

# HOW TO TALK ABOUT FOOD SYSTEMS

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute’s research on public perceptions of issues related to food systems. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, a toolkit with sample talking points and other communication materials as well as an interactive eworkshop. ([www.frameworksinstitute.org/foodsystems.html](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/foodsystems.html)) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials.

In this summary, we provide some of the highlights from this research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

## Situation Analysis

FrameWorks research has identified the following factors that affect the public conversation about food and food systems:

### 1. The Consumer Model

A major challenge to framing food as a systemic issue is its current definition as a consumer issue. Focusing on the role of consumers as purchasers of a product tend to obscure larger systemic aspects of the policy issues involved. To the degree that food is a commodity and the public identifies as consumers, the food system and its role in their daily lives is largely invisible.

### 2. Modernism: Progress is Inevitable

FrameWorks’ research on a number of issues points to the influence of a belief that modern life is something inevitable, with both benefits and consequences but, like a force of nature, it cannot be resisted. Standing in opposition to the course of modern progress, then, is seen as a futile and “backward” position. Even when the effects of progress are acknowledged as regrettable, with negative consequences for civic and family life, efforts to oppose them are seen literally as efforts to “turn back the clock.” Convenience and the pace of modern life, for example, quickly identify “fast food” as modern, and whole, organic, fresh foods as regrettably lost artifacts of a bygone era.

### 3. Unfamiliarity with the concept of a food system

The concept of the food system is virtually unknown. People don’t know much and don’t think often about it. The food system stands in glaring contrast to an issue like the health care system, for example, where people know so much that they are immobilized by the complexity of the problem. However, if the dominant cultural models listed above can be avoided, the issue holds enormous interest for most Americans.

## Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

Framing food is a complex task, as the issue touches on a number of related domains—health, nutrition, agriculture, the environment, and the economy, among others—and the public assessment is often colored by those associations.

1. FrameWorks research has found that those issues that are understood in the Consumer frame or as issues of individual choice do not advance support for public policy solutions. In this regard, Food may be the mother of all consumer issues.
2. Once people are reasoning in the Consumer model, the issue of cost takes over, which sets up another hurdle for a food system conversation. To the degree that low-cost is associated with fast food and conventional food, this transforms the discussion into a populist argument. This marks organics and natural food interests with the same identity issues that frequently beset environmentalists; charges of elitism, impracticality and aesthetic sacrifice become common.
3. When people are told that what they are eating is not healthy, they tend to throw up their hands in frustration. Bombarded with advice about what is and isn't healthy behavior, they become overwhelmed with information, and simply give up.
4. The issue of responsibility looms large on the list of problems associated with consumer thinking about food. Consumers are only responsible for themselves. The role of government is to set the rules and to get out of the way, letting the free market respond to consumer choice.

## Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Food System Issues

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal sequences, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively elevate support for food system issues. For the latest research findings as they become available, please visit our website.

### Values

**Legacy:** We expect our food system to produce what we need now and for generations to come, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that will affect the food system far into the future. Experts say that the pesticides and hormones

that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have long-term consequences on the food system's viability. Some experts are particularly concerned about food that is produced halfway across the country, or across the globe, which weakens farm economies and puts at risk our ability to produce food in years to come because more and more farmers quit farming. Other experts focus more on the pesticides and chemical fertilizers that can have long-term consequences for human health and the environment. Most experts agree that short-term decisions made by food producers in our food system have long-term consequences, and there are changes we can make now that will ensure we have a stable, healthy food system for our children and grandchildren.

**Protection:** We expect our food system to be dependable and trustworthy, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that affect us all and some experts are beginning to call for changes to protect us. For example, the pesticides and hormones that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have an effect on our health and environment. Take broccoli as just one example. Two heads of broccoli that look exactly the same can have far different health benefits. Some experts are particularly concerned about the distance food travels. If broccoli travels for two weeks before arriving at a grocery store, it loses most of its vitamin C, and almost all of its calcium, iron and potassium, and the same is true for other fruits and vegetables. Other experts focus more on the pesticides and chemical fertilizers that can have environmental and health consequences. Most experts agree that the health and nutrition that people expect from food, and that parents expect for their children, are being undermined by our [runaway] food system, and there are changes we can make now that will protect our well being.

### **Runaway Food System Simplifying Model:**

Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it almost by accident. Farming chemicals like pesticides and weed-killer are permanently altering our soil and water. Genetic engineering is changing the nature of the plants and animals we eat. And mile-long fishing nets are dragging the ocean floor and altering ecosystems. America needs to retake control of this runaway food system before it does more damage to the foundations we depend on.

### **Putting It All Together**

There are lots of things that we can do today to get control of the runaway food system and turn it into a system that provides healthy food while protecting the environment now and into the future. In fact, several cities and states are already acting on long-term solutions. Fifteen cities have just completed plans to encourage small and mid-size farms in their region, with distribution networks for locally grown, healthy foods. And some states now require that food contracts for state institutions, like hospitals, give priority to locally grown food. If we expand these practices, the proportion of healthy, locally grown food will increase from just 2% of our food to 10% or more, strengthening our food system for the future. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to fix the food system now.



Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about the food system.

## DON'T

- Allow the Consumer model to take hold by not offering a powerful alternative frame.
- Use “sustainability” or “diversity” or other term not fully understood by most people.
- Leave undefined or unlinked the consequences of the status quo to the food system and the future.
- Assume that people can link cause and effect in the food system.
- Use the economic argument, or try to evoke sympathy for family farmers.

## DO

- Start communications with the value of Legacy (or Protection, as appropriate).
- Explain why inaction is not an option, and attribute responsibility collectively by introducing the Runaway Food System model.
- Connect cause and effect via an intervention in the system, using causal links.
- Introduce examples of communities where actions have resulted in specific outcomes that improve the food system.
- Put progress on the side of food system reform.