

| | [More from Globe Ideas](#)[Submit to Globe Ideas](#)[Submit a Letter to the Editor](#)

IDEAS

No federal grants spells bad news for the Mass. local food ecosystem

Funding cuts are taking money out of farmers' pockets and food out of hungry mouths.

By **John Gove** Updated April 23, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



Protesters stood outside of Hadley's Town Hall on March 23 to speak out against federal funding cuts impacting local farms. JOHN GOVE

John Gove is a family farmer and environmental journalist in Leominster.

Sunny afternoons in the spring mean New England farmers are tending to their greenhouses, working with livestock, or pruning their fruit trees in preparation for the upcoming growing season. Protesting usually doesn't make the list of chores.

In late March, several hundred farmers, their supporters, and legislators gathered at the Town Hall in Hadley to voice their frustration with cuts made by the Department of Government Efficiency to federal programs that provide grants to farmers.

Two major programs in Massachusetts, Northeast Food for Schools (NFS) and the

Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, have been notified by the US Department of Agriculture that they will not be receiving federal funds this year. Last year, the programs provided about [\\$12 million](#) and \$6.4 million, respectively, to schools, nonprofits, and regional food distributors to subsidize their purchase of local produce. Without that funding, local Massachusetts farmers will not be able to compete with large farms in California and Florida that can charge much less for their produce.

Harrison Bardwell of Bardwell Farms in Hatfield told the crowd he estimates he'll lose \$200,000 in revenue over the next year, or up to 30 percent of his sales, as a result of the funding cuts.

Some of his produce would have ended up in schools across Massachusetts.

Jason Yeagle, the nutrition director at Fitchburg's Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School, known as Monty Tech, has used NFS funds to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables. "It was a bonus that I could source higher-quality, more-local produce," says Yeagle about the NFS funds.

The kids at Monty Tech are not going without vegetables because of the cuts, but the produce they eat will be less diverse and from farther away. If teaching kids to eat healthier is a goal for our schools, then providing lower-quality produce is not the way to get there, Yeagle says.

Shon Rainford, who directs the Worcester Food Hub, says his organization distributed roughly \$3 million of NFS-funded locally grown produce last year. This year, he says, "we are going to be less busy," and he's concerned about the effects on farmers and the people who rely on the Hub for affordable food.

New England farms are small. Eating “local” often means within the radius of a few towns, instead of [“local” as the US Department of Agriculture defines it](#), which is within 400 miles of where the food is sold.

Small farms are also more vulnerable to volatility.

“We do our planning in the winter. Everything has been ordered. A lot has been paid for,” says Bardwell. He worries about paying his employees, to whom he promised jobs and good wages, if he cannot find new markets for his produce.

Making matters worse, the cuts in federal funding came just months after [cuts to the state’s Healthy Incentives Program](#), which also supported local produce.

“As a farmer, I want to support and feed the community. Especially those families in need, with young students that are going to school and can’t afford a meal from home,” Bardwell said to the hundreds of fellow community members who convened at Hadley Town Hall.

Representative Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, who also spoke at the protest forum, criticized the Trump administration for its shortsightedness. “They have frozen critical funds. They have broken legal contracts. They’re shutting down USDA offices that serve our communities,” he said. “Farmers are the backbone of America. They are feeding the future, and in a very real sense, food security is national security.”

Applause and the sound of cowbells filled every pause he took.

[Show comments](#)

©2025 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC