

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

An initiative to develop 21st century regional food systems (Jump-started by a US\$10 billion federal stimulus COVID package)

**JAFSCD
Responds to
the COVID-19
Pandemic**



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The design and development of a rejuvenated and re-created regional food system for the USA are necessary now. COVID-19 has effectively unmasked the fragility of the global industrial food system. The ensuing crisis has provided us with a rare opportunity to pause, reflect, and imagine a more resilient and sustainable food system—one that is more balanced and just, one that is capable of withstanding shocks and disruptions, and one that better provides for people’s health and community economic security as well as the planet’s well-being.

A nationwide network of regional food systems is not only possible; its development needs to be stimulated and accelerated, as inspired by the 2010 report “The 25% Shift” (Masi, Schaller, & Shuman, 2010). This report analyzed the 16-county Northeast Ohio region around Cleveland and the impact of meeting a quarter (25%) of all demand for its food from the region itself.

The report showed that a 25% shift to local food production and downstream processing, distribution, and marketing within the region would (per the executive summary):

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- Create 27,664 new jobs, providing work for about one in eight unemployed residents.
- Increase annual regional output by US\$4.2 billion and expand state and local tax collections by US\$126 million.
- Increase the food security of hundreds of thousands of people and reduce near-epidemic levels of obesity and Type II diabetes.
- Significantly improve air and water quality, lower the region's carbon footprint, attract tourists, boost local entrepreneurship, and enhance civic pride.

How could such a system be designed? What would it look like?

Ecological and regenerative science provide key principles of a more resilient system. These principles need to be embedded into the organizational structure and social culture of the system to establish patterns that will endure for the long term.

Eight essential principles are:

1. *Community Wealth Creation*: The health and economic well-being of every community is dependent on the ample and equitable generation, retention, and circulation of capital.
2. *Local Ownership*: Community ownership is encouraged and optimized by developing new financial mechanisms.
3. *Just and Equitable*: Across the entire value chain, all participant needs—from farmers and food business owners to agricultural and retail workers—are met in a balanced, equitable, and just way. Throughout the system, the value of human labor is fairly recognized and appreciated.
4. *Integrated and Networked*: By vertically integrating and networking the components of food value chains, greater efficiency, transparency and fairness are achieved.
5. *Diversity*: Diversity and biodiversity in all aspects of the system are respected and recognized, from the biome to people, businesses, community, and culture.
6. *Stewardship*: In all aspects of food production and distribution, stewardship of our land and marine ecosystems is required to ensure that succeeding generations will have an equal or better opportunity to flourish from its resources. Our soil, water and air need restoring and improving.
7. *Right to Food*: All people have the right to high-quality, healthy food.
8. *Representation*: Complex systems require decision-making where the equitable participation of stakeholders is present at all levels of system governance. Decisions and deliberations must be made that fairly represent the diversity of affected views, and interests and are not dominated by any single view or interest.

A New Operating System

We believe that to create an operational model that could be adequately scaled to achieve something like a 25% shift, these principles would need to be integrated into three interlocking structural components.

1. **A Commons Trust**: A nonprofit, quasipublic entity to acquire and steward critical foodshed assets (such as land) in perpetuity.
2. **A Commons Community Fund**: A community-owned financial institution that provides capital and financial services to foodshed enterprises.
3. **A Commons Community Corporation**: A for-profit business entity that provides the umbrella for all the system functions, from production to distribution and wholesale, to retail and food service. Both community- and employee-owned, it provides scale economies, business services, technical assistance, training, and other services deemed necessary and beneficial.

Together, these represent a new economic paradigm and functional model for local and regional food. This type of organizational structure seeks the efficiencies of vertical integration with the goal of sharing the benefits across the value chain and within the community, rather than extracting and exporting wealth.

Central to the model is the recognition that farmland must be held as a long-term public good. Moreover, it offers the choice of an alternative system for the multitude of independent food system actors across the nation seeking a viable path for the future.

Stimulus Money for Regional Food—A US\$10 Billion Investment

We propose an immediate US\$10 billion federal stimulus investment to significantly and swiftly scale a nationwide system of regional food enterprises during and after the COVID pandemic.

The US\$10 billion could be allocated simply and directly. If the country were to be divided into 50 regional foodsheds largely located around urban centers, each would receive US\$200 million to be awarded for regional food system infrastructure development. Also, the investment could be structured to create a revolving capital fund supported by the community so that the original stimulus money would be retained locally indefinitely.

A major investment in a system of regional enterprises would jump-start the transition away from the structural and economic dependence on food and farm subsidies and “too big to fail” consolidated and centralized food enterprises.

Conclusion

Most of what is being proposed here is not new. All the pieces of a robust, integrated system for regional food exist. It is time to bring many of the pieces together and develop a more cohesive, coherent, and consistent whole. What we have proposed are the foundational underpinnings of a new systems model.

What is new is the demand for a federal government stimulus package to jump-start the initiative and a call to action to fund the building of infrastructure in regions around the country that would inspire a much improved and more balanced food system. 

Resources

For materials on developing a Food Commons regional food system model, email the authors: Larry Yee at lyee@ucdavis.edu or Jamie Harvie at harvie@isfusa.org.

Reference

Masi, B., Schaller, L., & Shuman, M. H. (2010). *The 25% Shift: The benefits of food localization for Northeast Ohio & how to realize them*. Retrieved from <https://foodhubresources.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/the-25-shift.pdf>