

2019 Massachusetts Envirothon

Current Issue Problem

Abundant, Affordable, Healthy Food

Background (For more extensive background see <https://massenvirothon.org/areas-of-learning/current-issue/2019-current-issue/>)

Our global, industrial food system – fueled by fossil energy and technological innovation – has largely kept pace with the population explosion of the past half century. This food system has been, in some respects, a success.

But the global, industrial food system has also come with huge environmental and social costs. Industrial practices have led to weakened ecosystem services for agriculture and fisheries – from soil contamination, erosion, and depletion to freshwater and saltwater pollution to threatened biodiversity. On the social side, unequal access to affordable healthy food remains a major feature of the food system, a reflection of larger disparities in society.

Climate change adds urgency to concerns for our food system. The industrial food system continues to be a major emitter of greenhouse gases. Changes attributable to global warming – including shifting seasons, extreme weather events, droughts and floods – have affected production. Farmers' and fishers' livelihoods depend on well-functioning ecosystems, and they feel acutely the uncertainty about the future effects of climate change.

There are indications that **a radical renovation of our food system, in this generation, is needed to ensure abundant, affordable, healthy food for all.**

Many pieces of a sustainable solution are within reach. Many are already underway in Massachusetts. Three areas are particularly ripe with potential solutions:

- Waste reduction and resource recovery – An estimated one-third of food produced is wasted in the chain from field to market to table to landfill. At every stage, however, people and organizations are raising awareness and making innovative connections, turning waste into valuable resources and preventing waste in the first place.
- Community Food Security – A large and permeable social “safety net” has not provided food security for all, despite efforts by government and civil society. But the concepts of Community Food Security and Food Justice are inspiring new networking, community empowerment, and policy innovations.
- Climate smart sustainable agriculture – Changes in agricultural practices offer the promise of healthier soil, water, and ecosystems; abundant local production; and climate resilience. Well-educated farmers and wise technology choices are part of the picture, as well.

A strong and healthy food system can provide additional benefits – human health, good jobs and robust local economies, open space protection, recreational opportunities, social justice, slowed climate change.

Massachusetts farms and communities play important roles in providing abundant, affordable, healthy food for all, but it will take new thinking and connections, collaboration, and policies that reflect sound science and justice.

The Problem

A new food policy council is forming in your community. They have asked your team to provide an overview of what's needed, and for your specific recommendations. They are asking:

What should our community do right now to help ensure abundant, affordable, healthy food for all in 2050?

They ask you to start with an assessment of the current local situation. What are the most significant social and ecological challenges, and what are the opportunities for positive change, in these three areas:

- Waste reduction and resource recovery
- Community Food Security
- Climate smart sustainable agriculture practices

What choices are being made in each of these areas, and what actions are being taken, to provide for the future? Who is involved? In what ways is the community coming together in positive action? Are there ways we can better support farmers and food production?

Are there “leverage points” – places where small shifts in policies, practices, or attitudes could yield important, positive changes? What is needed to make use of these leverage points?

They ask you to identify the most important next step your community should take. Of the variety of social and ecological challenges you have identified, which, in your judgment, is the right place to focus action now? Your proposed next step may address waste, food security, and/or agricultural practices, and other areas, too.

Who should be involved? What skills, perspectives, connections, and partnerships will be important for success?

The Council also knows that climate change presents a huge challenge for the food system. They want to know whether your proposal is in line with the enormity of that challenge. **Are you being realistic? Are you being radical enough?**

In your presentation you should:

Introduce the major features of your local food system, including its strengths and weaknesses.

- Define the area you have focused on as your community and food system (your choice, but you must be clear!)
- Describe ways that you volunteered or participated in other ways in your food system. What notable people and organizations did you encounter?
- Describe local agricultural activity and the growers you met. What food is produced? What's agriculture's impact on soil, water, biodiversity? Which ecosystem services are robust? Which are under stress?
- Introduce food resource recovery and food waste management activity you encountered. Who is doing what?
- Explain systems that you found for ensuring community food security. What people and organizations are playing a part? Where is the system strong, and where is it lacking?

Provide an overview of opportunities for more abundant, affordable, healthy food in your local food system

- What are food producers doing well and not-so-well? What more could be done in terms of sustainability and climate-friendly practices?
- In what ways is the system handling food waste well, and not-so-well? What more could be done?
- What more could be done to increase community food security?
- Where are the leverage points (if any) in any or all of these areas?
- Where possible, provide a quantitative assessment of the issue(s) to help your audience understand the problem.

Offer a convincing recommendation

- Propose the next step that you believe your community should take to promote abundant, affordable, healthy food. **Why do you propose this next step over other possible actions? Is it realistic? Is it radical enough?**
- Explain the social and ecological implications of your proposal.
- Explain how climate change will affect this proposal, and how this proposal will affect climate change.
- What will need to change? Who will need to be convinced that this is necessary? How can this be accomplished?

Some tips for your presentation

How it works:

- The Current Issue Presentation score is 25% of your team's total Envirothon score.
- Five (and only five) members of your team will make your presentation to a panel of six to ten judges. Your coach and other team members will be able to observe but not participate. The judges' job is to listen, ask good questions, assess your work, and give you feedback on your research, your recommendations, and your presentation.
- You have 15 minutes for your presentation, followed by a 10 minute period when the judges can ask questions.
- Six of the judges will be designated to give your team a number score. The average of their scores will be your score for purposes of the competition.
- All the judges are asked to give you helpful comments. Copies of the score and review sheets are sent to your coach.

Show the judges how you know what you know, and how you came to your conclusions. Tell them about where you visited, who you talked to, what documents you researched, what activities you participated in.

You may have encountered surprising stories about ecological systems and human undertakings. Share them!

Use visual aids and examples. Photographs, charts and graphs, samples, and quotes can help you make your points and distinguish your presentation from others. **Your Envirothon map** can be used to orient the judges to your community.

Practice your presentation. Practice makes it easier for you to be poised and at ease in your presentation, including being able to make good eye contact and speak naturally with the judges.

Be Prepared! You will be presenting in a tent, outdoors. The day of the Envirothon is often surprisingly windy and cold, and sometimes wet. Mount your visual aids on sturdy boards in case of wind.