

# Developing Resilient, Sustainable, and Equitable Food Systems

Northeast Region Cooperative Extension and Aginnovation

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Access to fresh local food is a persistent issue. Increasingly, we are approaching agriculture and food systems in the Northeast through this lens, and we are developing initiatives and strategies that seek to expand food production capacity to ensure a healthy, fresh, and secure food system for all residents.

The Northeast Region's 12 states and the District of Columbia are working individually and collaboratively to develop resilient, sustainable and equitable food systems on the local, state, and regional levels. Examples of this work are outlined below.

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## Alternative Food Networks and Innovative Agriculture

New England's agricultural sector, pivotal to the region's economy and community well-being, faces ongoing challenges in marketing and consumer engagement. A key issue is the limitations of traditional direct-to-consumer markets like farmers' markets, which, while popular, often cater to a specific consumer niche and present logistical challenges for both farmers and consumers. New Hampshire Agricultural Experiment Station embarked on a research project focusing on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) to reimagine and enhance these networks, making them more inclusive and accessible to a broader range of consumers.



This work contributes to the development of more effective marketing strategies for AFNs. These strategies aim to make locally sourced, sustainable food more accessible and appealing to a broader audience, thus supporting small and mid-sized farmers and food entrepreneurs in the region. The research paves the way for creating more inclusive and diverse AFNs that not only cater to a wider range of consumers but also contribute to the region's economic development and sustainability.



## Urban Agriculture and Opportunities for BIPOC Farmers

Farmers of color often lack opportunities and face barriers to institutional knowledge typically available to white farmers. Approximately 96% of U.S. farmers are white. Farmers of color may be reluctant to seek out assistance from organizations, which have a history of racially discriminatory practices. A UConn Extension-led program provided professional development for people of color to serve as leaders in conservation for

their communities this summer through the Leaders of Color in Conservation (LOCC) training program. It supports farmers of color in our state by connecting them with state and federal expertise and funding to help conserve their natural resources.

To do this, UConn and its partners trained eight people of color to serve as front-line technical advisors who were then able to directly reach 14 historically underserved farmers. One participant says he values the program's introduction to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. "I didn't know much about the NRCS, and I definitely feel like this program did a good job illuminating what they do and how to access them. Because that is the challenge for a lot of new and/or BIPOC farmers — not knowing these tools, and resources are available to them."

## Soil Health

Cover crops are an increasingly popular soil health practice; however, they present documented management challenges. American Farmland Trust, in partnership with the Cornell Cooperative Extension are evaluating and demonstrating the performance of cover crops in western New York based on measuring nine ecosystem indicators for up to five consecutive years on nine farms, using a quantitative approach to assess multifunctionality and service interactions. The project has significant value. Cover crops and planting green practices can help address many challenges in agriculture, including soil health, water quality, and greenhouse gas emissions. This project is evaluating and demonstrating the performance of these practices on nine farms in western New York, using a quantitative approach to assess multifunctionality and service interactions. This information can be used to provide farmers with practical, cost-effective, and innovative practices that they can adopt on their own farms. Additionally, a case study demonstrates the economic, water quality, and climate benefits associated with adopting soil health practices. By implementing practices such as no-till, cover crops, and nutrient management, the producer saw a significant increase in net income per year and a reduction in nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment losses, as well as greenhouse gas emissions. This case study can serve as a model for other farmers looking to adopt soil health practices and improve their bottom line while also benefiting the environment. Overall, this project has the potential to have a significant positive impact on both agriculture and the environment in western New York and beyond.



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