



Food System Talking Points

The following is meant to serve as an outline of the critical points that emerge from the framing research. It can be used as a checklist of options for translating specific messages into the new message framework.

1. **Our system of producing and distributing food has effects on every aspect of our lives and our society** – it's like the system of blood vessels that extends to every part of our bodies. This food system has effects on public health, educational achievement, economic vitality, community development, wages, environmental health, and even US financial and foreign policy. Given these important and far-reaching effects, we need to engage in a constructive national conversation about the food system – one that isn't confined to a few limited issues like food safety inspections, consumer nutrition guidelines and farm subsidies. And we need to create a coherent policy that takes the whole scope of issues into account.
2. **The quality of our children's and grandchildren's future food supply depends on our decisions today.** Our current approaches to producing and distributing food may work in the short-term, but over the long haul, they are degrading our resources and reducing our future options. Our current methods can't necessarily be sustained to provide for future generations because we aren't doing enough to ensure stable foundations for the food system's future viability -- like healthy natural systems and vital agricultural communities. If we protect these critical foundations of the food supply, future generations will be able to build on them. If we allow the current food system to run out of control, our children and grandchildren will be stuck with a food supply that is less secure, less diverse and less healthy than our own.
3. **Our food supply rests on particular foundations, that we are destabilizing with our current approaches to producing food.** Industrialized farming and food processing can alter the chemical makeup of our soil and water. Genetic engineering changes the DNA of the plants and animals we eat. Commercial fishing may use 50-mile long nets that scrape the ocean bottom and wreck whole ecosystems. Unless they are responsibly managed, these powerful new methods can alter the foundations of our food system. A critical yardstick of any method we use to get food is whether it is altering these foundations or can be sustained into the future without doing damage.

4. **Consumer action by itself is not enough to manage the food system effectively.** Even educated and enlightened consumers can only select among the options they find at their end of the food supply chain. They are not in a strong position to affect the processes and impacts of the system as a whole. As citizens, we should hold decision-makers accountable for overseeing the system in the interests of both consumers and the common good. As a society, we need to manage our food supply system wisely, and anticipate and plan for the challenges ahead. Policymakers need to exercise responsible management and address the long-term implications of a system that has gotten out of control.
5. **The food supply chains we depend on have been growing longer and more complicated – and this has created new vulnerabilities.** Food does not just pass from farm to market to table anymore. The links of these chains pass through more hands, more labs, more companies, more processing facilities, more countries, etc. Too much of this stretching food supply chain is out of sight, and out of public control. We either need to shorten the food supply chains by buying more locally produced food, or do a much better job of overseeing and managing them through all their twists and turns.
6. **Most Americans take our food supply for granted, but the food industry is currently failing to meet the country's needs** – about one in eight households doesn't have consistent access to affordable food. In the city of Detroit, for example, there are no longer any brand-name supermarkets. A number of factors are to blame, including decisions by grocery store chains not to locate in less profitable neighborhoods, and the disappearance of local producers from the picture. Important decisions about what food ends up where are made not by communities but by large, distant businesses. As a society, we need to take greater responsibility for our food system, and look closely at whether it is set up to give us what we need.
7. **The consolidation of decision-making power in fewer and fewer hands has seriously threatened the stability and resilience of our food supply system.** In recent years, waves of mergers, buy-outs and bankruptcies have drastically reduced the number of players involved in the food system – from growing to processing and retailing of food. As the field of players shrinks, competition and innovation suffer. As decision-making power is concentrated in fewer hands, regional economies and ways of life are subject to more sudden and drastic change. As decision-making happens at a greater distance, citizens have less and less ability to influence how things are done. Like a building built on too narrow a foundation, the whole structure has grown less stable -- parts of the food industry can even become vulnerable to an Enron-style collapse. We need to take steps to ensure the kind of broad-based, diverse, competitive food supply system that has served the US so well throughout our history.

8. **It is up to us as a society to decide what our food system looks like.** There is nothing inevitable about the ways we currently get our food. We have choices, and we have a collective responsibility to make wise and forward-looking choices – both for ourselves and for the generations who will inherit whatever we have created. Some of our methods of food production erode the foundations of our food supply, while other methods build up and strengthen those foundations. Some destroy agricultural communities and economies, others support them. Some lead to nutritious food on store shelves, others lead to less nutritious options. We have a choice. And those choices about our food system are choices about the quality of life for ourselves and our children.
9. **What people often call “conventional agriculture” is actually a particular approach, using particular kinds of chemicals and machinery.** The industrialized agriculture that has become dominant in the last 50 years may ultimately be the agriculture of the past, as science teaches us more about how to produce food using less damaging methods. Local, state and federal governments have remembered how important small and mid-sized operations are to local economies; more and more Americans are seeking out local or more carefully produced food; and the public is beginning to hold agribusiness accountable for some of the collateral damage that the current industrial methods cause.
10. **One of the most important areas of American life for our government to track is the workings of the food system.** Most people don't think much about how food gets to the store shelves, but the food system is huge and complex, and we all have a critical stake in how it's doing. Current problems that need solving include the fact that roughly 12% of Americans don't have consistent access to affordable food; industrialized agriculture is creating enough pollution to threaten both our health and future food production; and large regions of the country are becoming less economically viable as business decisions by a handful of corporations have broad and unintended effects. This is one of the domains of American life that is most in need of more responsible management.
11. **Our current runaway system for producing food offers no protection at all to agricultural economies and small towns.** As markets shift with global competition and large companies make business decisions with far-reaching consequences, large parts of the country are vulnerable to sudden and disastrous change.