

Federal Policy, Administration, and Local Food Coming of Age

Jill K. Clark and Becca B.R. Jablonski

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Hardesty's 2010 *Choices* article describes the mainstreaming of local and regional food systems (LRFS) at the federal level. She highlights the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill, which included policies and programs "designed specifically to increase the supply of and demand for local food" (p. 1), and the creation of the USDA's 2009 "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" (KYF2) administrative initiative. In 2018, and under a new administration, we investigate the evidence of the maturation of federal policies (and the administration of those programs) aimed at supporting LRFS. To do this, we look at evidence of both legislative maturation, focusing on changes in federal policy (mainly via the Farm Bill), and administrative maturation, focusing on changes in staffing, programming, and the way in which the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) carries out its legislative mandates (in other words, how the USDA does business).

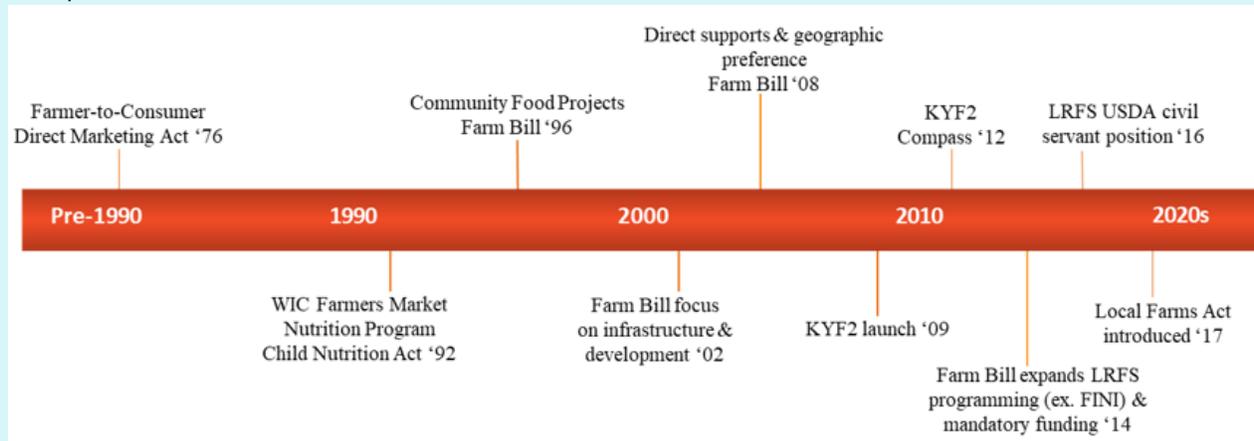
We start with a brief history of demand for LRFS policies from the U.S. food movement broadly and the growing policy response from Congress. Turning to the administration of LRFS policies, we then discuss the KYF2 initiative and its impacts as reported by the Obama administration. Subsequently, we discuss documents released following a Freedom of Information Act request pertaining to KYF2 as well as a survey of members of the KYF2 task force. Finally, we ask where KYF2 stands today within the federal administration and what this means for the future of LRFS within the USDA.

Evidence of Legislative Maturation: The Farm Bill

In the 1970s, agrifood organizations began successfully integrating their objectives into federal policy (Hunt, 2015). In general, the agrifood movement is concerned about reversing the growing distance (physically and relationally) between producers and consumers, reducing concentration and consolidation in the middle of the supply chain, increasing farmer incomes, and reducing community food insecurity and the environmental degradation that have resulted from the current global food system (Clark, Sharp, and Dugan, 2015). These organizations thought that these concerns could, in part, be addressed by developing and supporting LRFS (Constance, Renard, and Rivera-Ferre, 2014). Here, our focus is on the Farm Bill. Other legislation also addresses LRFS (for example, the USDA National Farm to School Program was formally created by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act), but the Farm Bill is arguably the most important for LRFS development.

Hunt (2015) traces the movement's interests at the federal level back to the development of local producer markets after the passage of the Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976 (Figure 1). Then, in the late 1980s, interests in linking low-income, low-access consumers to local products made their way into the Women Infants and Children program and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP). The 1996 Farm Bill included the Community Food Projects (CFP) Competitive Grants Program, further reinforcing the connection between local production and consumption while specifically focusing on building systems at the community level. The grant program served as an incubator for LRFS innovation (Maretzki and Tuckermanty, 2007). The 2002 Farm Bill reauthorized the CFP and created a new focus on infrastructure improvement and development, bolstering the possibilities for LRFS (Hunt, 2015).

Figure 1. Selected Highlights of the Legislative and Administrative Maturation of Local Foods at the Federal Level, 1976–2016.

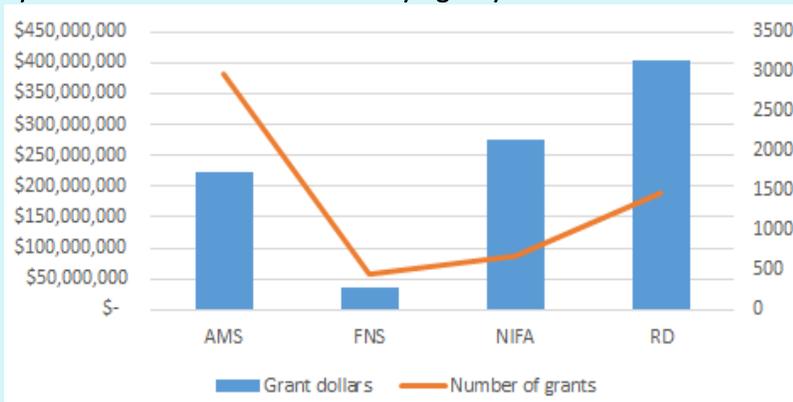


The 2008 Farm Bill largely continued and expanded the LRFS policies of the 2002 Farm Bill (Martinez, 2016). Direct support for LRFS was provided through several existing programs (Johnson, Aussenberg, and Cowan 2012), including, for example, the Business and Industry loan and loan guarantee program, an existing USDA Rural Development program, which specified that 5% of funding shall be in support of local and regional food production. In addition, language in existing child nutrition programs was amended to require the USDA to allow schools to use “geographic preference” when purchasing food.

Between the 2008 and 2014 Farm Bills, local food sales grew a purported 27%, to an estimated \$6.1 billion (Johnson, 2016). The majority of these sales were attributed to intermediated marketing channels (e.g., sales to restaurants, institutions, retailers) (Low and Vogel 2011). Accordingly, the 2014 Farm Bill continued to support and expand LRFS policy and programming, with a noted increase in funding to support the development and expansion of intermediated markets (Martinez, 2016). This Farm Bill included new programs, such as Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives (SNAP Incentives), and increased mandatory funding for such programs as the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2014). Although permanent funding increased for LRFS programs in aggregate, some programs, such as provisions for Farm to School, did not receive the support advocates had wanted (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2014).

Because of this Farm Bill activity, the USDA has supported a diverse array of LRFS investments and programs. Figure 2 illustrates investments by agency, dollar, and number since the 2008 Farm Bill. These include the 63 federal grant, loan, and technical assistance programs, of which LRFS are a part, described further in *Building Sustainable Farms, Ranches and Communities* (Krome, Reistad, and NSAC Policy Staff, 2014).

Figure 2. Selected USDA Investments in Local and Regional Food Systems since the 2008 Farm Bill by Agency.



Notes: AMS = Agricultural Marketing Service; FNS = Food and Nutrition Service; NIFA = National Institute of Food and Agriculture; RD = Rural Development)

Part of the maturation of LRFS in federal policy, and particularly the Farm Bill, is the move from discretionary funding to mandatory funding. For example, the government doubled CFP funding in 2002, but it was still discretionary. As of the 2014 Farm Bill, this program receives mandatory funding. Overall, increases in mandatory funding for LRFS and healthy food access, organic production, and rural development under the 2014 Farm Bill totaled \$501.1 million over 5 years, a 50% increase over the previous Farm Bill (National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, 2014). While funding for LRFS has increased since the initial investment of \$1.5 million over 2 years through the Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act, it is good to keep in mind that the overall expected 5-year outlay from the 2014 Farm Bill is \$489 billion (USDA, 2018).

Evidence of Administrative Maturation: Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food

While Congress legislates LRFS policy, the USDA administers its implementation via rule-making and, more broadly, management strategies. A strong piece of evidence of the maturation of LRFS within the federal administration is its integration of LRFS into USDA priorities, including enhancing the rural economy, the environment, food access, and nutrition and strengthening agricultural producers and markets (Hunt, 2015; Martinez, 2016). For example, under the Obama administration, development and support of LRFS was one pillar of the USDA's strategic plan (USDA, 2012). Further, in 2009, the USDA launched its LRFS management and communications strategy, known as the "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" (KYF2) Initiative (Figure 1). In Secretary Vilsack's announcement of this effort (2009), he stated that "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food means using existing programs to support the development of local and regional food systems." Although KYF2 faced some opposition in Congress, which is likely why KYF2 was launched using existing programs, it remained a focus of the USDA through the Obama administration (Johnson, 2016).

To deepen our understanding of how KYF2 administratively integrated LRFS activities within existing USDA programs, we used internal documents obtained from a Freedom of Information Act request and a survey of past and current USDA employees who had been part of the KYF2 task force. From these two sources of information, we learned that the primary public-facing document of KYF2 was its Compass (USDA, 2012). The Compass, which provides guidance on the internal and external roles of KYF2, states that KYF2 is not a new program and has no staff, no office, and no dedicated funding: "Rather the initiative seeks to leverage existing USDA resources, promote greater collaboration between the Department's 17 agencies and multiple staff offices, and identify ways to improve the administration and implementation of programs" (p. 17). At least one employee from each agency and many staff offices joined the KYF2 task force. The task force met regularly so that its members could share information, educate each other, and identify program synergies.

Further review of obtained documents provides additional information on the task force's intent. Specifically, the external goals focused on i) elevating a conversation already happening around LRFS, ii) connecting resources to nontraditional producers, and iii) facilitating the building of LRFS. Internally, the focus was on i) legitimizing LRFS work within USDA agencies, ii) supporting work on new topics and knowledge exchanges, iii) changing the allocation of public dollars and the ways in which USDA staff do daily business and, iv) eliciting new collaboration, particularly across agencies.

KYF2's Stated Accomplishments

In April 2016, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack delineated the department's accomplishments resulting from the KYF2 Task Force (Vilsack, 2016). These accomplishments included:

- expanding existing programs and new strategies to build USDA's capacity to serve local food stakeholders.
- creating a one-stop resource and information platform showcasing USDA programs that support LRFS (the KYF2 website, which featured the Compass). This includes transparent information about location and the financial support level of federally supported local food projects.
- launching and maintaining several local food directories (farmers' markets, CSAs, food hubs, on-farm stores).

- coordinating support that changed the way that USDA invests its resources, including making it easier for small and beginning producers to access loan programs and to meet regulatory requirements for intermediated markets, as well as support for local food infrastructure investments (including for food hubs and innovative retail).
- enhancing data collection and availability, including the new USDA-NASS local food marketing survey.
- increasing access to local food among low-income households, in part through increasing the number of SNAP-authorized vendors (including farmers' markets and farm stands).

Connecting Agencies, Changing Administration

The above information is based on KYF2's self-reported outputs, are the only compiled and publicly available data on the accomplishments and include little to no external validation. Accordingly, using the documents obtained from the Freedom of Information Act, we investigated evidence of KYF2's effectiveness in supporting the administrative maturation of LRFS.

From these documents, we see that members across agencies met every 2 weeks and that each agency appointed someone to the task force. Initially, the task force discussed how to remove barriers to collaboration and how to integrate LRFS within existing programming and began cross-agency workgroups on specific topics (e.g., research, regional food hubs, local meat and poultry), in addition to focusing on internal capacity building (e.g., brown bag talks). Later, the task force did outreach to field offices, coordinated around emerging topics (e.g., urban agriculture), tracked new initiatives with overlapping goals, and developed new resources for the public on LRFS-related issues. These meetings were meant to reorganize thinking and action around LRFS within the department and align and coordinate resources to improve the management and implementation of research and programming. Ultimately, a central mechanism to achieve these objectives got task force members coordinating and collaborating to produce cultural change within the USDA.

However, meetings themselves do not indicate the extent to which KYF2 supported a maturation of LRFS within the department. From a public management perspective, one way of assessing whether LRFS has matured is by examining whether KYF2 changed both the process and the outcome of operational systems within the USDA (Sandfort and Moulton, 2015). For example, did the daily work of its members become oriented toward LRFS, were members rewarded for this work, and did operations alter department outputs, such as integrating LRFS into funding priorities? Important to the central mechanism at play, did KYF2 result in task force members coordinating and collaborating on LRFS initiatives outside of task force meetings, thereby creating a systemic operation change?

To answer these questions, we developed a comprehensive list of current and past task force members using the obtained records and then asked members to participate in an online survey. We identified 265 task force members. Of those 265, we could not find updated contact information for 27 individuals. A total of 108 people responded, resulting in a 45.4% response rate. Of those who responded, 54% had started working at the USDA before the inception of KYF2 in 2009. Respondents represented 21 agencies, mission areas, and other USDA offices.

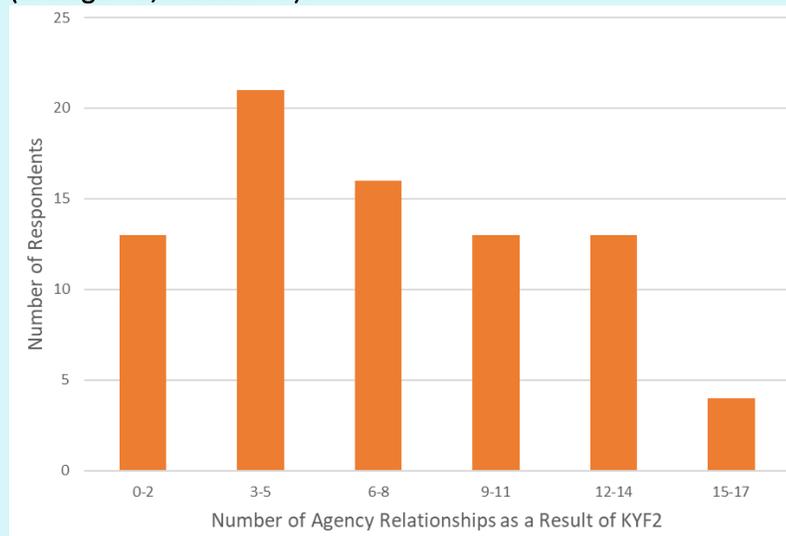
Focusing on respondents working in agencies, survey results provide evidence that KYF2 connected people and agencies and changed processes. An overwhelming 97.5% of respondents reported cooperating (exchanging information, attending meetings together, and offering resources—financial and nonfinancial—to partners) or coordinating (includes cooperative activities in addition to intentional efforts to enhance each other's capacity to address individual priorities) outside of KYF2 meetings across agencies and mission areas (PARTNER, 2012). KYF2 resulted in new relationships with staff outside of respondents' home agencies. The average and median number of agencies with which members had relationships as a result of KYF2 was 7 (minimum = 0; maximum = 17) (Figure 3). Overall, 72% of respondents believed that leadership in their agencies prioritized or prioritizes LRFS after KYF2. Just over 39% of respondents said that KYF2 was integrated into specific priorities, requests for proposals (RFPs), requests for applications (RFAs), or notices of funding that were not a direct result of legislation. Furthermore, 42% of respondents said that LRFS activities became part of their job descriptions and/or formal plans of work following KYF2, and 66% of respondents were rewarded for their involvement with KYF2 in their performance reviews/plans.

[We acknowledge that respondents may have self-selected to participate in the survey based on their interests in LRFS, which may bias the results.]

Where KYF2 Stands Today

In May 2016, before the end of the Obama administration, the USDA created a new, permanent civil servant position housed under the Agricultural Marketing Service to serve as a Local and Regional Food Systems Policy Advisor. The job description reads that the selected individual plays a critical role in advising Agency, Mission Area, and Departmental officials on key issues and decision making processes on a variety of complex, important, and sometimes controversial activities concerning Departmental and interagency LRFS policies and relevant programs. Primary responsibility includes coordination and leadership of the USDA Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Initiative. (USAJOBS, 2016)

Figure 3. Number of Respondents Reporting Agency Relationships as a Result of KYF2 Categorized by Ranges (average = 7; median = 7).

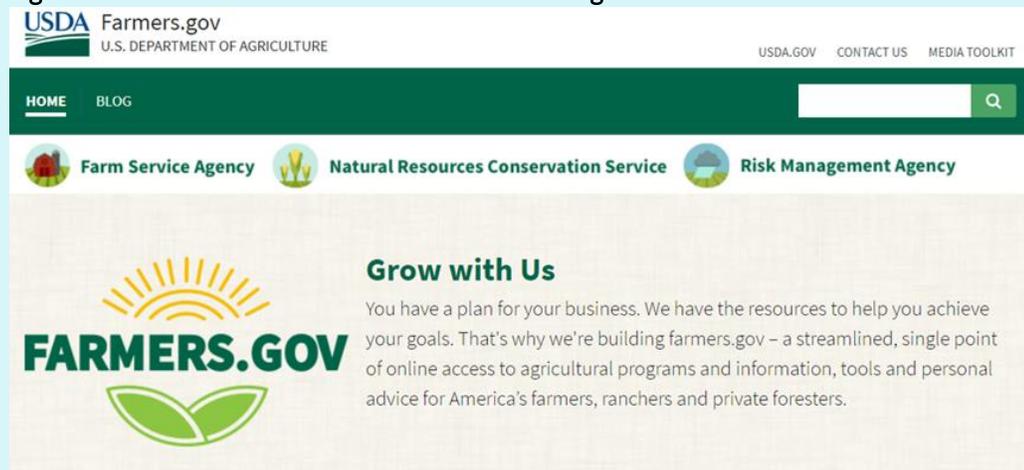


Although agency staff are no longer “assigned” to KYF2 under the new administration, the task force continues to meet biweekly and has transitioned to the voluntary Local and Regional Food Working Group. This group continues its focus on coordinating the USDA’s LRFS activities, creating opportunities for collaboration, and more generally cross-pollinating ideas. In 2018, the monthly meetings focus on four primary areas: research reporting, industry innovations, connections to field staff, and supporting programs and networks (such as to the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network or a new USDA program that provides awareness and tools for USDA staff to promote and use shared resources) (Kovacs, 2018).

Though one could view the fact that participation in LRFS meetings is no longer mandatory as a sign that that LRFS have not been institutionalized, we believe that the persistence of these meetings likely points to LRFS’ institutionalization across the USDA; agency staff now voluntarily choose to participate and are granted the ability to do so by their supervisors. Additionally, members of the Local and Regional Food Working Group self-organized an Interagency Grants Working Group as an opportunity for “grants administrators from across USDA [to] come together to improve efficiency, customer service, and ability to demonstrate impacts of their grant programs” (Kovacs, 2018). The group meets at least monthly to share strategies, systems, policies, and practices. Although the grants working group started as an outgrowth of the Local and Regional Food Working Group, it has subsequently expanded as other grants administrators throughout USDA have expressed interest in joining.

In many ways, the Local and Regional Food Working Group and the Interagency Grants Working Group provide evidence of fundamental cultural shifts at the USDA, tying in with the new administration’s “One USDA” and “customer service” priorities such as the new

Figure 4. Screenshot from the New USDA Farmers.gov Portal



farmers.gov website (see Figure 4), which provides a one-stop resource for services provided by the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Risk Management Agency (USDA, n.d.).

What Does This Mean Moving Forward?

It is difficult to know the extent to which legislative maturation will continue, and the timing of this article is somewhat awkward given ongoing debate about the next Farm Bill. However, there are hints of continued legislative maturation of LRFS. In October 2017, the Local Food and Regional Market Supply (FARMS) Act was introduced in both the Senate (D-Brown) (<https://www.brown.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/brown-introduces-legislation-to-help-farmers-grow-their-businesses-boost-ohios-rural-economy>) and in the House (D-Pingree) (<https://pingree.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congresswoman-pingree-leads-bipartisan-local-farms-act>). Though similar acts have been introduced previously, the Local FARMS Act is unique for two reasons. First, it represents the first time that both the Senate and House versions of the marker bills for LRFS have had bipartisan support. Second, it includes mandatory baseline funding at \$80 million per year for programs that enable farmers to access to new LRFS markets, increase access for LRFS consumers, and develop the infrastructure that connects the two via a suite of efforts (including Value Added Producer Grants, the Farmers Market Promotion Program, and the Local Food Promotion Program).

All indications are that demand for LRFS will continue to increase. Indeed, industry analysts have estimated that local food sales will increase to \$20 billion in 2019, outpacing the growth of total food and beverage sales (Hesterman and Horan, 2017). Therefore, regardless of where LRFS comes out during this Farm Bill debate, public choice theory suggests that we can expect policy makers to continue to respond to their constituents and LRFS stakeholder advocacy groups by pushing legislation that reduces market barriers and expands access for both farmers and consumers, building on past policy development.

Given our findings of changes in culture and management of LRFS within the USDA, the agency is likely better positioned to implement any LRFS legislative policies than it was a decade ago. The enhanced ability to coordinate across agencies likely improves the USDA staff's ability to handle LRFS programs, which tend to straddle agency lines. In addition, the existence of a point person in the Agricultural Marketing Service tasked with interagency knowledge and information concerning LRFS policies, programming, and initiatives means that Congress can more efficiently communicate with the USDA regarding cross-agency LRFS-related issues as they work to pass the next Farm Bill. Though an interagency group continues to meet to discuss LRFS-related issues, the lack of formal institutional support may lead to a deterioration of this cohesion moving forward, as well as the discontinuation of integrating LRFS into job descriptions and performance evaluations.

In this article, we have pointed to the increased consumer demand for LRFS, including projections of continued increases in sales through these differentiated markets. Continued growth in consumers is likely to drive policy development and the eventual administrative and management response. What remains unanswered is the impact that LRFS policies and administration have on the supply of and demand for LRFS. In other words, how effective has the maturation of LRFS in the federal government been in supporting these markets? This is an area ripe for future research.

For More Information

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Author Information

Jill K. Clark (clark.1099@osu.edu) is Associate Professor, John Glenn College of Public Affairs, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Becca B.R. Jablonski (becca.jablonski@colostate.edu) is Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.

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