The Rhode Island Food Policy Council strongly supports the General Assembly’s efforts to identify a dedicated funding stream for the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act grant program.

In 2012, the General Assembly had the vision to enact the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act, often referred to as LASA, which included a small grants and technical assistance program to (1) Assist in the marketing of Rhode Island grown agricultural products and local seafood . . . ; (2) Enhance the economic competitiveness of Rhode Island grown agricultural products and local seafood; (3) Provide financial and technical assistance support to organizations and farmers for activities and programs which enhance the economic viability of local agriculture, and support the development of a locally based, safe and sustainable food system; (4) Provide individual farm grants to small or beginning Rhode Island farmers that support the entry or sustainability within the respective industry; (5) Work with the state department of health to further develop and support food safety related programs and standards pertaining to local agriculture and seafood.

Over the following two years, you allocated general funds for this grants program, and we are now beginning to see the program’s early results. As you consider a dedicated funding stream for the LASA grants program, the Food Policy Council wants to underscore why we believe this legislation should be part of the comprehensive package of legislation designed to grow our state’s economy.

1. State funding for LASA has leveraged private support and can continue to do so. In 2014, and again this year, private foundations more than matched the LASA grant monies allocated by the state. They also supported Food Policy Council staff time to assist add administrative capacity DEM’s over-extended staff in administering to the grant program, working in partnership with DEM staff. This public-private partnering more than doubled the grant funds available ($210,000 in 2014; $230,000 in 2015) and ensured that there were sufficient personnel to administer the program was administered efficiently and effectively.

2. The large number of grant applications received demonstrates the need for this program, which provides critical access to capital to start-up and early stage businesses. In 2014, the LASA program received 92 applications, totaling $1,474,822 in requested funds. $210,030 was awarded to 17 recipients, including $20,000 for a statewide local seafood promotion campaign. This year the program received 73 applications totaling $1,025,993 in requested funding. There is $230,000 in grant money available to award, and the LASA Advisory Committee is now tackling the difficult job of determining which applications will receive grants.

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3. Many of the grants awarded help not only the immediate recipients but also other farmers and fishermen, and our local agriculture, aquaculture, and seafood sectors as a whole. A number of grant proposals include provisions for sharing equipment purchased with other farmers, holding information sessions to share lessons learned about new methods, technological advances or marketing approaches with other farmers and fishermen, and cooperative marketing.

We do want to point out one concern that S416 raises. After 2015 LASA grants are awarded in May, the next round of grants would be scheduled for the spring of 2016. We have had discussions with CRMC and have been told that, providing there are no delays, the construction schedule for the pilot wind farm installation off Block Island calls for completion in the fall of 2016. The first lease fee would not be assessed until the end of 2016, which means that no lease fees would be available to fund LASA grants awarded in the spring of 2016. In order to maintain the program’s momentum and to encourage private funders to maintain their support, we strongly urge the Finance Committee to provide funding for the 2016 LASA grant round from the General Fund.

At a time when some sectors of the state’s economy are stalled, the food sector is already growing. This growth is due to the hard work and entrepreneurial spirit of our farming, fishing and shellfishing businesses and other food sector businesses and to a widespread interest in local food. The LASA grants and technical assistance program supports these local businesses and we urge you to ensure that the program continues uninterrupted and to identify a dedicated funding stream for future years.

Leo Pollock
Network Coordinator
Rhode Island Food Policy Council

The Rhode Island Food Policy Council’s 22 members bring a diverse range of expertise in the food system, and the Council’s extended network represents farmers and fishermen, processors, distributors, retailers, consumers and recyclers. The Council creates partnerships, develops policies and advocates for improvements to the local food system to increase and expand its capacity, viability and sustainability. We envision a Rhode Island in which an increasing proportion of the state’s food supply is raised, caught, processed and sold locally, helping to grow our state’s economy and increase the number of jobs in the food sector, and where all Rhode Islanders have access to safe, fresh, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, regardless of income or race.