

A food system includes all processes and infrastructure required to feed a population: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting and marketing, as well as the consumption and disposal of food and food-related items. It also includes the needed inputs, such as energy and fertilizer, and outputs, such as greenhouse gas emissions, generated at each of these steps. A food system operates within and is influenced by social, political, economic and environmental contexts.

THE VALUE OF FOOD SYSTEMS

We all experience food, if for no other reason than because we all consume it. Our relationship with food and the food system extends far beyond the act of eating. How and what we eat is influenced by factors including geographical location, culture and food availability.

By understanding the intricacies of the food system, health advocates, researchers and policymakers can foster changes that have the potential to increase the health of people and the environment, as well as the efficiency and sustainability of production. Some of these positive changes might include promoting healthier diets, maximizing foodsheds, supporting small businesses, conserving natural resources, minimizing foodprints, mitigating climate change, improving air and water quality, and protecting animal welfare.¹

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOODSHEDS AND FOOD SYSTEMS

Commonly, a foodshed is defined as the geographic area that supplies a population — whether in a city, town or community — with food.² Local foodsheds are similar to community-based food systems, which describe how food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place. To learn more about foodsheds, check out additional information [here](#).

Similar to foodsheds, food systems describe a community's food access and place of origin, while also showcasing whether or not the community meets its own food needs and whether or not its agricultural practices compromise the ability of future generations to meet their food needs. Food systems address food security, proximity of producers and consumers, community self-reliance and land sustainability.

ACTIONS TO TAKE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The term community food system is often used to explain the relationship between nutrition, food, health, community economic development and agriculture.³ One way consumers can take action to address problems in the food system is by supporting and collectively strengthening their own community food systems. Actions that can be taken include:

- Choosing a diet rich in locally grown and processed foods. Regional food guides, such as the Northeast Regional Food Guide, provide guidelines to help consumers choose healthy local and seasonal diets.⁴
- Shopping at farmers markets and food co-ops, buying a share in a community supported agriculture farm or sponsoring someone else's share in order to help boost the community's economy and keep farmers on their land.
- Participating in a community or school garden or starting a home vegetable garden and sharing excess with neighbors, a community kitchen or local soup kitchen. This helps everyone in your community be more self-reliant on the community and also reduces food waste.
- Cooking from scratch. Ingredients can often be found in community gardens or at your local farmers market, therefore decreasing the amount of miles the food has to travel, as well as the amount of packaging along the supply chain.

¹ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. (n.d.). *Teaching the Food System*. Retrieved from http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/teaching-the-food-system/about/why_teach_the_food_system.html

² Peters, C. J., Bills, N. L., Wilkins, J. L., & Fick, G. W. (2009). Foodshed analysis and its relevance to sustainability. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, 24(1), 1–7.

³ Cornell University. (n.d.). A primer on community food systems: Linking food, nutrition and agriculture. *Discovering the Food System*. Retrieved from <http://www.discoverfoodsyst.com/cornell.edu/primer.html>

⁴ Cornell University. (1996). Northeast regional food guide. Retrieved from <http://www.human.cornell.edu/dns/extension/upload/Northeast-20Regional-20Food-20Guide.pdf>