

Substantial Change and the State

The Evolution of Community Self-Governance of

“Those who write the rules are those that profit from the status quo. If we want to change that status quo, we might have to change the rules. The rules available to us have been structured precisely to make sure we don't make substantial change.”

By Heather Retberg

One rainy November day in 2009, an inspector came down our driveway and threatened to eliminate the better part of our livelihood with a pencil. A combination of rule changes on poultry and an internal agency review on milk policy would take away more than half of our farming income unless we could comply, taking on a debt load that made little sense for the income generated from our dairy and chicken enterprises.

The inspector advised that we should “gather our people,” go to Augusta, and weigh in on the rule-making for a new poultry exemption law. On that cold and dismal day, I didn't think I had any people to gather. I had never been to our state capitol. I couldn't imagine speaking out loud in front of a legislative committee. If we were to continue, however, it became important to find my voice and “gather my people.” I wrote to our customers. I called our friend, the director of Food for Maine's Future. He sent my letter through the organization's network. It led to a public outcry. Over 50 people came during Christmas week to testify about slaughter rules for poultry. This had hit a nerve.

Despite the thoughtful testimony that followed, the state's response was that they must make rules “equal to or greater than” the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) rules or risk losing federal funding for Maine's meat inspection program. The existing regulatory structure, with money attached, made the voice of the people ineffectual.

This experience in our State House pointed us toward the local level of government. In Maine, we still have a bona fide annual town meeting where town residents vote on local matters that affect our health, safety and welfare. Maine statute and our state constitution grant our towns the authority to pass ordinances that deal with matters “local in nature.” Local food raised in our town is certainly “local in nature,” as Maine statute requires, and certainly affects our health, safety and welfare. Together



Rally in front of Blue Hill Town Hall calling on the State of Maine to drop the laws on slaughter rules for poultry. Photo by Dan Brown.

with a small, but committed group, the Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance was drafted.

Community organizing led to national networking that led to alignment with a global food sovereignty movement. This led to a new understanding that smallholder, peasant, and family farmers all over the world shared a common analysis of and struggle against the industrial, globalized, corporate-controlled food system. Attending a conference on food sovereignty, I nearly jumped out of my seat when Basque Country farmer Paul Nicholson spoke of farmers' response in his country to the corporate food system. We had come to the same conclusions! He spoke of food sovereignty as the farmers' proposal to society, that it was dynamic, that it was always bottom up. It was a proposal that puts people who eat and people who grow food at the heart of decision-making policy about food, instead of corporate agribusiness.

Because of our experiences in our state legislature, a whole system of corporate/government collusion in rule-making was made visible to us. As we shared our experiences and what we were learning about the structures of governance, many more voices joined ours in our common proposal. It started jumping town lines — our “proposal to society” resonated. It took us from our tiny towns of Sedgwick, Penobscot and Blue Hill that first spring of 2011, across



Ben Retberg milking his cow, Paula

photo: Greg Asbed