



# RETROSPECTIVE

2017-2022

Rhode Island State Food Strategy 5 Year Report

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The past five years of growth in Rhode Island's food system have come about thanks to the collective efforts of nonprofits, business owners, state and local public officials, academic institutions, and passionate food citizens, all of whom work to make Rhode Island a better place to live for all. A special thanks to Sue AnderBois, for her vision and efforts to develop and execute *Relish Rhody*, Rhode Island's first-ever statewide food strategy. Additional thanks to Ken Ayars, Janet Coit, Liz Tanner, Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, former Governor Gina M. Raimondo, Ken Payne, Jesse Rye, Sheri Griffin, Leo Pollock, Courtney Bourns and the many others who had the foresight to support the creation of the first Rhode Island Food Strategy. Thank you to the generous support of our philanthropic partners, especially the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, which has made significant investments in Rhode Island's food system over the last decade; the Rhode Island Foundation; the van Beuren Charitable Foundation; and the John Merck Foundation, which supported the development of *Relish Rhody* and the creation of the Director of Food Strategy role in state government. Thank you to the many partners and collaborators on the *RI Food Systems Planning for 2030* Advisory Board and other food system leaders who reviewed and contributed to this document. Most of all, thank you to the fishers, farmers, cooks, food businesses and food workers that steward our lands and waters and maintain our quality of life, ensuring we have sustenance for current and future generations.

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## AUTHORS

**Julianne Stelmaszyk**  
Director of Food Strategy  
Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

**Holly Fowler**  
Project Consultant, Co-founder and CEO  
Northbound Ventures Consulting, LLC

**Diane Lynch**  
Board President  
Rhode Island Food Policy Council

**Daniela Fairchild**  
Chief Strategy Officer  
Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

**Ken Ayars**  
Chief of the Division of Agriculture and Forestry  
Rhode Island Department of Environmental  
Management

**Randi Belhumeur**  
Program Administrator, Healthy Eating and  
Active Living  
Rhode Island Department of Health

**Chris Ausura**  
Chief of Strategy Planning & Evaluation  
Rhode Island Executive Office of Human Services

**Alison Macbeth**  
Food Strategy Project Manager  
Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF FOOD STRATEGY

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When I took the baton in March 2021 from Sue AnderBois, Rhode Island's first Director of Food Strategy, it was during a period of uncertainty. The position had been vacant for 15 months and the world was still in the thick of a global pandemic. Most of us could only think about tomorrow, let alone what might be on the horizon in coming months or years. It was a time of doubt and fear, but it was also one of collaboration and hope where we saw neighbors, businesses and communities working together in unprecedented ways.

Nowhere was this more evident than in our food system.

When schools went remote, food service operators, nonprofits and public agencies worked together to figure out how to keep kids fed through commissary kitchens. When restaurants were forced to close their doors, state and municipal officials directed relief funds to businesses to stay afloat, like the DishUP RI effort that helped restaurants pivot to retail when people stopped eating out. Throughout the pandemic, we were reminded daily that our farmers, fishers, food workers, processors, truck drivers and other frontline workers are essential, keeping us fed when national food supply chains collapsed.


In 2017, Rhode Island launched its first comprehensive statewide food strategy, which built a foundation for imagining a more resilient, sustainable and equitable food system. Six years later, it could not be more evident that how we feed ourselves matters. Good food is not a luxury, it is life.

This Retrospective offers a look back at the first five years of *Relish Rhody*, taking stock of its impacts and ripple effects. Now that we can think beyond tomorrow, we can begin the collective work of planning for a renewed food strategy with shared goals and a clear roadmap for collective impact. This report celebrates the wins of the last five years (so we can have more of them!) and also keeps us honest about where we have fallen short. Rhode Island's food economy is growing, making up 20 percent of the State's GDP, but it's not working for everyone. Even today, the lack of access to affordable and nutritious food has left nearly one in three Rhode Islanders unable to meet basic needs. Wages for food industry workers, while having risen during the pandemic, continue to fall short of the increasing cost of living. An unpredictable and warming climate threatens our ability to produce food now and in the future.

Still, I am hopeful. As we endeavor to create the next iteration of Rhode Island's statewide Food Strategy, I am encouraged by the people and success stories shared in this report. It has been a privilege to serve Rhode Islanders working to build a better food future. They know that food is the answer, and I hope after reading this report you will too.



**Julianne Stelmaszyk**  
**Rhode Island Director of**  
**Food Strategy**



“We are fortunate in Rhode Island to have such a broad ecosystem of individuals, organizations and agencies who care so deeply about the food system, and whose collective spirit drives things forward. It is perhaps the most valuable part of the story, without which a Rhode Island Food Strategy would be impossible to develop or implement. We are careful to acknowledge and support this collective passion and take the approach of a grassroots, bottom-up approach to building a local food system where everyone has an equal role and stake in the process. Much of the RI Food Strategy is about capturing, conveying and supporting what is happening organically among the many organizations and individuals who are singularly focused on building a resilient and just food system that benefits all.

There has been much progress over the past several years, and as many new and unforeseen challenges. We fully recognize the shortcomings that appear as a result of these challenges, the passage of time and different voices at the table and are committed to solving them. The many ongoing challenges and disruptions to the food system, particularly climate change related, and persistent lack of equity are among reasons to continue to prioritize this work. We all have a stake in the process and outcomes. Most importantly thank you to the many whose work and passion this Retrospective tries best to capture, and forgive if it does not, but know that what we are trying to achieve in Rhode Island would never be possible without your collective effort and spirit.”

**Ken Ayars**  
**Chief of Agriculture & Forestry**  
**RI Department of Environmental Management**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five years into the implementation of the State Food Strategy, *Relish Rhody*, this report takes inventory of what has been accomplished, where challenges remain, and provides guidance on priorities for the next phase of planning toward a 2030 food vision for Rhode Island.

This report examines what has been accomplished since the first food strategy was launched in 2017 and where there are remaining gaps and challenges in light of a rapidly evolving food system and environment. It does not attempt to be a comprehensive food system assessment, inventory of activities or direct accounting of progress against baseline metrics. Rather, it aims to provide guidance for the next phase of planning.

**Rhode Island's food system has made progress in three key areas:**

- 1. *Catalytic investments***
- 2. *Policy and Regulatory progress***
- 3. *Increased coordination and collaboration***

**Investments in growing Rhode Island's food system** have grown dramatically through state and federal grant programs administered by Rhode Island State agencies which helped to leverage additional private and philanthropic investments. These grant programs supported food businesses, food hubs and food incubators; increased state funding to address food insecurity; and leveraged federal funds to support farmers, fishers and seafood waste processing.

**Policy and regulatory reforms** have included business-friendly regulations (i.e. opening up cottage food businesses, supporting COVID-related adaptations); improvements to environmental sustainability (i.e. food waste diversion); and addressing hunger and food insecurity (i.e. creating the Hunger Elimination Task Force).

**Coordination and collaboration** have increased dramatically across the three state agencies that lead the implementation of the food strategy (RICC, RIDEM, RIDOH) and between nonprofits and businesses throughout the state. This includes a shared staff liaison, the Director of Food Strategy, quarterly meetings; shared data, metrics and objectives; increased integration of plans and investments; and increased coordination with both nonprofit and for-profit partners. There has been additional growth in collaboration across the RI Department of Labor and Training and food business service providers, and among the nonprofit organizations working to reduce hunger in the state.

Acknowledging this progress, the first food plan was developed when widespread public awareness of the intersections between food systems, climate change and racial equity was relatively low. As a result, the plan did not incorporate strategies related to climate resilience nor factor in the environmental impacts that will impact the global food supply chain in coming years. Additionally, the voices and concerns of those most affected by injustice and inequality in the food system were not well-represented in the first plan. The intention moving forward is to address both of these challenges head-on in future plans.

# INTRODUCTION

State level food system plans have become an important part of public planning, public health and economic development in the United States over the last two decades. Charters, strategic documents and food action plans began to launch in 2005 with California as the first state in the nation to develop a statewide plan. Food plans connect often siloed efforts across agriculture and fisheries, public health, food safety, food waste and economic development, helping states to:

- 1 IDENTIFY COMMON GOALS AND CONNECT PARTNERS FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT**
- 2 ESTABLISH SHARED METRICS FOR STRATEGIC ACTION AND GREATER IMPACT**
- 3 INFORM POLICYMAKERS OF STATEWIDE AND LOCAL PRIORITIES**
- 4 CATALYZE COLLECTIVE ACTION ACROSS THE FOOD SYSTEM**

Food system plans are a foundational component of a growing trend in regional resiliency planning that anticipates external shocks such as climate change, geopolitical conflicts, health crises and market fluctuations. Meaningful responses to such shocks rely on well-developed relationships, redundancy and diversity within the system to adapt quickly. These factors are vital to innovating change and maintaining continuity of food production and provision, especially in a regional food system model. The ways in which food is produced, processed, distributed and utilized have far-reaching impacts on our environment, public health, local economies and quality of life. Ensuring our food supply remains vibrant, sustainable and accessible to all people in all circumstances requires targeted efforts and equitable management of resources.



*Pell Elementary Garden Education Program  
Photo Credit: Aquidneck Community Table*

## Regional Food System Context

Rhode Island is part of a regional food system in the New England where partners have been working for the last decade within the six-state region of New England toward a shared vision known as the New England Food Vision. This regional vision calls for 50 percent of our food to be produced regionally by 2060 (current estimates show that we produce just 10 percent of the food we eat). Collaborative networks such as Food Solutions New England, Farm to Institution New England and New England Feeding New England have formed partnerships with state-level food system organizations in each of the six states in order to strengthen and grow the regional food system. These partnerships strive as a whole to be in alignment with the New England Food Vision and collaborate with state governments and community groups by supporting local and regionally based food system efforts.

Across the nation, Rhode Island is one of only 18 states to have an active food system plan and one of even fewer to align with regional food system planning. [1]

## ABOUT RELISH RHODY

In 2016, the nascent Food Strategy publication and Director of Food Strategy (DFS) role were created through the advocacy of nonprofit organizations, State agencies, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) and several philanthropic funders, all alongside the passion and leadership displayed by the former Raimondo Administration. The DFS role, first filled by Sue AnderBois (2016 - 2019) and now by Julianne Stelmaszyk (2021 - present), was charged with developing a statewide food strategy and leading its implementation. Guiding documents like the Agricultural Partnership's 2011 Five-Year Agricultural Plan provided a vision for the state's agriculture sector, but as Ken Ayars, Chief of the Division of Agriculture at the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) explains, **"We came to the conclusion that we needed to have another effort and person focusing on the food system as a whole."** This strategy would provide a food system roadmap for Rhode Island, following a regional trend of statewide plan development and strengthening the state's involvement in broader food system initiatives happening in New England and throughout the country.

Creating the state's first food system strategy involved engaging with several hundred stakeholders over the course of a year. The DFS conducted more than 150 interviews and made more than 30 public presentations to community groups. The first Rhode Island Food System Summit, hosted by the University of Rhode Island, allowed another 350 Rhode Islanders the opportunity to review the draft strategy and provide approximately 40 pieces of written public comment. State agency partners from the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), Rhode Island Commerce Corporation (RICC), Department of Education (RIDE), Department of Corrections (DOC), Department of Human Services (DHS), Governor Raimondo's Office, and others all contributed to what would become statewide food system priorities.

The final strategy was released by Governor Raimondo's Office on May 22, 2017 on Rhode Island Agriculture Day at the State House. Entitled *Relish Rhody*, the five-year plan was organized around three intersecting themes: **economic development, health & access, and environment & resiliency**, with the following five integrated focus areas to guide activity:



### INTEGRATED FOCUS AREAS:

Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island

Enhance the Climate for Food & Beverage Businesses

Ensure Food Security for all Rhode Islanders

Sustain & Create Markets for Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products

Minimize Food Waste & Divert It from the Waste Stream

## IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of *Relish Rhody* has been a state-led effort across three backbone state agencies: Rhode Island Commerce (RICC), RIDEM and RIDOH. These three agencies work in tandem with community and industry partners. The ecosystem of partners is considered a strength of *Relish Rhody* and is seen as a model by other states for its effectiveness. The intention of the new role, the DFS, was to ensure there was leadership to implement the plan. Community partners such as the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC) have served to mobilize the network of stakeholders in service of the plan. The RIFPC, a nonprofit organization founded in 2011, is the state's only Food Policy Council, holding a mission to build a more equitable, accessible, economically vibrant and sustainable food system in Rhode Island. Other State agencies where food plays a role also support implementation. The Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council (IFNPAC) serves as a coordinating body for the plan. The IFNPAC was established by statute in 2012 to find ways to overcome regulatory and policy barriers toward developing a strong, sustainable food economy and healthful nutrition practices. Under Rhode Island General Laws 21-36-3, IFNPAC membership is made up of the directors, or their respective designees, from the following state agencies:

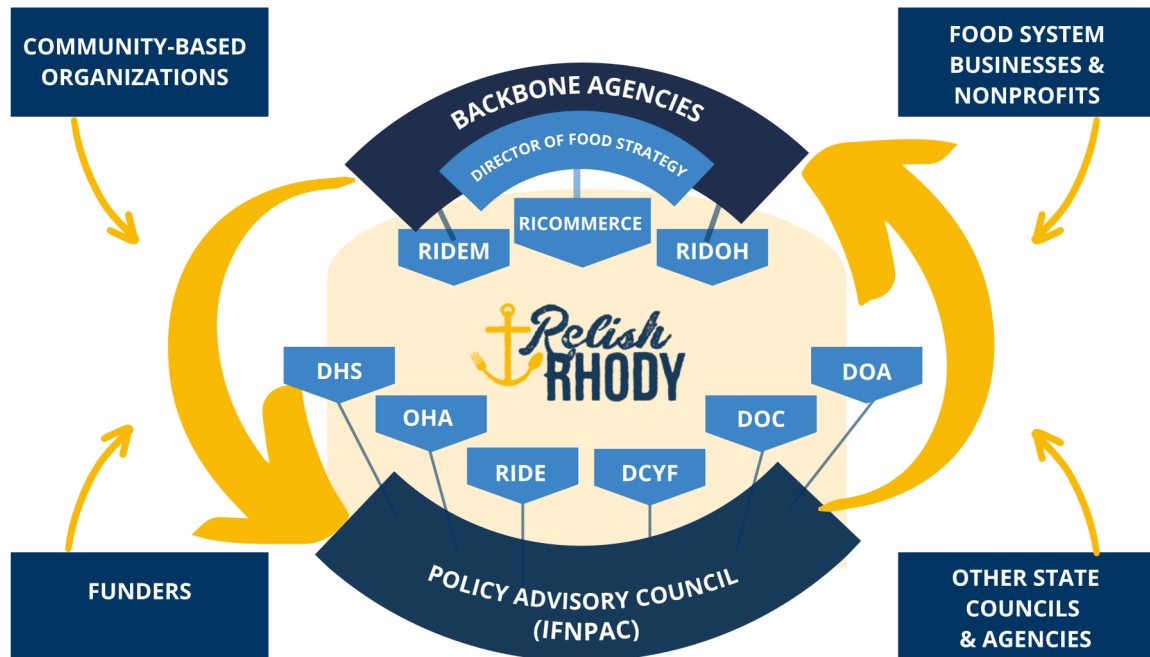
*Department of Health (RIDOH)*  
*Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)*  
*Department of Administration (DOA)*  
*Department of Human Services (DHS)*  
*Office of Healthy Aging (OHA)*  
*Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE)*  
*Department of Corrections (DOC)*  
*Rhode Island Commerce Corporation (RICC)*  
*Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF)*

Administrators and directors from other state agencies and community-based organizations often participate in IFNPAC, including representation from the leadership of the RIFPC, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank (RICFB), Farm Fresh Rhode Island (FFRI), the University of Rhode Island's SNAP-Ed Program and many others.

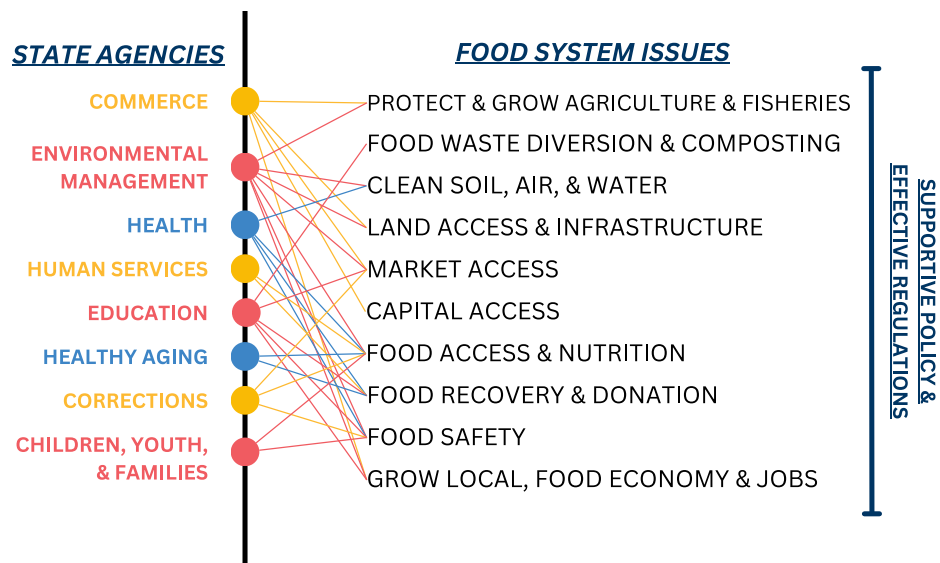


## Participation and Implementation Partners

**Who is responsible for implementing the food strategy?** The Director of Food Strategy, housed at Commerce, leads the implementation of *Relish Rhody* in partnership with two other backbone agencies, RIDEM and RIDOH. The three agencies work closely with IFNPAC member agencies to communicate, collaborate, strategize and drive progress. A network of community-based organizations, funding foundations, food system organizations and other councils are vital to informing the coordinating body. This network together is devoted to coordinating materials and knowledge in a way that is purposeful, equitable and inclusive.



This map illustrates the interconnectedness and roles that State agencies play in addressing food system issues, policies and programs.



## MEASURING IMPACT:

### *Retrospective Approach & Methodology*


Each of the five focus areas of *Relish Rhody* had a set of recommended action steps as well as corresponding metrics. While important to understanding the effectiveness of our strategy, these quantifiable metrics only tell a small piece of the story. Due to limited capacity and data availability, there was inconsistency in tracking the outlined metrics over the last five years. **The process of developing the plan and the movement-building relationships facilitated by the DFS have made important connections between people and ideas, leading to increased collaboration between stakeholders, more effective initiative design, and better collective leveraging of resources.** The funding of this role has been critical to the overall success of *Relish Rhody*, as it has enabled intentional activation of the plan that in turn provides for more streamlined collaboration and use of resources that drive Rhode Island's food system progress. This report includes key milestones, success stories and highlights of investments, policies, collaborations and activities to date. It also contains a section on gaps and opportunities that must be addressed as we work to develop a renewed food strategy toward 2030.

Development of this report was led by a contracted consultant, Holly Fowler with Northbound Ventures, LLC and an interagency Project Steering Committee, which included the DFS and leadership at RICC, RIDEM, RIDOH, and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). Information utilized for this report relies on primary and secondary sources. The Project Team assembled background documentation and prior research from a wide range of state agencies, organizations, work groups and websites. Eleven key informant interviews gathered input and a survey from stakeholder groups garnered 14 detailed responses from across the state's food system. The Project Steering Committee and DFS have also gathered input from one-on-one conversations with several food system leaders, community members, farmers, fishers, food business owners and nonprofit organizations operating within the food system over the last six months.

## FOOD SYSTEM COMPONENTS, PROCESSES & ACTIVITIES



*International Institute for Sustainable Development; Niles et al. (2017)*



**RI's food economy generates 20% of GDP or \$12 billion**



**\$25+ million invested**  
in food supply chain to bring more locally grown and made food to more diverse and regional market channels

**3x increased funding**  
for underserved and disadvantaged farmers and fishers via Local Agriculture & Seafood Act Grant program



**\$5.7 million ARPA funding directed to nonprofits to increase food access via the Rhode Island Foundation**



**400+ food producers**  
expand local food sales thanks to Farm Fresh RI's new Providence HQ and food hub

**\$29+ million federal funding leveraged by state agencies to support local food economy and food security**



**RI Farm to School Network re-launches**  
support from state and community collaborations to 480+ members



# MAKING PROGRESS

*Noteworthy Food System Advancements since launch of 2017 RI State Food Strategy*

# LOOKING BACK

The development of *Relish Rhody* benefitted from the support of many partners who collectively galvanized around the shared vision to improve how the food system can benefit all Rhode Islanders, restore the environment and celebrate the state's unique food cultures and landscape. As part of the planning process for a RI Food Systems 2030 strategy report, the Project Steering Committee asked for a retrospective report on the first food strategy in order to:

- **ASSESS WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS**
- **ACKNOWLEDGE HOW THE FOOD SYSTEMS LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED FOR RHODE ISLAND**
- **INFORM AND INVIGORATE THE NEXT PHASE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

## KEY MILESTONES

The timeline of the *Relish Rhody* journey began well before its 2017 launch. Foundational milestones included:

1. Creation of the backbone advocacy (RIFPC in 2011) and governance structures (IFNPAC in 2012).
2. Comprehensive food system assessments (2011 & 2016) to inform a statewide food system strategy.
3. Gathering of resources to fund development and implementation.



2007

- Nonprofit Farm Fresh RI establishes its **Wintertime Market** at AS220 and launches the Fresh Bucks program, allowing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients to use their benefits to purchase fresh, local produce



2010

- Farm Fresh RI launches its **Market Mobile** program, providing an aggregation and distribution channel from local farmers and producers to institutions. This initiative was made in partnership with RIDOH, DEM, and Narragansett Creamery



2011

- **Rhode Island Food Policy Council** (RIFPC) founded by state agencies and community partners to serve as backbone network for RI food system stakeholders
- **First state food system** assessment completed



2012

- **Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council** (IFNPAC) created by Rhode Island Gen. Laws § 21-36-1, establishes a council of seven state agencies to identify and address regulatory and policy solutions towards a strong sustainable food economy and healthful nutrition practices
- The **Local Agriculture and Seafood Act** (LASA) of 2012 establishes a grant program within RIDEM's Division of Agriculture to support the growth and marketing of new and beginning farmers and fishers

Photo Credit - RIFPC



# 2014

- Nonprofit **Hope & Main** establishes Rhode Island's first food business incubator to assist food & beverage companies looking to launch their products. Construction of their new headquarters is completed in Warren and includes three commercial kitchens made possible by a \$2.9 million USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Loan



# 2016

- The **Director of Food Strategy**, a new state government position established in the Governor's Office, is created. This new position supported the development and implementation of a statewide food strategy thanks to funding from philanthropic partners: The Henry P. Kendall Foundation, van Buren Foundation and the Rhode Island Foundation
- Release of "Update to the RI Food Assessment: 2011-2016 and Beyond," by the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and the Rhode Island Foundation
- **Food Waste Ban** passes requiring large food waste generators to divert waste from landfill



# 2017

- **First statewide food strategy Relish Rhody** released
- Authorization of IFNPAC to serve as a coordinating agency to drive outcomes toward the food strategy in partnership with the DFS
- **Hunger Elimination Task Force** launches to develop recommendations and actions to reduce food insecurity within the State
- **First Annual Rhode Island Food System Summit**, hosted by the University of Rhode Island (URI)
- Creation of the Rhode Island Emergency and Supplemental Food Site Map



# 2018

- RIDOH launches the **Rhode to End Hunger** connecting RI restaurants and hospitality businesses with food pantries and kitchens across the state through a partnership with MEANS database
- Second Rhode Island Food System Summit held at URI
- **Right to Farm law** (RI Gen. Laws § 45-24-31) amended to allow agriculture in all zoning districts
- RIFPC publishes 5-year LASA Impact report showing positive impacts of the grant program for small and beginning farmer and fisher viability



# 2019

- Third Rhode Island Food System Summit
- First Director of Food Strategy, Sue AnderBois, leaves position



- Governor's **Food Security Substream** is established to coordinate emergency COVID-19 response to food access across multiple state agencies
- **Farm Fresh RI expands** to 60,000 square foot headquarters in Providence, supporting 8 co-located food retail and/or manufacturers and 250+ businesses through regional food sales and distribution. This leads to 30FTEs being created
- Fourth Rhode Island Food System Summit



- **Second Director of Food Strategy**, Julianne Stelmaszyk, hired at RI Commerce
- Fifth Rhode Island Food System Summit
- **LASA Grant Program increases** state funding from from \$100,000 to \$700,000
- RIFPC establishes formal policy work groups to advocate for priority issues centering on food access, economy and climate



- **Passage of 2022 Cottage Food legislation** (RI General Law § 21-27-6.2) removes barriers for home-based food entrepreneurs
- Sixth Rhode Island Food System Summit
- **Southside Community Land Trust** breaks ground on 404 Broad food hub and farm-to-market processing center with delivery and packing space, commercial kitchen, three retail spaces and office space for education, workplace development and the youth entrepreneurship center
- **Hope & Main opens** Downtown Makers' Marketplace showcasing over 100 products made by Hope & Main members in RI
- Farm Fresh RI offsets energy for refrigeration by installing a large-scale solar array
- LASA Grant Program sustains \$700,000 funding in Governor McKee's budget.
- **Branchfood** establishes RI office to support growing food businesses



- Seventh Rhode Island Food System Summit
- RIFPC launches the Rhode Island Food System Data Dashboard to monitor and evaluate progress on food strategy metrics
- **Funding secured to begin a 2030 update to the State Food Strategy**



## NOTABLE DEVELOPMENTS SINCE RELISH RHODY 2017

The 2017 strategy established a framework and priority actions for cultivating a more sustainable and equitable statewide food system. After engaging with key stakeholders and taking stock of the last five years, three areas of change emerged as a direct result of the *Relish Rhody* strategy: **catalytic investments, policy and regulatory progress, and strengthened collaboration and coordination.**

### CATALYTIC INVESTMENTS

Rhode Island boasts a \$12 billion food economy, representing about 20 percent of the state's total GDP. This critical economic sector supports nearly 64,000 jobs across agriculture and fisheries, manufacturing, distribution, grocery, and food composting. Based on economic multiplier effects, the total estimated impact of sales through the food system within Rhode Island's economy is nearly \$23 billion, which takes into account additional sales due to business-to-business transactions and household spending [2]. Investment in growing Rhode Island's food businesses and jobs was a central component of *Relish Rhody*.

In 2019, the DFS position moved from the Governor's Office to Rhode Island Commerce. This organizational change reflected the state's desire to align economic development goals with *Relish Rhody's* health and environmental goals. Having a dedicated food sector lead has accelerated innovative investments in Rhode Island's existing food businesses and helped attract out-of-state investment to create new jobs, economic opportunities and increased food production. Thanks to collective advocacy from community advocates and nonprofits, the General Assembly allocated \$20 million in 2021 to the Rhode Island Foundation to address food insecurity, behavioral health and housing.

Additional investments included funding from federal and state sources as well as private foundations and public charities – all with the overarching goal of advancing strategic food system objectives. The initial implementation stage has been accelerated by an unprecedented amount of federal funding directed towards state agencies and community-based organizations as a result of pandemic recovery efforts. State agencies have prioritized non-governmental collaboration with partners on the ground to secure and administer these resources more expeditiously.

A SNAPSHOT OF STATE-LED FOOD SYSTEM INVESTMENTS:		
<b>AgCore Technologies</b> Cranston, RI	<b>goTeff</b> Providence, RI	<b>Southside Community Land Trust</b> Providence, RI
<b>American Mussel Harvesters</b> North Kingstown, RI	<b>Gotham Greens</b> Providence, RI	<b>The Compost Plant</b> Providence, RI
<b>Branchfood</b> Providence, RI	<b>Hope &amp; Main</b> Warren, RI	<b>The Family Cake Co.</b> Providence, RI
<b>Farm Fresh Rhode Island</b> Providence, RI	<b>Infinity Meat Solutions</b> North Kingstown, RI	<b>United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI)</b> Providence, RI
	<b>Matunuck Oyster Shellfish Hatchery</b> Wakefield, RI	

**Since 2017 Rhode Island state agencies have collectively leveraged over \$29 million in federal funding** to support strategic projects towards the food strategy including, but not limited to:

SAMPLING OF FEDERAL GRANT FUNDING AWARDS	STATE AGENCY	AMOUNT
<u>RI Seafood Marketing Collaborative</u> to increase local seafood consumption (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – NOAA)	RIDEM	\$2,898,000
Technology Innovation grant to improve data entry of local food purchases (United States Department of Agriculture – USDA)	RIDE	\$250,000
Farm & Ranch Stress Assistance Network funded the <u>“Land &amp; Sea Together”</u> Program to provide resources to farm, fish and forestry industry (United States Department of Agriculture – USDA)	RIDEM	\$559,000
Relief funds to commercial fishing, aquaculture and seafood processing businesses (American Rescue Plan Act – ARPA)	RIDEM	\$6,465,000
Feasibility study to expand seafood wastewater processing capacity (Economic Development Administration – EDA)	RIDEM (with RICC and Town of Narragansett)	\$360,000
<u>Federal State Marketing Improvement Program</u> for farmers wholesale readiness (United States Department of Agriculture – USDA)	RIDEM	\$111,249
Farm-to-School initiative to increase institutional procurement of local foods and expand the <u>RI Farm to School Network</u> (United States Department of Agriculture – USDA)	RIDEM (with RIDE, RIDOH, RICC and Farm Fresh RI)	\$341,800



## SUCCESS STORY: Building supply chain resilience by connecting small farmers to emergency food providers

The Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), a new USDA initiative launched in 2022, uses non-competitive cooperative agreements to provide up to \$900 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods produced within the state or within 400 miles of the delivery destination to help support local, regional and underserved producers.



Farm Fresh RI Packline Volunteers | Photo Credit - Jessica Watson RIFPC

This was due to the collaborative efforts of RIDEM, Farm Fresh RI and the RI Food Policy Council. RIDEM directed LFPA funds to connect local food producers to the state's emergency feeding network by **strengthening new and existing networks of producers, community organizations, and distributors**. RIDEM subcontracted with Farm Fresh RI to work with partners at the Southside Community Land Trust, the African Alliance of Rhode Island, and the RIFPC to purchase food from local and underserved producers, including refugee and immigrant farmers. The plan called for food purchases to be distributed to underserved communities throughout the state by community-based organizations outside of the traditional hunger-relief system. Over the next two years, it is anticipated that roughly \$700,000 worth of locally grown products from roughly 90 growers will be distributed to more than 60 community-based organizations outside of the traditional hunger relief system serving approximately 35,000 socially disadvantaged individuals per month.

Urban Edge Farm Potatoes | Photo Credit - RIFPC

## POLICY AND REGULATORY PROGRESS

As noted above, the implementation of the state-led *Relish Rhody* Food Strategy is shared in close coordination and partnership with the Rhode Island Food Policy Council (RIFPC). This collaboration helps build momentum for the food strategy goals and policy change from a network of stakeholders across the state. Food policy defines and directs every aspect of the food value chain, from food production and safety; processing, pricing, market channels, consumer access and purchasing; to organic waste and recycling. Working together to advance a shared strategy, Rhode Island agencies and nonprofit organizations have been able to advocate for and inform policies that empower the people working within the system and further reach their collective goals.

## NOTABLE POLICY GAINS SINCE 2017

### Investment in Farm & Fishery Viability

- State funding secured for the [Local Agriculture and Seafood Act \(LASA\) Grant Program](#), provides small grants to Rhode Island farmers and commercial fishers. The program is credited with leveraging more than \$2.5 million in additional grant and loan funding, creating more than 80 new jobs, increasing grantee sales by more than \$5.05 million and launching new products into new markets.
- FY24 State budget included \$2.5 million for farmland preservation.

### Addressing Food Insecurity and Hunger

- [Hunger Elimination Task Force](#), established in 2017 by Raimondo administration, develops recommendations and action steps to reduce the state's food insecurity levels.
- In 2021, NourishRI Campaign advocacy led to State funding for new healthy retail SNAP incentive pilot to incentivize more consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- FY24 State budget included \$20 million of ARPA relief funds for food insecurity, behavioral health and affordable housing.

### Action Towards Climate Change

- Act on Climate was signed into law in April 2021 setting enforceable emissions-reduction mandates.

### Food Waste Diversion and Waste Reduction

- Food Waste Ban of 2017 ([Chapter 23-18.9-17](#)), required organic-waste diversion to composting or anaerobic digestion facility if within 15 miles of a facility and generates 30-104 tons per year.
- [Styrofoam food container prohibition](#) reduced single use waste.
- [School Waste Recycling and Refuse Disposal](#) passed in 2021 requires schools to conduct waste audits and to comply with recycling and food waste diversion laws to donate unserved food to the food bank.

### Supports for Food & Beverage Businesses

- In response to the challenges faced by harvesters during the pandemic, [An Act Relating to Fish And Wildlife - Commercial Fisheries in 2021](#) was passed that permits the dockside sale to a commercial fishing license holder.
- Adoption of the [Cottage Food Manufacture Law](#) in 2022 allows small-scale food producers to cook, process, and prepare certain foods in a home-based kitchen setting, allowing more food entrepreneurs, especially those without access to large-scale kitchen facilities, to enter the food-based economy.



Port Galilee | Photo Credit - RIDEM

## Strengthened Collaboration and Coordination

The impact of network building and partnerships through the Food Strategy underscores the importance of a **collective impact approach that is intentional, leverages resources and minimizes the duplication of efforts in a thoughtful and meaningful way**. The following are state-led, community and regional plans and committees that have been strengthened by participation of the Director of Food Strategy and integration with *Relish Rhody* over the past five years:

- RIDEM Seafood Marketing Collaborative (2018-present)
- LASA Grant Committee (2018 - present)
- Hunger Elimination Task Force (2017 - present)
- Interagency Food Nutrition & Policy Advisory Council (2017 - present)
- Farm to Institution New England (FINE)'s Network Advisory Committee (2017 - present)
- RI Ag Energy Advisory Committee (2017-2019)
- RI Farm to School Network Action Planning Committee (2022 - present)
- Resilient Fisheries Strategy (2017-2018)
- EC4 Science & Technology Advisory Board (2022 - present)
- Kendall Foundation New England Food Vision Prize Grant committee (2022)
- RI Commerce Comprehensive Economic Development Plan "RI Innovates 2.0" (2019) and 2023 Update
- URI PRESS Coordinating Committee (2023 - present)
- RIDEM Specialty Crop Block Grant Committee (2021 - present)
- RI Farm to School Network Leadership Council (2021 - present)
- New England Feeding New England Initiative (2020-present)



## PROGRESS & OUTCOMES (2017-2022)

*Relish Rhody* was intended to be visionary and actionable, with each of its five focus areas given an associated set of recommended near-term action steps. The following sections outline the prioritized actions for each, notable advances that have been influenced or attributable to *Relish Rhody*, success stories, and potential considerations for continued planning.

### INTEGRATED FOCUS AREAS:

**Preserve & Grow Agriculture, Fisheries Industries in Rhode Island**

**Enhance the Climate for Food & Beverage Businesses**

**Sustain & Create Markets for Rhode Island Food, Beverage Products**

**Ensure Food Security for all Rhode Islanders**

**Minimize Food Waste & Divert It from the Waste Stream**

## Integrated Focus Area 1:

## PRESERVE AND GROW AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES INDUSTRIES IN RHODE ISLAND

### BACKGROUND

As of 2017, Rhode Island has 56,864 acres of agriculture and 1,043 farms [3]. The majority of acreage is represented by woodland (42.5 percent), followed by cropland (31 percent), and finally pasture and other land (25 percent). The market value of agricultural products sold by the state is nearly \$58 million, predominantly comprised of products from nurseries or greenhouses (e.g., floriculture, sod), vegetables, aquaculture and milk. The state's fisheries and seafood sector additionally play an important economic and cultural role, representing over 420 firms spanning commercial fishing and shellfishing; fishing charters; processing; professional service firms; retail and wholesale seafood dealers, including importers and exporters; service and supply firms; and tackle shops. These entities provided 3,147 jobs and \$538.33 million of gross sales as of 2016 [4]. The sector also supports the state's \$1.3 billion tourism and hospitality industry [5].

**Rhode Island has the highest agricultural real estate values per acre of any state in the country at \$17,500.** The national average for 2022 was \$3,800 per acre. Rhode Island's expensive farm real estate is a result of its small land area and development pressure. American Farmland Trust reports that from 2001-2016, 3,600 acres of Rhode Island's agricultural land was developed or compromised. This included 1,700 acres of the state's "Nationally Significant" land, the country's best land for long-term production of food and other crops. These agricultural land losses to commercial, industrial, and residential use further fragment the agricultural land base making it harder for working farms to produce, market and manage their operations.

RIDEM leads the overall work to support the agriculture and fisheries. Having non-governmental and community partners has allowed for more effective funneling of resources and program implementation by connecting directly to those on the ground.

### Prioritized 2017 Actions

- **Expand preservation of active farmland**
- **Support a robust RIDEM Division of Agriculture**
- **Enhance technical assistance and improve coordination and communication about existing resources**
- **Strengthen job training opportunities for agriculture industries**
- **Explore innovative funding and financing tools**
- **Continue to invest in critical infrastructure**
- **Support efforts of the Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative**
- **Promote recruitment efforts within fishery industries**
- **Support efforts of Rhode Island's Shellfish Initiative**

### Outcomes

- The DFS advised the RI Agriculture Plan (2011 - 2017) update disseminated by the RI Agricultural Partnership.
- The DFS served on the LASA Grant Review Committee and supported a five-year evaluation of the program from 2017-present.
- In 2017, 2018 and 2019, the DFS served as part of the advisory committee for the RI Agriculture Energy Grant Program.
- Real Jobs Rhode Island Program established under the Raimondo Administration leveraged funding to ensure "food jobs" were part of the new state program. From food service handling to food production, Real Jobs RI prepares job seekers for a rewarding career in Rhode Island's vibrant food economy driven by industry needs.
- The Growing Futures RI program, funded by DLT's Real Jobs RI program, was established as an incubator for green industry talent, offering hands-on training through its Career Catalyst training program, supplemented by a registered apprenticeship program for practical, on-the-job expertise building.
- The DFS provided commentary and advice on the Rhode Island Commercial Fisheries Blueprint for Resilience released by Resilient Fisheries RI in 2018.
- Thanks to support from Governor McKee and the General Assembly in 2022, the Local Agriculture & Seafood Act (LASA) grant program of RIDEM awarded \$700,000 to small and/or beginning Rhode Island farmers and food producers aimed at increasing the amount of locally grown, raised and harvested food to support long-term food security and farmland viability goals.
- The RIDEM-led Seafood Marketing Collaborative (SMC) created annual events like Quahog Week to increase demand for local seafood during the off-season, May through August, with 900+ people attending events in 2023.
- DFS provided regular input into the development of the regional Blueprint for Agriculture developed by the Carrot Project (now the Agriculture Viability Alliance).

- RIDEM's Division of Coastal Resources executed three contracts totaling \$17.7 million to improve capital assets in the Port of Galilee, including docks, bulkheads, electric systems, fire suppression systems, and water, all of which support continued growth and viability of commercial fisheries and the seafood industry at large.
- The Rhode Island Nursery & Landscape Association (RINLA) partnered with the RIFPC to secure a federal grant to launch a new degree at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) "Environment, Sustainability, and Management" to increase pathways for careers in the state's land and sea industries
- RIDEM's Division of Agriculture and Forestry utilized USDA funding to expand several programs that purchase locally produced food for the emergency and supplemental food system. These programs include:
  - Local Food Purchase Assistance Program: A partnership with Farm Fresh Rhode Island to connect locally grown food by socially disadvantaged farmers to community organizations outside of the traditional hunger relief system [9].
  - Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program: A program to help low-income older Rhode Island adults better access fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Combining aquaculture industry education and on-the-job training, the Oyster Farmhand Apprenticeship Program equips participants with oyster cultivation and preparation skills.
- The Commercial Fishing Apprenticeship Program provides career pathways into the state's historically important economic sector. Real Jobs Rhode Island is looking forward to continued investment in training programs to support this Food strategy and enhance RI's food industry.
- RICC, RIDEM and the RIFPC secured a \$400,000 federal EDA grant for the Town of Narragansett to conduct a feasibility study for expanding seafood wastewater processing in Port Galilee, addressing a longstanding challenge for growing the industry.

**At \$17,500 per acre versus the national average of \$3,800 Rhode Island has the highest cost of agricultural land value in the country.**

Losing farmland is dramatically more costly than preserving it. Because the price to bring new farmland into production is so daunting, the first step should be to preserve as much existing productive landscape as possible. The solutions need to be as big as the problem.



## Progress

**In recent years there has been a growth of new and beginning farmers in Rhode Island with demand for more land in urban and rural areas.** We have also seen a greater demand for farmers' markets, and local food consumption is on the rise. However, the state's significantly high cost of land leaves many farmers facing challenges to lease – let alone own – suitable land. In addition to the challenge of securing real estate, farmers are also navigating high costs of inputs and labor, as well as difficulties with succession planning and land tenure.

Commercial fishing and aquaculture both continue to serve as critical, robust industries for the state's economy, yet the majority of landings are still exported outside the region due to a lack of seafood wastewater processing and consumer preferences. Continued expansion of funding and investment for farms and fisheries, like the LASA grant program and farmland preservation, is vital for supporting the next generation of food producers.

### **SUCCESS STORY: *Investing in the next generation of farmers and fishers through microgrants***

**The Local Agriculture and Seafood Act (LASA) Grants Program was established by the General Assembly in 2012 to support and invest in the growth, development and marketing of local food and to strengthen the state's food system.**

Competitive grants of up to \$20,000 are aimed at small farmers and fishers that typically struggle to receive funding from other sources, either because they are new, lack sufficient assets, have social enterprise goals that require patient capital, or are programmatic and unlikely to show profit.

For its first five years the program was funded through a public-private partnership between the State, the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, the Henry P. Kendall Foundation and the Rhode Island Foundation. Today LASA grants are fully state funded, increasing from \$250,000 to \$700,000 per year in FY23.

Administered by RIDEM, grantees are selected by members of the program's Advisory Committee, who are appointed by the Director of RIDEM from a broad range of different food system sectors and perspectives, including farmers, fishermen, food business owners, planners, and experts in economic development, marketing, policy and law, public health and food systems.

**Since 2017 LASA has awarded 108 grants to small food producers and harvesters totaling \$1.35 million. This has a multiplier effect where the recipients have leveraged additional grant and loan funds, hired locally (80 new jobs since 2014) and increased sales by more \$5.05 million. [7]**

LASA is a popular and successful program, supporting the next generation of farmers, shell fishermen and fishermen.

## LASA Recipients Over the Years



Photo Credit - Sweet & Salty Farm

### Sweet & Salty Farm

*Sweet & Salty Farm is a small family farm in Little Compton that sells a variety of local dairy products. As a 2019 LASA recipient, they had the opportunity to purchase and install an ice accumulator, making their milk pasteurization processes more efficient, increasing dairy production and sales.*

### African Alliance of RI's Bami Farm

*AARI is a nonprofit organization that connects all Rhode Islanders of African descent with community programming focused on health, food, education and culture. Bami Farm is a six-acre community farm in Johnston RI, run by the AARI. As a LASA recipient, Bami Farm has been given the resources to expand land and provide deeper technical assistance to refugee and immigrant farmers. This has allowed them to increase production of ethnic specialty crops, improve marketing expertise and develop consumer education.*



Bami Farm | Photo Credit - African Alliance



Walrus and Carpenter | Photo Credit - Angel Tucker

### Walrus and Carpenter Oysters RI

*Walrus and Carpenter Oysters has farms sitting in the pristine waters of Ninigret Pond and Dutch Harbor, in Charlestown and Jamestown, Rhode Island. As a 2017 LASA Recipient, Walrus and Carpenter Oysters was able to expand their sugar kelp production and provide a network of growers with seed lines for sugar kelp.*

### Southside Community Land Trust

*Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) is a nonprofit based in Providence whose mission is to provide access to land, education and other resources so people in Rhode Island can grow food in their own communities through urban farming collectives. SCLT has been a LASA recipient more than once, and with this support has been able to expand their facilities and improve support.*



## Integrated Focus Area 2:

# ENHANCE THE CLIMATE FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGE BUSINESSES

### BACKGROUND

Rhode Island has the potential to be a premier place to start, grow and/or relocate a food business. As of 2021, there were 2,200 food production businesses (e.g. farms and fishers), 447 food distribution businesses, 3,990 food service businesses, and 360 food and beverage manufacturing businesses operating in Rhode Island. The Ocean State's food scene is widely recognized and celebrated for its high-quality ingredient inputs and stand-out culinary scene, but success for businesses within this sector depends on navigating complex, matrixed regulation, while having access to capital, a qualified workforce, and business support services. These needs are reflected in the recommended actions of Relish Rhody and key activities undertaken in the first five years.

### Prioritized 2017 Actions

- Identify, prioritize and tackle regulatory challenges for food enterprises
- Assess and implement communications and engagement best practices for processes and regulations
- Address funding gaps and communicate funding opportunities
- Recognize and celebrate food system partners
- Support key agencies and staff in fostering innovation

### Outcomes

- The Department of Business Regulation (DBR) worked with the DFS to identify issues impacting food businesses, several of which have been addressed, such as dockside seafood sales, cottage food permit and removal of the litter permit fee for food and beverage retailers.
- With support from RICC and the RIFPC Food Business/Economic Development Work Group, the General Assembly passed the Cottage Food Law removing barriers for home-based food entrepreneurs.
- The Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program bolsters Rhode Island food businesses and led to the expansion of local businesses like Chi Kitchen & Ellie's Bakery.
- In 2018, the Small Business Friendliness Omnibus passed through the state budget process, streamlining regulations and reduced fees to make it easier for small businesses to open and expand in Rhode Island.
- Johnson & Wales University launched the EcoLab Center for Culinary Science which hired a position with food process authority, previously a service that required out-of-state approval.
- Three RI food businesses were winners in the national Good Food Awards, including The Backyard Food Company, Sacred Cow Granola and SanoBe Superfoods.

- The Department of Business Regulation (DBR) worked with the DFS to identify issues impacting food businesses, several of which have been addressed, such as dockside seafood sales, cottage food permit and removal of the litter permit fee for food and beverage retailers.
- With support from RICC and the RIFPC Food Business/Economic Development Work Group, the General Assembly passed the Cottage Food Law removing barriers for home-based food entrepreneurs.
- University of Rhode Island worked with the DFS to host seven food summits (drawing 300+ attendees annually) which featured food-system partners and businesses, aligning partners towards *Relish Rhody* goals.
- A food business guide was launched on RelishRhody.com to be a central place for technical assistance and funding resources.
- RICC, Hope & Main and Johnson & Wales University hosted a delegation of 40 Belgian food businesses looking for opportunities in Rhode Island as part of a national economic mission to the US.
- RICC launched a resource website “How to open a restaurant in RI” to help businesses navigate the process of permitting and licensing across multiple state and local departments.
- In 2018, the Small Business Friendliness Omnibus passed through the state budget process, which streamlined regulations and reduced fees to make it easier for small businesses to open and expand in Rhode Island.
- A food business guide was launched on RelishRhody.com to be a central place for technical assistance and funding resources.
- Inclusion of food businesses in the RICC Innovation Voucher and Network Matching Grant programs have supported small food business growth - to date awarding 42 grants and loans totaling \$1.9 million. Fifty-four percent of this total was provided to women and minority-owned businesses.

## Progress

Collaboration across regulatory food agencies has increased to streamline permitting and reduce burdensome regulations for food businesses such as the dockside sales and cottage food laws; however, many regulatory barriers and conflicts over use of agricultural land and coastal waters amongst other industries (such as offshore wind) and local communities still exist. Likewise, the lack of “scale-up” co-manufacturing options for growing consumer packaged goods businesses has left Rhode Island companies with the only option to move production out-of-state.

**“Real Jobs RI is more than a training initiative - it's a springboard to a diversified, inclusive and forward-thinking workforce that is responsive to the needs of Rhode Island's food industries. In 2017, the *Relish Rhody* Food Strategy provided a guide for our industry partnerships to understand industry growth areas and develop targeted workforce training programs around Rhode Island food production goals.”**

Matt Weldon, Director,  
Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training.

## ***SUCCESS STORY: Growing the foodie-economy while supporting neighbors in need - Hope & Main***

While the concept of Hope & Main originated in 2009, *Relish Rhody* is credited with validating this idea before its time. Hope & Main founder Lisa Raiola describes how her vision for the shared kitchen incubator was born out of the Great Recession, prior to any food ecosystem existing to support it. Opened to clients in 2014 in a renovated schoolhouse on the main street in rural Warren, the enterprise was still working to establish necessary scaffolding (e.g., entrepreneur training, market access points, capital) when the food strategy was released in 2017. The fact that the plan presented a systems approach and objectives paralleling those of Hope & Main set wind in the sails of the effort to incubate small food businesses.



Lisa Raiola, Founder & President  
Hope & Main

**"Small businesses require much more than resources to launch and grow; they require affordable and accessible systems that are designed with intention," said Raiola. "Relish Rhody brought systems thinking to bear on a set of once-intractable challenges. Also, having a Director of Food Strategy is a vital signal. It communicates that this work is a social and economic priority in Rhode Island. Otherwise, the message would be that we're all in this alone."**

### **Nourish Our Neighbors**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as Hope & Main convened with food system peers, they were inspired to reach beyond convention to try new ways of connecting the local food system with emergency food access. One demonstration project with lasting effects is Nourish Our Neighbors. When restaurants and shelters closed, fishers found themselves without a market for their catch and individuals and families experiencing homelessness and food insecurity found themselves facing greater challenges to secure basic needs like food. Hope & Main paid its members to transform fish and other local ingredients into prepared meals that could be delivered to food insecure neighbors throughout the community. The program continues under a distribution model whereby Hope & Main delivers several hundred Nourish Our Neighbors meals to partners across Rhode Island such as Head Start, women's shelters, housing authorities, and the Providence Public Library. The meals are sold in a "buy one, give one" model to enable broader public support. To date, Hope & Main has distributed more than 60,000 meals, and raised more than \$500,000 to sustain lives and livelihoods post pandemic.



Nourish Our Neighbors | Photo by Hope & Main



Pyn's Kitchen | Photo by Hope & Main

## Incubating Food Entrepreneurs

Since opening in 2014, Hope & Main has supported the launch of 450 food businesses that annually generate \$10 million in sales. Many of these companies have become beloved brands and have graduated into their own production and retail facilities (e.g., The Backyard Food Company, Anchor Toffee and NaVad Bakers - previously BUNs Bakery). Applications to the incubator kitchen have doubled since the pandemic to roughly 30 applications per month, with many inquiries originating from closer to Providence. Hope & Main is expanding to meet the demand, renovating a facility in the west end of Providence to house six additional shared kitchens.

Raiola describes many in this cohort as “entrepreneurs of necessity.” They are primarily women and/or people of color disenfranchised by the pandemic or unable to pursue traditional job opportunities, so they chose a path of self-employment in order to support their households. Hope & Main’s comprehensive model enables these food entrepreneurs to transform a food idea into a viable business. Relish Rhody, the Director of Food Strategy, and the now more mature ecosystem of food partners provide more scaffolding for Hope & Main to build a new, local food economy. In Raiola’s words, **“We have the most brilliant, dedicated people working on food systems in this state. This enables us to authentically center the needs of our community and to build a more equitable and resilient local food system”**.



## **Integrated Focus Area 3:**

# **SUSTAIN AND CREATE MARKETS FOR RHODE ISLAND FOOD AND BEVERAGE PRODUCTS**

## **BACKGROUND**

Rhode Island food production relies on local direct-to-consumer markets and farm-to-table restaurants like the state's more than 40 regular and pop-up farmers markets [8]. As of the USDA 2017 Agricultural Census, 23.9 percent (by value) of the food grown in Rhode Island was sold directly to consumers and another 6.3 percent sold directly to retail markets, institutions or food hubs for local or regionally branded products. With the direct-to-consumer market mostly saturated, increased sales must come from regional markets in nearby states and other channels such as direct-to-consumer harvested products, retail/grocery stores, restaurants and institutional food service. To access and develop within new markets, food businesses need appropriately scaled and affordable infrastructure to support processing, manufacturing and distribution, as well as compelling overarching marketing that promotes the Ocean State's unique products and location as a food tourism destination.

## **Prioritized 2017 Actions**

- **Expand direct-to-consumer sales opportunities, particularly within fisheries**
- **Connect Rhode Island products to institutional markets**
- **Support infrastructure investments**
- **Promote food tourism under a unified brand message**

*East Providence High School | Photo Credit - RIFPC*

## **Outcomes**

- RIDEM collaborated with RIDE, DFS and RI Farm to School Network to secure a \$260,000 USDA Farm to School grant in 2022 to increase supply chain connections between food producers and institutional food buyers, and to develop an action plan for the Network.
- Since 2021, RICC's Supply RI initiative has partnered with Hope & Main and Farm Fresh RI to host a Tabletop Food Show that brings together more than 200 regional food buyers from institutions, wholesale, retail and corporations with 50 small Rhode Island food businesses.
- Federal CARES Act funding through Rhode Island Commerce supported Hope & Main and Dave's Marketplace to help restaurants forced to close during the pandemic pivot to retail through the "DishUp RI" program in 2020.
- RIDEM's Seafood Marketing Collaborative launched a statewide RI Seafood Marketing Campaign thanks to a federal Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant to increase local seafood consumption among Rhode Islanders through a statewide branding campaign.

- RIDE, RIDEM, the DFS and community organizations like Farm Fresh RI and the Healthy Schools Coalition supported efforts around the growth and expansion of the RI Farm to School Network, including the development of a RI Farm to School brand and the RI Farm to School website, which connects local schools, early care professionals, and farmers with resources to support local food system education and farm to cafeteria initiatives.
- In 2022, Greenline Apothecary opened Town Made, a new food incubator in South County to support food makers and value-add processing for farmers supported by an Innovation Grant from Rhode Island Commerce.
- In 2022 Plants to Food opened a 140,000-square-foot food co-packing/co-manufacturing facility in Lincoln for plant-based consumer packaged good products. RICC helped to support a \$2 million loan for the retrofit which will support dozens of Rhode Island businesses and attract food businesses from out of state.
- RIDOH Coffee Plus Pilot: DFS partnered with RIDOH staff to connect Coffee Plus vendors with Roch's Fresh Foods distribution to purchase locally processed fresh produce for sale in state-operated office buildings. Coffee Plus is a collaboration between the Office of Rehabilitation Services and RIDOH with small food retail establishments located within state agencies.
- RIDE supported the disbursement of more than \$7 million in federal funding designed to help school meals operators overcome supply chain challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. \$1 million of the funds will be used for Rhode Island or regional products.
- In 2020 Farm Fresh RI significantly expanded mid-supply chain food processing and distribution with their 60,000-square-foot headquarters in Providence, supporting eight co-located food retail and/or manufacturers as well as a year-long farmers market.

## Progress

Local purchasing among food service institutions such as schools, colleges and farmers markets expanded through infrastructure investments and wholesale connections; however, more market channels are necessary, especially for locally landed seafood. Although brand development for RI Seafood and RI Grown is underway, there is no unified brand for local food. Additionally, second stage food businesses need expanded access to capital and infrastructure to support scaling production in order to enter regional markets and larger grocery channels.



## **SUCCESS STORY:**

### ***Expanding mid-supply chain infrastructure*** ***Farm Fresh Rhode Island***

In fall of 2020, Farm Fresh RI significantly expanded its operations to its new 60,000-square-foot headquarters in the Valley neighborhood of Providence after a decade at its Hope Artiste Village location in Pawtucket. The new, larger facility allowed Farm Fresh RI to consolidate its programs and operations under one roof, including New England's largest year-round indoor farmers market.

Half of Farm Fresh RI's space is leased to eight food manufacturers with retail space. Collectively, these enterprises support more than 250 food producers through regional food sales and distribution and development and have created more than 30 full-time jobs. In addition to supporting food and farm businesses through their farmers markets and their Market Mobile buyer-to-supplier platform, Farm Fresh supports several smaller nonprofit organizations working to support a better food system as a fiscal sponsor. They also manage several programs that support workforce development and improved food access and nutrition, such as Harvest Kitchen, Farm-to-School, Hope's Harvest and Bonus Bucks, the last of which is a critical healthy incentives program that doubles the purchasing power of SNAP recipients at farmers markets.

Additionally, the site is a model for "smart growth" and sustainable design with a half-acre of publicly accessible space featuring sustainable, native plants surrounding the building, a rooftop solar array and stormwater mitigation.

"As a leader of an organization that took on an \$18 million food systems infrastructure project, I referenced the [Relish Rhody] Plan on a continuous basis with state agencies, municipal leaders, funders and other important decision-makers. The state setting clear priorities for food strategies made the Farm Fresh expansion possible by showing how the state could rally around a project that had multiple food systems impacts. When Farm Fresh was preparing to speak to Commerce Secretary Stefan Pryor in Governor Raimondo's administration, we referenced the alignment of Farm Fresh's development goals with the plan. We were able to show how our project not only advanced the goals of our organization, but how it would be a demonstration of success from the plan.

**Being able to have a plan, and smart folks in government who understand our work was the start of buy-in for major investment and funding in our project."**



Jesse Rye, Executive Director & Local Food System Advocate  
Farm Fresh RI

## Integrated Focus Area 4:

# ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR ALL RHODE ISLANDERS

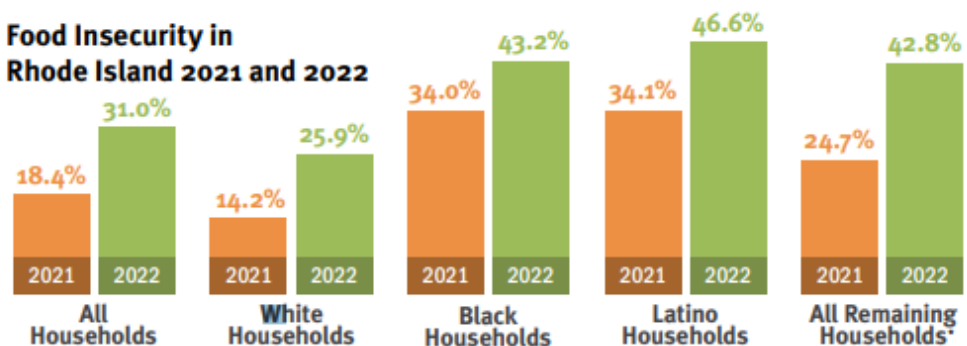
### BACKGROUND

During the pandemic, Rhode Island experienced its highest level of food insecurity recorded in 20 years. According to the 2021 RI Life Index, an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health, 18.4 percent of households were worried about having access to adequate food. Racial and ethnic disparities were evident in access to food, as 34 percent of Black and Latino households were food-insecure compared to 14.2 percent of White households [10]. *While every other New England state showed increased enrollment in federal nutrition programs, Rhode Island's enrollment in SNAP went down and the WIC program remained under-enrolled.* Direct service providers in the state consider enrollment in these programs to be harder than it has ever been despite initiatives meant to streamline the process. On the other hand, administration of national school food programs have been optimal, and advocates are now on a path to instituting free school meals for all students. In addition to this, Rhode Island will be instituting an innovative healthy incentive program as a pilot for SNAP participants to buy fresh produce at supermarkets known as "Eat Well Be Well" through the Department of Human Services in partnership with the Rhode Island Public Health Institute (RIPHI).

### Prioritized 2017 Actions

- Create a statewide hunger elimination task force to lead efforts to reduce food insecurity in Rhode Island to below 10 percent by 2020.
- Maximize participation in federal meal programs
- Reduce transportation barriers to food access
- Reduce the price and increase access to healthful foods across the state
- Support the development of community gardens
- Continue to promote high levels of health and nutrition in public schools and daycare facilities
- Expand partnership with public health advocates
- Encourage healthy workplaces

**Food Insecurity in Rhode Island 2021 and 2022**



Source: RI Community Food Bank "2022 Status Report on Hunger"

\*All remaining households includes Asian, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and more than one race/ethnicity.

## Outcomes

- The Hunger Elimination Taskforce (HETF), a state-led initiative launched in 2017, brings together a network of food access advocates and organizations quarterly to address food access and nutrition security issues.
- The HETF network was crucial in helping the Rhode Island Foundation to conduct outreach to all eligible nonprofit organizations for ARPA support grant funding during the pandemic, which awarded over \$5 million to food access and hunger relief organizations.
- RIDE partnered with the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition and a consulting firm to conduct direct outreach to communities to expand offerings and participation under the School Breakfast Program and Summer Food Service Program. In 2020, the School Breakfast Expansion Toolkit was created to help schools implement innovative service modules that would increase participation in this federal food access program.
- During the pandemic, state agencies, led by Chief of Agriculture Ken Ayars, stood up a weekly call with hunger relief organizations to coordinate emergency relief efforts and navigate federal and state relief efforts.
- DHS contracted with a new SNAP outreach provider, mRelief, which uses texting and online technology resources to help screen individuals and families for potential SNAP eligibility and offer assistance with the application process.
- OHA collaborated with RIDEM in the annual Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program. Unlike previous years, where low-income seniors received vouchers to purchase fresh food at farmers markets, in 2022, 9,578 produce boxes were distributed through local senior centers and senior housing sites. The produce box deliveries were distributed by Farm Fresh Rhode Island to eligible Rhode Island low-income seniors with fresh, local produce.
- OHA contracted with Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island (MOWRI) to implement the Culturally Responsive Home Delivered Meal Program, delivering 5,474 meals to homebound residents who are unable to drive or cook and have no one to assist them with food preparation.
- In 2022 a collaborative partnership between five founding partners and funded by a USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) grant launched the Rhody Feeding Rhody Alliance in 2022, creating supply chain connections between the local emergency feeding system and local farmers and fishers.
- The Center for EcoTechnology partnered with RIDOH to create food donation training materials for grocers to increase wasted food diversion.



Photo Credit - RIFPC

- In 2021 strong advocacy from the Nourish RI Coalition, led by RIPHI, allocated \$11.5 million of state funding, via ARPA funds, to pilot an inaugural healthy incentive program via DHS. The “Eat Well, Be Well Rewards” program will increase consumption of fruit and vegetables through a SNAP reimbursement system at participating grocery retailers.
- Johnson & Wales University, *Relish Rhody*, RIDOH, EPA, and Rhode Island Hospitality Association collaborated to create a tip sheet for donating food as part of The Rhode to End Hunger, an initiative to help divert unused, edible food to organizations that can use it.

## **Health Equity Zones (HEZ): A community-driven approach to wellness**

Since 2015, residents, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, private sector partners, philanthropic donors, and state government leaders across Rhode Island have partnered to support the development of an innovative and novel program called the Health Equity Zones (HEZ) initiative. Each HEZ represents a geographic area where community leaders come together across areas of focus and priorities to break down silos and form collaboratives of diverse partners working together to establish and implement a shared strategic vision for community health and prosperity for their respective communities. Although HEZs were not part of the initial food strategy, these groups have become an important stakeholder group working on the ground to implement the plan. The initiative has grown to 15 HEZs across Rhode Island representing nearly 85 percent of Rhode Island residents. The initiative is supported through the collaboration of more than 300 community-based organizations, more than 1,800 actively engaged residents and leaders representing more than 20 industry sectors operating across the state’s economy.

**The HEZs represent a unique asset for the state. Across all of the HEZs, food access has emerged as a universal priority. Since 2015 the HEZ communities have engaged in a wide range of efforts to improve the food system.**

- During COVID (June 2020 - April 2023) HEZ partners delivered meals 842,098 meals to residents in quarantine and isolation.
- Launched farmers markets to expand access to locally produced, culturally appropriate food in existing community settings.
- Provided community educational opportunities on urban farming, hydroponics, food policy, cooking, healthy eating, and diabetes management and prevention.
- Worked with municipal leaders and vendors to identify food deserts and improve access by developing new points of sale and increasing the availability of fresh, local food.
- Addressed barriers to food access by resolving public transportation barriers through the addition of additional bus routes and stops, and by improving pedestrian and bike routes to key food access points.
- Deployed community food access programs such as SNAP incentives for local food, community refrigerators, expansion of food pantry locations, Food on the Move mobile market, Summer Meals Program, and street outreach to drive demand for fresh, healthy, local food.
- Established food access and food justice policy initiatives to engage residents as leaders in the advancement of a more equitable and just food system.

Root Riders Youth Employment Program | Photo Credit - Aquidneck Community Table

- In 2022, the HETF launched a monthly newsletter, called the RI Food Access Bulletin to keep the network members informed and coordinated. Managed by the RIFPC, the bulletin has 450 subscribers.
- RIDOH and the DFS secured federal funding to hire the state's first Food Access & Equity Program manager to support the HETF and serve as a liaison between the state agencies and community-based organizations involved in nutrition security programs. This built critical capacity to support more interagency coordination for activities which improve food access and food assistance.
- Working with federal partners, DHS issued more than \$144 million in COVID-19 SNAP emergency allotments in 2022.
- Creation of the Rhode Island Emergency and Supplemental Food Site Map and an Emergency and Supplemental Food Delivery Food Guide.
- Due to the challenges provided during COVID, the USDA's definition of food security became unreliable. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank worked with the Brown School of Public Health on getting a more accurate number by conducting a survey, Rhode Island Life Index, of 2,000 households.
- RIDOH successfully completed and launched the Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) Strategic Plan; 2023-2028 which was created with a broad group of partners, including IFNPAC members, to chart the course for healthy eating and physical activity for all Rhode Islanders. The last plan concluded in 2018, after a funding lapse through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## Progress

Collaboration and coordination increased during the past five years across community-based organizations, hunger relief organizations and state agencies, a process accelerated by the pandemic. At the same time, though, the inflationary pressures created during the pandemic led to increases in the cost of food, both in terms of production and retail, as well as major supply chain disruptions. Today, food insecurity is higher than it was pre-pandemic.

In 2022, 1 in 3 Rhode Island households were food insecure, meaning they cannot meet their basic food needs (RI Life Index). Concurrently, the lack of affordable housing in Rhode Island is only exacerbating access issues to basic needs, such as food and shelter, for individuals and families.

Funding for new and existing federal food assistance programs increased during the pandemic; however, the number of Rhode Islanders enrolled in SNAP declined [10]. Service providers would like to see access to federal benefit programs like SNAP and WIC streamlined with simpler, clearer application processes.



Food Access Project | Photo Credit - RIFPC

# Success Story: Strengthening the network of food access and nutrition security advocates

The RI Hunger Elimination Task Force (HETF) was established by the DFS as a working group in 2017 to **develop recommendations and action steps to reduce the state's food insecurity levels to below 10 percent**, a *Relish Rhody* target. The working group was tasked to develop and present a list of recommendations to the Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council in 2018 to advance food security. As part of its *Relish Rhody* implementation partnership with RIDOH and the DFS, the RIFPC has served as facilitator of the HETF since 2021. Today the HETF has continued as a statewide network of food access, nutrition and public health champions guided by the following objectives:

**1 - Leverage and communicate HETF as a key piece of the IFNPAC and the *Relish Rhody* Food strategy.**

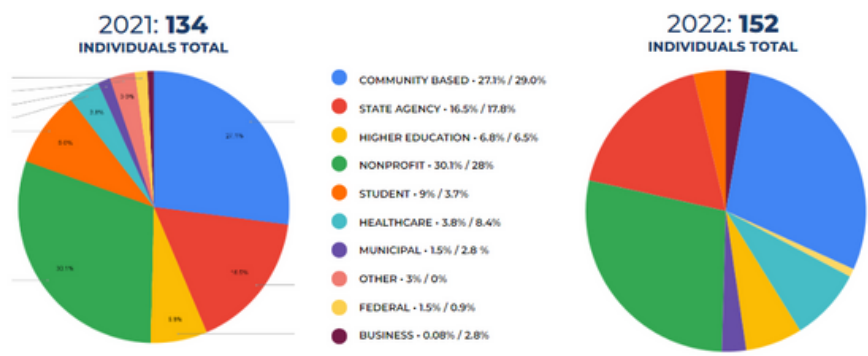
**2 - Improve nutrition security in Rhode Island by identifying and educating decision-makers about solutions that improve food security supply chain logistics such as delivery, storage, processing and aggregation.**

**3 - Develop a centralized and up-to-date statewide source for nutrition security resources, in partnership with frontline task force members, such as food pantry operators and community health workers.**

**4 - Reduce stigma around accessing supplemental nutrition programs by aligning food access more closely with messages of health and chronic disease.**

With 150+ participants, members represent community-based organizations, Health Equity Zones, nonprofits, emergency food providers, food justice and sovereignty advocates, state agency staff, healthcare professionals, students, and many others. Their ongoing coordination supports a variety of food security interventions that include school-based nutrition, community gardens, access to federal nutrition benefit programs, healthy retail incentives, expanded food delivery services, and programs that help purchase locally produced and harvested foods for distribution to underserved communities [11].

**HETF ATTENDANCE 2021 v 2022, BY CATEGORY**



2022 Q4 Hunger Elimination Task Force Meeting

**“Food insecurity in Rhode Island continues to be a front burner public health issue due to the rippling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including inflation, rising gasoline prices and the impending rise in utility costs. Rhode Island families continue to struggle to provide basic needs to their loved ones. HETF continues to bring a diverse mix of leaders across public, private and nonprofit sectors together in order to tackle this issue. It is a forum for sharing best practices, aligning and leveraging those best practices, innovating solutions, recommending policy priorities/solutions and strategizing as a state, in light of these rippling effects.”**

Randi Belhumeur, MS RD, Health Program Administrator,  
Rhode Island Department of Health

## Integrated Focus Area 5:

# MINIMIZE FOOD WASTE AND DIVERT IT FROM THE WASTE STREAM

### BACKGROUND

In the U.S. one third of all food or an estimated 80 million tons goes to waste as uneaten or unsold [12]. Most of the waste is post-consumer from households that throw food away or foodservice/retail outlets. This wastes not only food but money, water, land resources, and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions since food that breaks down in a landfill releases methane. **In Rhode Island food waste and compostable products make up 35 percent of all waste landfilled [13].** Prevention, recovery, and recycling are integral to improving public health and achieving climate action goals.

Rhode Island's 2016 "[Food Waste Ban](#)" mandated that any institution or business generating more than 52 tons per year of organic waste divert waste materials to a compost facility or anaerobic digester within 15 miles or recover waste through another approved recycling method (e.g. used for agricultural purposes). In 2022 the law was expanded to K-12 schools that produce greater than 30 tons per year of organic waste. Exemptions may be granted if there is no composting facility within 15 miles, or if the tipping fees would cost the institution more than landfilling. This was done with the goal of prolonging the lifespan of the state's central landfill, which is projected to reach capacity by 2034, as well as the desire to foster a greener local economy based on harnessing the waste for biogas generation or valuable soil amendments [14]. In fact, according to a 2015 waste characterization study prepared for the RI Resource Recovery Corporation (RIRRC), it was estimated that 165,100 tons (16 percent of tonnage accepted) could be diverted from the landfill through composting or anaerobic digestion.

### Prioritized 2017 Actions

- **Leverage opportunities to reduce food waste at the source.**
- **Connect healthful, potentially wasted food to Rhode Islanders in need.**
- **Provide technical assistance and needs resources to help divert organic waste from the landfill**

### Outcomes

- RIDE and RIDEM strengthened their partnership with the RI Recycling Club to support compliance with the [Food Waste Ban](#) in order to reduce food waste in schools by 50 percent by 2030. The 8 schools currently participating in the program have diverted 55 tons of food waste from the landfill and redistributed 10,000+ pounds of surplus food to those in need.
- Since 2018, a food waste summit hosted at Rhode Island College brings stakeholders together to coordinate food waste efforts across the state and share best practices.
- EPA created maps for Rhode Island showcasing where food waste generated commercially across the state and the options for food waste diversion, helping launch a partnership between RIDEM and CET that would reach businesses impacted by the expanded 15-mile rule.

- From 2017-2022, Rhode Island experienced a 59 percent increase in the number of commercial and institutional customers served according to the Center for EcoTechnology.
- A 2018 pilot program was created to investigate technical assistance opportunities to help large food waste producers track and measure food waste and implement reduction strategies. The DFS partnered with the RI Office of Innovation and Phood Solutions, a source reduction technology, to offer all Rhode Island colleges and universities the opportunity to take advantage software that would allow them to measure and manage their food waste over the course of a semester.
- RIDE and RIDOH partnered to develop [Share Table and Food Waste Guidance for Schools](#) to help schools address food recovery and reduce food waste within school cafeterias.
- In 2017, the DFS participated in the House Committee on Food Waste which led to state funding to RIDEM for technical assistance in implementing the food waste ban.
- In 2022, RIDEM partnered with Commerce, DOA and the RI Resource Recovery Corp. to secure the EPA's Solid Waste Infrastructure & Recycling (SWIFR) grant to update the state's Solid Waste Management Plan and increase technical assistance to waste generators.
- In 2017, a food waste event was hosted in partnership with Johnson & Wales University to explore the opportunities to expand food waste recovery in the hospitality industry (100 attendees).
- The DFS presented to RIDEM and the Office of Energy Resources (OER) on opportunities in renewable natural gas production through anaerobic digestion of food and organic waste following an opportunity to participate in a fact-finding mission to Denmark, hosted by the Danish Trade Council.
- In 2022, RIDEM made progress with streamlining the existing rules for the permitting of organic waste processing facilities, and implemented new rules for innovative processing systems proposed by the business community.
- Earth Care Farm in Charlestown has long been the only commercial-scale compost facility in the state. In 2018, owner and farmer, Jayne Merner Sencal, was able to participate in the 10,000 Small Businesses Program and expand her operation to also include retail bags of compost. Since then, Earth Care Farm has significantly expanded its composting infrastructure to support more food waste diversion and create rich organic soil for sale in the process.
- In 2017, with support from the USDA, Center for EcoTechnology (CET) created a food waste marketplace assessment based on successes, challenges and opportunities. Since this initial funding, CET was able to secure grants to continue providing technical assistance to businesses across the state, resulting in 400,000+ pounds of food diverted from disposal. This funding includes assistance to develop local composting and food waste hauling industries.
- In 2018, The Compost Plant received a Commerce Innovation Voucher to test different compost recipes. They have since opened a food waste hauling and processing center in Providence, significantly increased waste diversion from the central landfill.



## Progress

There continues to be more awareness of and funding to support wasted food solutions, particularly in regard to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building soil health. Over the last few years Rhode Island has seen rapid growth in food recovery organizations such as Rescuing Leftover Cuisine and more technical assistance to businesses on how to recover and divert wasted food thanks to support from CET. However, there remains significant regulatory, financial, cultural and infrastructure barriers that prevent residential and commercial composting and source reduction. More composting infrastructure, especially commercial digester facilities, is needed in the state.

### **SUCCESS STORY: *Stopping food waste upstream through farm-based food recovery - Hope's Harvest***

Hope's Harvest started in 2018 as Rhode Island's first gleaning project. Founder, Eva Agudelo, credits *Relish Rhody* in its origin story:

**"In reviewing the strategy as part of my work with the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, I noticed that while addressing food waste was a focus area, the strategy didn't speak to farm-based food recovery, which I had experience with in previous roles. Knowing that food waste was an important part of the state's strategy added weight to my hypothesis that a gleaning program would be welcome and needed in the state."**



The program has grown to include not only farm-based food recovery, but also expands markets for local growers via an emergency food system arm. To date, Hope's Harvest has recovered nearly 630,000 pounds of fresh produce from more than 20 local farms and has donated food to 48 hunger relief agencies. With the commitment of more than 700 volunteers contributing more than 4,900 hours, agency partners have been able to serve more than 35,000 individuals per month with the fruits (and vegetables). In 2022, Hope's Harvest became a program of Farm Fresh RI and aims to increase food rescued each year [15].



# WHERE WE STAND NOW:

## *Insights and Lessons Learned*

In perspective-gathering for this report, key informants were asked to provide the food-related priorities, gaps and opportunities they think require continued or increased attention in the coming years, as well as what they consider to be current strengths of Rhode Island's food system.



## CURRENT STRENGTHS

### 1. Environment & People:

- A diversity of agricultural and seafood products are cultivated in Rhode Island thanks to a variety of natural landscapes, conscious food consumers, small diversified farms and a robust commercial port in Galilee that supports a thriving commercial fishing industry.
- Passionate farmers, fishers and food makers who want to be responsible stewards of our land and waters and provide safe, healthy foods to their respective communities.

### 2. Connectivity & Collaborative Spirit:

- Well-networked organizations with a lot of experience in the space working together towards common goals.
- Willingness of state employees to engage in work at community level.
- Activated and engaged partners across academia, nonprofits, industry and government.
- RIDEM is an instrumental partner agency and supportive of collaborative efforts around building a better statewide food system - including having a DFS, a strategic plan, the IFNPAC and HETF structures and collaborative efforts around building a better statewide food system

### 3. Location & Size:

- Our small size allows ease in accessibility to each of the major players in the food system, driving collaboration, connections and the advancement of common goals.
- Within a day's drive of 60 million consumers and a \$4 trillion economic corridor, Rhode Island is well-positioned to increase local and regional food consumption as a hub for food manufacturing and distribution as well as its coastal resources that provide abundant and sustainable seafood proteins.

### 4. Forward-thinking:

- Rhode Island is leading on addressing the climate crisis with aggressive climate policy and renewable energy goals such as the Act on Climate 2021 and goals for 100 percent renewable energy by 2050.
- As one of the only states with a Director of Food Strategy and one of eighteen with a state-led food system plan, Rhode Island punches above its weight.
- Rhode Island is home to nationally recognized institutions and organizations for their leadership in culinary arts, sustainability and food systems innovation, such as Brown University, URI's Sea Grant, Johnson & Wales University, Farm Fresh RI, Southside Community Land Trust, and Hope & Main.

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

**External shocks to the food system are far from theoretical. They are part of our recent history and certain to be part of our near future. Since 2017, the food system has undergone important shifts at all levels, revealing that global, national and regional events all have the potential to reverberate through Rhode Island's food system.**

These disruptions in the food system have been identified at the state, regional and national level and have helped drive increased federal funding for food system resiliency. Under the Biden Administration, the USDA's Food System Transformation framework has created unprecedented funding opportunities for state agencies and regional coalitions in sustaining local, equitable, climate-smart and economically vibrant food systems. Likewise, efforts such as the New England Planning Partnership have increased regional data collection, planning and coordination to bolster local food production and consumption in the Northeast.

The new context of food systems work reflects these conditions and more:

- RI's food economy generates almost \$12 billion in economic activity; however, its benefits are not evenly distributed, leaving small, beginning and minority food producers and entrepreneurs with limited access to land, capital and technical assistance.
- The pandemic permanently shifted consumer behaviors, and supply chain disruptions changed many food market dynamics.
- The impacts of climate change and a warming planet have created a new urgency for developing climate-smart food system policies.
- The murder of George Floyd fueled a powerful social movement to address racism and inequities throughout American society – including the food system.
- In 2022, the cost of food reached a 40-year high and federal pandemic supports like boosted SNAP benefits and school meal waivers expired at a time when low-income families are still struggling to meet basic needs.
- Effects of pandemic disruptions combined with pre-existing economic conditions has exacerbated food security with one in three Rhode Island households with children lacking adequate food (2022).
- Leadership changes in 2021 and 2022 led to staffing gaps and transition costs as Governor Daniel McKee succeeded Governor Gina Raimondo. Since 2017 all three backbone agencies that support the Food Strategy have new directors, as well as a new Director of Food Strategy.



## LOOKING AHEAD:

### *RI Food Strategy 2030*

This moment presents an inflection point to inventory progress in Rhode Island's food system, reflect on lessons learned and start the process to identify new goals and meaningful actions toward 2030. Looking ahead, specific gaps and opportunities that stakeholders would like to see prioritized in the *RI Food Systems Planning for 2030* include those described below.



*Tour of Urban Edge Farm, state-owned land  
stewarded by Southside Community Land Trust*

## GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### **Racial inequities and health disparities in the food system:**

The first Food Strategy did not go far enough to address racial inequities in the food system or to acknowledge the food sovereignty rights and engage with leaders of the Narragansett Indian Tribe or other indigenous perspectives. There are still large disparities across diet-related diseases, food insecurity, access to land and water, and access to capital for businesses along with training and education. As of June 2022, one in three households were food insecure, of which a disproportionately higher percent were Black or Latino households (RI Life Index 2022). The next phase of planning should support development across the food system in a way that builds economic opportunities and food sovereignty for Black, Brown and Indigenous communities.

### **Gaps in support for second-stage food businesses:**

Rhode Island has seen rapid growth in food entrepreneurs and starts-ups thanks to incubators like Hope & Main, Town Made, Social Enterprise Greenhouse and RI Hub. There has also been a growth in urban and small farmers and shellfish farmers. However, as food businesses grow, there is increased demand for co-manufacturing infrastructure, access to flexible and patient capital and the need for more market channels in order to reach more regional and national consumers.

### **Underinvestment in farmland viability and food solutions to climate change:**

While there has been a growth in new and beginning farmers over the last five years, Rhode Island is rapidly losing farmland and working waterfronts while the cost of production and labor continues to grow for food producers. However, the future is uncertain. Rhode Island has the highest cost of farmland in the country, the surface temperature of the Narragansett Bay has increased 2.5-2.9°F from 1960-2010 and sea levels have risen more than 10 inches since 1930 [16]. Farmers and fishers are facing more extreme weather events which are impacting our food production capacity in the region as well as the parts of the country which we rely on for the vast majority of our food. This puts us in a vulnerable position for future supply chain disruptions and must be addressed in the next phase of planning.

## PRIORITIES FOR THE 2030 PLANNING PROCESS

The current process underway to renew Rhode Island's statewide food strategy for 2030 provides an important opportunity to bring it into alignment with current social, political and environmental realities. Most notable to those reflecting on the first version of *Relish Rhody* was that it did not include any meaningful strategies to address racial equity and climate change through the food system. Additionally, the limited capacity to measure and track progress against priorities made it challenging to understand its impact and empirically what worked and what did not.

***"My biggest disappointment was that Relish Rhody 1.0 didn't address racial equity as a priority and spoke sparingly about climate change."***

*- Food System Stakeholder*

### ***Themes and focuses identified for the 2030 planning process:***

*Summarized from key stakeholder interviews and surveys.*

#### **→ Prioritize Nutrition Security & Climate Change**

- Address food insecurity by centering on nutrition security - expanding access to healthy, nutritionally dense, fresh, locally produced and culturally appropriate foods for all Rhode Islanders.
- Increase participation in federal nutrition programs (e.g., SNAP for qualifying consumers to buy healthy, local food from farmers).
- Identify opportunities to mitigate food industry emissions and climate risks in Rhode Island and support food, farm and seafood businesses to adapt to a rapidly changing climate.
- Raise profile of the profound effect wasted food has on greenhouse gas emissions.
- Create more compost and build healthy soils.

#### **→ Invest in Middle of the Supply Chain Infrastructure**

- More holistic and robust focus on composting infrastructure and processing solutions for beneficial uses (e.g. mussel shells as fertilizer, anaerobic digestion, etc).
- More and consistent investment in technical assistance and grants for businesses to divert wasted food from the landfill in support of the EPA and USDA waste reduction goals of 50 percent by 2030.
- Better supports for second-stage and growing companies which lack sufficient resources (technical assistance, infrastructure and access to capital) to grow.

#### **→ Promote and Encourage Conditions for Community Food Sovereignty**

- Support communities with place-based solutions that decentralize and diversify food systems to meet the unique needs of each community.
- Acknowledge and address the critical importance of food sovereignty for the state's Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and Tribal communities.

#### **→ Leverage Shared Regional Assets and Efforts**

- Put more focus on land preservation, especially in urban and tourist-heavy settings.
- Secure +funding for RIDOH's Statewide Physical Activity and Nutrition Program ([SPAN](#)).
- Work collaboratively with regional partners such as New England Feeding New England to build regional food resilience.

### → Support Targeted Policy & Incentives to Achieve Goals

- Incentives to increase institutional purchasing from farmers and/or local producers.
- Incentivize consumers to buy locally grown/produced food. The cost of farming in Rhode Island is higher due to extremely high land costs and high costs of living. It is hard to make a living and pay fair wages when competing with produce grown using unfair labor practices out west.
- Look to successful policy models to implement more solutions to wasted food and more funding for businesses and technical assistance providers to address wasted food at all levels.

### → Grow More Food, Affordably and Sustainably

- Develop “smart growth” strategies and technologies to grow more food on a shrinking land-base.
- Protect and utilize existing farmland with prime soil for growing food, reaching a broader audience with regard to markets and CSA programs.
- Increase access and affordability of locally grown and fresh foods to low- and moderate-income households, beyond seasonal and high cost farmers market prices.
- Continue to strengthen local food pathways into institutions, hunger relief and other avenues that increase food security for vulnerable Rhode Islanders, while also ensuring sustainable livelihoods for producers and anyone involved in harvesting, preparing and distributing food.
- Expand access to community gardens and urban/semi-urban agriculture lands.
- Help small farmers access new markets that pay a fair price.
- More and better access to capital for food producers along with ongoing consumer education to inform the buying consumer about the implications of national food policy and politics. (e.g. What does the Farm Bill really fund?)

### → Center Equity and Inclusion in the Food System

- Acknowledge and address racial inequities in the food system in a more explicit and targeted way.
- Focus on food solutions for the most vulnerable populations.
- Ensure that those communities most affected by inequalities and injustice participate fully in creating the plans to address and ultimately eliminate those inequalities.
- Develop incentives to increase local production and make regionally sourced foods competitive in price with commodities for consumers so that local food is not a privilege for only a few.
- More attention to climate resiliency, land access and preservation and racial equity.

### → Strengthen Collaboration across Government and Private Sector

- RIDEM, RIDOH and RI Commerce are key partners in implementing food system change and they all have pockets of strength and pockets of weakness. We need to continue working on those, as well as working on building better support within our General Assembly.
- Relationships and collaboration with industry partners remain weak in many areas. Real food system change requires that key industry partners are at the table.
- More overall support for food businesses that are beyond the startup phase and/or are considered too large to be categorized as small businesses.

## THE NEXT PHASE: PLANNING FOR 2030

**Updating the state food strategy with goals set for 2030 presents an opportunity to build on the momentum of the first five years and embrace the ongoing and new challenges facing the food system in a time of rapid transformation.**

The *RI Food Systems Planning for 2030* development process will be led by the DFS and the Project Steering Committee. Over the next year we will research and engage stakeholders across the food system as well as food-adjacent organizations and partners. As part of this process, an Advisory Board of approximately 30 representatives will provide diverse and important perspectives on the planning process to:

- Represent stakeholders or organizations impacted by the food system.
- Provide subject matter expertise for the 2030 priorities.
- Support issue brief development.
- Serve as ambassadors for the state's food strategy.

Timing of this initiative coincides with the release of the new report by [New England Feeding New England](#), an initiative of the New England State Food System Planners Partnership to assess a nearer-term milestone of the [New England Food Vision](#), or what it would take for New England to produce 30 percent of what New Englanders consume within the six-state region by 2030 (called the 30 x 30 goal). This offers Rhode Island food system partners the chance to develop the next set of *Relish Rhody* objectives with improved grounding in its regional role. This is also an exciting time to align a 2030 food strategy with regional efforts and parallel state planning efforts underway:

- [Rhode Island Climate Strategy 2025](#) as mandated by the [2021 Act on Climate](#) legislation
- [Update of the Healthy Eating & Active Living \(HEAL\) Program](#) led by the Rhode Island Department of Health
- Comprehensive [Economic Development Strategy](#) led by Rhode Island Commerce
- [Rhode Island Farm to School Network Action Plan](#) led by Rhode Island Department of Education
- Rhode Island [Healthy Eating and Active Living: 2023-2028 Strategic Plan](#)
- Comprehensive [Solid Waste Management Plan 2038](#) led by Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
- [Rhode Island 2030: Charting a Course for the Future of the Ocean State](#) working document led by the Governor's Office

## **GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A 2030 RHODE ISLAND FOOD STRATEGY:**

- *How might we deepen integration of food systems with other public planning efforts at the state and municipal level?*
- *How do we move forward in a way that addresses racial and economic inequities toward a more inclusive plan that elevates the perspective of traditionally underrepresented groups, including BIPOC and indigenous perspectives such as the Narragansett Indian Tribe, Mashpee and Wampanoag Tribes?*
- *How do we ensure that our actions mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change and more extreme weather events?*
- *What have we learned about building more resilient food-based supply chains? What are the areas where Rhode Island and New England remain the most vulnerable? Where are the areas of potential high growth?*
- *What role will Rhode Island play in achieving the “30 x 30” goal of New England Feeding New England towards regional resiliency?*
- *How can Rhode Island better support equitable and affordable access to local and healthy foods?*
- *What lessons can we take into the 2030 planning process to ensure that previously underrepresented organizations and communities benefit?*
- *What emerging trends need to be elevated or prioritized as we look toward 2030?*
- *How and when should we measure and track impact? Who is responsible for implementation and evaluation?*
- *Which perspectives and communities need to be elevated and more meaningfully considered in RI Food Systems Planning for 2030 process?*
- *How can we better assist and help scale the food producers and processors, farmers and fishers in Rhode Island, the majority of whom are small businesses?*

There will be many opportunities to learn more about this project and participate. Visit [www.relishrhody.com](http://www.relishrhody.com) to opt-in to communications so as not to miss a chance to lend your voice and insights to the planning effort.

## GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

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**ARPA:** American Rescue Plan Act

**BIPOC:** Black Indigenous & People of Color

**DOA:** Rhode Island Department of Administration

**CACFP:** Child and Adult Care Food Program

**DOC:** Rhode Island Department of Corrections

**DFS:** Director of Food Strategy

**DHS:** Rhode Island Department of Human Services

**EDA:** United States Economic Development Agency

**EOHHS:** Executive Office of Health and Human Services

**HETF:** Hunger Elimination Task Force

**HEZ:** Health Equity Zone Initiative

**IFNPAC:** Interagency Food and Nutrition Policy Advisory Council

**LASA:** Local Agriculture and Seafood Act Grants Program

**NOAA:** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

**OHA:** Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging

**RICC:** Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

**RICFB:** Rhode Island Community Food Bank

**RIDE:** Rhode Island Department of Education

**RIDEM:** Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

**RIDOH:** Rhode Island Department of Health

**RIFPC:** Rhode Island Food Policy Council

**RIPHI:** Rhode Island Public Health Institute

**SNAP:** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture


## CONTRIBUTORS

**Eva Agudelo**, Farm Fresh Rhode Island 

**Sarah Amin**, University of Rhode Island 

**Sue AnderBois**, Providence City Council (first Rhode Island Director of Food Strategy)


**Patrick Baur**, University of Rhode Island 

**Cristina Cabrera**, Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group 

**Luca Carnevale**, Hope & Main 


**Maria Cimini**, Office of healthy Aging

**Kerri Connolly**, RI Public Health Institute 

**Dan Costa**, RI Department of Environmental Management 

**Azure Cygler**, URI Coastal Resources Center 

**David Dadekian**, Eat Drink RI 


**Margaret DeVos**, Southside Community Land Trust 

**Traci Dufresne**, RI Hospitality Association 


**Catherine Feeney**, Center for Food Protection, Rhode Island Department of Health

**Chelsea Gazillo**, American Farmland Trust 



**Greg Gerritt**, ProsperityForRI.com

**Roberta Groch**, Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning 


**Bevan Linsley**, Aquidneck Community Table 

**Maggie Longo**, RI Small Business Development Center 

**Caitlin Mandel**, RI Department of Education


**Coryanne Mansell**, Center for EcoTechnology   
Vernon Martin, Kinfolk Benefit Trust 

**Fred Mattera**, Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island

**Terrence McNamara**, RI Department of Corrections 


**Angel Mendez**, Red Tomato Food Hub

**Allison Montagnon**, Rhode Island Food Policy Council

**Jessica Patroliia**, Rhode Island Department of Education 

**Jennifer Pereira**, Rhode Island Foundation 

**Lisa Raiola**, Hope & Main


**Nessa Richman**, Rhode Island Food Policy Council 

**Kelli Roberts**, Roots Farm

**Jesse Rye**, Farm Fresh Rhode Island 

**Kate Sayles**, RI Land Trust Council 

**Andrew Schiff**, Rhode Island Community Food Bank


**Sarah Schumann**, Shining Sea Fisheries Consulting/Commercial Fisheries Center RI 

**Dana Siles**, Rescuing Leftover Cuisine 

**Betsy Skoda**, Health Care Without Harm 

**Amy Smith**, Local Patch

**Dinalyn Spears**, Narragansett Indian Tribe 

**Rachel Stancil**, East Bay Community Action Program 

**Rocky Steeves**, Aquidneck Farms

**Heather Strout**, MLK Community Center

**Karen Voci**, Harvard Pilgrim Health Foundation 

**Amy Voigt**, University of Rhode Island

 Member of the RI Food Systems Planning for 2030 Advisory Board

# ENDNOTES

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