

INSTITUTIONAL PROCUREMENT OF LOCAL FOOD: CONNECTICUT POLICY SNAPSHOT

This snapshot is part of a six-state series exploring demand-side policies in New England that support public institutions' ability to increase purchases of local food. These **snapshots**, links to **resources**, a **regional report** with comparative findings and recommendations, a **database** and **scan** of all policies discussed, and other related information can be found on [FINE's policy page](#). These documents are current as of May 2019.

KEY STATE LAWS AND INITIATIVES:

- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 4a-51](#): Establishes a **state agency purchasing preference** where state agencies must prefer local dairy products, poultry, eggs, beef, pork, lamb, farm-raised fish, fruits, or vegetables in bids when the in-state products are comparable in cost to out-of-state products.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 4a-57](#): Establishes a **small purchase threshold** for state agencies that simplifies bidding requirements for purchases of \$50,000 or less, and waives the competitive bidding process for purchases of \$10,000 or less.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-215d](#): Requires an amendment to **school nutrition standards** to facilitate purchases from local farmers and in furtherance of the farm to school program.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-215j](#): Establishes a **school purchasing preference** that requires food service management companies responding to a request for proposal (RFP) from a school board of education to include information in their bid demonstrating consistency with the Connecticut Farm to School Program and purchases from local farmers. When choosing among equal bids, boards of education must give preference to bids that facilitate purchases from local farmers.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 22-38a](#): Establishes a **Connecticut-Grown Certification** program to help consumers, including institutions, identify locally produced products.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 22-38d](#): Establishes a **farm to school program** within the Department of Agriculture and creates the **Connecticut-Grown for Connecticut Kids Week**. Requires consultation with the Department of Education, and that outreach and training be provided to schools to support local purchasing.
- [Conn. Gen. Stat. § 22-456](#): Establishes a state **food policy council** tasked with developing a state food policy and revising and commenting on any proposed food policy-related legislation or regulations.

KEY PLAYERS:

In Connecticut, institutional procurement of local food is advanced by institutions, nonprofits, and government entities. The [Connecticut State Department of Education](#) (CSDE), along with the [Connecticut Department of Agriculture](#) (DOAG), are the primary government entities involved in local procurement. These two agencies are joined by [UConn Extension](#), [FoodCorps](#), the [New England Dairy & Food Council](#), and others on the [Connecticut Farm to School Collaborative](#) to strengthen farm to school procurement and other activities across the state. On the local level, there are many community-based nonprofits helping to boost farm to school programming, including: [Green Village Initiative](#) in Bridgeport, [Hartford Food System](#), [Common Ground](#) in New Haven, and [FRESH New London](#). The [University of Connecticut](#)'s self-operated dining service program makes a consistent and concerted effort to source food locally, and the legislatively established [Connecticut Food Policy Council](#) meets monthly to discuss advancing a cohesive state food policy.

BACKGROUND ON LOCAL PROCUREMENT INITIATIVES IN CONNECTICUT:

Connecticut has enacted five demand-side policies that are primarily focused on food purchasers. The **small purchase threshold**, enacted in 1999, allows for less rigorous bidding requirements for contracts of \$50,000 or less, enabling state agencies to more easily purchase from local producers. The statute permits state agencies to engage in bidding for contracts of \$50,000 or less without providing advance notice of the bid. It also allows agencies to engage in bidding for contracts of \$10,000 or less without soliciting quotes from multiple vendors.

In 2004, the legislature enacted a law that created the **state agency purchasing preference** that directs the Commissioner of Administrative Services, when procuring foods on behalf of state agencies, to contract with or purchase products from in-state producers when comparable to out-of-state options. Next, in 2006, the legislature created a **farm to school program**, housed within the DOAG, with required input from the CSDE. The farm to school program requires the creation and maintenance of a database of local food producers and encourages and facilitates school food purchases from local farmers. However, the DOAG's farm to school program has not been fully staffed or operational in recent years. Since 2015, UConn Extension, with the support of CSDE, has led outreach and support to school food service directors through the [Put Local On Your Tray Program](#). There are also many individual farm to school programs happening in municipalities through local leadership. In 2016, the legislature enacted a law requiring the State Board of Education to amend **school nutrition standards** to facilitate purchases from local farmers. The same law established a school purchasing preference for school districts that utilize food service management companies. This preference requires food service management companies to provide information in their bids detailing how their purchasing practices are consistent with the state's farm to school program. When awarding a contract, all else being equal, schools should give preference to bids that facilitate purchases from local farmers.

In addition, Connecticut has established a number of broader food policies that could have an impact on institutional procurement. First, in 1997, the Connecticut legislature established a **food policy council**. By law, the council must be comprised of individuals involved in agriculture, anti-hunger initiatives, food sales, and state government. The authorizing statute directs the council to "develop, coordinate, and implement" a statewide food policy that considers agricultural, urban, and environmental issues, as well as economic development. Further, the council is directed to review and

comment on proposed state food policy. In addition to the state food policy council, the **Connecticut-Grown Certification Program**, enacted in 2004, establishes a local food label to promote Connecticut products and help consumers, including institutions, easily identify products produced within the state.

CURRENT STATUS OF LOCAL PROCUREMENT IN CONNECTICUT:

Connecticut has created a logical policy framework to increase institutional procurement of local food in the state. Nonprofit initiatives and large institutions with an independent interest in local food sourcing have also had a significant impact in facilitating institutional procurement of local food.

Most existing institutional procurement efforts in Connecticut are focused on bringing more local food into the K-12 school system. The **Connecticut Food System Alliance** helped launch a stakeholder subnetwork focused on farm to school, which evolved independently into the Connecticut Farm to School Collaborative. CSDE takes the lead on training school food directors in local procurement, and in collaboration with the DOAG, CSDE organizes the annual CT Grown for CT Kids Week each October. UConn Extension's Put Local On Your Tray Program, supported by CSDE, coordinates the state's farm to school program by connecting school food directors with farmers and providing communication tools to celebrate local food on the menu. FoodCorps places 22 AmeriCorps members in 11 high need school districts that function as on-the-ground champions and facilitators for farm to school efforts. The Connecticut Farm to School Collaborative, a network of state farm to school partners and practitioners, work together to increase and enhance farm to school programming throughout Connecticut. In 2019, the Collaborative is embarking on the development of a state Farm to School Action Plan, as well as a public education campaign for National Farm to School Month.

Connecticut's **state agency purchasing preference** aims to increase agency procurement of local food. From the perspective of state institutions, such as state universities, this policy is difficult to implement due to existing institutional food procurement practices. Large institutions, like universities, often enter into purchasing contracts with only a few food distribution companies; for example, the University of Connecticut (UConn) partners with **Sysco Connecticut** for much of its food purchasing. UConn can buy local products through Sysco, and can prefer local products when they are produced by a **Connecticut Certified Small Business**. However, institutions do not have a clear incentive from the state government to purchase locally grown products. Without such encouragement, many institutions likely continue to work with their existing distribution network and purchase the products they are accustomed to buying.

In 2016, the legislature passed a law that required the state's **school nutrition standards** be modified to align with the **farm to school program**. CSDE responded by modifying the state bid template for school districts to use when procuring services from a food service management company. This modification requires boards of education to include a request in their RFPs for information detailing the consistency of a vendor's bid with the state's farm to school program. In awarding a contract, the school board must choose the bid that best facilitates purchases from local farms. While food service management companies must provide information about the consistency of their services and internal procurement practices with the farm to school program, they do not have to comply with any specific mandates, such as purchasing a certain percentage of food for the contract from local farms, or commit to increases of local purchases over the life of the contract. As a result, the **school purchasing**

preference does not provide the rigidity or requirements necessary to motivate action from private companies entering into these contracts. According to UConn Extension Educator Jiff Martin, “It’s all about relationships. When the school director meets the farmer and wants to buy the farmer’s products, then the school director is willing to go back to the drawing board and rewrite the bid or modify their internal procurement policy to accommodate that. But not until the relationship has been created.”

The **small purchase threshold** simplifies the process for institutions to enter into contracts with local producers for smaller quantities of goods. However, local producers still express that they lack the necessary processing and transportation infrastructure to meet institutions’ needs. NGO support, or a state-mandated position to facilitate these relationships, can be extremely beneficial in these situations.

At the time of this writing, Connecticut is the only New England state without a comprehensive food policy or plan, although the state **food policy council** was tasked with developing and implementing such a policy over 20 years ago. Part of the difficulty in creating a successful statewide policy may arise from the structure of the state food policy council and the language of its authorizing statute, which does not give the council a specific date by which it must develop a statewide policy. Additionally, the very prescriptive council membership list mandated by statute, and the lack of diversity of stakeholders on the council may, in some ways, inhibit progress. In the absence of action from the state food policy council, CFSA is working to gather information and ideas from stakeholders about what a state food plan could look like and how to make the policy something that serves all residents of the state. Martha Page, CFSA Executive Director said, “It takes a lot of time to build relationships when individuals and groups aren’t already connected in some way. But we are already seeing some of the benefits of connecting folks across the Alliance, and one important thing to remember about the planning process is that the process is almost as important as whatever emerges from it.”

Connecticut’s existing policies do not appear to provide institutions with a real incentive to purchase local products. Additionally, producers do not have many options for processing and transporting products to institutions. Many of the existing efforts to bring local food into state institutions are a result of nonprofit initiatives and an interest in local procurement from institutions themselves. Martin stated, “The barriers are pretty real. K-12 schools don’t always know how to find the farmers that will sell to them, and farmers have a lot of misunderstandings about selling to schools.” Martin elaborated that UConn Extension is working on “finding the farmers, explaining to them what it means to sell to K-12 schools, and then working with schools to help them understand the opportunity.”

UConn has made a dedicated effort to buy locally for over 30 years. As of 2019, UConn makes more than 25% of its food purchases from regional producers within a 250-mile radius. UConn reaches its local food procurement goals by purchasing local products through its prime vendor, Sysco Connecticut, and its Hartford-based produce vendor, **Sardilli**. Though UConn is sourcing a significant amount of locally grown foods, relatively little is produced in the state of Connecticut. Instead, it is purchased from other states within 250 miles of UConn.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- The **state agency purchasing preference** has the potential to increase institutional food procurement by requiring agencies to purchase locally whenever possible. However, this policy is currently difficult for state agencies to use because they often enter into large contracts with distribution companies, which may limit their options to purchase local products within those contracts.
- The **small purchase threshold** can make local food purchases easier for state institutions. However, some producers cannot comply with a large institution's processing and distribution needs, rendering the institutional market inaccessible to many local producers.
- The revised **school purchasing preference** may help schools purchase more local food by modifying the state bid template to apply a preference for contractors that purchases from local farms. However, without a method to track the volume of local food purchases made by these private entities, it is unclear how much progress can or will be attributed to the revised school purchasing preference.
- The amendment to the **school nutrition standards** seeks to encourage local procurement in schools by updating the standards to facilitate purchases from local farms, in furtherance of the goals of the **farm to school program**. However, federal child nutrition legislation passed in 2010, the **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act**, creates a national platform for nutrition standards that all schools operating the National School Lunch Program must comply with for reimbursement. Stakeholders have questioned the utility and ability of the state to mandate its own nutrition standard separate from the federal requirements, and advocates are working accordingly to have the state nutrition standards rescinded.
- Connecticut's legislature has enacted seven policies related to institutional procurement of local food since 1999. Still, collaborative efforts by state agencies, UConn, and NGOs seem to be the reason for the bulk of existing active local food procurement efforts. Connecticut is home to several community-based food organizations that support local procurement by connecting area farmers with institutions (particularly schools), among other activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- In order for Connecticut's existing policy framework to function more effectively, the policies must include clearer mechanisms for measuring the successes, shortcomings, and structural efficacy of the state's local food initiatives. Advocates also see a need for additional educational efforts to help policymakers better understand the needs of farm to institution stakeholders.
- The **state agency purchasing preference** enables procurement officers to prefer local food over non-local options when the costs are comparable between the offerings. This local preference statute could be amended to include specific language for a price percentage preference or an annual monetary target of local purchases rather than simply directing agencies to procure locally when costs are comparable. Doing so would likely make local products a more viable option to purchase.
- The state legislature could set a goal that all state institutions (excluding K-12 schools) procure a certain percentage of food from local producers by a certain year. This language should include a method to track progress toward the goal as well as the necessary funding and staffing required to meet the goal.

- The Connecticut General Assembly could establish clearer mandates for the state **food policy council's** work, more succinctly outlining the state food policy council's duties and concrete timelines for completion of tasks and implementation of a statewide food policy.
- Policies that aid producers in complying with institutional needs may help more Connecticut farms sell to state institutions. These policies could come in the form of state grants targeted at upgrading producers' existing growing, processing, or transportation infrastructure, or assistance with achieving

food safety certifications desired by institutions. Additionally, the state could work with nonprofit stakeholders to establish food hubs that could support local processing and distribution. The **Northwest Connecticut Food Hub** is an example of the type of resource that is growing and is demonstrating real benefit to Connecticut producers. The state legislature's **transfer of the Hartford Regional Market** to the Capital Region Development Authority may also help streamline local food procurement efforts in the state by providing additional funding and guidance for the Regional Market.

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- **Martha Page**, Executive Director, Connecticut Food System Alliance and Hartford Food System
- **Meg Hourigan**, Coordinator, Connecticut Food System Alliance
- **Tracey Roy**, Associate Director of Procurement, University of Connecticut Dining Services
- **Jiff Martin**, Associate Extension Educator, UConn Extension
- **Lynn Peccerillo-Hills**, Contract Specialist, Connecticut Department of Administrative Services
- **Monica Pacheco**, Associate Education Consultant, Connecticut State Department of Education
- **Dawn Crayco**, Connecticut Program Director, FoodCorps
- **Craig Stearns**, President, Mountain Dairy

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RESEARCH TEAM:

- **Alyssa Hartman**, Student Clinician, Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, Vermont Law School
- **Lizzie Fainberg**, Student Clinician, Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, Vermont Law School
- **Sophia Kruszewski**, Clinic Director, Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, Vermont Law School
- **Erica Morrell**, Policy Fellow, Farm to Institution New England
- **Peter Allison**, Executive Director, Farm to Institution New England

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To learn more about the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at Vermont Law School, visit: www.vermontlaw.edu/CAFS



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