Stories from the Field:

The Role of Local and State Food Policy Councils in Federal Policy Making and Implementation
Summary

Local and state food policy councils (FPCs) have the potential to benefit from, and even influence, food system policies and regulations at the federal level. This report highlights the ways in which local and state FPCs can increase their understanding of the larger federal policy making process, bring local issues to the attention of Congress and federal agencies, increase the flow of federal resources to local communities, and educate and mobilize local communities about how federal policies and regulations affect them.

It is critical that FPCs become knowledgeable about federal regulatory and legislative processes, and how they interact with their work. This report offers an introduction to these processes, and also offers additional guidance on how stay aware of and educate others about the issues that are important to your FPC. The primary ways FPCs can interact with federal government are described in the following sections:

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- Comment on Proposed Federal Regulations (pg. 5)
- Public Education (pg. 6-7)
- Work with National Advocacy Groups (pg. 8-10)
- Federal Funding Opportunities (pg. 11-12)
- Role of State/Regional Agencies in Federal Policies and Programs (pg. 13)

Key Takeaways:

- Federal policymakers and agencies welcome feedback (communicated via appropriate channels) on issues impacted by legislation and rules.
- Resource exist to help you learn about and track important pending legislation and rules to inform the drafting and timing of your communications.
- FPCs can play a significant role in educating the public on the relevance and impacts of federal policies and programs.
- National advocacy groups can be helpful resources for staying informed about proposed federal legislation and regulations.
- Federal agencies and legislative mandates support grants that may fund FPC work.
- Members of the media are looking for interesting local stories and can be allies.
- Building relationships with staff members for both Congressional representatives as well as agency employees is critical for successful communication, collaboration, and implementation of federal policymaking.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed by the organizations included in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for a Livable Future or the Johns Hopkins University.

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Contact Members of Congress and Federal Officials about Legislation

FPCs have the opportunity to provide information on the effects of proposed legislation on their communities or work. Members of Congress, as well as state and local policymakers and their staffs, want to receive well-reasoned, thoughtful information on the issues they deal with and how those issues impact constituents. As staff members are “spread thin,” being required to cover many issues, they appreciate receiving evidence- and experience-based input.

Firstly, it is important to understand that Congress is organized based on the term of a member of the House of Representatives. All 435 Representatives are elected every two years and, therefore, Congressional terms are two years long (divided into two, one year sessions). Legislation introduced in that two year term expires at the end of the term if it has not become law and must be re-introduced in subsequent Congressional terms. While a Senator has a six year term, one-third of the Senate is up for election every two years to conform to the Congressional structure.

To be the most effective, be knowledgeable about the legislative process, and stay aware of the issues that are important to your FPC (national advocacy groups, such as those discussed on pages 8-10, can be helpful resources to do so). Many larger pieces of legislation, such as the Farm Bill, have specific websites available from various advocacy groups through which you can learn about the many different sections of proposed legislation and expected implications, and sign petitions related to them. The Library of Congress website, www.congress.gov, includes information about all bills introduced in the House and Senate. Legislation may be searched by bill number or sponsor.

Form letters may be influential when received in large quantities. However, personal letters are taken more seriously and could have a greater impact on your representative. When writing a letter as an individual citizen or on behalf of your FPC/organization, begin by listing your name and contact information at the top of the letter, followed by the address of your representative. Contact information for Senators is available at www.senate.gov/senators/contact and members of the House at www.house.gov/representatives.

*NOTE: Do NOT contact your representatives or Senators in relation to proposed rules/regulations (pg. 5), funding programs (pg. 11-12), or other matters under the jurisdiction of federal agencies and not Congress.*
In the body of your letter, politely address the representative (either “Dear Senator” or “Dear Congresswoman/Congressman”) and then describe your credentials/experience or your FPC’s mission. Clearly, factually, and briefly explain the issue you are writing about and how it would affect your community/state. Make sure to reference the specific bill title and number (including identifiers: “H.R.,” “H.RES.,” “H.J.RES.,” “S.,” “S.RES.,” and “S.J.RES.”) in the letter – available on www.congress.gov.

You may also call your representative, or request a meeting with them. Every Representative and Senator has offices based in their district or state, and often those staff are more accessible than staff on Capitol Hill. Those state-based staffs can help you get your message to their counterparts in Washington and are all part of the community with you. It is important to contact your Senator, Representative, or their staff when you first learn that a bill of interest to you has been introduced and to contact them again as you learn of potential legislative activity, especially when a bill is the subject of a Congressional hearing and when it is before one of the chambers for final action.

The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA), a grassroots political advocacy and education organization in North and South Carolina, has been engaging with the growing network of food councils around federal policy with the help of Community Food Strategies, a convener of FPCs in NC. In spring 2015, the organizations worked with leaders from the Davidson County Local Food Network, Forsyth Food Consortium, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Food Policy Council, and Cabarrus Farm and Food Council to engage members of their councils and networks to call and send emails and letters to Congresswoman Alma Adams’ (D, NC) office. Adams is a co-sponsor of the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act, which CFSA opposes as it would remove individual state’s rights to pass food labeling requirements.

Recognizing that most FPCs in NC are relatively new and overwhelmed with work at the local level, CFSA reached out to the councils in Congresswoman Adams’ district and asked them if they were passionate about the issue. All four councils had members who expressed interest, but requested support from CFSA. Thus CFSA provided research, appropriate framing/talking points, sample letters, and phone scripts to the council leaders, who then sent out the information to targeted members of their networks. Members of the Davidson County Local Food Network even attended an in-district event with Congresswoman Adams to question her directly on the bill and other local food issues.

While it is still unclear if the bill will advance in Congress this year, this effort aimed to educate Congresswoman Adams about the existence of these established FPCs and the opinions of local constituents on labeling issues. Ideally, CFSA and the partnering FPCs would like her to drop her co-sponsorship of the bill and prevent her from supporting any similar bills in the future. By providing councils with the tools they need to engage at the federal level, CFSA hopes to continue to foster collaboration between NC FPCs on federal policy advocacy.
Comment on Proposed Federal Regulations

Federal agencies create and enforce rules, based on their legislative mandates, which impact many aspects of the food system. Some of the agencies that most directly affect the work of FPCs include the Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) – parent agency to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Education (DoED), and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Commenting on proposed regulations from these agencies is one of the most important ways in which the public can participate in the federal rulemaking process.

Individuals or groups, such as FPCs, can submit comments during the “notice-and-comment” period for the rule, which usually lasts between 60-90 days. This period and other information about the proposed rule is described in its entry in the daily Federal Register, a legal journal which includes current regulations; proposed rules; Executive Orders, proclamations, and other presidential documents; and other non-rulemaking documents of public interest.

After you have collected and reviewed all the necessary information about the proposed rule, you can visit www.regulations.gov to submit your comment. Comments can be any length, and may focus on specific sections of the proposed rule or broadly address the overall topic. Once submitted, the comment will be reviewed and then posted publicly (one can find using the Comment Tracking Number received upon submission).

Many FPCs have submitted comments on federal regulations. During the fall of 2013, the FDA released proposed rules to be implemented as part of the Food Safety Modernization Act, a sweeping overhaul of the country’s food safety laws that was signed into law in 2011. The Grow Montana Coalition helped coordinate and encourage comments from residents across the state who could be impacted by the FDA’s proposed regulations. The West Virginia Food & Farm Coalition submitted its own comment on behalf of Appalachian farmers who would be affected by the proposed “Produce Rule.”

In spring 2015, the Santa Fe City and County Advisory Council on Food Policy submitted a public comment to the USDA and HHS to express its support of the recommendations found in the 2015 “Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee.” In its comment, the Council emphasized how the 2015 Dietary Guidelines, if approved in their current form (which included a new factor of considering sustainability), aligned with and supported the findings and recommendations of official City and County documents such as the 2014 Santa Fe Food Plan, the Santa Fe County Health Action Plan: FY 2015-2017, and the Sustainable Santa Fe Plan. The Council also drafted resolutions to the Santa Fe City Council and the Santa Fe Board of County Commissioners requesting that they also submit comments in support of the Dietary Guidelines recommendations.
Public Education

As FPCs ideally serve as a conduit between the general public and policymakers/other food system leaders, educating the public on the relevance and impacts of federal policies and programs is another important sphere that FPCs can influence. FPCs may consider a variety of strategies, including hosting community listening sessions or panel discussions, informing voters about politicians’ food policy priorities, and training community food advocates in key food system issues.

As 84% of Detroit City public school children qualify for free or reduced price lunch, the Detroit Food Policy Council, as a member of the No Kid Hungry: Detroit Chapter (formerly the Detroit Child Nutrition Coalition), recognized that the 2015 Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization (CNR) would impact its local community greatly. It saw the need to educate and mobilize local citizens around supporting continued funding for school feeding programs (school breakfast and lunch, after-school, and summer meal), so it made CNR the topic of its annual Food Summit in 2015 (attended by 250 adults and 100 children). The Coalition also has advocated for changes to make the policy more relevant to their community. Coalition members met with Senator Stabenow to express our support of her efforts to be a champion for CNR 2015 and the programs it encompasses. The coalition talked with members of the Michigan Department of Education (MDE is the state administrator of CNR child nutrition programs) and USDA representatives to discuss steps to amending the congregate feeding requirements for the summer food program to make them work better for children in their community.

Aiming to be a proactive instead of reactive voice on food system policies, the Cumberland County (Maine) Food Security Council seeks to connect practitioners and communities with congressional representatives and administrative agencies on an ongoing basis. As child nutrition is one of the three primary policy focuses of the council – the other two being senior nutrition and minimum wage increases (local, state, and federal) – the Council decided to highlight on-the-ground work related to the CNR through a three-hour forum in spring 2015. The event was intended to bring people together not just to better understand what’s included in CNR and how different nutrition programs relate to federal level agencies (it differs among states), but also to self-organize around these issues, with the Council serving as a support mechanism for networking and collaboration.

The 40 attendees at the event included representatives from school food service, AmeriCorps, public health agencies, grassroots organizations, and more. The keynote address was given by a representative from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service regional office in Boston, followed by a panel with representatives from the state DoED which oversees the summer meals program, state HHS which oversees the child/adult care feeding programs, and the Nutrition Director of Portland Public Schools, the WIC Director from the county Community Action Program agency, and a representative from Congresswoman Chellie Pingree’s office. Participants then broke into affinity groups (school food service, summer food – community eligibility, WIC programming, ...
child/adult care feeding programs) to discuss the impact of the bill in their respective areas of interest. The forum initiated conversations and planning for further collaboration between the Council, attendees, and agency representatives. It also led to a subsequent meeting initiated by the NE Region Office at which the Council hosted USDA Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, Kevin Concannon on June 12, 2015.

As one of its many other efforts, the Connecticut Food Policy Council launched a public education campaign and forum on the state’s farmland loss beginning in 1999. This initiative led to the creation of a farmland protection coalition and the development of a $20 million-a-year state farmland preservation program. The FPC’s engagement with the National Resource Conservation Service and the Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program led to the contribution of federal funds to the state and private efforts to preserve farmland.

Some councils also work on informing the public about which politicians best support food system reform. The Iowa Food Systems Council created a Voter’s Guide of questions for citizens to ask local, state, and federal candidates to raise awareness and promote public discourse around the many pertinent issues affecting the food system. The Los Angeles Food Policy Council and Detroit Food Policy Council created compilations (LA’s and Detroit’s) of city council candidates’ positions on various local food policies. FPCs could consider creating similar guides to inform their communities about their state and federal candidates’ food policy positions. The advocacy organization Food Policy Action also maintains a database specifically on proposed/pending federal legislation that may affect the food system, as well as a history of how various politicians have voted in relation to previous food-related policies.

Communicating your policy positions to the media is also an important reinforcement for policymakers at all levels. With the burgeoning interest in local food issues, citizen participation and involvement in such policy matters will be of interest to local media.
Work with National Advocacy Groups

FPCs may also choose to engage with national advocacy groups that focus on issues they are already working on. Many of these groups have political and legal expertise in specific components of federal legislation and regulations, and may provide support to FPCs efforts.

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The American Farmland Trust advocates to protect farmland and ranch land in the United States, promote environmentally sound farming practices, and keep farmers and ranchers on the land. It lobbies for federal legislative initiatives related to farmland protection in Congress, conducts research and mapping projects, educates the public through its Farmland Information Center and other campaigns, and supports conservation pilot projects.

The American Planning Association is an educational organization that provides leadership in the development of vital communities by advocating excellence in planning, promoting education and citizen empowerment, and providing the tools and support necessary to meet the challenges of growth and change. It coordinates a Food Interest Group for those interested in food systems planning at the local, regional, state, or national level.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonpartisan research and policy institute. It pursues federal and state policies designed both to reduce poverty and inequality and to restore fiscal responsibility in equitable and effective ways. Food assistance is one of its priority research areas, in addition to other topics that FPCs may find relevant including climate change, health policy, and economic development.

The Farmers Market Coalition is an information, education, and advocacy center aimed to strengthen farmers markets for the benefit of farmers, consumers, and communities. It serves as a central hub for the host of agencies and groups that support farmers markets (e.g. cooperative extension, food security advocates, departments of agriculture, and nonprofit organizations) to identify and share best practices, as well as positively impact public policy pertaining to farmers markets.

The Food Chain Workers Alliance is a coalition of worker-based organizations whose members plant, harvest, process, pack, transport, prepare, serve, and sell food, organizing to improve wages and working conditions for all workers along the food chain. It publishes a variety of reports, facilitates action campaigns, evaluates labor certification programs, and hosts leadership skill-training workshops.
Food and Water Watch is a consumer rights group that focuses on corporate and government accountability relating to food, water, and fishing. Some of its top food system priority areas related to food safety, factory farms, the Farm Bill, irradiation, genetic engineering, and consumer labels.

The Food Research and Action Network is a national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and under nutrition in the United States. It maintains a set of legislative priorities each year, mostly focused on child nutrition (school meals, summer feeding programs), federal food assistance programs (SNAP, WIC, senior nutrition, etc.) and other anti-poverty initiatives (minimum wage). It also releases a variety of publications and statistics on food insecurity, poverty, state and federal assistance programs, food access, food costs, and more.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works with organizations around the world to analyze how global trade agreements impact domestic farm and food policies. It produces reports, fact sheets, commentaries, and action alerts related to its key focus areas, including agriculture, agroecology, climate change, energy, environment, farm-to-institution, rural development, globalization, and more.

The National Association of Counties represents county governments in the United States by promoting sound public policies, fostering county solutions and innovation, promoting intergovernmental and public-private collaboration, and providing value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. It conducts policy research, hosts conferences and webinars, and coordinates steering committees on a variety of federal level legislative issues, including those related to agriculture and rural affairs; community and economic development; environment, energy and land use; and health.

The National Association of Development Organizations provides advocacy, education, research, and training for the nation’s regional development organizations. Some of its legislative priority areas relate to the Farm Bill, HUD Community Development Block Grants, and USDA-Rural Development funding.

The National Conference of State Legislatures a bipartisan nongovernmental organization that serves the members and staff of state legislatures. It seeks to improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures; to promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures; and to ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system. It conducts research and trainings on a variety of issues that FPCs may find relevant, including agriculture and rural development, environment and natural resources, health, labor and employment, and transportation.
The National Family Farm Coalition represents family farm and rural groups whose members face the challenge of the deepening economic recession in rural communities. It links grassroots organizations throughout the country working on family farm issues, including those related to land and resource access, trade, food sovereignty, new farmers, animal disease traceability, and other farm and food policy issues.

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and preschools. It serves as a guiding resource for information about national, state, and local policies that impact farm to school efforts.

The National Farmers Union advocates for the economic and social wellbeing, and quality of life of family farmers, ranchers, fishermen and consumers and their communities through education, cooperation and legislation. It provides fact sheets, policy briefs, educational materials, and other resources to support the sustainable production of food, fiber, feed and fuel.

The National League of Cities represents 19,000 cities, towns, and villages, and encompasses 49 state municipal leagues. It lobbies Congress on federal legislative and regulatory issues, provides training to municipal officials, holds conferences, and conducts applied research. It provides assistance to cities on a variety of issues that may be relevant to FPCs, including economic development, governance and civic engagement, healthy communities, housing and community development, and sustainability.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition advocates for federal policy reform for the sustainability of food systems, natural resources, and rural communities. It provides research briefs, official platforms, and action alerts for some of its key campaigns, including those related to the Farm Bill, Food Safety Modernization Act, Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, and federal appropriations related to agriculture.

The National Young Farmers Coalition represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers to support practices and policies that will sustain young, independent and prosperous farmers now and in the future. Some of its top priorities include supporting independent family farms, sustainable farming practices, affordable land for farmers, fair labor practices, farmer-to-farmer training, farmer diversity, and cooperation and friendship between all farmers.
Federal Funding Opportunities

A variety of grants are available from the federal level to support local, state, and regional initiatives on which FPCs may work. Due to the amount of time and resources needed to apply for federal grants, a group of FPCs in a state or region may consider coordinating to prepare a federal application together, or partnering with other community stakeholders for a proposal. Below is a summary of the funding opportunities most relevant to the work of FPCs, and references to recent FPCs that have received those grants if applicable. Check out this list of Regional Food System Funding Opportunities as well as the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition’s Grassroots Guide to Federal Farm and Food Programs for a more complete list of grant opportunities that may interest your council or council members.

**USDA Community Food Projects (CFP) Competitive Grant Program**: Supports community-based solutions that promote the development self-reliance and food security of low-income communities. Grants are available for Community Food Projects, Training and Technical Assistance Projects, and Planning Projects. The Community Farm Alliance and Gardenshare are recent recipients of a CFP grants to support the creation of a Kentucky Food Policy Network and St. Lawrence County (NY) Food Policy Council, respectively. Some information on past grant recipients is available at http://networks.whyhunger.org/?search_cfp=1.

**USDA Farm to School Grant Program**: Supports the development of farm to school activities, such as school meals incorporating locally produced foods, school gardens, and programs teaching students about food, agriculture, and nutrition. Grants are available to farmers and public, private and non-profit entities for training, planning, support service, and implementation. The Mississippi Food Policy Council, in collaboration with partners, and the Willamette (OR) Farm and Food Coalition are recent recipients of FTS grants. A list of previous awardees is available at www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/grant-awards.

**USDA Farmers Market (FMPP) and Local Food (LFPP) Promotion Programs**: Provide financial support to organizations to create and expand direct-to-consumer marketing strategies and enterprises that aggregate, store, process, or distribute locally or regionally produced food. Grants are available for planning or implementation. The Willamette (OR) Farm and Food Coalition and the Food Bank of North Alabama (which also organizes the North Alabama Food Policy Council) are recent recipients of Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion grants, respectively. The USDA maintain a full list of previous grantees of FMPP and LFPP.

**USDA Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) Grant Program**: Supports agencies and non-profit organizations in projects to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by low-income consumers through cash incentives at locations like farmers markets and grocery stores. A description of the first round of FINI recipients (the program was created through the 2014 Farm Bill): http://nifa.usda.gov/resource/usda-awards-31-million-grants-help-snap-participants-afford-healthy-foods
USDA Rural Development Programs: Grant funding and loans are available for a variety of rural development programs, including those aiming to improve access to healthy, affordable food; support rural business owners, value-added producers, and entrepreneurs; and develop regional food systems. In 2015, the Northern Forest Center received a Rural Development Community Initiative Grant to develop a food system network in northern New Hampshire and the Northeast Kingdom in Vermont.

USDA Specialty Crop Block Grants Program: Grants awarded to state departments of agriculture to support and enhance the competitiveness and consumption of fruits, vegetables, and other specialty crops through value-added processing, food hub development, farmer food safety training, and farm-to-school initiatives. The Virginia Food Systems Council received this grant in partnership with the VA Department of Agriculture to expand its $10 a Week Challenge to a 10% Campaign, which encourages Virginia organizations, institutions and businesses to pledge at least 10 percent of their annual food budget to buy specialty crops from the state.

CDC Partnerships to Improve Community Health (PICH): This 3-year initiative (awards to be granted in 2014, 2015, and 2016) supports the implementation of evidence-based strategies to improve the health of communities and reduce the prevalence of chronic disease. PICH funds a variety of governmental agencies and nonprofits, including school districts, local governments, hospital and health systems, community-based organizations, public health offices, and American Indian tribes. Poor nutrition and lack of access to opportunities for chronic disease prevention, risk reduction, and disease management are two of the four priority intervention areas. The Douglas County (KA) Food Policy Council partnered with its Health Department to receive funding through this grant to support a full-time Food Systems Coordinator for three years (read more).

HUD-DOT-EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities: This interagency collaboration was created to coordinate federal housing, transportation, water, and other infrastructure investments to make neighborhoods more prosperous, allow people to live closer to jobs, save households time and money, and reduce pollution. Each agency offers funding opportunities to communities as part of this partnership (view this interactive map to see information on awards already granted). The Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation received a Regional Planning Grant from HUD to create a sustainable community plan for the Lehigh Valley. Its Local Food Economy Assessment Report, completed as part of the overall planning process, initiated the launch of the Lehigh Valley (PA) Food Policy Council.

HUD Community Development Block Grants: These grants providing funding for 1, 2, or 3 years (as determined by the grantee) for activities that benefit low- and moderate-income persons, prevention or elimination of slums or blight, or address community development needs having a particular urgency because existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the health or welfare of the community for which other funding is not available. Information about past grantees is located in this database.
Role of State/Regional Agencies in Federal Policies and Programs

In many cases, the implementation of federal legislation, funding programs, and regulations is carried out by state and regional agencies. States vary in how their departments are organized, but in general they are responsible for implementing federal programs, including writing rules, designing processes for their states, and administering some federal grants funds.

In addition to the state departments of agriculture, public health and human services, education, transportation, etc., FPCs may find that contacting county Cooperative Extension offices; state Rural Development offices; National Resource Conservation Districts, Farm Service Agencies, Rural Conservation and Development Councils; regional Economic Development and/or Planning Councils and Food and Nutrition Service offices can help inform their efforts.

As one example of the interaction between FPCs and state agencies, the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council pursued its state health agency to apply for Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program funds, which the agency had been reluctant to do. The Council was successful it getting the agency to apply and subsequently receive about $300,000 for Senior FMNP (view spreadsheet of all state FMNP grant amounts from 2009-2015). It has also pursued the state public education agency to advocate for farm to school funding. That agency had stalled in the distribution of legislatively appropriated funds to purchase fresh produce from local farmers. The Council has been advocating for them to move the process along, which they finally have done.

FPCs could also consider having representatives from state agencies as part of their membership or at least attend special events by the council, in order to facilitate interaction between the different levels of government. The Alaska Food Policy Council, for instance, includes the Executive Director of the USDA Alaska Farm Service Agency on the board of the FPC. This relationship has been extremely valuable in connecting the state FPC to not just state policymakers, but also to federal level programs. The Cumberland County (ME) Food Security Council invited someone from their regional FNS office to present at their public forum on Childhood Nutrition Act Reauthorization (see page 6). This speaking engagement launched a relationship between the Council and FNS office, and conversations are underway to plan future collaboration.