

Testimony to New England Fisheries Council
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Hannah Mellion and I work at Farm Fresh Rhode Island. Farm Fresh is a nonprofit that works to re-grow the local food system in Rhode Island. The local foods movement has been a part of an incredible resurgence in agriculture these past few years, and I believe the lessons learned can provide guidance for local fishing communities and marine policy makers. I will share what we have seen working with local farmers in Rhode Island, to provide a context for your work here today.

At Farm Fresh, we've looked closely at what makes a food system sustainable: one that addresses the needs of producers, eaters, and the environment. We envision a food system that provides fresh and healthy food for eaters, maintains economically viable businesses for producers and protects small family businesses, and preserves farmland and agricultural knowledge so that we can continue to produce good food for future generations.

The growth of industrial, consolidated agriculture began in the 1930s, and subsidized commodity crop production on thousand acre farms. These policies quickly wiped out small family farms across New England. We lost agricultural land, knowledge, farmers, and the relationships and networks to bring food from local farms to tables. As our food supply began to come from larger producers located farther away, we lost touch with the importance of the people behind our food. We stopped paying attention to how it was grown and where it was coming from.

After decades of letting farms and agricultural infrastructure disappear, we are beginning to see a shift in where and how our food is being produced. People, when asked, want to buy local. They want their food dollars to benefit their community and the place they live. So through coordinated campaigns to reeducate people about where and how their food is grown, consumers have begun demanding local food for their homes and at their groceries, restaurants and more. That's creating new markets and sources of income for local farmers, which means existing farms are growing and new farms are starting and surviving. In fact, the 2007 Census of Agriculture showed a 42% growth in the number of farms, from 858 in 2002 to over 1,200 in 2007.

We have seen tremendous opportunity for small scale, family-run operations to thrive through direct marketing to customers. Direct marketing allows farmers to set fair prices for their products - prices that allow them to continue farming. We have responded by creating more chances for customers to purchase direct from farmers. The number of farmers markets double in the past five years: there are now 45 farmers markets across the state, of which Farm Fresh runs 7 in the summer and 2 in the winter months that reach thousands of people every week. There are twenty Community Supported Agriculture

programs, or CSAs, serving about 1,500 families who pay in advance for a subscription to local agriculture, and over 50 farm stands across our state that are thriving. There are fabulous examples across our region, such as Port Clyde Fresh Catch, of successful Community Supported Fishery programs, cooperatives of small fishermen who offer weekly pick-ups of fresh fish to local customers. NAMA has been working to set up similar programs in Rhode Island, and we have been working with a co-op in Bristol to sell at our farmers markets and to area restaurants. The threat of consolidation will undermine the efforts and progress already made to link small fishermen to local food resources, prevent these new initiatives from really making a difference in the lives of these fishermen.

In addition to the important supply of food local marine resources provide, the protection of small scale fisheries is a matter of pride for Rhode Island. We are the "Ocean State," and our coastal communities are an integral part of our state and region's heritage and its current way of life. Our waterfronts have provided sources of work, income and sustenance for its residents for hundreds of years. It is our responsibility to protect and nurture these invaluable resources for future generations.

The growth we have seen in agriculture in these economic times is extraordinary, and speaks to potential opportunities for local fishing communities to prosper in such a system. Local food production IS economic development. Every family farm, every fishing family, is a small business. And we know that supporting small businesses keeps money circulating in our own communities, which benefits all of us.

The local foods movement has built the infrastructure that will allow small fishermen to grow their businesses. There are new and exciting marketing strategies already in practice, and we have great plans for the future of smaller fisheries in RI. Our farmers markets are ready, and the customers who want to know their farmer want to know their fishermen too. Now we just need to make sure we are protecting the most important piece; small scale producers whose operations protect our natural resources and keep marine knowledge and money in our communities.

Find the solution that will protect the heritage of our region, our food supply, and the livelihoods of hundreds of our friends and families. Take the hard lessons learned by our region's small farmers, and choose to protect our food producers and build smart systems today. Help us to create a food system that nurtures the people who harvest our food, and nourishes all of us who eat.