Recommendations for supporting a robust food system and agricultural economy during and after COVID-19
Submitted by
CEI Policy and Food Systems

The Maine Food System Investment Program (MFSIP) is a cross-cutting initiative that would immediately stabilize, sustain, and ultimately, support and grow, value-added food system businesses in Maine. This initiative aligns with the state’s 10-year Economic Development Strategy to foster talent and innovation by focusing on technical services, value-added production and sustainable supply chain development in Maine’s food industry. Its implementation is all the more timely with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis: the pandemic has illuminated the fragility and lack of resilience in today’s mainstream food system, as well as climate change and its tangible repercussions. This food systems plan can readily expand to other resource-based industries and serve as cornerstone of a unified vision to sustain Maine’s working landscapes.

This investment toolkit consists of three concrete actions that address the ongoing and documented need for targeted business assistance and access to capital to help Maine’s value-added and food processing businesses achieve scale – and now, in light of the pandemic, sustain and adapt their operations.

**Action 1.** Establish a technical assistance program targeted to food processors and value-added businesses to develop and/or implement viable business resiliency plans

**Action 2.** Establish a food enterprise investment fund to support processors and value-added businesses that source from Maine farms and agricultural suppliers.

**Action 3.** Engage industry and statewide stakeholder network to identify infrastructure needs, gaps, market challenges and opportunities, and benchmark progress with associated metrics.

The MFSIP will prioritize infrastructure investment, job creation, and a robust and traceable supply chain. It will expand market opportunities (including in the traded and institutional sectors) for Maine producers, to strengthen local and regional food systems. It is a statewide strategy, with priority given to businesses positioned to create and retain jobs in distressed communities. It is modeled on Maine’s iconic and successful “Farms for the Future” farm business technical assistance and funding program and inspired by Vermont’s Working Lands Enterprise and Massachusetts’s Food Innovation Fund – both launched with ARRA1 stimulus funds and supported with state bond funding and budget allocations. Like the model developed by our colleagues in Vermont, its purpose is to support, strengthen and scale existing efforts that provide business and workforce consulting and access to capital to food system businesses.

This initiative can be launched immediately. It has been discussed with the DACF, DECD and agricultural service providers and stakeholders as a long-term strategy to sustain and diversify Maine’s food system. It is the central thesis of 2019 LD 1531 (amended), An Act to Establish the Maine Food System Investment Program To Create Quality Jobs and Support Farms, Fisheries and Food-related Businesses, and has been vetted by, and received unanimous approval from, the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. We strongly recommend the MFSIP as a strategy to sustain and support these businesses as part of Maine’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic – and to enhance and advance Maine’s food system into the future.

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1 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009