



Notes 2026 Food Summit
Growing Together: CARAT Insights + Partner Impacts Across Southeastern MA
September 24, 2026

The Marion Institute's Southcoast Food Policy Council

The Marion Institute is a nonprofit organization based in Marion, Massachusetts, that has been operating for more than thirty years. The organization's work centers on turning ideas into action through four interconnected programs designed to educate, advocate, and strengthen the local food system so that all people can access and enjoy health-promoting foods.

The Southcoast Food Policy Council (SFPC) is one of the Marion Institute's four core programs. The Council operates by connecting, convening, and advocating for local food producers, consumers, and community members, with the goal of improving and strengthening the regional food system, improving community health, and eliminating food insecurity. The SFPC carries out its work in collaboration with a thirty-five-member Community Advisory Board (CAB) composed of stakeholders across the food system. Each CAB member participates in one of three working groups, which serve as the primary vehicle for advancing the Council's policy priorities and initiatives. In addition, the Council maintains a broader base of more than two thousand members-at-large, who follow its educational programming, attend events such as lunch-and-learns and food summits, and respond to advocacy alerts. An effective food policy council functions as an umbrella organization, listening to food system stakeholders while also engaging with policy, public health, and environmental decision-making at the local, state, and federal levels. This positioning allows the Council to respond to emerging crises while planning for long-term, systemic change that strengthens the resilience of the food system.

Statewide and Regional Context & The New England Food System Planners Partnership

Holly Fowler of Northbound Ventures, the Marion Institute's food system consultant, has worked with the organization since the 2021 food system assessment and is continuing that partnership on the 2026 assessment. She explained that she has spent more than a decade working alongside South Coast partners, including SEMAP, Coastal Foodshed, and New Bedford Public Schools, and noted that the Council's work is part of a larger set of regional food system planning efforts taking place across New England.

The New England Food System Planners Partnership, a coalition established with support from a USDA Agricultural Marketing Services grant to bring together statewide food system planning organizations, including the Massachusetts Local Food Collaborative. A central product of this partnership has been the New England Feeding New England report, which builds on earlier research to examine what it would take for 30% of the food consumed in New England to be regionally produced by 2030. Related research includes the Local Food Count, first conducted in 2022 with an updated release expected by November, and a report examining seven common food system challenges. Long-term food supply planning is one such challenge, and the SFPC's CARAT-driven approach is helping demonstrate a model for how other regions across the Commonwealth might address this challenge.

History of Food System Assessments in Southeastern Massachusetts

The first assessment, completed in 2014 was conducted in partnership with SEMAP and the Island Foundation, and relied solely on publicly available/secondary data. At the time, it was notable for revealing that approximately one in eight residents in the region were food insecure. The second assessment, launched in 2020 and published in 2021 was conducted by the Marion Institute together with its newly formed SFPC and introduced primary data collection for the first time, including surveys of more than four hundred consumers, a producer survey conducted in partnership with Coastal Foodshed, and interviews with direct service providers. That assessment found that fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy were the food items most difficult for food-insecure residents to access. The Marion Institute is now conducting its third assessment, due to be published later in 2026. The 2026 food system assessment differs from its predecessors in two significant ways. First, its geographic scope has expanded beyond the original three counties of Norfolk, Plymouth, and Bristol to include Barnstable, Dukes, and Nantucket counties. Second, the assessment incorporates a new model for



data collection and stewardship that combines primary and secondary public data with the CARAT tool, introducing a participatory, community-led, and stakeholder-driven research approach.

CARAT Tool

Rita Higgins of the Marion Institute introduced the Community and Agriculture Resilience Audit Tool, or CARAT, which she has been using to conduct assessments across all six counties over the past year. The tool was developed by Indiana University and the North American Food Systems Network to measure the resilience of a local food system, defined as its ability to withstand disruptions, adapt to change, and recover quickly while continuing to provide healthy, accessible, and sustainably grown food to its community. The CARAT is organized around seven major themes, each addressing questions such as how a community protects its natural resources, whether all community members have access to healthy local food, and whether local food producers and fishers have a voice in planning decisions. The original tool includes 101 indicators, to which the Marion Institute added 52 fishing and seafood indicators developed in partnership with Barnstable County and members of the fishing and seafood community.

The Marion Institute's CARAT Journey

The Marion Institute's work with the CARAT, began in early 2024 when the organization was selected as one of twelve nationwide to pilot the tool. The initial pilot was conducted in Bristol County in partnership with SFPC members. Recognizing the value the CARAT added through participatory engagement, relationship-building, and qualitative, ground-level data collection, the Marion Institute expanded the effort by the end of 2024 to launch CARAT assessments in its five neighboring counties: Barnstable, Dukes, Nantucket, Norfolk, and Plymouth. The SFPC appreciates the county partners and CAB members who made the CARAT work possible, noting that each partner organization is respected and trusted within its community and brought essential networks and local knowledge to the process. The partners continue to meet through a monthly community of practice as they finish each county-level assessment and move into the next phase of the project.

The CARAT Process

The core CARAT process begins by convening community members and forming county-level CABs. The CABs then work to gather as many resources as possible for each indicator, after which findings are distilled into an assessment of where each indicator stands and rolled up into summaries by theme and county, eventually building toward a full regional assessment of food system resilience. The process continues with an analysis phase, in which CARAT findings are combined with quantitative data to identify gaps and opportunities at the county and regional levels, followed by an effort to amplify findings and engage additional voices. The process will conclude with the development of local food action plans based on the results. The CARAT process differs from a traditional, quantitative food system assessment in that it is community-led, participatory, ongoing, and iterative. The process may seem 'messy', as it captures conversations, comments, and ideas rather than simple numerical data, and requires effort to translate those intangible inputs into a clear picture of the food system.

The first step in each county was identifying community leaders and county partners and working with them to convene a CAB representing as many food system sectors and geographic areas as possible, from farmers and distributors to business owners. Each CAB reviewed all 153 CARAT indicators across the seven themes in meetings held biweekly or monthly, with the process averaging about seven months per county, depending on factors such as weather, holidays, and seasonal availability.

As an example of how the resource-gathering process worked, we will use Indicator 33, which assesses whether a community has emergency plans that ensure food access for isolated residents. Gathering evidence for this indicator involved working with CAB members, conducting email outreach, interviews, focus groups, and online research, with both board members and Marion Institute staff contributing to the effort.

The Distillation Process

Each indicator was assigned to one of four categories based on the resources identified. An indicator was marked "no findings" when no relevant resources could be located, which does not necessarily mean no resources exist. An indicator was marked "being considered" when it was under discussion by one or more organizations but had not yet resulted in concrete action. An indicator was marked "being implemented" when pilot projects or newer programs were underway but remained fragile, often dependent on a single organization or lacking long-term funding. Finally, an indicator was marked "established" when resources were being provided by multiple organizations with long-term funding and, where relevant, enforcement mechanisms in place.

Bristol County Results as an example — Community Health and Well-Being

The results for Theme 2, Community Health and Well-Being, in Bristol County, which includes twenty-six indicators covering topics such as equitable access to nutritious food, leadership opportunities for historically marginalized community members, farm-to-school programs, and emergency food planning. The gray portion of the pie chart represents indicators still being finalized, while the remaining segments show indicators with no findings, those being discussed, those being implemented, and those considered established. Bristol County's results were presented alongside those of its neighboring counties, noting that the comparison is not intended as a competition but rather as a way to identify shared strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for counties to share resources such as translation services, policy templates, or emergency plans.

Food Access and Emergency Planning Sub-Theme

Theme 2 contains two distinct sub-sections, and breaking out the food access and emergency planning sub-section revealed a markedly different picture than the broader theme. While the nutrition and food access portion of the theme showed relative strength across counties, the emergency planning sub-section revealed significant gaps, including limited planning for isolated communities, a lack of integration between town-level emergency plans, insufficient food storage recommendations, and limited public engagement in plan development. It was noted that several counties had already begun taking action on these gaps, including forming focus groups and engaging new stakeholders, even before the CARAT process was complete.

Regional Gaps Identified Across All Counties

There are significant gaps identified across all six counties. These included emergency planning for food access; farm-to-institution programs, which have historically been inconsistent and difficult to sustain; support for soil health practices among farmers; support for marginalized community members seeking to enter food-related businesses, including grants and land access; a lack of organizational capacity dedicated to food system policy advocacy, with the SFPC remaining the only formal food policy council in the region; the need for more strategic new farmer programs and farmland protection strategies to complement existing state-level tools; and gaps in the enforcement of water resource protection policies, despite the existence of substantial related programming.

Key Takeaways from the CARAT Process

The principal takeaways from the CARAT process included:

- the critical importance of community buy-in from the outset
- the value of regular connection among county partners through the monthly community of practice
- the power of Community Advisory Boards in creating space for cross-sector conversation among school staff, fishers, farmers, healthcare workers, and local government
- the process allowed community-led priorities to emerge organically

County lead partners shared their reflections on the CARAT process.

- Andrea Scarpellini of Cape Cod Cooperative Extension, who led the Barnstable County Community Advisory Board, noted that participants possessed far more food system knowledge than she initially expected and that the process helped community members recognize their own role in the food system, ultimately building the confidence and shared understanding needed to begin acting on the county's strengths and gaps.

- Noli Taylor of Island Grown Initiative on Martha's Vineyard reported that the process engaged over 40 people, including municipal and tribal leaders, farmers, grocers, and fisheries advocates, and helped bridge the island's land-based and water-based food system communities for the first time. She noted that the county is now pursuing funding for a dedicated emergency planner focused in part on food access, and that a new partnership had formed around municipal composting. She also identified the absence of a food policy council and the need for stronger farmland access pathways as continuing gaps.
- Posie Constable of Sustainable Nantucket and Meg Browsers of Nourish Nantucket described the process as having built valuable new relationships across organizations and off-island partners, while also surfacing a significant gap in the island's disaster and food recovery planning given its dependence on ferry access and a single supermarket.
- Michelle Tyler, representing the Town of Randolph in Norfolk County, which had just completed its final Community Advisory Board session the day before the summit, described entering the process with limited prior knowledge and discovering how siloed municipal departments often are. She noted that the process left her with a concrete list of opportunities to bring food considerations into other areas of municipal planning, including emergency management.
- Bill Napolitano, from Old Colony Planning Council in Plymouth County (OCPC), shared that the process provided a clearer understanding of its role in the regional food system and highlighted opportunities to partner with others to drive meaningful change. This will shape how OCPC integrates food system planning into other local and regional documents. On the planning side, OCPC is building on this work with SRPEDD, MDAR, and the Wildlands Trust through the Farmland Planning Initiative, is incorporating agricultural assessments into the OCPC Regional Water Plan, and is exploring food access as a component of a potential regional transportation grant. CARAT and the partnership with the Marion Institute were also central to OCPC's recently completed Resilient Local Food Action Plan for Plymouth County, which offers strong potential for continued partnership work and may serve as a template for other counties.

Dock to School Panel

Shelly Edmundson of the Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust and Brett Tolley of Chatham Harvesters, whose work on connecting local seafood to schools emerged as a significant regional opportunity during the CARAT process.

- Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust is a nonprofit that provides land-based support to the island's sea-based fishing businesses, including waterfront infrastructure, safety gear grants, collaborative research, permitting assistance, food pantry donations, and farmers market sales.
- Chatham Harvesters as a four-year-old, fishermen-owned cooperative of twenty-five fishing families that processes, packs, and sells its own catch directly to consumers at farmers markets and to local schools.
- Dock to School concept allows schools to source seafood locally, with a known origin and story, in contrast to the low-quality, distantly sourced fish schools typically receive. Chatham Harvesters currently supplies seafood to approximately twelve schools across three school systems on the Cape, and that classroom and cafeteria visits, paired with storytelling about the fish and the fishing families behind it, have proven effective in encouraging students, including many from local fishing families, to try foods they might otherwise avoid.
- Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust shared that community connection has been the most important factor sustaining the program through the inherent unpredictability of fishing businesses, and that the Martha's Vineyard program, launched last year as a pilot, was motivated in part by a desire to keep local seafood on the island and served to children whose own families fish for a living.
- Looking ahead five years, there is hope that local seafood would become a standard cafeteria option throughout Massachusetts schools, supported by fair pricing for fishermen and adequate school lunch budgets. Both panelists agreed that the model is replicable in other counties. It was noted that flash-freezing technology could make local seafood accessible even to landlocked counties. The primary barrier to replication is not cost but building the relationships and confidence needed to support food service staff who may be unfamiliar with preparing local, whole fish.

New Farmer Panel

Brad Fesmire of SEMAP and Posie Constable of Sustainable Nantucket, whose work supporting new farmers was similarly identified as a regional priority through the CARAT process.

- SEMAP, the Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership, as an organization working across Bristol, Norfolk, and Plymouth counties to support farmers through technical assistance, grant writing and business development support, educational events, the annual Southeast New England Agriculture Conference and Trade Show, a local food guide, a newly launched farm passport program, and a new initiative examining the intersection of art and agriculture.
- Sustainable Nantucket, founded in 2000, is an organization that pivoted its focus toward food access at the outset of the pandemic and now runs four programs, including the Mentor Farmer program, the Farm to School program at Nantucket Public Schools, the island's only farmers and artisans market, and the Nantucket Growing Brand program, which connects farmers with local restaurants.
- It was advised that aspiring farmers should first work on an established farm for at least a season to understand the physical demands and seasonal realities of the profession before starting their own operation. Once a new farmer receives a small plot, often around one-tenth of an acre, that space allows them to experiment and discover which crops they are best suited to grow, without the pressure of meeting the crop diversity typically required of a full-scale CSA operation.
- Sustainable Nantucket's Mentor Farmer program, established in 2014 in partnership with the Nantucket Island Land Bank, provides new farmers with land at nominal cost, shared infrastructure such as irrigation and deer fencing, hands-on training from experienced farmers, and business planning support; farmers typically begin on an eighth-acre plot and expand as they demonstrate readiness, with some graduates of the program now operating some of the island's most productive small farms.
- Both panelists identified responsiveness to each farmer's individual needs, business planning support, access to funding and technical assistance, and reliable market access as essential ingredients of a successful new farmer program.
- Nantucket's seasonal tourist economy creates market gaps that the organization is working to offset through school cafeteria purchasing and grant-funded produce donations.
- When asked what would most significantly increase the number of new farmers in Southeastern Massachusetts over the next decade, there is a need for a broader cultural shift toward valuing farming and its role in community life. Engaging young people early through school gardens, culinary programs, and internships tied to farming and fishing was also cited as critical.

Audience Question and Answer Session

- In response to a question about whether promoting local food narratives conflicts with emergency food preparedness, there is a difference between food emergencies, which involve short-term, acute disruptions to the food supply such as those caused by storms or the COVID-19 pandemic, and food security, which concerns longer-term access to food. Strengthening local food sources supports emergency resilience by diversifying supply away from disrupted external systems, and neither the CARAT process nor the broader Feeding New England research advocates for 100% local food production. Rather, the goal is to draw on local food where it is practical, economically sound, and beneficial to the broader local economy.
- In response to a question about outreach to the John Stalker Institute and an upcoming fish-to-skills training offered by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, the panelists welcomed the connection. There are several additional statewide resources supporting local food in schools, including Project Bread and Mass Farm to School.
- In response to a question about increasing access to fresh food for students more broadly, the Marion Institute's Grow Education program, funded by the Kendall Foundation, is convening a Community of Practice with southcoast food service directors, to strengthen local sourcing and procurement practices.

Closing Remarks

CARAT findings will be synthesized into the 2026 food system assessment and used to inform county-level local food action plans.

CARAT County Leads:

- Andrea Scarpellini, Cape Cod Cooperative Extension <https://www.capecod.gov/departments/cooperative-extension/>
- Noli Taylor and Caroline Pam: Island Grown Initiative: <https://www.igimv.org/>
- Posie Constable, Sustainable Nantucket <https://sustainable-nantucket.org/>
- Meg Browsers, Nourish Nantucket <https://nourishnantucket.org/>
- Ania Amedee, Bay State Community Services, Mass in Motion <https://www.baystatecs.org/programs-services/prevention/mass-in-motion/>
- Michelle Taylor, Planning Department, Town of Randolph <https://www.randolph-ma.gov/396/Planning-Department>
- Pam Denholm, South Shore Food Bank <https://www.southshorefoodbank.org/>
- Joanne Zygmunt and Bill Napolitano, Old Colony Planning Council <https://oldcolonyplanning.org/comprehensive-planning/>

Panelists:

- Shelley Edmundson, Martha's Vineyard Preservation Trust <https://vineyardtrust.org/>
- Brett Tolley, Chatham Harvesters <https://www.chathamharvesters.com/>
- Posie Constable, Sustainable Nantucket <https://sustainable-nantucket.org/>
- Brad Fesmire, Southeastern MA Agricultural Partnership <https://semaponline.org/>

Resources:

- 2026 Southeastern MA Food System Overview <https://www.marioninstitute.org/programs/sfpc/southeastern-ma-food-system-assessment>
- Join the Southcoast Food Policy Council <https://www.marioninstitute.org/programs/sfpc/southcoast-food-policy-council-join-the-sfpc/>
- Join the SFPC Food Alert listserv
Email: SFPC@marioninstitute.org
- Get the Marion Institute monthly newsletter <https://www.marioninstitute.org/get-email-updates-from-the-marion-institute/>

Link to Post Food Summit Survey: <https://s.zoom.us/j/bPIRzq8zW>