



## **Food for Thought: Time for Action**

Synopsis of Donor & Funder Forum

October 1, 2009

College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor

Meredith Jones, President and CEO of the Maine Community Foundation, welcomed the panelists and participants on behalf of MaineCF and the Maine Philanthropy Center, the organizations co-hosting the program.

During the introductions, participants shared a few specific reasons for their interest in this topic:

- Have a small foundation and interested in food and economic development
- Former involvement in a nonprofit focused on farming and current focus on fisheries, trying to learn more about what's happening in Maine in this area
- New staff member at a foundation where food funding has been directed primarily to soup kitchens, interested in discussion on innovation and how to focus on Maine's neediest population in a different way
- Social justice angle
- Be sure farms work

### Panelists:

#### **Charlie Bernstein, *Maine Initiatives, Harvest Fund***

The Harvest Fund was created about 10 years ago and at the time the term for this area of work was "sustainable agriculture." The question the organization was asking at that point was "what makes sense to invest in where small grants can make a difference?" Ten years ago the environmental movement didn't see the connection with sustainable agriculture but since then there's been a large cultural shift. In the early days the Betterment Fund and Sandy River Charitable Fund were their biggest supporters. Charlie shared a story about a grant they made to the Penobscot Elementary School that included a school garden and commented on the fact that community gardens in schools are now seen all over the state. He also shared an example of a grant to the Maine Organic Milk Producers Association, which helped non-organic dairies learn about switching to more profitable organic milk.

In terms of where the Harvest Fund is going from here, they're looking to collaborate more with other funders. Their advisory committee is strong and with their expertise they can be a resource to others. They would also like to make bigger grants. He stressed the importance of public policy and shared an example of grant to Food for Maine's Future that resulted in an ordinance to stop genetic engineering of food in a specific community in Maine (Montville). Funders should do what they can to promote collaboration and communication within their own networks.

**Andrea Perry, on behalf of Broad Reach Fund, MaineCF**

About five years ago, on behalf of an anonymous donor, Andrea interviewed about 15 nonprofit leaders in this area to better understand the issues and strategic points for philanthropy (<http://mainecf.org/portals/0/pdfs/2/agricultureIssueBrief.pdf>). From that starting point, grantmaking focused on farm viability/business support for farmers through such groups as Coastal Enterprises, MOFGA, and Maine Farmland Trust. Since that time, there has been a lot of movement in the field and they have now broadened their thinking to food systems (including fishing), workers' rights, food security (example of Good Shepherd Food-Bank and their gleaning project), cooperatives, and supporting emerging leaders in the food systems arena through a grant to the Maine Association of Nonprofits.

**Cheryl King Fischer, Vermont Food Funders' Network**

Cheryl highlighted the importance of putting grant dollars into the whole food system. If the idea is to have a food system revolution, then we need to invest in community gardens to get a broader number of voices to speak. She shared her personal experience of joining a CSA; now 60-70% of the food her family eats at home is grown in Vermont. In terms of the Vermont Food Funders' Network, about 18 months ago 7-8 foundations started a conversation that started with a question "Can we feed ourselves?" The group decided that it needed to map the food system in Vermont and through pooled funding commissioned a research project with the University of Vermont to identify the different parts of Vermont's food system and where philanthropic dollars were being invested ([http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/Documents/Nickerson\\_foodlandscape.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/Documents/Nickerson_foodlandscape.pdf)).

**Eleanor Kinney, donor advisor to a MaineCF fund**

Eleanor came to the question of food in a personal way through her children and not wanting them to have chemicals in their food. More recently she has focused on issues related to growth/sprawl and was active in a local effort in Damariscotta to fight a Walmart store coming into town because of the importance of keeping a village center intact with surrounding farms, field, and forests. She sees the ways that our built and un-built environment is linked to issues of climate change and highlighted her belief in the importance of influencing public policy. Since there's no way we can afford to buy all the land we want to preserve, we need to look at other public policy tools such as regulation to help us accomplish this goal. She highlighted a recent grant made to Maine Farmland Trust by the Environmental Funders Network because of all the linkages it makes (farm viability, local planning). In her time as an environmental funder, she has felt that farmland has been getting left out of the discussion and needs to be included more.

**Comments from participants**

- There's some real momentum around this issue and limited dollars. Where are the access points? Need to figure out what is going to happen anyway versus what are real holes.
- Grassroots organizing is what really moves things.
- Suggestion that Maine consider doing a food system study like Vermont and question about what organizations are tracking some of this information. (Maine Farmland Trust, MOFGA, and the Census for Agriculture suggested as resources)

- Reference to some work being done in Massachusetts and the importance of being aware of the distributors and brokers of food/wholesalers, such as Chelsea terminal.
- Encouraged by the number of young people who want to be farmers.
- Example shared of some international work in the Congo where non-farmers were getting paid to get into farming and the importance of farming being profitable. One example of how the price of food was brought down was through the use of draft animal power vs. tractors. Using oxen here in Maine might make financial sense.
- The cost-subsidy system in place through governmental programs needs to change.

### **Some nonprofit groups highlighted during the forum**

- Coastal Enterprises (CEI)
- Cultivating Community: focus on school-aged kids and getting food onto low-income tables
- Eat Local Foods Coalition: great network and website (especially for events)
- Food for Maine's Future
- Good Shepherd Food-Bank
- Healthcare without Harm: farmers' markets in hospital parking lots
- Kitchen Gardeners International: instrumental in White House planting a garden
- Lots to Gardens: community garden in housing projects
- Maine Council of Churches
- Maine Farmland Trust
- Maine Migrant Health
- MOFGA
- North Atlantic Marine Association (NAMA)
- Penobscot East Resource Center: restore fisheries
- Restaurant Opportunities
- Soil & water conservation groups: working on food preservation and extending the growing season
- Western Mountains Alliance

### **Topical areas discussed**

- Fisheries
- Data
- Public policy
- Preserving farmland
- Living wages/worker rights
- Waste
- Draft animals
- Slaughterhouse/processing
- Wholesome food & food safety
- Food preservation
- Community gardens
- Future leadership

**Question to the panelists: Where do you think funders can have the most impact?**

- *Charlie*: public policy/advocacy
- *Cheryl*: invest money in tangible short term results that fund different patterns; food councils are a growing area of interest
- *Eleanor*: infrastructure (e.g. slaughterhouses) -- help with value-added
- *Participant*: people -- fund those organizations that are run by dynamic
- *Participant*: environmental preservation/easements -- look at the work of the Virginia Environmental Preservation Fund, a coalition of people interested in historic importance, natural beauty, open lands and farmland.

**Next steps**

MaineCF will host two programs/meetings for donors in 2010. The first will take place in February in conjunction with the Environmental Funders Network and another will happen in late spring in the Greater Portland area. Please also take a look at the Farms, Food, and Philanthropy section of MaineCF's website ([www.maineef.org/farmsfoodphil.aspx](http://www.maineef.org/farmsfoodphil.aspx)) for a listing of local agriculture-related grants and reports specific to food systems here in Maine.

MaineCF and MPC will send out a survey to participants asking them to note their future interest in being part of a network of funders and/or being involved in future events.