

The Local Food Movement: from Maine to Washington, DC

By Congresswoman Chellie Pingree

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I appreciate all of you being here to talk about the future of food and farming in our country and I'm thrilled to be able to have a chance to be part of your conversation for a little while. I know you all do interesting work either in or out of DC and it's great to have so many brilliant minds thinking about these issues.

I'm relatively new to Congress -- only a "sophomore" Member. That said, I'm not new to politics and I am not new to agriculture.

I was first elected to the State Legislature in the 1990s and I served on the Maine Agriculture Committee in 1993. During that session, we were discussing banning Bovine Growth Hormone, irradiated food and genetic engineering -- and you can imagine they were very controversial. We were also very concerned about hanging on to our dairy farms in Maine. Half of them disappeared in that decade alone.

I am new to the House Agriculture Committee and thrilled to be there to write a new Farm Bill. As some of you may know, there are four new members on the Committee from the New England. It is our hope that we will provide a little bit of regional interest for some of the things that we're interested in. This includes Jim McGovern from Massachusetts, who's long worked on hunger and food policy, Joe Courtney, who represents many of the dairy farmers on Connecticut, and Peter Welch, who, of course, comes from a state where people care very deeply about local foods and local farming, and already have given a lot of attention to that movement in their state.

As to my own personal history, I am not at all new to agriculture and farming -- even in my family history. Although I represent the State of Maine, I was actually born in Minnesota. (I can say "yeah sure, you betcha" like the rest of them.) My grandparents were all Scandinavian immigrants: half Swedish, half Norwegian. My grandfather had a dairy farm in Kenyon, Minnesota, and my cousin is still farming there today.

In 1971 I was one of many people who moved to the East Coast and became part what was a big "in-migration" in Maine. Being a part of that era helped to shape my ideas about food and farming. I was a student at College of the Atlantic, which is a very small environmental school, and I was lucky enough to study there with Elliot Coleman, one of the early gurus of today's organic farming movement. I was an early part of MOFGA -- the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association -- and started their apprenticeship program, because I, myself wanted to be a farm apprentice.

I started my own farm back in the 1970s when I was first married and raising children. I had two acres of vegetables, and we sold milk and eggs right off the farm. I learned to slaughter every possible kind of animal (which is a helpful skill in politics). I learned to sell and market direct from the farm in a time when there were far fewer rules and regulations.

As my family grew, I got into the sheep and wool business. This was a great opportunity for me to have a value added on-farm business. We had the wool spun into yarn, and then created a business selling yarn, hand knit sweaters, and knitting kits around the country. Eventually this became my primary business selling to 1200 stores, 100,000 catalogues and employing 10 people in my tiny year round community -- all using the charm of Maine farming to market a locally

grown and produced product to distant markets.

In 40 years a lot has changed. For me, the good news is that what was once seen as a fringe “back to the land movement” now has become “the local food movement” and is one of the fastest growing parts of the American economy.

I’m lucky enough to have started a new farm in recent years with my husband. I also added it to a business I have owned for years, an inn and restaurant in my community. We are rebuilding a 200 hundred year old farm, selling vegetables, goat cheese and meat at our own farm stand and the local farmers market, and feeding our local products to the over one hundred people a night in the summer who eat at our restaurant. People come primarily because they’re very enthusiastic about eating food that was raised locally. We raise vegetables, our own beef, chicken, turkey, eggs, and make goat cheese on the farm. It’s been a great business for us, great for our community, and a great generator of jobs in our island community.

In Maine we’re proud to say that the average age of our farmers is bucking the trend and going down. More women and minorities are getting into farming. The amount of land in our state under cultivation is finally going up. We’re seeing more farms being created every day. And we have wonderful institutions that support some of that. The Maine Farmland Trust helps put aging farmers who want to leave the land together with young farmers who want to move on to the land, often using conservation easements to keep it in production. The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association is known nationwide for its work, and continues to have an apprenticeship program and a journeyman program so people can learn more as they get into farming. MOFGA also hosts one of the best agricultural fairs, The Common Ground Fair, every fall, which attracts tens of thousands of people from all over Maine and New England to learn about traditional farming, organic and sustainable techniques, and to enjoy some of the best food you could ever eat at a fair – all grown organically.

Farmers markets are growing and expanding. In some locations they have gotten so big that communities are adding a second farmers market to fit all the farmers. We are working to make it easier to use EBT cards to purchase fresh and locally grown food, and working with organizations like Wholesome Wave to help low income people to get even more healthy food. The Land for Maine’s Future Program allows for the protection of even more farmland in Maine and works with many partners to do that. Even our relatively conservative, newly elected, Republican governor has supported a variety of farming initiatives, including the purchase and expansion of an old school, “Good Will-Hinckley,” which will train young people to work on the land as farmers.

This conversation regarding local food resonates virtually everywhere. As a part of my role as a Member of Congress, I speak to many, many different groups and organizations about a variety of topics. I find—it doesn’t matter if I’m talking to a group of teachers, real estate agents, or members of credit unions if I bring up the topic of locally grown foods, healthy school lunches, or promoting farming, people brighten right up, people nod their heads with enthusiasm and want to know more. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Republican or Democrat, I find people are very interested in making sure we have policies that will ensure they can purchase their food locally, that will eliminate the toxics in their foods, and will serve healthy foods to their children in schools.

Although most of my experience has been in the State of Maine, these trends are evident around the country. People’s increasing interest in healthy, locally grown food has had an effect on the market.

For example:

The National Restaurant Association said that locally grown produce and locally sourced meats are the hottest trends for 2011. We certainly find that in the restaurants in Maine – from local diners to those with white tablecloths. When tourists come to Maine, much of their excitement is based on eating local lobsters and clams and they are happy to learn that many of the vegetables and cheeses on menu are produced locally.

Farmers markets, as we know, are growing nationally. The Union of Concerned Scientists recently conducted a study that found that there are currently 7,000 nationwide up 150% from the year 2000. According to the Food Institute, overall sales in the grocery industry is up 1.8%, but organic sales are up 4.4%. Clearly, this is where a lot of growth in food markets is occurring. Two polls were recently conducted on these issues, the first one done by an industry group, and the second by an environmental foundation – both showed that three-fourths of the people surveyed wanted to know how their food was grown, and healthy food was a top priority. Further, 70% said that shopping decisions were affected by how their food was grown and raised. They want to know if there are chemicals and pesticides, if they're grown in a sustainable way, and many, many people want to support local farmers. They understand the idea that supporting a locally raised product means that you are helping somebody with a job, keeping a family in your community and their land open and available.

Many large food companies have purchased smaller businesses that are organic or have sustainable practices. Dean Foods owns Silk, the soy milk company. General Mills owns Cascadian Hills Farms, and Kraft Foods owns Boca Burger. We know that big food companies are making it clear that they believe that there is a market out there and they want to make sure they are involved with it.

Wal-Mart has done some very interesting things. Let me say, I know there are often questions that are raised about the business practices of Wal-Mart, and I understand. I was on the “Wal-Mart Watch” board at one time, so I know that there are many concerns about food giants and big box stores, but it's still interesting to observe how they participating in this trend.

In 2006, Wal-Mart decided to double the amount of organic offerings they had in their stores; from dry foods, to dairy, to produce, and now they've gone beyond that, making a great commitment to buying food locally. They have a program they call the “Heritage Agriculture Program” which purchases produce from farms within a day's drive of their warehouses rather than buying the same product that would require several days shipping from California or Florida. Nothing against California or Florida, of course, but just the idea that more of our food could be sourced locally, putting fewer miles on the truck, less carbon in the environment, and arriving fresher to the consumer. And this change in policy is coming from the largest retailer of groceries in America today.

I say all that to say that I'm not just making this stuff up as a hippie “back-to-the-lander” from the 1970s in Maine. It is clear in our country that whether it is the consumers who are doing the shopping, or the companies that are recognizing what's out there of interest in the market, there is a huge demand and interest in our country today for growing more of our own food, procuring more locally, and whether it's sustainable or organic, consumers want to know where it came from and what's in it.

I come from one of the most rural states in the nation. Although we are in the Northeast, an

intensely populated region of our country, Maine has a tremendous number of small communities, and it makes a big difference when a dairy farm has to shut down, or a local vegetable grower goes out of business. The loss of every farm takes away jobs from our communities. It is the end of families whose children no longer attend the local school, support the local church, shop at the local retailer. When too many farms go out of business in a town, we lose the tractor dealer, the local diner and grocer. It has a tremendous negative impact on our ability to make sure that everyone in our communities is well fed.

We have more and more schools in Maine who are taking advantage of the opportunity to buy more foods locally. I visited several of them, and I can tell you every time I sit down in one of those schools where the kids have a little garden outside – I meet lots of young people enthusiastic about eating their vegetables.

In South Berwick, Maine, the elementary school students have a greenhouse and garden, at Longfellow Elementary school in Portland, Maine, they cultivate vegetables in what was once a paved lot. Sometimes the carrot on their plate isn't the same one that necessarily grew in the backyard, but because the students have now had the experience of planting the seeds, watering and harvesting a bright orange fresh carrot, they're just that much more likely to eat it. When I visited the students at the Bonnie Eagle Middle School, where they grow vegetables year round in a passive solar greenhouse, they were having sautéed kale with garlic and proudly showed me what was on their plate before they gladly gobbled it up. It not only means that they are eating healthier meals at school, but it means that they are taking these lessons home to their parents, and asking them, "Can we go to the grocery store and get some kale?" And their mother might say, "...and what was kale again?" In some families they might not even have a steamer in the house, or know how to cook many fresh foods, but now parents are being encouraged by their children – and often returning meals to a healthy family activity. All of those things are wonderful to encourage when we talk about the increases in childhood obesity, the growing number of people suffering from long term diseases, and so many other significant and costly wellness issues in our culture. So as I said, healthier school lunches, buying and growing locally seems to me like it's a no brainer.

I am thrilled to be on the House Agriculture Committee at a time when we're discussing the opportunities to put more local food on Americans' plates. We are working with a whole variety of people-some in this room, along with some of our colleagues in Congress-to introduce a local food title to the Farm Bill. Our goal is primarily to put some of these ideas together so that they get discussed in a way that we are all able use the widespread interest in healthy food to motivate changes. As much as anything else, we are really trying to find more ways to ensure that agricultural policy reflects what's actually going on out there in the market place and in many of our communities.

Some of our interest is focusing on what consumers have shown us, encouraging small and medium sized farmers, and supporting larger farms that grow food locally. One of the big challenges today is that we've lost a lot of the infrastructure and some of the distribution networks. We can grow a lot of crops very well in Maine, but except for a few products such as blueberries and potatoes, we aren't hooked into the distribution networks to get the food to the population centers just down the road, in Boston or in New York. We're working on that in our home state but there's a lot that needs to be rebuilt.

Local slaughterhouses are a huge issue that we talk about all the time. Many small farmers like me, don't do custom slaughtering on the farm. We take our animals to a USDA-inspected slaughterhouse so we can serve it in the restaurant and sell it across state lines. But the space is

tight—in fact, when our baby pigs get a start in life, we have to sign them up immediately for a space at the slaughterhouse as if it were some sort of exclusive kindergarten. If they're going to have a place at "freezer camp," as we call it, we need to reserve it months in advance, because the pressure on those slaughterhouses is so great – particularly because the businesses that use organic techniques or will process our meat in a way that we are interested in selling to our customers are so limited. The investment to start a new one is difficult.

There are more and more young people who want to farm. I joke that kids go to Ivy League colleges and upon graduation ask "where can I sign up to work on a farm." And its true, people are moving to Maine with great entrepreneurial ideas about a crop they can grow, and maybe turn it into a value-added product or market it around the country.

We can do more. We can do more to help allow widespread use of EBT readers and smart phones at the farmers markets, and to make it easier for farmers to sell their product and for people of low income to purchase it, increase funding for many of the value added producer grants and specialty crop block grants. We can also provide food safety training for young farmers, new farmers, and small farms who want or need to revise their practices. We need to expand the number of commercial "community kitchens" --kitchens that people can use for a few hours during the week to process their products without having to invest in the entire infrastructure on their farm, making it possible for them sell then on a bigger vista.

There are challenges ahead. I join many of my colleges on both sides of the aisle who are concerned about the impact the actions of the "Super Committee" will have on funding for agriculture. I am worried about how the budget process is going to be laid out and how it is going to impact the 2012 Farm Bill.

There are some things we already know that are cause for concern: agricultural programs have been cut disproportionately compared to other aspects of federal funding. There have been significant cuts in the past and many critical programs are vulnerable -- rural development, nutrition and conservation.

These are the programs that help young farmers--that help a farmer build a hoop house on a farm that could sell produce a few more months out of the year. That helps with building a creamery for a small goat dairy.

I have had the good fortune, as you can see, of working on a farm much of my life. I have farming in my DNA and in my life experience. I have the good fortune to live in a state where no one grows up too far from their grandmother's or neighbor's garden. We are still in a place where people have the opportunity to grow our farms, to rebuild our infrastructure, and to build on this momentum--all that in spite of the fact that we are 38th in per-capita income, we are the oldest state in the nation, and our resources are very, very limited.

I see a Local Foods Title as a jobs bill, an environmental bill, a healthy foods bill, and as critical part of our health care system. It supports what is currently happening in the marketplace and funds what is desperately needed in our economy and culture. And it's one of those great policies that we can work on together and across party lines. It includes people of all ages, demographics and backgrounds. We all eat, we all care about where our food comes from. We care deeply about staying healthy and keeping our kids and grandchildren healthy.

I know we have a huge mission in front of us. I am not naïve. I have worked on many political issues and volatile issues, and I know these things come to blows in areas that you never expect.

But I am hoping we can continue to build a broad base of support as we take the opportunity to look at the new Farm Bill, we can support the things that consumers are counting on us to do, and communities hope deeply that we can do, and make it part of our future mission.

Thank you very much for having me. Thank you for all the work that all of you are doing.