of regional purchasing.
- Efforts to align branding activities.



Social and Economic Justice

The fair & equitable distribution of political, economic & social rights & opportunities.

- A core concern across dimensions.
- At all levels, current food systems are a manifestation of racism.
- Regionalism enables examination of structural barriers & also place-based solutions & common cause.
- Region-specific context
 - Historic, e.g., Northeast's legacy of land dispossession
 - Demographics & cultures
 - Rural & urban tensions w/in a region

Regional examples

- NESAWG
- Future Harvest-CASA
- NEFOC/LT
- Native Land Conservancy
- Grow NYC
- FR SAN-Northeast



Social and Economic Justice

- Regional food needs, access & security
 - Volume & variety greater than local.
 - Culturally appropriate to suit diverse preferences.
 - Regional strategies for food access.
- Fairness & opportunity
 - For all food system players: producers to farm & food chain workers.
 - Inter-regional fair trade is a venue for food system justice.
 - COVID-19 pandemic & Black Lives Matter.
- Training & development: regional lens on social justice issues
 - Organization staff & new leaders.
 - Educational curricula.
 - Diversity in training & education programs, ag & food organizations, agencies.



Social and Economic Justice

- Challenges
 - Regionalism may be less germane to a systemic social justice agenda.
 - Local, national & interest-based groups are more resonant.
 - Organizing & networking around shared social justice values, priorities, & agendas can be difficult.
- Yet regional lens is essential for analysis & action.
- Tie food & land justice to other social issues at the regional scale, e.g., housing, public health, labor, redlining, education, & wealth disparities.



Human and Political Capacity: Governance

The structures, systems & processes that determine authority, decision-making and accountability.

- Existing & new; public, private & civic sectors.
- Historic governance structures cannot address the scale & complexity of current challenges.
- Good governance principles function differently depending on size, location & complexity.
- “Scale and governance should be integrated.”



Human and Political Capacity: Governance

- Key role of nongovernmental organizations.
 - Can operate purposefully & flexibly at regional levels.
 - Food policy councils & advocacy networks, for example, can encourage regional thinking & action, & model good governance.
- Regional governance can overcome rural-urban divides.
- Challenges
 - Few models & examples.
 - Entrenched allegiances & silos.
 - Absence of systems thinking.



Human and Political Capacity: Policy

A regionalist approach to federal policy development requires:

- Flexible application across regions.
- Address each region's strengths & needs.
- Not advantage one region over another.
- Foster regional approaches, solutions & alliances.

Examples

- Northeast Ag Works! Policy Project
- NEASDA
- Land Access Policy Project (New England)
- CSG/Eastern Regional Conference
- NESAWG



Human and Political Capacity: Policy

Challenges

- One size does not fit all regions.
- Federal government slow to embrace regionalism & support regional initiatives.
- Parochialism undermines e.g., regulatory harmonizing & reciprocity among states.
- Inter-regional competition & conflict thwart solidarity.
- Regional organizing for advocacy.



Human and Political Capacity: Food Supply Chain Capacity

Skills & power to build equitable region-scale initiatives.

- Support services: service providers & centers; educators & researchers; suppliers; advocacy orgs/networks; funders.
- Food chain players: producers, industry/trade groups; buyers.
- Few models at regional level.

Examples

- Northeast Beginning Farmer Learning Network
- Red Tomato
- Farm to Institution New England
- Chesapeake Foodshed Network
- Northern Forest Center
- Northeastern Agriculture & Resource Economics Association
- Harvest New England
- Community Food Funders



Thinking and acting regionally

- Appreciation of regionalism & the importance of scale.
- Systems & strategic (not parochial) thinking.
- Appropriate governance.
- Cross-sector coalitions; forge common cause.
- Balancing tensions around efficiency, equity, and competing interests.
- Recognition of a continuum of regional endeavors.

Examples

- NESAWG
- NEASDA
- EFSNE Project
- USDA-NESARE
- NERCRD
- Northeast Farmers of Color
- Food Solutions New England
- Future Harvest (Mid-Atlantic)
- Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Association
- Northeast Organic Farming Association



Thinking and acting regionally

Everyone has a role to play in advancing regional food systems.

What you can do:

- Understand & advocate for ‘regional.’ Train & educate on RFS.
- Build region-scale projects & collaborations.
- Collaborate across regions.
- Employ a systems perspective: horizontal & vertical relationships.
- Support collaborations, structures, activities & mechanisms that enhance regional functioning & governance.
- Read & share the report!



Thank you!

Find the report & executive summary on NESAWG's website:

https://nesawg.org/sites/default/files/a_regional_imperative_full_report_final.pdf

https://nesawg.org/sites/default/files/a_regional_imperative_executive_summary_final.pdf

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