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# Executive Summary, Cumberland County Foodshed Assessment, Report 1

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Executive Summary, *Cumberland County Foodshed Assessment, Report 1*

Barbara Ives

September, 2011

Like everyone else in these troubled economic times, Mainers are looking for ways to create jobs that will remain relevant and vital in a global economy, that cannot be outsourced, and that will regenerate rather than exploit our natural resources.

A growing number of people believe that a food system rooted in local farms, fisheries, and food production and distribution enterprises can strengthen Maine's economy and its communities' health, thereby increasing revenue and decreasing an expense that is crippling government agencies and individuals alike – healthcare. Business people who want to make a living related to food, and public and government agencies that are responsible for our health and safety, are recognizing that each group's interests can be served by a collaborative effort to increase local food production and consumption – to put it in the words of the Eat Local Foods Coalition, “to put more Maine food on more Maine tables more often.”

In the fall of 2009, two Tufts graduate students, Amanda Beal and Ellen Tyler, initiated a project called *By Land and By Sea*. With organizational support of the Eat Local Foods Coalition (ELFC), farmers and fisherman from Maine communities attended a series of facilitated regional forums to explore what they had in common and how they might combine their voices to impact Maine state policy. The aim was “to create a more sustainable, economically viable and food-secure locally-based food system.”

The students wrote a report, summarizing and appraising their findings, in which they organized what they learned into four broad categories: infrastructure, markets/market access; policy, and consumer education. They identified quite a few shared themes among the locations and stakeholder groups that crossed the four categories. And they shared their results with a special meeting of the Eat Local Foods Coalition on June 8, 2010.

From that presentation came a discussion about what sort of public policy recommendations would help the state develop a stronger local food economy. A member of ELFC, Sarah Curran of Planning Decisions, Inc., met with interested ELFC members afterwards to plan a way to build on these findings and recommendations. This group decided that a foodshed assessment could inform community level discussions about policy and planning, and serve as a mechanism by which stakeholders could develop a system-wide perspective and make state-wide plans accordingly. The *Cumberland County Foodshed Assessment (Phase 1 Report)* is what followed.

Two graduate school programs contributed to the report: *Agriculture, Food, and Environment* at Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy and *Public Policy and Planning* at USM's Muskie School of Public Service. The students formed a Planning & Coordinating Team of three, who organized the seven other researchers and the project as a whole; and from outside their programs they collected an Advisory Committee of 19 individuals. These individuals were stakeholders from every level of the food system and beyond, including farmers, educators, planners, directors of nonprofits, and a state representative; interested in food, agriculture, water & soil conservation, health & nutrition, marine management, land trusts, and more.

The process and data were managed through a wikispace, where team members stored and shared assessments from around North America. After reviewing a couple dozen reports from varying resources and locations, of varying degrees of detail and scope, they choose indicators to research primarily based on *What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Community Guide to Community Food Assessment*. Guided by other readings, they added a few indicators that they felt would contribute to the unique goals of this project.

The final list of indicators was as follows:

- Agricultural Resource Base
- Community Food Security & Access
- Consumption
- Demographics
- Distribution
- Economic Productivity
- Education & Advocacy
- Environmental/Natural Resources
- Fisheries
- Food System Wages & Employment
- Funding/Philanthropy
- Public Health
- Regulatory

Once these indicators were selected, researchers selected topics; and since there were fewer researchers than indicators, not all indicators were examined.

The next decision that needed to be made before research could be conducted was the geography of the study. ELFC had identified three key factors to be considered when defining the geographic boundary of the region:

1. The size of the area needed to reflect one of the main goals of the assessment, which was to serve as a tool to engage community level discussions.
2. The intended outcome of the larger “regional food strategy” process was to enhance economic development opportunities.
3. Since the assessment would include fisheries, the selected area needed to include year-round island communities whose residents engage in commercial fishing.

Given these factors, the following area definitions were considered: Labor Market, Metropolitan Statistical Area, Economic Development District, Commutershed, Watershed, and County. Each area had strengths and weaknesses, and the Labor Market was considered the most appropriate focus, but due to availability of the type of data the team felt they had the time to research and assess, the County was ultimately chosen. In short, Cumberland County included the critical fishery area, and the County could provide the most comprehensive dataset, given the resources and time available.

The data collected constitutes almost 60 pages of charts, narrative, and appendices.

#### Lessons Learned

The project was limited to the time-frame of a class during the Spring 2011 semester at the Muskie School, so the findings are process- more than content-oriented. What this report did was move the discussion forward and educate the researchers about the process of researching a foodshed.

The lesson that came from this work, in a word, is data. The geographic area of the project ended up being selected based on what secondary data was immediately available, which is not an optimum way to design a study. Furthermore, since the data from various public sources was so heterogeneous, it was extremely difficult to synthesize.

This assessment will be deeply improved by adding what data is missing and by developing methods to obtain and analyze more primary sources.

#### Next Steps

Although they have made considerable progress with data collection efforts to date by utilizing student/volunteer researchers, the next phase of the Cumberland County Foodshed Assessment will require funding to assure that the remaining secondary and primary data is collected in a coordinated way, and that the resulting product is a

report that will be meaningful for the many stakeholders of this geographical area and illuminates the connections between this more densely populated southern area and the rest of the urban, suburban and rural areas of the state.

Meeting a fundraising goal of \$12,000 will allow ELFC to:

1. Complete secondary data collection within the following indicator categories:
  - Agricultural Resource Base
  - Community Food Security & Access
  - Education & Advocacy
  - Environment/Natural Resources
  - Public Health
2. Design and implement primary data collection tools and activities (e.g. focus groups, surveys, key informant interviews, etc.) for:
  - Consumption
  - Human capital
  - Product flow and processing
3. Synthesize data into a public report that is widely available and presents information in an accessible manner.
4. Grant electronic access to all assessment tools, templates and other resources developed to serve this project, providing a functional 'toolkit' for replication of county-wide assessments in other areas of the state.