

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN ISSUE BRIEF



ISSUE:

Agricultural and Food Literacy

What's At Stake?

Agricultural literacy and food literacy are important because increased knowledge of agriculture and food can help Vermonters make informed choices, as both consumers and civic actors, that support their health, their communities, and the environment. A variety of barriers currently prevent us from achieving an economically robust food system that provides dignified compensation for its producers and workers, protects the environment, and produces healthy products for consumers. One barrier is a culture of cheap food that prioritizes low prices at the expense of social and environmental values. Culture is a complex and dynamic system, subject to change as new information, new values, and new frameworks emerge and gain popularity. While knowledge alone will not result in immediate changes to our food system, it is a key ingredient: knowledge contributes to attitudes, social norms, purchasing habits, and, eventually, policy. The ongoing disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic shine a spotlight on national food supply chains, and more consumers are understanding the vulnerabilities of the existing food system.

Current Conditions

Agricultural literacy and food literacy exist on a continuum of food system knowledge related to how food is produced and consumed. The value of agricultural literacy is in how people understand the labor, resources, and expertise necessary to produce raw agricultural products. This can lead to a greater appreciation for the value of food, including the importance of farmers receiving compensation that matches their costs of production. Agricultural literacy means understanding the nuances and policies related to how different production practices can have implications for workers, livestock, health, and the environment (see *Agriculture and Food Policy* brief). It can also foster higher tolerance of the sights, sounds, and smells associated with living near farms.

Food literacy is associated with an understanding of the health implications of our food choices, as well as the preparation of food, while food system knowledge is a

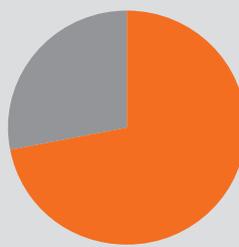
more holistic understanding of the multiple stages of the agricultural and food supply chain, from production through processing, distribution, and consumption. A food systems lens is inclusive of environmental and social considerations throughout the food system, as well as the interconnected nature of policies and conditions that affect it.

Vermonters currently gain knowledge about food, agriculture, and the food system through a variety of mechanisms, including product marketing, various media, relationships with people who work in the food system, formal and informal education, and visits to farms (see *Agritourism, Marketing* briefs). Some programming has been developed with the express purpose of exposing people to experiences that help them develop a more nuanced understanding of food and agriculture, including cooking classes and annual events (e.g., Open Farm Week).

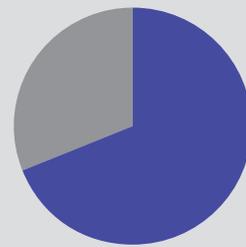
Nationwide in 2018, only 11% of total U.S. jobs were in the food system, and only 1.3% were on farms.



In a nationwide survey of consumers in 2011, 72% said they know very little or nothing about farming and ranching



but 69% think about food production at least somewhat often.



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- United States food policies designed to keep food costs low for consumers have created an expectation that food should be cheap and all types of food should be available year-round.
- Because many consumers do not have personal connections to the people who grow their food, they are uninformed about factors such as production costs, production methods, and environmental and economic benefits.
- People develop their relationships with food as children, where palates and preferences are set in the context of their family and the broader culture, so additional knowledge may not change certain eating habits.
- Specific data about the most effective way to shift Vermont residents' knowledge related to food and agriculture and potentially affect their purchasing habits is lacking.
- Local relationships and socio-economic factors are limits to local purchasing even when literacy is high. An individual might know that local foods are healthy and good for their local economy, but they may not have access to the funds to purchase them.

Opportunities

- Many Vermont residents are proud of Vermont's agricultural character and are open to learning more about farms, and farmers are eager to increase the agricultural literacy of consumers.
- Existing programming (e.g., food system programs at institutions of higher education) has the potential to expand in order to reach audiences who have not traditionally participated, and farm education programs that primarily serve youth have the potential to ripple out to family members as well as increase agricultural literacy for future generations (see *Agricultural Literacy K-12* brief).
- Social media campaigns (e.g., Rooted in Vermont) can help people develop a social identity with the local food economy.
- Providing people with experiences that elicit an emotional response (e.g., farm visits) may complement food and agricultural knowledge, and result in more desired changes in purchasing habits and attitudes about food and farming.
- Health care providers can support food literacy through nutrition education.

Recommendations

- Prioritize research related to the relationship between Vermont residents' food and agricultural knowledge and other drivers of purchasing decisions. Use a validated food literacy assessment tool to establish a baseline of agricultural literacy of Vermont residents. Possible research questions include: to what extent does knowledge of agricultural production and personal relationships with producers play a role in food choice? What type of experiences or information result in greater levels of behavior change (e.g., visiting a farm vs. reading about a farm)? How do programs like Crop Cash impact access to local foods, and do they improve agricultural literacy? Research results can inform the next decade of agricultural literacy efforts in Vermont.
- Expand existing successful farm and food education programming for adults and explore strategies for including new audiences, with 1 additional FTE at an established Vermont farm education outreach program. Cost: \$100,000.
- Provide annual state funding for a collaborative statewide marketing and consumer messaging campaign for local agricultural products. Leverage stories, messaging, and increased public awareness related to food supply chain vulnerabilities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic to generate more awareness about where our food comes from, who produces it, and under what conditions it is produced. Further leverage these experiences to draw connections with the implications of future climate disruptions and advocate for policies that shift Vermont to a more diversified and regionalized food system (see *Consumer Demand* brief).
- Cross-sector relationships to build agricultural and food literacy exist via the Farm to Plate Network and other collaboratives. Expand collaboration and coordination between groups (e.g., partner with health care providers and nutrition professionals on the relation between food, health, and local food sources).

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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