

Local agriculture is a vital part of life in Maine. Our sense of place, our economy, and even our health can be tied to local food production.

Maine boasts more than 1.31 million acres of farmland. Agriculture contributes \$1.2 billion to the state's economy. A high percentage of small farms combined with recent growth in community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and organic farms across the state reflect a diverse and increasingly vibrant agricultural economy.

That said, local food production in Maine faces great challenges:

- ◆ Development pressures and escalating property values threaten the rural landscape. In the last ten years, 160,000 acres of Maine's best farmland were converted to residential and commercial use. During the next decade, 250,000 acres are expected to change hands.
- ◆ An aging farm population puts future production at risk. Half the state's farmland is owned by people age 60 or older. To maintain the status quo, at least 200 new farmers will need to begin farming each year.
- ◆ Rising costs and the challenges associated with competing in the national and global economy make it difficult for Maine farmers to start or continue operations. In addition, new farmers often lack the collateral or cash flow needed to begin or grow their business. Nearly 40% of New England farmers with farm income less than \$24,000 were denied financing from traditional sources in 2006.
- ◆ Limited processing and distribution infrastructure undermines the ability of farmers to meet local demand and develop value-added products.

Fortunately, many public, private, and nonprofit groups are working together to promote solutions:

- ◆ Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) works with land trusts and a state land conservation fund to protect farmland and keep it affordable for farmers.
- ◆ Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association and MFT are growing a new cadre of farmers through hands-on assistance and apprenticeships.
- ◆ Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI) and the Maine Department of Agriculture provide business assistance to farmers through the Farms for the Future program.
- ◆ Western Mountains Alliance, CEI, Farm Credit, and other groups offer financing for farmers.
- ◆ Healthy Acadia and Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools support community-based efforts to connect farms and schools.



- ◆ Maine Migrant Health provides quality primary and preventative healthcare services to migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Other efforts are under way to promote community gardens and access to local food through farmers' markets, food co-ops, supermarket chains, and food banks. Several organizations are also working to improve our ability to process food in Maine and to develop new markets by adding value to existing products.

Support for local agriculture continues the legacy of Mainers building livelihoods and drawing inspiration and sustenance from the water and land around us.

Maine is uniquely poised to build strong communities centered around local agriculture. Successful models exist and are ripe for expansion. The Maine Community Foundation, its donors, and others have provided support to many of these efforts and continue to explore how philanthropic resources can make a difference.



