

# Advancing New Jersey's Food System: An Update on NJFDC's Legislative Priorities for 2024



## What is this update?

This update provides the background, potential solutions, and resources to advance food and farming policy in NJ that will benefit farmers, consumers, and the environment. It is divided into four main sections: overview, policy priorities and opportunities, 2024-2025 legislative session opportunities, and 2023 legislative champions.

**We present four policy priorities: Regional Food System Resilience; Farmer and Food Worker Advancement; Healthy Food For All; and Resilient, Restorative Food and Farming Practices.** Despite these four priorities, it is important to remember that the food and farming system is just that—a system, in which all of these policy priorities are inextricably linked. To effectively address the system's challenges and improve its outcomes, New Jersey must comprehensively address our food and farming system to ensure it is equitable and that existing programs and policies are functioning optimally.

# Overview : Transforming NJ's food and farming system

The New Jersey Food Democracy Collaborative envisions a connected food and agriculture system that is accessible to all and helps heal the planet and local communities. **New Jersey leaders have an opportunity to achieve the system we imagine** even in the face of threats from climate change, budgetary constraints, economic and racial inequities, and public health crises. In fact, good policy can help mitigate and transform these crises to bring about the food and farming systems that support this vision.

As we continue to build this thriving, inclusive food and farming system, we must consider **some of its current fundamental facts and challenges:**

## **NJ's food system needs more equity, resilience, and coordination.**

- Too many NJ residents experience food insecurity.
- Too many of NJ's food system workers live in poverty.
- Many sectors of NJ's food system are under-resourced and would be more resilient and stable if they were better connected to one another.
- Farmers face myriad challenges from land access and tenure, and access to markets.
- NJ needs to create more opportunities for local, small businesses, including small farms, to thrive.
- NJ can simultaneously improve economic, environmental, and food security challenges by developing an integrated and diverse state food system that includes food hubs, community food retailers, and processing facilities at appropriate scale.

## **NJ's food system needs stronger protections for farm and food workers.**

- Farm workers and food chain workers work in one of the most dangerous industries in the nation. NJ can ensure that these workers experience safe working conditions by improving enforcement of existing laws and establishing new processes to help these workers file workplace complaints.

- All NJ programs that serve farmworkers must be linguistically accessible.
- NJ can improve the safety net for farm workers who are impacted by smoke, extreme heat, and drought.

**NJ's food system should protect the environment and promote practices that benefit our food ecosystem.**

- NJ food and farming is dominated by a conventional, chemical-dependent agricultural system that harms soil ecology, farmworkers, and the environment.
- Agroecology, an approach that incorporates ecological principles and practices to farming, is an alternative that supports the environment and the well-being of the people involved with farm work. We can also refer to this as regenerative farming.
- NJ can promote agroecology practices by increasing the number of climate smart agriculture programs for all NJ producers, and increasing farmland access to small-scale farmers, immigrant communities, and other emerging producer groups.
- NJ can implement policies that increase support for transitioning to more climate-ready farming systems that center soil health and restoration.

**NJ's food system can foster a justice-oriented approach to increase access to healthy food.**

- Too many NJ communities are struggling with food insecurity despite current efforts to address it.
- Not enough NJ residents who qualify for federal food programs are accessing them due in part to inadequate outreach and efforts to reduce stigma, and inadequate funding for staffing at county and local offices.
- NJ's farming system can feed more people if the root causes of inequitable access, e.g., systemic racism, are addressed. Centering robust local farming economies as foundational to food security, especially for historically- marginalized, socially-disadvantaged and emerging producers, can help to address this.
- Local land use and policies pose restrictions and barriers to urban and small-scale community food production and community markets. Opportunities for change abound at the local level. Providing guidance and incentives to cities, such as in the next State Development and Redevelopment Plan can help ameliorate this.
- Identify and implement ways to collaborate and coordinate among food system sectors to address these challenges.

## Caretakers of the Land & Water

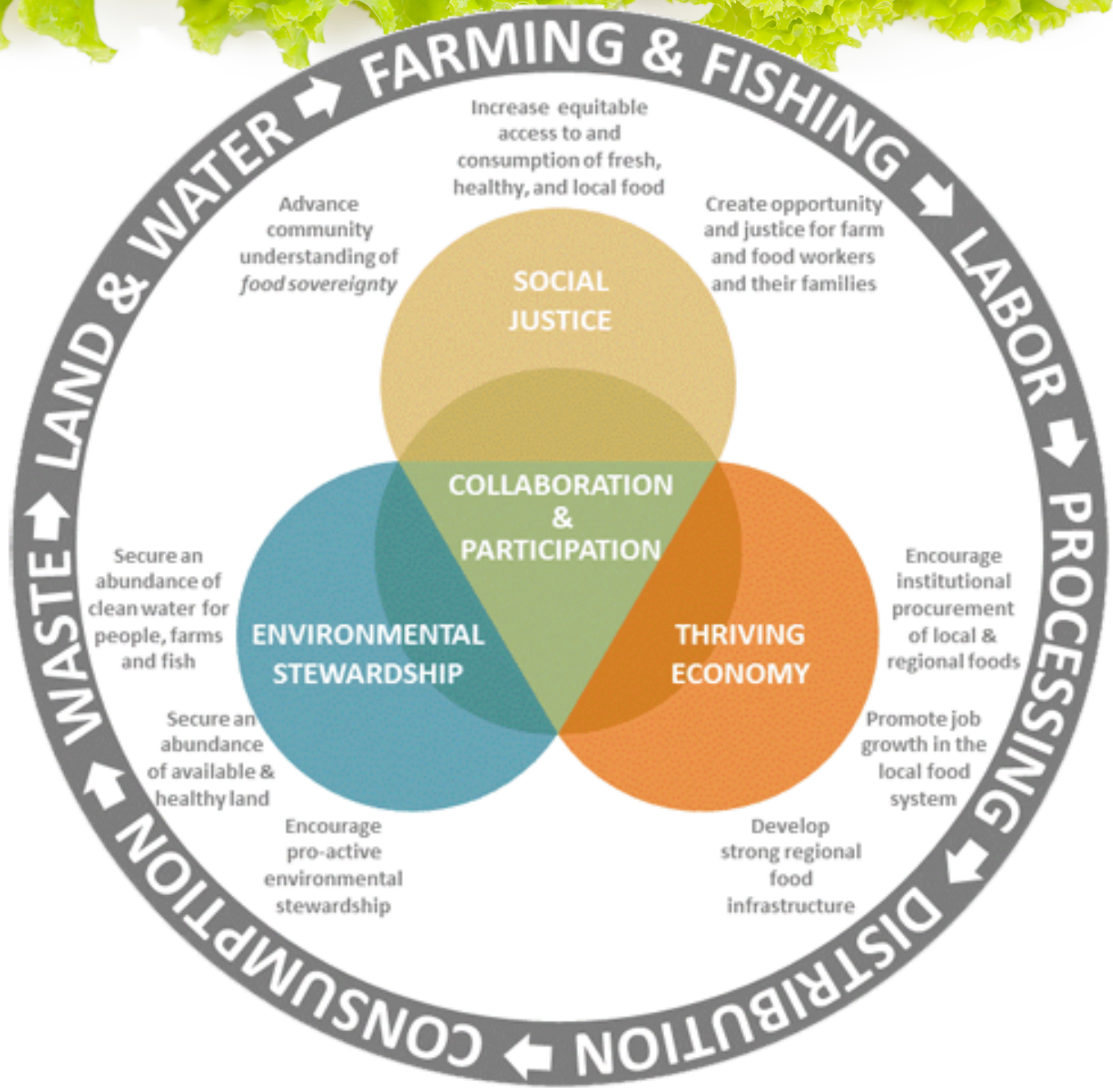
Caretakers of the Land & Water include the many organizations and individuals concerned with the health and resiliency of our natural environment, such as land trusts, environmental activists, and Indigenous communities.



## What is a Food and Farming System?

A food system is the totality of the complex networks that include all the inputs and outputs associated with food production, consumption, and disposal. More specifically, a food system encompasses the entire range of sectors and their interlinked activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of foods, and their connections to the broader economic, societal, governmental, and natural environments in which they are embedded. <https://www.usda.gov/oce/sustainability/definitions>

This includes all food producers, processors, distributors, retailers and restaurants, free and low cost food providers, institutional buyers, consumers, food waste facilities, and caretakers of the land and water in the State of New Jersey, as well as the government entities that legislate for and regulate these food system sectors. Food security (or insecurity) is an example of an outcome of a food system. That is why NJFDC's focus is on the food system as a connected whole, rather than on a single outcome.



Better food and farming systems require a systems-thinking approach. Image credit: WSU Whatcom County Community Food System Assessment

# NJ FOOD SYSTEM HIGHLIGHTS 2023



**\$195 Billion**

FOOD SECTOR  
ECONOMIC OUTPUT



**555K**

DIRECT FOOD  
SECTOR JOBS



**739K**

ACRES OF AGRICULTURAL  
LANDS PRODUCING FOOD



**189K**

ACRES OF PRESERVED  
FARMLAND IN USE



**\$85 Million**

STATE FUNDING FOR  
THE FIVE LARGEST  
FOOD BANKS



**4.8 Million**

POUNDS OF FOOD  
GLEANED FROM FARMS  
BY NJ NONPROFITS



**8.8%**

PORTION OF NJ'S  
POPULATION THAT  
IS FOOD INSECURE



**70**

FARMERS MARKETS  
ACCEPTING SNAP BENEFITS

Sources, from left to right: 2023 Feeding the Economy Report (first two statistics); 2017 Agricultural Census Data; NJ State Agriculture Development Committee, 2023; 2022 NJ Annual Report and Agricultural Statistics; Household Food Security in the United States in 2022, USDA; NJ Food Democracy Collaborative via USDA. This figure was compiled by NJFDC in 2023.

## NJ's Food System is Valuable and Complex. NJFDC is a Resource.

The NJFDC can provide legislators and regulators with invaluable research, data, lived experience insights, and proposed solutions about the challenges facing NJ's food system, including insights about the needs of socially disadvantaged, urban, small-scale, and historically underserved food producers.

The NJFDC has NJ's only state level Inclusive Markets Workgroup that has deeply investigated the issues faced by farmers and market managers who work with programs such as SNAP, WIC, and Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Programs. Working together, the NJ government and the NJFDC can strengthen New Jersey's food system through policy, environment, and system-change!



# FOUR POLICY PRIORITIES TO TRANSFORM NJ'S FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

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## REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM RESILIENCE

***Advance resilient and community-centered food systems in NJ characterized by a robust agricultural sector and equitable access to healthy foods***

- Boost local food economy infrastructure and shared infrastructure to support strong community and regional food systems.
- Increase the availability of healthy food to all residents.
- Ensure access to clean water, and ensure food safety.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. Provide a diversity of funding support for food aggregation, distribution and processing infrastructure. Support capital investments of regional food system infrastructure to build more resilience into communities across the state. Examples include shared-use infrastructure such as community commercial kitchens; community cold storage space for farms, food pantries, and schools; regional and local food hubs; and equipment and marketing support for community farmers' markets that embrace Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance programs.
2. Incentivize cities and counties to understand their food systems using recommended tools such as food policy assessments and the Community and Agriculture Resilience Assessment Tool.
3. Provide state funding to help operate and promote economically inclusive markets that integrate federal Food and Nutrition programs, operate in low food access communities, and offer local healthy food incentive programs.



# FOUR POLICY PRIORITIES TO TRANSFORM NJ'S FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

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## FARMER AND FOOD WORKER ADVANCEMENT

***Strengthen livelihoods for food producers and food workers in NJ.***

- Increase sustainable and climate-smart production, sales, and consumption of local foods.
- Create jobs and economic opportunities in food, fisheries, and farming and improve the wages, working conditions, and skills of food system workers.
- Ensure all farmer businesses that can demonstrate intentional support for community food access and food security, regardless of size or profit, are valued through policy, and protected by “right to farm”-type legislation.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. Create a Statewide Farmers' Market Task Force, with equitable representation from the three geographic regions of the state to discuss key issues to improve and strengthen the community markets sector.
2. Support the Farm Worker Epidemic Health and Safety Act which concerns public health and certain protections for farm workers.
3. Create a legislative work-around for low-income farmers to be able to access federal and state health insurance subsidies. Convene farmers to learn about the problem and discuss possible solutions.





# FOUR POLICY PRIORITIES TO TRANSFORM NJ'S FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

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## RESILIENT, RESTORATIVE FOOD AND FARMING PRACTICES

***Protect the land, water, and biodiversity needed to promote food and maximize environmental benefits from agriculture and fishing.***

- Promote and create demand for healthy and sustainable diets and reducing waste. Transition to regenerative and restorative agricultural practices and food systems grounded in agroecological principles.
- Support protection of biodiversity, including agro-biodiversity.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. Support legislation for healthy soils and climate mitigation and adaptation for NJ food producers, including producers under 5-acres.

2. Encourage NJDEP and other state agencies and programs to include food systems resilience planning and priorities in the Climate Resilience efforts.

3. Provide funding to support resilience measures in the middle-of-the supply chain, such as solar power-battery storage for regional warehouses, emergency food access points, and resilience measures for on-farm food storage.

4. Incentivize cities to develop local land use and other policies that support robust urban farming and community food systems.



# FOUR POLICY PRIORITIES TO TRANSFORM NJ'S FOOD AND FARMING SYSTEM

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## HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL

### Employ a justice-oriented approach to resilience in the food system.

- Improve knowledge and assessment of the food system and increase transparency.
- Draw on the existing environmental justice focus to build a robust social and racial justice framework for resilience.
- Design and ensure opportunities for authentic participation and leadership from impacted, under-served and historically-marginalized communities in food system governance at all scales.
- Prioritize equity and the repair of past injustices throughout the food system.
- Foster local and regional food policy coalitions and cross-sector food and farming networks at the county and local levels.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

1. NJ Government could produce an **Annual NJ Food Equity Report**. State agencies should collaborate to produce and share a report on the state of the food and agricultural system, with a focus on equitable access and resilience.
2. The NJ Legislature or the Governor could create a **statewide Healthy Food Incentives Program**, similar to the program in Massachusetts, to connect and make permanent, the various local, healthy food incentive programs in NJ currently funded by less-stable federal grants.
3. The NJ Legislature or the Governor could support a **farm-to-pantry/charitable food access program** based on the lessons-learned and recommendations from the current Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, Jersey Fresh for All.
4. NJ leaders could create a state-managed grant program, modeled after the Massachusetts, **Local Food Policy Grant Program**, to support the development and expansion of county and city level food action networks, and food system coalitions, focused on civic engagement and collaboration for better food policy.

## 2024 – 2025 Legislative Session Opportunities (as of March 1)

<b>BILL</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>A3017</b>	Establishes New Jersey Healthy Soils Program; establishes grant program for soil testing of urban agriculture sites; establishes Urban Agriculture Site Soil Testing Fund.
<b>A4547</b>	Exempts community gardens operating on-site composting systems or other systems of managing organic waste from certain DEP permits under certain conditions.
<b>S626</b>	Establishes “New Farmers Improvement Grant Program” to provide matching grants for farm improvements to beginning farmers.
<b>A2320/ S641</b>	Requires Department of Agriculture to take various actions to publicize and promote community supported agriculture in New Jersey.
<b>S2186</b>	Establishes NJEDA urban farming grant and loan program.
<b>S2005</b>	Farm Worker Epidemic Health and Safety Act concerns public health and certain protections for farm workers.
<b>A5573</b>	Requires public and nonpublic schools with lunch programs to provide free lunch to increasing numbers of income-eligible students and, after five-year phase-in, to provide free lunch to all students, regardless of income or federal eligibility.
<b>S1881</b>	Requires NJEDA to establish loan program to assist beginning farmers in financing capital purchases.
<b>A5459</b>	Requires Secretary of Agriculture to establish Farm to School Local Food Procurement Reimbursement Grant Program to reimburse school districts for costs expended in sourcing and procuring local foods for students; appropriates \$6,500,000.
<b>A4724</b>	Provides CBT credit for development of anaerobic digestion facilities that process food waste.
<b>A3634</b>	Transfers administration of certain nutrition programs to Department of Agriculture.

# EQUITABLE POLICY MAKING FOR A VIBRANT FUTURE!

Equitable policies come from equitable policy development processes. NJFDC centers lived experiences as expert knowledge. Our Collaborative's decision making body and workgroups are intentionally made up of leaders from grassroots organizations, and front-line food and farming stakeholders. We prioritize the knowledge, and perspectives of those most impacted by the food system. This helps to shape better policy solutions. We invite you to engage with us in that work.



# NJFDC's Food System Policy Champions of 2023



Representative  
Roy Freiman,  
District 16  
Chair of the  
Assembly  
Agriculture and  
Food Security  
Committee 2022-  
2023

Assemblyman Freiman Chaired the Assembly Agriculture Committee through the 2022-2023 Legislative Cycle. During that time, Representative Freiman Sponsored, co-sponsored, or supported many pieces of legislation that supported NJ's farmer and farm businesses, in particular organic growers. He did not come into the Chair role with a background in agriculture or food systems. But he made himself and his staff open and available to meet with various groups, including NJ Food Democracy Collaborative, to learn and connect. With an acumen in business and finance, he understands the needs for farm businesses to be profitable and sustainable, to access new markets and expand access to existing ones, and to reduce and redirect wasted/excess food as a solution to food insecurity. Thank you Assemblyman Freiman for your leadership and support of NJ farmers and food system stakeholders.

**Noteworthy bills sponsored by Assemblyman Freiman:**

- A3444 Establishes Organic Farming Board in Department of Agriculture.
- A4763 Establishes "Climate-Resilient Crop Grant Program" in Department of Agriculture; appropriates \$200,000.
- A3924, Requires Secretary of Agriculture to establish agricultural disaster assistance program.
- A2631 Provides limited civil liability immunity to farmers hosting agritourism activities.



Representative  
Alex Sauickie,  
District 12

Assemblyman Sauickie had big shoes to fill after the passing of long-time Agriculture advocate, Assemblyman Ron Dancer in 2022. He ran unopposed in a special election to fill Assm. Dancer's vacant seat in the General Assembly. In his first year on the Assembly Agriculture and Food Security Committee, Assm. Sauickie sponsored several bills that had the support of NJFDC. His office was a welcoming place for conversations on food and farming policy needs and opportunities.

**Noteworthy bills sponsored by Assemblyman Sauickie:**

- A5079 Authorizes EDA to provide grants from "Global Warming Solutions Fund" to finance replacement of certain agricultural equipment.
- A1940 Requires Department of Agriculture to take various actions to publicize and promote community supported agriculture in New Jersey.
- A5295 Authorizes counties and certain boards to acquire unpreserved lands in agricultural development areas for use by agricultural support businesses, and to sell or lease county-owned lands in such areas to such businesses at reduced price.

## APPENDIX A

### **2022 – 2023 Legislative Session Successes Examples**

**A2360 (P.L.2022, c.27):** Eliminates requirement that participation in NJ SNAP Employment and Training Program is mandatory for certain recipients.

**A3444 (P.L.2022, c.141):** Establishes Organic Farming Board in Department of Agriculture.

**A4729 (P.L.2023, c.245):** Revises method for appraisals of farmland to be acquired for farmland preservation purposes.

**A4821 (P.L.2023, c.318):** Directs DEP to take certain actions concerning identification and testing of microplastics in drinking water, and requires DEP and BPU to study and promote use of microplastics removal technologies.

**A5462 (P.L.2023, c.329):** Revises law establishing Office of Food Security Advocate, and establishes certain conditions for use of monies appropriated to emergency food organizations.

**A5684 (P.L.2023, c.336):** Requires certain nonpublic schools to provide meals to all students under "Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act"; authorizes limited expansion of income eligibility to qualify public and nonpublic school students for free lunch.

**S428 (P.L.2023, c.20):** Extends Right to Farm Act protections to certain shellfish aquaculture activities.

**S757 (P.L.2023, c.9):** Authorizes special occasion events at certain commercial farms on preserved farmland, under certain conditions.

**S2921 (P.L.2022, c.47):** Revises various provisions of Food Desert Relief Program.

**A5209 (P.L.2023, c.87):** Establishes Agritourism Fund; requires annual appropriation of \$2.5 million from General Fund; appropriates \$2.5 million.



## **ABOUT NJFDC**

**The NJ Food Democracy Collaborative (NJFDC) is an independent nonprofit state food policy council. We focus on building resilience and equity in the food system through fostering collaborative action; affecting structural change; advocating for innovation and optimization of public programs. Any person or organization who is involved with food system transformation in New Jersey is considered part of the NJFDC network. There is no formal membership in the NJFDC. A Network Facilitation Team provides oversight and direction. Three Workgroups address specific policy and system-change needs that were identified as NJFDC's highest priority programmatic goals: Legislative and Policy Workgroup (including an Urban and Small Scale Agriculture Policy Subcommittee), Inclusive Markets Workgroup, and Education and Training Workgroup.**

### **NJFDC's Accomplishments**

- NJ State of the Food System Summit, statewide convening on food and farming policy issues, 2021, 2022, and 2023
- NJ Roadmap Report for Food System Resilience: A holistic justice approach to food system transformation (2022)
- Priority Solutions for Urban & Small Scale Farming in NJ (2022)
- Funding Food Policy Councils in NJ: A case statement
- NJ's Food System in a Nutshell (2022)

### **Grant-Funded Projects & Collaborations**

- USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement, partner with Community Food Bank of NJ and NJ Department of Agriculture (2023- 2024)
- Empowering Communities Through Food Systems: Development of a Statewide Food System Data Dashboard, partner with Rutgers University (2023)
- USDA Increasing Land, Capital and Market Access, partner with Foodshed Alliance (2024- 2028)
- Initial Community Food Assessment for Atlantic City, NJ, partner with Stockton University (2021)
- Food Asset Inventory and Mapping Project, partner with Stockton University (2021)

# Who Participates in the NJ Food Democracy Collaborative?

NJ health care and public health organizations



Emergency and charity food organizations, regional and local food banks

NJ farmers, growers, and producers



Food security, community food access, and food justice organizations

State and local agencies and public officials



Academic institutions and cooperative extension



Food retail organizations including community farmers markets



## NJFDC's Current Work Groups

- Legislative and Policy
- Urban and Small-Scale Agriculture Policy
- Inclusive Local Markets
- Research
- Education and Training





We want to hear from you. Tell us about a resource. Ask a question. Or share an event. Have questions about this report?

We would love to connect.

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