



Food conference theme: Increase consumption of locally harvested products

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. - There's a disconnect between the seafood that's caught in Rhode Island and the seafood that's eaten in Rhode Island.

"We import 90 percent of the seafood that we eat. We export 80 percent of the seafood that we harvest," said Anna Malek Mercer, executive director of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation. "That doesn't make sense."

Speaking at a food conference Tuesday at the University of Rhode Island, Mercer pointed to the scup fishery to illustrate the imbalance. The state has a 31.5-million pound annual quota for the small fish, but it's not a popular species among American eaters. Less than half the quota is filled every year and most of what is caught is shipped overseas. The stories are similar for butterfish and dogfish.

"Changing that ...; needs to be a priority," Mercer said during a panel discussion on local fisheries.

The discussion was held as part of the Rhode Island Food System Summit, a first-of-its kind event organized by the state Food Policy Council, the R.I. Department Environmental Management, the R.I. Department of Health and a host of local food and agriculture groups.

More than 350 people attended the summit, which was aimed at connecting farmers, fishermen, food businesses, government regulators and policymakers to help support local producers and grow the state's 60,000-job food sector.

"What we've done is put in place a new foundation," said Ken Payne, of the policy council. "We have to build on that foundation."

The summit marked the release of a draft of the state's first food strategy, an effort led by Sue AnderBois, who was hired last May as Rhode Island's director of food strategy. The grant-funded position was created by Gov. Gina Raimondo's administration in order to lead the efforts to build up the state's food scene.

The strategy (available at relishrhody.com) is a five-year action plan that breaks down the state's food system into three components - production, health and access, and economic development - and makes recommendations in each.

For example, in support of local producers, it recommends expanding connections with large institutional buyers, doing more to celebrate local restaurants and food businesses and having state government buy more local food.

At the summit, breakout sessions were held on financing opportunities for food businesses, reducing food waste, food insecurity and regulatory challenges.

During the fisheries panel, Derek Wagner, the chef and owner of Nick's on Broadway in Providence, said that restaurants should do more to change consumer behavior by serving lesser-known food like scup that's from Rhode Island.

"We have an opportunity to use our money, to use our menus, to support the right things," he said.

If there was one overarching message at the summit, it was just that - to buy local. As part of its food strategy, Rhode Island has committed to a regional goal of having 50 percent of the food consumed in New England be produced in the region by 2060.

But even though Rhode Island has 1,200 or so farms and more than a tenth of its acreage is devoted to agriculture, only 1 percent of the food consumed in the state is harvested locally.

"If it's grown in Rhode Island, you ought to eat it. If it's caught in Rhode Island, you ought to eat it," said David Beutel, aquaculture coordinator for the state Coastal Resources Management Council. "Ignore those imports. Eat what we have here."

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