

# University of Maine System seeks bids on food contract with local focus

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By Mary PolsStaff Writer

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As the University of Maine System put out a call Monday for a new food service contract that would include a commitment to buying at least \$1.5 million in local foods by 2020, a new coalition of food producers announced it will bid on the contract and hopes to meet that goal as early as the next academic year and eventually exceed it.

The Maine Farm and Sea Cooperative would aim to have local food make up 30 percent of the food service by 2021. The group's board of directors includes Ron Adams, who is widely known for bringing an intensely local focus to Portland schools as the system's food programs director, and Marada Cook, president of the food distributor Crown o' Maine Organics Cooperative – and co-owner with her sister and fellow board member Leah Cook of food producers Northern Girl & Fiddler's Green. Also on the board is Jonah Fertig, a cooperative development specialist with the Cooperative Development Institute and co-founder of Local Sprouts Cooperative.



## **HOLISTIC APPROACH BEYOND FOOD**

Fertig said the Maine Farm and Sea Cooperative would address the university system's food service needs and go beyond edibles into the economics, including using local banks, insurance companies and laundries for linens "to see how we can maximize our Maine economic impact." Another board member is John Entwistle, who retired this year from Maine Small Business Development Center at the University of Southern Maine.

It's not yet clear what competition the cooperative faces for the contract. No formal bids have been submitted yet.

The university system is looking for a new food service contractor for six of its seven campuses. The flagship campus of the University of Maine in Orono operates on a separate contract. The \$1.5 million local pledge represents 20 percent of annual food purchases at those six schools. Whoever gets the contract, which has been held by Aramark for nearly a decade, will have to meet a first-year goal of 15 percent local, with an increase of one percentage point annually until 2020.

In announcing the request for proposals on Monday, university system officials said the requirements represent a “significant” change from the way food service contracts have been formed in the past. Aramark is in the last year of its 10-year contract. “We put a stake in the ground,” said Rudy Gabrielson of the system’s procurement team. “We are asking bidders to really answer our questions about sustainability.”

## **TRUSTEES CALL FOR LOCAL**

The University of Maine System’s board of trustees unanimously approved a directive in May that called for the next contract to include a preference for local, sustainably produced food. The call for bids includes provisions to make it easier for Maine farmers to meet the definition of “local,” despite the far-flung nature of the state’s campuses. Food produced or harvested within 175 miles of any of the UMaine System campuses will be considered local, meaning that strawberries from a farm in, say, York could still make it onto a cafeteria tray at UMaine Presque Isle more than 300 miles away.

While Maine agriculture and food production has been booming in recent years, an oft-raised question is, can any but the biggest of Maine farms make the transition to selling to large institutions? Can the same farm that has primarily sold its strawberries at a farmers market in a midcoast town of 20,000 produce enough to feed Maine’s university students? John Rebar, the head of UMaine’s Cooperative Extension, thinks so. “Maine agriculture is passing the test,” Rebar said. “We have the most diverse agriculture in New England.”

And a marketplace for it.

“By some measures we are second only in the nation to Vermont in terms of interest in local foods,” Rebar added.

The Maine Farm and Sea Cooperative describes itself as “the nation’s first farm-to-institution food service cooperative,” and it’s aiming to do more than what’s required in the university system’s proposal.

“Our goal is to meet that goal (of 20 percent by 2020) in the first year and then increase it,” Fertig said.

The cooperative’s focus is on winning the contract, but the member-owned group plans to work with other institutions and schools regardless of whether it is victorious with the UMaine System bid or not. “We’ll be facilitating relationships with Maine institutions and suppliers,” Fertig said. “And sharing this model nationally as well.”

A coalition called Maine Food for the UMaine System has been a player in shaping the upcoming contract. It includes farmers, producers and organizations, including the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, and lobbied the UMaine System to set the 20 percent goal.

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