

VIEWPOINT

What is the role of national policies in fostering local food supply chains?

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National Policies and Programs Supporting Local Foods

As defined in the 2008 farm bill, local foods are those that are transported less than 400 miles from their origins or only within the state in which they are produced (Martinez et al., 2010). However, different states use other definitions of local foods. For example, state organizations, like the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCDA&CS) and North Carolina Coop-

erative Extension, recognize local foods as food grown, caught, or raised in North Carolina (Favre, 2022). Both producers and consumers generally consider the definition of local foods to be “locally grown and sourced” products, with an appreciation for local farmers and their commitment to stimulating economic activity and development.

The initial concept of local foods can be traced back to neighborhood activities or county-level connections that allowed growers to connect with residents. Many of us who grew up in rural areas (where modern supermarkets were not as popular) share personal experiences or memories of going to local markets and being fascinated by the dynamic interactions between sellers and buyers. Over time, this type of localized exchange has evolved and expanded into more formal market settings, such as farmers markets, roadside stands, food hubs, and restaurants showcasing specialty products sourced locally. Martinez (2016) provided a comprehensive review of policies that contribute to the local food movement in the U.S., thus

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strengthening the relationship between growers and consumers grounded in rural communities. Some of the obstacles to growing local food programs and initiatives have been discussed by researchers including production limitations (e.g., geographical location and landscape, soil, and climate variations), distribution limitations (e.g., demand versus supply matching, market regulations, and food safety compliance), traceability issues between vendors, suppliers, and buyers, and timely responses to unforeseen challenges (e.g., economic and environmental shocks create gaps for labor and market channel operations) (Martinez, 2016).

Since the 2008 farm bill, federal agencies working on food and agricultural policies and programs have included financial and technical support to help farmers grow local food markets, build infrastructure, and adopt sustainable practices (Martinez, 2016). Many USDA agencies have offered programs to support local food production, resource conservation, procurement, financing, risk management, consumer education, diet and health optimization, market accessibility, food safety and accountability, and innovative business and market development (USDA National Agricultural Library, n.d.). Many of these government programs have integrated impacts on local food development and household welfare.

Beyond USDA efforts, local foods are affected by new initiatives at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (U.S. FDA). Specifically, FDA introduced new approaches through the Human Foods Program (HFP) in 2026 and set a priority to improve food safety and food traceability to ensure the high quality of food supplied to consumers. These new initiatives will affect some farmers' participation in growing and supplying local markets, provided proper compliance, such as maintaining records from production to supply chains. In the sections below, we focus on three USDA programs and provide a more in-depth discussion.

Investments in Local Foods through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

To enhance farm operations through practices and management, NRCS offers a series of technical

assistance and cost-share programs to help farmers improve on-farm infrastructure, increase yields, access irrigation water, extend crop seasons, and establish a feasible conservation and ecosystem protection plan. These programs include the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. High tunnels (a hoop house used to extend the growing season) are among the most popular cost-share programs in EQIP, allowing farmers to work with NRCS staff to mitigate threats posed by unpredictable weather patterns and extend production seasons for many fruits and vegetables to meet market needs at the local and regional levels (USDA NRCS, n.d.-a). NRCS programs are often linked to a variety of technical assistance for business and enterprise development thus providing farmers with opportunities to learn strategies for creating effective plans to engage local markets. For example, many community-based organizations often collaborate with NRCS and local colleges or universities to run the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development program for those interested in designing, creating, and running farm enterprises at different scales. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program also draws participants from active-duty military service (e.g., the North Carolina State Cooperative Extension offers a Soldiers to Agriculture program specifically within 180 days of separation), veterans, and other culturally diverse groups who are passionate about enhancing food security and community health at the local level (Johnson, 2025).

There has been a shift in NRCS focused programs since December 2025, when NRCS launched the Regenerative Pilot Program including 15 types of primary conservation practices (USDA NRCS, n.d.-b). This new program invests US\$700 million (US\$400 million through the EQIP and US\$300 million through the Conservation Stewardship Program) to help farmers address whole farm natural resource management via voluntary regenerative agriculture conservation plans. This new program aims to encourage producers to bundle practices with an integrated approach while addressing all resource concerns in soil, water, and other elements. It also encourages supply chain

vendors to offer farmers assistance and credit for proper resource management.

Investments in Local Foods through the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)

AMS leads marketing and promotion efforts to help local/regional farmers connect with buyers through several programs and directories. AMS programs also have interconnecting effects that help consumers access local foods regardless of income level. AMS's investments focus on three flagship programs, the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP),¹ and the Regional Food System Partnership (RFSP).²

The most significant change in AMS funding is the recent cut in several programs. The over US\$1 billion funding cut impacted schools' and local food banks' purchases of local foods from farmers (Santucci, 2025). For example, the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program lost funding for 2025, and the LFPA Cooperative Agreement Program also lost funding support. Although the current LFPA agreements will continue, there will be no new funding moving forward. The funding cut directly influences the local farmers' income and reduces the opportunities for schools and community organizations to acquire local foods.

In March 2026, AMS announced an award of US\$26.8 million to support projects through the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP), which aims to support the development, coordination, and expansion of direct marketing, local and regional food systems, and value-added agricultural products. LAMP could fill the gaps due to the previous funding cut to stimulate coordinated efforts between producers, supply chain service providers, community-based organizations, and local government agencies to cultivate public-private partnerships while strengthening business planning and enterprise development to improve income and economic opportunities for the overall food system participants. The LAMP Navigator offers online information, which allows users to explore LAMP

grant information such as project activities and other details (Figure 1). This data includes historical records from 2006 to 2024 of all projects funded under the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP),³ LFPP, and RFSP.

To understand how the funding distribution varies across the U.S., we further extracted specific data from the LAMP database via keyword searches, then used ArcGIS Pro to show awards under the FMPP, LFPP, and RFSP programs in different states based on available public data (Figures 2–4).

A large proportion of the FMPP awards were made in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions (Figure 2). The number of awards does not seem to correlate with the amount of funding received in each state. For example, California, Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania received 18 to 56 awards, according to the current data, and the average award amount was between US\$125,000 and US\$287,000. Nevada and Maine had 1 to 5 awards, and the average amount of awards was above US\$300,000.

Most of the awards of LFPP were distributed in two coastal regions (Figure 3). Colorado, New Mexico, Minnesota, and West Virginia had 9 to 12 awards each with an average award of least US\$190,000.

California, Colorado, New York, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Virginia had the highest number of awards in the RFSP (Figure 4). Montana, Oklahoma, Michigan, Indiana, and North Carolina received significant award amounts, with an average award of over US\$500,000. The funding amounts reflect the fact that it takes some effort to coordinate stakeholders, organizations, institutions, and government agencies to establish a sustainable regional food system network and partnership. For example, in fiscal year 2024, the RFSP awarded 10 projects with a total of US\$5.2 million to support building a statewide, grassroots network of partnership to address Alaska's food insecurity issues; for several counties in California to enhance market access for local producers; and to bring together a diverse community of partners to increase efficiencies throughout the supply chain that support the

¹ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/lfpp>

² <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/rfsp>

³ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/fmpp>

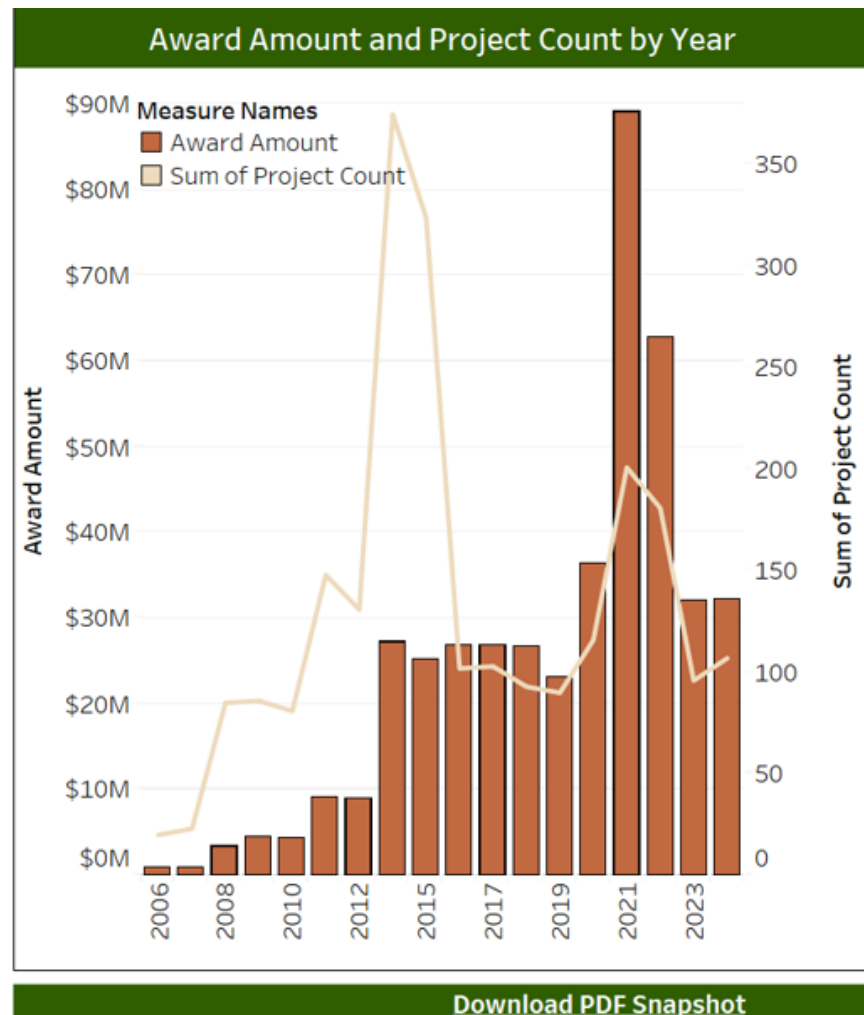
charitable food network (USDA AMS, n.d.-b).

Beyond providing financial assistance for local and regional entities to develop effective strategies in supporting local food development, AMS has compiled directories to assist consumers in finding local food vendors, including agritourism operations, community supported agriculture operations, farmers markets, food hubs, and on-farm markets (e.g., farm stands and roadside markets). Queried in March 2026, there were 13,564 listings in the Agritourism category, 1,992 listings in the Community Supported Agriculture category, 7,090 listings in the Farmers Market category, 479 listings in the Food Hub category, and 4,674 listings in the On-Farm Market category.

Investments in Local Foods through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

FNS programs support local foods by connecting federal nutrition assistance (e.g., school meals, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children [WIC]) with local food producers. Several federal programs have provided resources to establish farm-to-school initiatives or allow schools to purchase locally available produce for lunch and childcare programs. Many farmers markets accept SNAP, WIC, and Senior Assistance benefits nationwide. For example, in 2017, over 7,000 farmers and farmers markets across the country were authorized to accept SNAP benefits, a significant increase from 2012. According to a 2022 USDA ERS report (Sauer et al., 2022), there are

Figure 1. Partial View of the AMS LAMP Dashboard Showing Trends of Funds and Number of Awards, 2006–2024



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service [USDA AMS]. (n.d.-a).

over 8,700 farmers markets in the U.S., and the number has been steadily growing since 2014. The USDA FNS (2021) estimated that US\$33 million in SNAP benefits were redeemed at farmers markets in 2020. Witzling et al. (2025) examined attendance and experiences at U.S. farmers markets using a national survey. The descriptive analysis of the survey responses yielded some observations: (a) most of the customers purchased fresh fruits and vegetables at the farmers markets, and many were interested in buying a meal kit; (b) summer was the most common season to visit farmers markets; (c) customers were more likely to visit farmers markets located along a main street or in a

neighborhood; (d) many customers preferred using cash or credit cards at the farmers markets, and (e) there was strong interest in using SNAP, WIC, or coupons issued by the farmers market or a state agency at farmers markets. These strategies encouraged customers at farmers markets to purchase affordable fruit and vegetables, which helps support low-income communities (Ball et al., 2019; Grin et al., 2013).

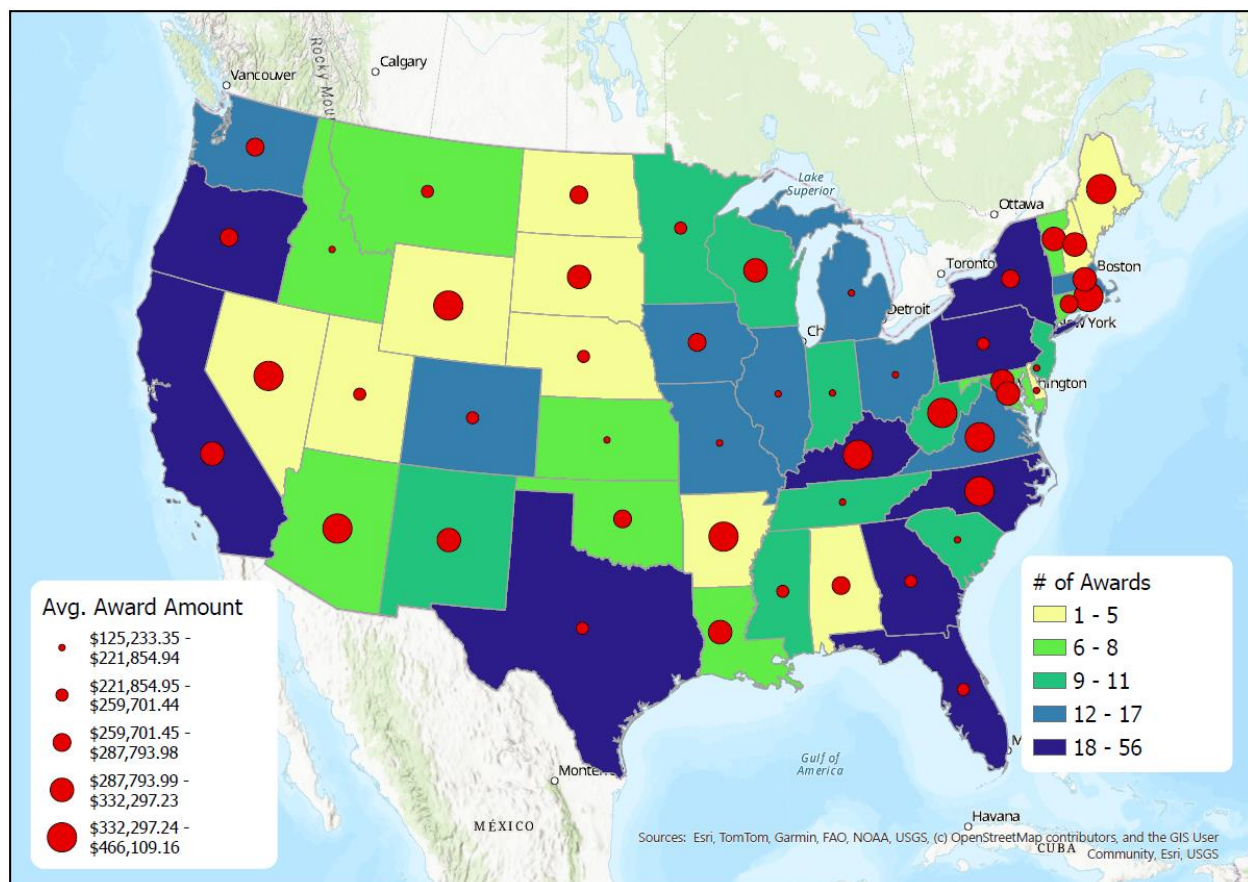
There have been drastic changes in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) since 2025 (USDA FNS SNAP, undated). The One, Big, Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 changed certain eligibility criteria for individuals or families to apply for SNAP. For example, individuals need to prove their eligibility according to citizenship status, all applicants must have a social security number, able-bodied adults between the ages of 16 and 60 must register for work and take part in an employ-

ment and training program to which they will be referred by the SNAP office. Other restrictions are applied to students and persons on strike, and on the basis of income and resources available within the families. These new eligibility requirements might restrict participation in SNAP, which could trigger a decline in the number of people using SNAP benefits to purchase local foods at farmers markets. This could lead to income loss for some local farmers whose primary income sources are from local farmers markets.

What is the Role of Local Food Policy Councils in Supporting Access to Federal Programs?

Local food policy councils host meetings to facilitate brainstorming and the exchange of information among farmers, local government agencies, supply chain service providers, consumers, and

Figure 2. Funding Distribution and Number of Awards Related to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service's Farmers Market Promotion, 2015–2025



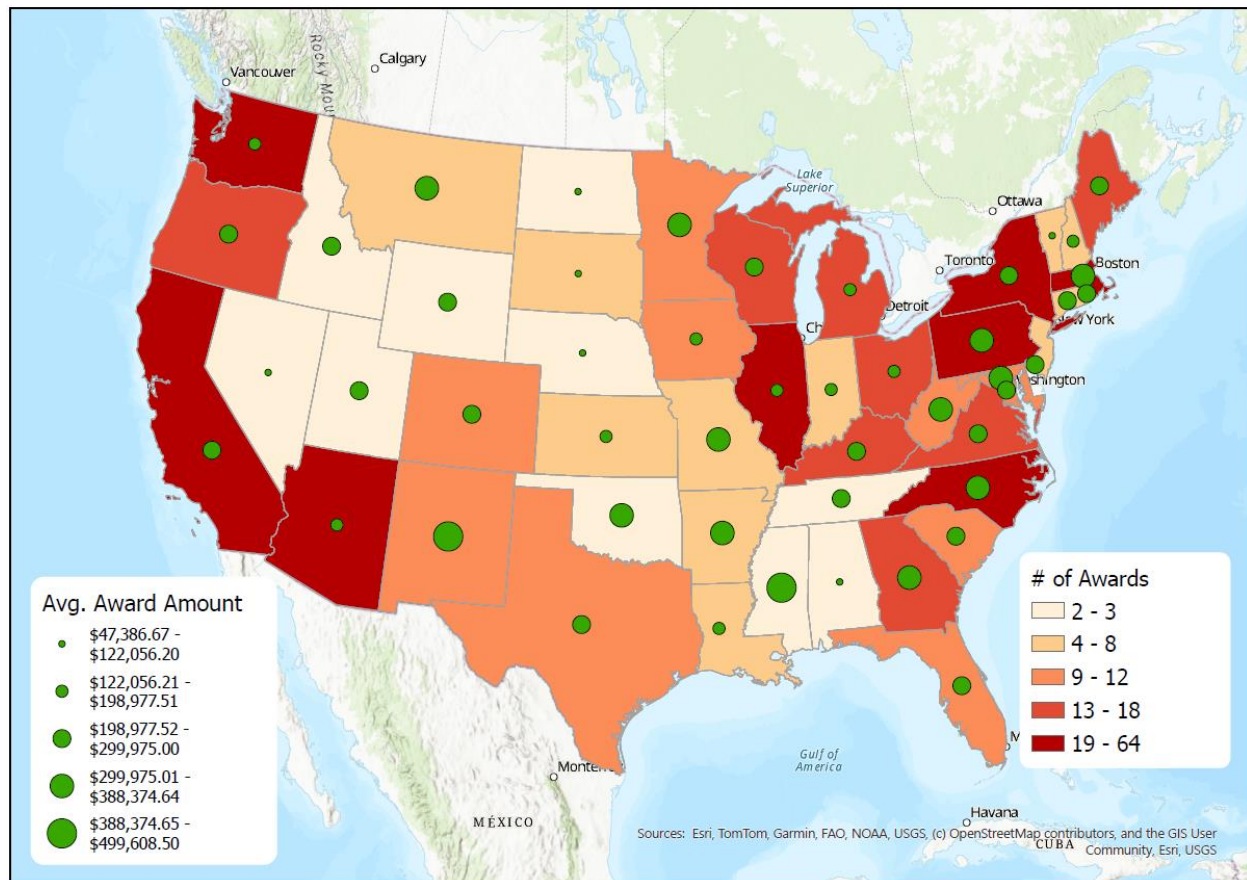
nonprofit organizations. According to a database maintained by Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future's Food Policy Networks (FPN) project, more than 300 food policy councils operate in the U.S. Local food policy councils are usually formed organically by groups of organizations or individuals committed to generating ideas to establish local food systems (Liang & Brown, 2019). The formation and operation of local food policy councils may be triggered by state authorities responding to specific state-level needs, or by grassroots movements in which community organizations propose and initiate the gathering with volunteers. Many local food policy councils lead initiatives by collaborating and coordinating with institutions, government agencies, and grassroots organizations to design and apply for USDA AMS program grants to enhance food security, improve food system resilience, and eliminate barriers for individuals and families to

access locally grown products (e.g., USDA AMS, n.d.-b). Many local food policy councils also engage in discussions of state and federal policies to formulate scalable, adaptive, and community-oriented strategies to connect producers, government, and consumers when solving complex food system issues (see for example Gupta et al., 2018).

What Might Be the Next Iteration of the Local Food Movement in Light of Changes in National Policies?

A series of new federal policies introduced by the USDA and U.S. FDA in 2026 emphasizes achieving national health goals. Some examples of these new policies include emphasizing eating "real food," strengthening local food security, increasing local sourcing for schools, and improving food safety monitoring standards, including monitoring for chemicals and microplastics in food (USDA

Figure 3. Funding Distribution and Number of Awards Related to U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service's Local Food Promotion Program, 2015–2025



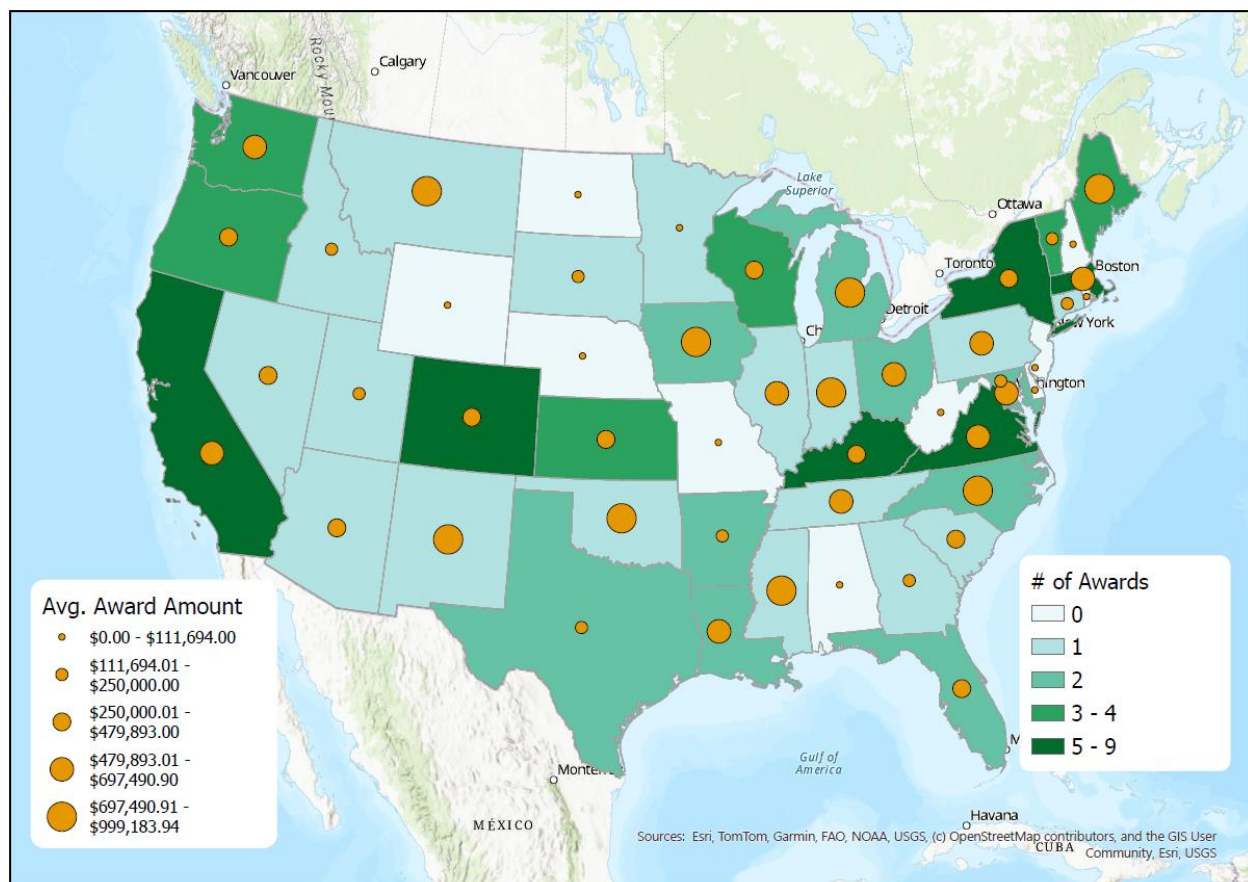
NIFA, 2026; USDHHS, 2026; U.S. FDA, 2026). NIFA has reinforced the importance of supporting and promoting local and regional food systems as effective approaches to “reduce food waste; support local economy; increase the biodiversity, freshness, and nutritional value of foods; and reduce food insecurity” (USDA NIFA, n.d., para. 1). Given evolving trends and national priorities, there will be new opportunities to engage and energize farmers and community organizations to reimagine the possibilities of local food systems (Liang, 2025). For example,

- USDA offers financial and technical assistance to farmers seeking opportunities to establish, expand, or transition into local and regional food market chains. However, farmers in rural areas often lack the knowledge or information to access federal or state resources. With the

new efforts initiated by USDA and other agencies to enhance local and regional food systems, support is needed to establish effective, timely communication channels from federal agencies that relay program details to state governments and Cooperative Extension agents at land-grant universities, enabling them to offer information sessions for farmers and grassroots service providers. Such coordinated efforts will significantly demystify federal initiatives and turn federal policies into actionable items that can be understood and implemented at the local level by non-policy audiences.

- Small farmers or grassroots organizations in rural areas often face challenges in establishing credit lines when applying for funding or cash-matching programs to start building or growing farmers markets. There is a need to

Figure 4. Funding Distribution and Number of Awards Related to U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service’s Regional Food System Partnerships, 2015–2025



increase financial literacy training and education for farmers or organizations to maintain meaningful financial records when applying for federal or private financial assistance, such as loan and cost-share matching programs.

- Local food varieties may be limited at farmers markets and other local-oriented venues compared with those in conventional grocery stores. This is a natural limitation due to geographical environment, weather variations, and soil and land characteristics. Although local farmers would not be able to grow all the foods for customers, there are ways to reduce the barriers for farmers to extend production seasons (e.g., high tunnels), reduce pest and disease threats (e.g., technology driven sensors and monitoring), and better manage their field practices to offer high quality food as well as achieve higher profit margins from local food sales (e.g., climate resilient varieties, seed enhancement, and field monitoring using Artificial Intelligence for instant reporting and responses). National policies could support technology development, technical training, and infrastructure enhancement to improve access to data, information, analysis, and diagnosis for timely problem-solving.
- Continuing or increasing nutrition incentives would be essential to change the national health profile in the long term. Local food systems often compete with large chain stores for affordability, accessibility, and availability. The support of local food policy councils, Cooperative Extension programs, and public-private partnerships across the food, nutrition, and healthcare industries could help create and share messages aligned with national food policies and priorities to develop holistic community strategies tailored to different needs.

Food safety issues are integrated into all phases of local food development. An interview with a food safety service provider revealed some concerns and hopes for future policy design (J. White, personal communication, January 29, 2026). There is growing interest among wholesale buyers in

sourcing more local food. However, many farmers are not commercial-ready due to (a) lack of food safety certification; (b) difficulties in maintaining reliable and consistent traceability; and (c) lack of reliable commitment to meet requirements in all logistics, including supplies, varieties, timing, and quality standards. Many local food hubs and co-ops serve as local aggregators for farmers. Many producers or aggregators need assistance in creating shared space or shared marketing strategies, especially in understanding the mandatory FSMA 204 rules. The FDA's FSMA 204 set the compliance starting date to January 20, 2026, but has proposed extending it to July 20, 2028 (Fragedakis, 2026). The FDA FSMA 204 set rules to require business entities (including domestic and foreign companies involved in foods on the Food Traceability List) that manufacture, process, pack, or hold foods on the FDA's Traceability List to maintain details of all records in electronic formats, which would allow for timely identification and removal of adulterated foods. Several key aspects of FSMA 204 include (a) Food Traceability List (FTL)—applies to food deemed “high risk” defined by FDA; (b) Critical Tracking Events (CTE)—must record, maintain, and share information at points of harvesting, cooling, packing, shipping, and receiving; (c) Traceability Lot Codes (TLC)—must assign unique codes to specified products to facilitate rapid tracking when certain events occur; (d) 24-Hour Rule—must provide records within 24 hours per FDA requests; and (e) Traceability Plan—must develop a plan including details of gathering, maintaining, and sharing records. National policies could support these intermediary service providers within the supply chains (e.g., recordkeeping, aggregation, shipping, handling, distribution, and inspection) in achieving required compliance and in building trust and transparency for all involved in local food systems.

There are some exemptions that could benefit small-scale producers (U.S. FDA, n.d.), such as:

- Farms with annual produce sales of US\$25,000 or less (on a three-year rolling average adjusted for inflation) are exempt.
- Small Retail Food Establishments (RFEs)

and restaurants with annual food sales of US\$250,000 or less are generally exempt from recordkeeping requirements.

- Food grown and packaged solely for personal use on a farm, or by home gardeners, is not covered.

Direct-to-consumer and institutional exemptions include:

- Sales through farmers markets, roadside stands, on-farm stores, or CSAs are generally exempt, provided that the food is packaged on the farm, remains sealed until it reaches the consumer, and is labeled with the farm's contact information.
- Food sold or donated directly to consumers, or delivered directly to schools and institutions, may be exempt or qualify for modified requirements.

Concluding Remarks

Our world of food—what and how we grow, what and how we eat, and what happens if we eat different things—has changed dramatically. Local food issues are evolving with food safety requirements, healthy diet needs, and funding appropriation given various priorities to protect the U.S. population. The unknowns will continue to challenge us to develop new ideas and approaches. National policies related to local food systems provide a means for achieving the expected goals and serving various needs. The continuity of funding plays a key role in supporting, enhancing, and creating innovative strategies to boost the local food movement linking supply to demand for all U.S. citizens. From a research perspective, we explore the frontiers of future possibilities when faced with limited resources and time constraints. Who defines the goals, for what purposes, and in what timeframe become a critical factors for local foods systems in achieving a balance between nurturing healthy people, cultivating invigorated places, and achieving long-term prosperity.



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