Greater Philadelphia & the Farm Bill
The Greater Philadelphia Regional Farm Bill Working Group

With the reauthorization of the next federal Farm Bill underway, The Food Trust has connected with national and local partners to identify the opportunities through which this critical legislation can and will benefit our regional food network for years to come. Our region has a wealth of resources to build a vibrant food system, including some of the nation’s richest agricultural land, a diversified farming sector, nationally recognized nonprofit and for-profit stakeholders, and renowned leaders in academia. By combining the power of these assets with the influence of farmers, grocers, environmentalists, public health advocates, and hunger relief providers, we can create a transformational Farm Bill.
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Cover photos by (top left) Tyrone Turner and (bottom right) Ryan Donnell. Back cover photos by (top) Gabriella Mora and (bottom) Tyrone Turner.
Introduction

The Farm Bill directly affects virtually all Americans. It is a massive piece of federal legislation that guides our nation’s priorities and policies around agriculture, nutrition, environmental conservation, and energy. Reauthorized by Congress every five years, the bill, in some way or another, plays a role in how food in the United States makes it from the farm to our tables.

As it does in other communities and regions in the country, the Farm Bill has a large impact on the Greater Philadelphia area. Regionally, hundreds of thousands of people living in poverty rely on SNAP benefits (food stamps), which are a vital part of the economy in lower-income communities. The impact is also found at local farmers’ markets that are made possible by the Farmers’ Market Promotion Program and in urban school-based gardens made possible by the Community Food Projects program. These Farm Bill programs work to prevent hunger, bring fresh foods to communities lacking access, and add vibrancy and diversity to the local food system.

The Farm Bill must address key priorities shared by Congress and the nation: the need to create jobs, reduce the deficit, reverse the obesity epidemic, prevent hunger and malnutrition, ensure a stable food supply, and protect the environment. While this might seem like a tall order, the potential exists. In its many provisions, the Farm Bill has the power to improve our food system and change the way America eats. Diet-related diseases such as heart disease and diabetes are the primary drivers of our skyrocketing health care costs and deficits. By increasing access to healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables, we can decrease the prevalence of obesity-related disease and ultimately reduce our spending on healthcare costs while creating jobs on farms and in markets.

Informed by the expertise of working group participants, this document serves as a resource that illustrates the value of past Farm Bill provisions and the potential that exists for the future in the Greater Philadelphia region.
Key Provisions of the Farm Bill

SNAP and SNAP-Education

With a name like the “Farm Bill” it is not surprising that many people do not realize that food stamps – SNAP – comprise the largest percentage of dollars spent by the Farm Bill. Passed in 2008, the last bill allotted nearly 75% of total funds to SNAP and served tens of millions of children and families each month. The consequences of a cut to SNAP are enormous. A recent study found that a 10% reduction would result in $258 million less in SNAP payments to residents, 3,611 fewer jobs, and 159 million fewer meals for lower-income children and families in Pennsylvania alone.

As a result, the Farm Bill is one of our nation’s most important hunger prevention programs and helps to ensure that all Americans have the ability to provide nutritious meals for their families.

SNAP not only prevents hunger in the Philadelphia region, it also is an important part of our economy. SNAP dollars flow from recipients to local businesses – like grocery stores – that provide jobs and economic stability to neighborhoods. Last year the program brought nearly $986 million to the region, with each food stamp dollar generating a $1.79 return for the local economy.

An important component of the SNAP program – SNAP-Education – provides nutrition education to eligible populations with the aim of promoting healthy eating choices within a limited food budget. In Southeastern Pennsylvania, federal, state, and private funds come together and account for $14.5 million used to educate thousands of students in Philadelphia, Montgomery, Delaware, and Berks counties.

Recommendation: Congress should preserve and protect SNAP’s structure and benefit levels to meet the growing needs for food assistance.

Recommendation: Congress should promote healthy eating through bonus programs for SNAP users that make purchasing healthy foods, like fruits and vegetables, at preferred food retailers easier for lower-income Americans.

Regional Spotlight: The SNAP Hotline

The Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger’s SNAP Hotline is working to screen and enroll Philadelphia’s 180,000 eligible but unenrolled residents. In addition to screening over 7,000 individuals a year, the Coalition manages and resolves hundreds of cases of residents wrongly denied benefits. Without such a comprehensive and accessible approach to SNAP enrollment, thousands of children, families, seniors, and disabled in the region would be forced to make difficult decisions about food, home energy, rent, and medications.

Regional Spotlight: SNAP Education with Children

Research has shown that school-based nutrition education programs are a great way to systematically reach and educate a large proportion of the population in an effort to prevent and curb childhood overweight and obesity.

In a project made possible by SNAP Education, the School District of Philadelphia teamed up with The Food Trust and Temple University to implement and measure the success of a comprehensive school-based nutrition policy and education program in lower-income schools. The program consisted of school self-assessments, nutrition education, nutrition policy, social marketing, and parent outreach, and yielded a 50% decrease in the incidence of overweight (BMI for age between the 85th to 94.9th percentiles).
Farmers’ Markets

Over the past 20 years, the Greater Philadelphia region has seen a resurgence of farmers’ markets. In Philadelphia and its suburbs, there are over 50 markets organized by many community groups and nonprofits. Enhanced by Farm Bill programs like the Farmers’ Market Promotion Program and the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Programs, farmers’ markets have become an important source of healthy foods, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods underserved by supermarkets. Together these programs create access to healthy foods and make the purchase of fresh foods more affordable for lower-income seniors and moms.

The economic impact of farmers’ markets is as valuable as the ability to bring fresh food access to underserved communities. Markets support the small businesses of local farmers who may otherwise be forced to sell their harvests at wholesale for below market prices. They also bring jobs to communities. In a comprehensive economic analysis, the Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that 500 new markets per year could yield nearly 14,000 jobs over a five-year period.6

Recommendation: Congress should increase funding for farmers’ market programs in the Farm Bill to meet the demand for fresh food in communities, create opportunities for improved health, and create more rural farm jobs.

Recommendation: Funding for healthy food incentives at farmers’ markets should be included in the Farm Bill.

Recommendation: Support to facilitate SNAP redemption at farmers’ markets and other innovative fresh food provision programs (i.e., farm shares through Community Supported Agriculture) should be included in the Farm Bill.

Protecting the Environment

Increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables is not possible without clean and abundant natural resources. The Philadelphia region benefits from the rich, fertile farm lands of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. Protecting the land and the Delaware Valley watershed is an important priority for the next Farm Bill. Land preservation ensures healthy soil and crops, while protecting waterways ensures sound ecosystems and a safe drinking water supply for over 15 million Americans.7

Recommendation: Congress should fund environmental protection and conservation programs that incentivize and reward good practice (i.e., green payments) and conservation compliance, as well as sustainable agriculture practice.
Regional Spotlight: Farmers’ Markets and Philly Food Bucks

The Philly Food Bucks program, modeled after New York City’s Health Bucks Program, aims to increase the consumption of fresh, local produce in lower-income communities by increasing the purchasing power of SNAP users and promoting repeat visits to farmers’ markets. As funded by Get Healthy Philly (made possible by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and its partners, Philly Food Bucks provides SNAP participants with a $2 voucher for every $5 spent at farmers’ markets.

In the farmers’ market setting, the Philly Food Bucks program improved affordability of fresh produce, increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and yielded a 300% increase in the number of SNAP sales since its inception.
Healthy Food Financing Initiative

The term “food desert” has swiftly entered the public lexicon in recent years. Measured by the United States Department of Agriculture, urban and rural food deserts are a significant barrier to accessing and consuming fresh foods. In 2004, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, through the leadership of State Representative Dwight Evans, created a new model for incentivizing grocery store development in lower-income urban and rural food deserts. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative – a public private partnership co-managed by The Reinvestment Fund, The Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, and The Food Trust – provided grants and loans to fresh food retailers willing to open markets in lower-income areas lacking access to fresh produce. Nearly 90 new and expanded fresh food retail projects across the state have been approved for funding, creating or retaining over 5,000 jobs and improving access to healthy food for approximately 500,000 Pennsylvanians.

The flexibility of the program resulted in a variety of projects based on community needs from full service supermarkets to farmers’ markets, co-ops, and small grocery stores. Other states such as New York and New Jersey have launched similar programs based on the Pennsylvania model. In 2011, the Obama Administration launched the national Healthy Food Financing Initiative, coordinated over three federal agencies to provide national support to the effort to improve access to healthy food.

Recommendation: Congress should authorize and fund the USDA to implement the Healthy Food Financing Initiative to provide nationwide support for urban and rural grocery store projects.
Young and New Farmers

With a soaring world population, new analyses suggest a more than 100% increase in global crop demand by the year 2050. In the United States, this demand is being placed on an aging farming and ranching population. In 2007, the Census of Agriculture reported an average farmer age of 57 years; the fastest-growing demographic is farmers aged 65 and over. Simultaneously, entering the field of agriculture is costly and requires an initial high-risk investment. It also requires extensive training. Despite the challenges, the power of local, regional food, and food systems has piqued interest for young potential farmers. In order to address the growing domestic and international demand, the need for new farmers and innovative practices is clear.

**Recommendation:** Congress should support farmers by incentivizing new and urban farmers. Increased opportunity can aid in removing or alleviating the barriers to farming.

Farm to School

Farm to school is a national movement that aims to connect schools to their local farms. Programs exist in all 50 states and cover a wide-range of activities including school gardens, farm trips, adopt-a-farmer programs, composting, and fresh food purchasing. From vibrant school gardens in New Jersey to farm field trips in Maryland, farm to school has grown exponentially in the mid-Atlantic region in the last few years.

**Recommendation:** Congress should support farm to school initiatives by authorizing the USDA to implement farm to school programs in school districts across the country. By encouraging farm to school efforts, school districts can begin to incorporate, healthy farm fresh foods into cafeteria menus.

Regional Spotlight: Farm to School

As the Mid-Atlantic Regional Lead Agency for the National Farm to School Network, The Food Trust helps to grow and strengthen the farm to school movement in six states and Washington, D.C. The Food Trust provides training and technical assistance, media outreach, networking, research and evaluation, information services, and policy development to grassroots programs across the region.

In Philadelphia, the School District has partnered with Fair Food, The Philadelphia Urban Food and Fitness Alliance, The Food Trust, and others to create a robust farm to school pilot program. In a district with high rates of food insecurity and extremely low food access, the School District of Philadelphia’s farm to school pilot offers students the opportunity to eat locally grown, farm-fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their reimbursable meal. The program provides healthy foods for Philadelphia’s children while also providing another revenue stream for the Delaware Valley’s small to mid-size farms.
Food Hubs

The food system is a complicated network of people who work to move food from where it is grown to where people are eating it. Ultimately, the best programs are formed when communities start learning from each other and collaborate to create system-wide change. Local food hubs, like The Common Market of Philadelphia, have the potential to provide a model of systems change that can transform the way institutions like schools and hospitals access fresh food. Instead of produce or fresh meat traveling thousands of miles to the cafeteria tray of a student or patient, it travels only a couple hundred miles. The relationship created by the Common Market is one that works harmoniously to support health of students, patients, employees, consumers, and the local economy.

Recommendation: Congress should support the development of local and regional food hubs similar to the model created by the Common Market.

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Emergency Food

Federal nutrition programs like SNAP are often not enough to meet the needs of Americans struggling with hunger. With an average SNAP benefit of $5 a day, many lower-income families – including those that do not qualify for SNAP benefits – in the region are relying on a network of nonprofit, charitable, and faith-based emergency food providers. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program that provides surplus farm commodities so emergency food providers can keep food on pantry shelves and in soup kitchens. In the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, TEFAP provided nearly $33 million dollars in commodity food in 2011. This program is not only putting meals on tables; it is assisting farmers in times of low food prices.

Recommendation: Congress should authorize the United States Department of Agriculture to encourage TEFAP distributors, like food banks, to further integrate into the community and the local food system by way of hunger relief initiatives that promote sound nutrition and local farms. For example, financial incentives could be provided to encourage agencies to invest in sourcing local produce.

Recommendation: Congress should increase TEFAP commodity and administrative funding to meet rising demand, rising food prices, and to match current inflation.
Growing a Better Farm Bill

The task that awaits Farm Bill reauthorization is daunting, but the opportunities presented are vast. Unlike bills before, this Farm Bill can capitalize on the changing needs of the nation by supporting healthy diets, creating new jobs, and bringing us back to the roots of our food. The Philadelphia region stands to benefit greatly from a strong Farm Bill. As a source of inspiration, the model of this region is an asset to other communities with similar health and economic goals.

Though detailed, the priorities and recommendations of this collaboration do not represent an exhaustive list of recommendations. Rather, this list unites the collective voice of stakeholders in a region that—through its strong agricultural roots and innovation—benefits greatly from programs made possible by the Farm Bill.

Emergency Food: SHARE Food Program

Serving lower-income, food insecure children and families in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and the Metro New York area, the SHARE Food Program is the lead distributing agency of state and federal emergency food for the county of Philadelphia. SHARE goes beyond addressing hunger by promoting healthy, local food through their Farm Fresh food box and community urban farm. The food made available by SHARE is available to all, and volunteerism on the farm or in the community is encouraged and incentivized through custom, reduced priced food boxes.

Endnotes

Ensuring That Everyone Has Access To Affordable, Nutritious Food

The Food Trust, a nonprofit founded in Philadelphia in 1992, strives to make healthy food available to all. Research has shown that lack of access to healthy food has a profound impact on food choices and, therefore, a profound impact on health.

For 20 years, The Food Trust has worked with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers to develop a comprehensive approach to improving the health of America’s children.

For more information, visit thefoodtrust.org or contact The Food Trust.

1617 John F. Kennedy Blvd. | One Penn Center, Suite 900
Philadelphia, PA 19103 | contact@thefoodtrust.org
(215) 575-0444 | Fax: (215) 575-0466