

The Farm to Plate Investment Program: A 10-Year Roadmap to Revitalizing Vermont’s Food System

Program Summary and Highlights

The Vermont Legislature commissioned the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund to develop a strategic plan to revitalize its food and farm sectors and increase purchasing of local foods. Implementation is under way with more than 350 organizations working together as the Farm to Plate Network, including the Farm to Institution Task Force focused on increasing institutional local food procurement.

- In the program’s first five years, the local Vermont food system gained [4,189 new jobs](#), an increase of 7.2 percent since the initiative began.
- Between 2007 and 2012, the economic output of Vermont’s food system grew 24 percent, to [\\$8.6 billion](#).

Background

In late 2008, amid the Great Recession, Vermont’s agricultural economy faced uncertainty. Conventional milk prices, which represent 65 percent of farm agricultural sales in the state, were sinking to record lows, well below the cost of production. Farmland was under increasing development pressures as the number of small and mid-sized dairies continued to decline—Vermont lost 20.5 percent of its farmland between 1982 and 2012, while New England as a whole lost only 9.1 percent. At the same time, there was growing excitement in the local food movement, with an increasing number of farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, and young people interested in starting diversified farms.

In response, the state legislature, along with Rural Vermont, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, and a growing number of private foundations, sought to better understand and strengthen the local food system in order to stimulate



economic activity, assist producers, and keep land in production. They created the [Farm to Plate \(F2P\) Investment Program](#) and tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (Jobs Fund) with developing a program designed to strategically strengthen the state’s food and farm sector and encourage the purchasing of local foods. The state legislature seeded the initiative with \$100,000 through the Vermont Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and, in addition to \$50,000 in commitments from private foundations, has contributed \$100,000 in state general funds each year since. This comprehensive approach to local food system planning reflects the state’s ongoing dedication to economic growth that capitalizes on Vermont’s small-scale, rural character and commitment to the environment. The effort also gained bipartisan support in part because its job growth and industry-development outcomes perfectly matched the mandates associated with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding. Farm to Plate is meant to increase agricultural economic development, create jobs in the food system, and make healthy foods more accessible for all Vermonters over a 10-year time horizon.

Farm to Plate Network

The Jobs Fund is a 501c3 nonprofit organization created by the Vermont Legislature in 1995 to catalyze development of Vermont's green economy. The Fund facilitated a comprehensive process to inventory the state's food system and develop a 10-year strategic plan to measurably improve economic development of its food and farm sectors. Informed by an extensive community engagement process, the Jobs Fund released the first edition of the strategic plan in January 2011; it features 25 goals ranging from increasing local food consumption and acres in food production to improving food workers' wages and farm viability. Consistent with the Jobs Fund's use of [the Results-Based Accountability](#) (RBA) framework to measure outcomes, each goal is accompanied by strategies for its achievement and indicators of its progress.

In order to implement the strategic plan, the Jobs Fund launched the Farm to Plate Network, a group of more than 350 organizations from all sectors of the food industry that work in teams on issue areas such as food access or skill areas like production and processing. The Network has adopted a collective impact model of governance whereby members pursue a common agenda through reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and shared metrics, with backbone support from the Jobs Fund. F2P also provides stipends to Network working group chairs in order to support their leadership, as well as to maintain an extensive [website](#), organize an annual Network gathering, and provide some funding support for specific Network projects. The Processing and Production Working Group, for example, convened a Meat Processing Task Force in 2011. Task force members convened producers, processors, and distributors along the meat value chain to learn more about each other's business models and needs. Four years later, their work has helped to open new, and strengthen existing processing facilities, as well as start a meat-cutters apprenticeship program to address the capacity challenges identified through the task force.

While the Jobs Fund continues to report annually to the state legislature on F2P's progress, it also serves the needs of the Network in its role as the backbone support organization through process facilitation, capacity building, leadership development, and expansion of available funding. As the Jobs Fund convened the Network, Executive Director Ellen Kahler embraced this vision of pursuing a common agenda among stakeholders, and it paid off. "We wanted to build a network

Equitable Impacts

37%

Increase in food manufacturing firms in Vermont since 2009

\$343,000

Amount spent by UVM Medical Center on transactions directly with farmers in 2014

35%

Increase in direct purchases from farmers by UVM Medical Center in 2014

45%

Increase in produce distribution by Vermont Foodbank in 2014

> 1 million

Pounds of Vermont-grown produce distributed by Vermont Foodbank in 2014, for the first time in its history

that had a culture of shared leadership, mutual accountability, and an ability to focus on changing the food system as a whole, and not just some of its parts. A network of organizations who could bring their expertise and knowledge to bear on complex problems while also leaving their organizational egos at the door,” Kahler said. “Farm to Plate belongs to all of us in Vermont, so we all need to be part of implementing it; this message has been really key to getting buy-in, ownership, and multiyear engagement by Network members.”

Just a few years in, F2P’s focus on local food-system development to stimulate economic activity is working. Within the program’s first five years, the local Vermont food system gained [4,189 new jobs](#), an increase of 7.2 percent, and [625 new farms and food businesses](#). Between 2007 and 2012, the economic output of Vermont’s food system grew 24 percent, to \$8.6 billion, and the number of food-manufacturing firms in Vermont has grown by 37 percent since the legislation’s launch in 2009. In 2014, major institutional purchasers such as the University of Vermont (UVM) Medical Center increased their purchasing directly from farmers by 35 percent compared to 2013, spending \$343,000 of \$1.6 million on local food purchases. The Vermont Foodbank increased its fresh produce distribution by 45 percent in 2014, distributing more than one million pounds of local Vermont produce for the first time in its history.

Now halfway through the strategic plan timeline, the Network is looking at its next big move: more independent grocery stores offering locally produced food and the launch of a local food campaign to engage a broader set of consumers. Kahler, who serves on the Network team for [Food Solutions New England](#), and the F2P Network as a whole also have their sights set on expanding the regional food system. It may be too soon to ask what the Farm to Plate Network will look like after 2020, but its infrastructure is well placed to start planning for 2060.

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