

Food Policy Council Questions and Answers

What is a Food Policy Council?

Food Policy Councils (FPC's) are comprised of stakeholders from various segments of a local food system. Councils are typically sanctioned through government action such as an Executive Order, Public Act, or Joint Resolution however, many Councils have formed through grassroots effort and operate without an official convening document. FPC's are innovative collaborations between citizens and government officials which give voice to the concerns and interests of many who have long been under-served or un-represented by agricultural institutions. The primary goal of many Food Policy Councils is to examine the operation of a local food system and provide ideas and recommendations for improvement through public policy changes.

What is a "food policy"?

A food policy is any decision made by a government agency, business, or organization which effects how food is produced, processed, distributed, purchased and protected. This includes the types of foods consumers have access to, information available pertaining to place of origin, and the rules and regulations which influence many aspects of farming. Examples of food policies include:

- A decision by school officials whether to purchase foods raised by local farmers;
- Regulations for selling raw milk to consumers;
- The eligibility standards that allow low-income residents to participate in food assistance programs;
- The regulatory health and safety requirements for food based business;
- Food ingredient labeling;
- The percentage of a food ingredient which qualifies a food product as being "organic".

Why create a Food Policy Council?

There are many reasons why state or local governments may want to create a Council. The most significant may be to broaden the discussion of issues beyond agricultural production to enter into a more comprehensive examination of a food system. The opportunity to use a food systems approach to explore food policy issues at a local level creates an inclusive process convening a diverse group of stakeholders.

Councils can also create a forum in which people involved in all different parts of the food system and government can meet to learn more about what each does - and to consider how their individual actions impact other parts of the food system.

What can a Food Policy Council do that is not already being done in government?

Food Policy Councils can address a variety of issues not normally examined or implemented from within government.

- Food Policy Councils convene individuals and government agencies which do not typically work directly with each other nor are they asked to be involved when farm and agricultural policy is discussed.
- Food Policy Councils can examine issues which often go unexamined; such as the effectiveness of food assistance programs and the causes of hunger in a society.
- Food Policy Councils can enter into a more comprehensive approach to analyzing food system issues which recognizes the inner-workings between different parts of the food system and the need for coordination and integration of actions if policy goals are to be achieved. For example, if a key objective is to increase markets for locally produced food, a Council can play a role to consider how decisions at all levels of a food system- not just farmers or governmental officials- but also food buyers, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers factor into public policy decisions.

What purpose do Food Policy Councils serve?

Food Policy Councils can play the role of a "neutral" non-partisan forum to convene multiple stakeholders in a food system. For this reason, many FPC's become "food system specialists" and become a valuable resource for developing and implementing risk management activities designed to serve the needs of traditionally under-served farmers and producers. FPC's can create additional leverage and amplification for moving forth public policy recommendations.

Who typically serves on a Council?

Membership on a Council is frequently though not exclusively, determined by the officials responsible for forming it. The goal is to have broad representation of issues and interests of stakeholders across the food system. For this reason, most FPC's are considered to be a "non-partisan" forum and do not convene with a political agenda.

Typical representatives might include farmers, consumers, anti-hunger advocates, food bank managers, labor representatives, members of the faith community, food processors, food wholesalers and distributors, food retailers and grocers, chefs and restaurant owners, officials from farm organizations, community gardeners, and academics involved in food policy and the law.

Many FPC's have state governmental officials involved as special advisors or "Ex-Officio" non-voting members which represent state departments of agriculture, economic development, inspections, education, human services, public health, cultural affairs, and departments of transportation. State legislators and locally elected officials may also be involved, however would not typically be appointed as a voting member. Some FPC's have youth participating on the Council which then serve as liaisons back into their school system; providing food system education for their peers.

Please see this link for a list of Food Policy Council members participating on Councils throughout the U.S.

How are Council members appointed?

Council members can be appointed in different ways depending on the agency or organization administering the Council. The Iowa Council has a two-way process of identifying potential members; driven both by the suggestions of current members, special advisors, Agricultural Law Center staff, and the Governor's staff. Ultimately, the Governor of Iowa approves and appoints the Council members as those individuals who will best be able to meet the goals and objectives of the Executive Order, those who acknowledge this appointment as one of service to the citizens of Iowa, and who support the structure and function of the Council.

In other states, Commissioners of Agriculture may appoint members, non-profit organizations may implement an "open-door-policy" where anyone can attend a Council meeting and participate as a member, or the selection process can run solely through the office of a Governor or city/county official.

The approach used to identify potential members is generally agreed upon by Food Policy Council's throughout the U.S.; that being a selection process that is non-partisan, objective, and all-inclusive of a broad base of food system stakeholders. Representation from different geographic regions of a state, gender balance, and culturally diversity is typically encouraged and sought after.

How are Councils created and administered?

A Council is typically created through an official government action such as the passage of a law, the issuance of an executive order, or a proclamation. Councils that are created in this way frequently have a greater 'buy-in' or support of government officials which is critical for implementing public policy changes. It also helps legitimate a Council's activities.

Food Policy Council's can either be administered as an official part of the state government or can be administered through a non-profit or educational institution as an advisory body. For example in Portland, Oregon, the city office of Sustainable Development administers the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council, a city/county Council created

through a city and county resolution. In Iowa, the Agricultural Law Center at Drake University, an academic institution, administers the Iowa Food Policy Council which was created through executive order. In New Mexico, the New Mexico Food Policy Council is administered through the non-profit organization, Farm to Table. This council formed as a grassroots movement which later became recognized by state government through the passage of a memorial. There are more different, unique ways that Councils are created and administered than there are similarities.

What is the best structure or "model" for a Food Policy Council?

Food Policy Councils are not a "one-size-fits-all" process. A Council's structure and stakeholder representation should reflect the political culture and climate of a given area and for this reason, FPC models while may share similarities, do not typically form to mirror other Councils in operation. This is a good thing. For example, the State Food Policy Council structure and stakeholder membership in Connecticut may not be able to address the unique cultural food and agricultural policy needs in a Native American Nation. Councils need to reflect and focus upon the needs of the communities in which they are formed.

Councils are usually housed within three types of organizations or agencies: 1) A state department of agriculture, 2) A non-profit organization, or 3) An academic institution. There are benefits and challenges for each type of administrative house depending on specific community needs, policy issues, staffing resources, and available funding. None of the three aforementioned "structures" or administrative homes for FPC's are any more or less advantageous. Again, the culture, political climate, and the specific food and agriculture policy needs which a Council will examine and develop recommendations for should drive the discussion and careful consideration about which administrative home will be the most effective and appropriate.

What is unique about a Food Policy Council?

Several things are unique about FPC's.

- First, the process involves a diverse group of individuals discussing a broad range of food and agricultural topics. By using a "food systems" approach - which involves discussion about food production, processing, distribution, and retail sales, a detailed investigation into food and agriculture opportunities can occur.
- Second, Councils include officials from government agencies responsible for policy decisions affecting the state's food system, e.g. Department of Health - food inspection; Human Services - food assistance; - and Education - school food purchasing. Experience shows that outside an FPC convening, these officials have little incentive or opportunity to talk with others in government to coordinate delivery of related programs.
- Third, the Councils create an environment in which people are able to ask questions usually not asked. For example, "How much food eaten is raised locally?", "Does the state make efforts to purchase local food?", and "What is the state's hunger problem."
- Food Policy Councils have the ability to positively impact many parts of a food system.

By empowering a citizen group to make a comprehensive examination of a food system, the Governor can obtain an independent and objective set of recommendations and ideas for "improving" how the state does business.

This process creates a vehicle to articulate specific priority objectives for a food sector, e.g. reducing the incidence of hunger, expanding rural economic development, utilizing provisions of the 2002 farm bill, and improving the administration of state programs. The Councils also create a way to engage into discussion about emerging issues such as local foods, direct marketing, small farms and other "new agriculture" developments - which fall outside traditional "farm" programs - but which have their own political constituencies.

What are the outcomes?

The primary outcome of Food Policy Council activities should be a change in food and/or agriculture policy. Examples of public policy changes catalyzed through FPC's include:

- Change in the motor vehicle requirement for food stamp eligibility;
- Implementation of EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) equipment at farmers' markets;
- Urban agricultural resolution to conduct an "Agricultural Inventory" of city-owned property directing appropriate bureaus to identify city-owned land which may be available for community gardens or other agricultural uses;
- Procurement rule change allowing correctional facilities to purchase locally grown food;
- Creation of new forms of insurance for small producers;
- Development of a simplified application for food stamp benefits;
- Implementation of "Farm to School" and "Farm to Cafeteria" programs.

In addition to tangible policy changes, a number of agency outcomes can result from the work of FPC's. When government agency representatives have the chance to meet and interact with citizens as part of a focused discussion on food and agricultural policy, a unique educational and networking opportunity occurs. One of the greatest benefits of an FPC is the inter-agency cooperation and understanding that results. This can illuminate agency programs and services where government spending is redundant, can identify ways government agencies can leverage more support and services between one another, and has helped form agency collaborations for grant funded programs.

What are the costs of starting a Council?

The financial resources to create and operate a Council are minimal. Connecticut is the only state to provide direct state funding for their Food Policy Council and then only \$50,000 and contingent upon matching funds. In the majority of states or regions that have an FPC get financial support for administrative, programmatic, and staffing costs through public and private grants.

One of the aspects that makes many Food Policy Councils attractive to a state or local government is the fact that they do not require creating a budgetary line item to start, maintain, and staff a Council. Funding for the operation of many Councils comes from a variety of sources including federal and state grants and private monies. It has not been typical for a local or state government to allocate funds to support and staff a Food Policy Council. There are exceptions to this general rule, however they are rare.

The largest cost implementing an FPC comes from the hundreds of hours of volunteer time provided by Council members. Most Councils meet six times a year, not including any committee or task-force meetings. As these are service positions, some Council member time, particularly for government agency representatives, counts toward regular office hours.

What is the USDA RMA and what interest do they have in promoting Food Policy Councils?

The USDA Risk Management Agency, (RMA) is an agency within the United States Department of Agriculture to help farmers manage and minimize business risks. RMA's mission is to strengthen the safety net for agricultural producers through sound risk management programs, education, and outreach. The RMA has provided financial support to Drake University Agricultural Law Center to assist with the development and support of Food Policy Councils throughout the U.S. as a vehicle to mitigate agricultural risk for non-traditional producers and farmers.

While the RMA does not directly fund Food Policy Councils, they are seen as a unique and progressive way to reach the RMA's targeted audience by providing education, outreach, and technical assistance.

What resources are available to help start a Food Policy Council?

The Agricultural Law Center at Drake University has developed an extensive initiative on state and local food policy. The Center has a Partnership Agreement with the USDA Risk Management Agency to help create State and Local Food Policy Councils as an alternative strategy of risk management. Operating and newly forming Councils have received assistance in Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, and the Hopi Native American Tribe and are being considered in several other states.

Part of the partnership agreement between Drake University and the RMA is to work with governments and organizations interested in forming a Food Policy Council by providing resources, consultation, and funding assistance.

If the agency or organization you are affiliated with is interested in learning more about what type of support may be available or if you would like to have Drake University staff consult with you, please contact us at 515.271.4956.