

FOOD POLICY

Increasing public interest in how food is produced, food safety issues, local sourcing of food, and understanding the food system have led to the formation of “Food Policy Councils” or similar organizations in several states.

In Oregon, local councils have formed in Portland, Eugene, Clatsop County, Tillamook, Salem, and other communities.

The stated purpose of a food policy council is to improve food systems, broadly defined to include food producers, processors, distributors, retailers, restaurateurs, hunger relief agencies, public health agencies, extension services, academic agriculture programs, departments of agriculture, food and farming organizations, institutional food purchasers, and household consumers.

The premise is that food policy councils can act as a forum to bring together a broad array of food-related public and private stakeholders to evaluate every stage of the food process from seed to table. Members of food policy councils represent the diversity of players involved in the food system, from farmers and processors to retailers, anti-hunger advocates, institutional food buyers, city planners, consumers and others.

These councils are often established by local or state governments—

though some have formed through grassroots efforts. Agricultural organizations were somewhat wary of food policy councils in their formative stages, but more growers are now serving on the boards and actively involved in their efforts.

Governor Kulongoski has proposed a state-level Food Policy Council to assist local councils in their efforts. The mission of this effort would be to support and enhance an economically viable, socially beneficial, and environmentally sustainable food system in Oregon with the following goals.

- Create urban and rural partnerships.
- Improve access to fresh, nutritious foods.
- Eliminate hunger in Oregon.
- Increase purchases of local foods in the regions.
- Enhance agricultural viability.
- Expand food-related businesses and jobs.

Advocates of food policy councils argue that locally-sourced food has many benefits and should be supported. Food in the United States now travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles, on average, from farm to table—as much as 25 percent farther than 20 years ago (Worldwatch Institute). Much of the purchase of food from afar is driven by cost. Many inputs are cheaper outside the US at this time, contributing to the trade

What determines the availability of local foods?

The supply of food is largely dependent on the price farmers receive for what they grow... if they are making a profit, they will continue to produce; if not, they may shift to other commodities or, in the long run, quit producing all together.

Other factors include physical resource availability and constraints—the quantity and quality of available land and water for agricultural use, and the availability and cost of inputs for production, such as seed, fertilizers, fuel, labor, etc.

The cost and availability of new technology, and adoption of such, (reliant on research and extension outreach) also affects what can be produced profitably in any location.

Access to local markets is also key. The interest and willingness of local restaurants, retail outlets, schools and other institutional entities to support local agriculture is important, as are the development of farmers' markets, roadside stands, and other non-traditional distribution methods.



deficit. Price is key to sales. Yet, when food is transported, there is a price to be paid in highway maintenance, use of nonrenewable and expensive resources, and the quality of land, air, and water.

It is important to keep in mind that not all food items needed in a locality can be produced locally due to climate, soil, land and water resources. Further, traded sectors bring in new dollars to the state, and Oregon agriculture ships over 80 percent of production out of the state to areas that buy the unique products produced here. Maintaining or increasing traded sector functions of the industry is as equally valid as increasing local demand for products.

Another argument in support of a viable and vibrant local agriculture, rather than a heavy reliance on “imported” products, is the potential threat to the food supply from natural or human-made disasters. This may even include being at the mercy of an energy crisis when long-distance transport fails. Part of the role of a food policy council is to work with appropriate agencies and organizations to ensure that communities have reasonable emergency plans for food distribution during natural disasters or other crises.

Supporters of food policy councils are also interested in addressing nutrition, health, and hunger (access to food) issues. Governor Kulongoski’s stated objectives for a state-level food policy council include activities that support specific concepts.

1. Access to adequate, nutritious food for all Oregonians is a fundamental goal of state and local government, the food industry, and consumers.
2. Food security contributes to the health and wellbeing of residents while reducing the need for medical care and social services.
3. Food and agriculture are central to the economic health of Oregon.
4. Strong regional systems of food production, distribution, access, and reuse that protect our natural resources contribute significantly to the environmental and economic well-being of Oregon.
5. A healthy regional food system further supports the sustainability goals of Oregon, creating economic, social, and environmental benefits for current and future generations.
6. Food brings people together in celebrations of community and diversity, and is an important part of Oregon’s culture.