

A Call for Emergency Preparedness Planning for Food Supply Chain Disruptions Due to Climate Change [and Pandemics] in New England

Adapted from a speech delivered to the [New England Food, Farms, Fisheries, and Forest conference](#) on February 19, 2020 by Ellen Kahler, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.

Many of us believe that New England will face considerable disruption to the regional food system because of climate change over the next several years. The COVID-19 emergency has also raised fears of a scarcity of food in the US, in real time. New England is at the end of the food supply chain in this country with most of the food we eat originating in Mexico, California and the mid-west. Less than 20% of the food New Englanders consumer comes from New England farms, food manufacturers and fisheries.

Climate resilience planning has thus far focused on emergency preparedness related to dangers posed by large storms and rising sea levels. But what happens if there is a major and sustained disruption in the US food supply chain? How will we feed ourselves in the region? We need to ensure that municipal, state and regional plans address the risk of food supply chain disruptions and prepare for emergencies should they arise -- an emergency regional food preparedness plan. What we need is a plan to increase the percentage of the food we grow, raise, catch and make in New England which is then consumed in New England.

A Lack of Preparedness

To our knowledge there is no coordinated or comprehensive effort yet underway to regionally plan for the impacts climate change or pandemics will have on the region's food supply, where it will come from and in what quantities, and how to ensure that all New Englanders can access it in an equitable manner.

Nor has there been a coordinated or comprehensive effort to assist farmers, food entrepreneurs and fishermen to put in place sufficient planning and climate- or pandemic-adaptive measures so that they can continue to produce food for regional consumers and be profitable doing so.

Nor have we yet created the plans or secured the financial resources that will be required in order to secure our land-base for needed agricultural production – given the increasing land-use pressures that are already starting to occur from climate-induced migration (and will surely happen after COVID-19 is behind us) – wealthy families, equity firms, and the foreign investors are on the move – buying up large tracks of agricultural land and existing farms (with no intention of farming). We have no idea the magnitude of what is already going on around us.

So what do we need to do?

In order to reduce escalating food security-related risks, we need to reorient food production and distribution to the regional level. In addition, regional food production and distribution can both reduce the harmful impacts of climate change on the food system, and reduce the harmful impacts of food production and distribution on the climate. In order to realize this critical change we need to support the ability of our farmers, fishermen, distributors, and all food sector businesses to have a voice in developing and implementing a continual process of adaptation aimed at increasing the economic, social, and environmental resilience of this most critical industry. We also need to ensure that immigrant

populations and people of color have access to land, investment capital and other supports to ensure we are meeting the needs of everyone in the region.

A strong regional food system has the capacity to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, improve water quality, and potentially position New England farmers and fishermen to be more competitive with farms and fisheries outside the region – if we do it right.

Ensuring the resilience of our regional food system requires coordinated action. Maintaining and strengthening our agricultural land base, commercial fisheries, food manufacturing infrastructure, and regional distribution channels, and ensuring access to affordable, culturally appropriate food for all people living in New England cannot be achieved in a policy vacuum.

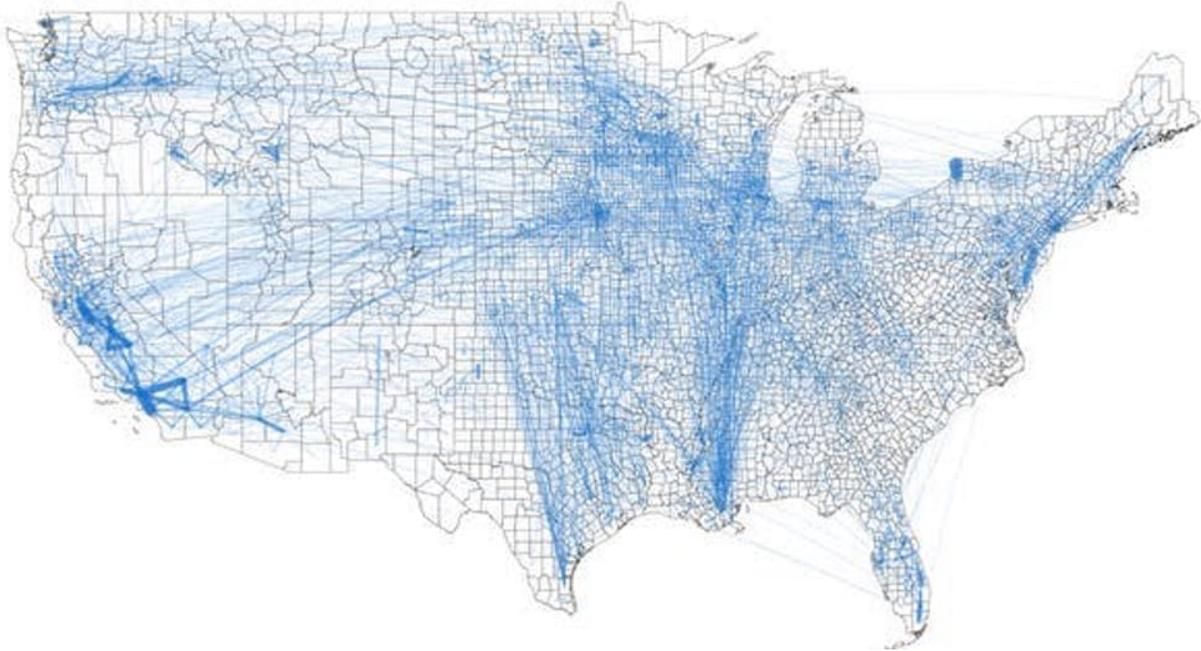
The 2014 New England Food Vision (published by Food Solutions New England) indicated that with an additional 2 million acres across the region under regenerative agricultural production (to achieve a 6 million acre goal) and with some shifts in what we produce (e.g., shifting to all grass based livestock production), we could produce 50% of the caloric needs of New Englanders from within the region.

So here is our big idea ... we think that over the next 5 years, a consortium of key food system stakeholder organizations should come together with the 6 state Departments of Agriculture and other climate action, resilience, and emergency preparedness planning organizations at the municipal, state and regional level to tackle these 5 interconnected areas of focus:

1. Create targets for each state's agricultural production by food category that can be used to coordinate investment and implementation in order to achieve the NE Food Vision and make measurable progress towards IPCC goals for GHG reductions. Once targets have been agreed to, implementation will begin in earnest.
2. Work to adopt state and regional level policies, procedures, and plans to ensure that the regional food supply is sufficient to weather global or national food supply chain disruptions caused by climate change and pandemics. In essence – emergency level food preparedness.
3. Work to adopt effective policies and implement best practices aimed at reducing the most intensive carbon practices associated with food sector operations from production to consumption.
4. Put in place policies that will support farmers, food entrepreneurs and fishermen to be economically viable using regenerative practices.
5. Secure sufficient and long-term funding from state and federal sources to implement the plans that get put into place; this may mean redirecting current commodity subsidies (e.g., corn, soy, wheat) to regional diversified farmers who produce a range of products aimed at feeding a regionally defined population.

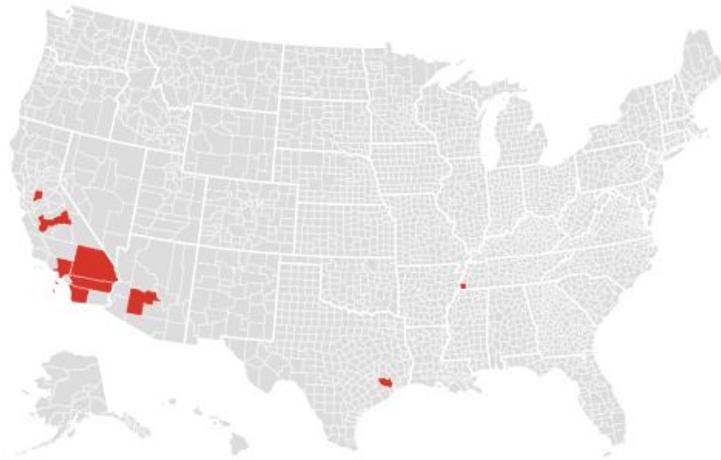
This big idea is a work in progress and input is most welcomed!

Food flows between counties in the US



Core counties for the US food supply

A study showed that these nine counties – mostly in California – are most central to the overall structure of the food supply network. A disruption to any of these counties may have ripple effects for the food supply chain of the entire country.



Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: [Environmental Research Letters \(2019\)](#) • [Get the data](#)

Xiaowen Lin et al 2019 Environ. Res. Lett. 14 084011 doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ab29ae | <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ab29ae>