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THIRD MAINE TOWN PASSES LANDMARK LOCAL FOOD ORDINANCE

Effort Gaining Attention Nationwide

BLUE HILL, MAINE - On Saturday, April 2, Blue Hill became the third town in Maine to adopt the Local Food and Self-Governance Ordinance. The Ordinance was passed at Blue Hill's town meeting by a near unanimous vote. This comes on the heels of the unanimous passage of the Ordinance in the neighboring towns of Sedgwick and Penobscot on March 5 and March 7, respectively. The Ordinance asserts that towns can determine their own food and farming policies locally, and exempts direct food sales from state and federal license and inspection requirements.

The Ordinance failed in a fourth town, Brooksville, on March 7, by a vote of 161 to 152, however voting irregularities have called the vote's validity into question. Brooksville town residents are circulating a petition calling for a revote at a special town meeting, which could take place in as little as a few months. The petition questions the legality of placing the town's Ordinance Review Committee's recommendation of a "No" vote on the ballot. Brooksville was the only town to vote on the ordinance by ballot, rather than by a show of hands.

Blue Hill resident John Gandy said the passage of the Blue Hill ordinance "is a huge milestone in the struggle to protect the rights, not only of farmers to sell their products, but also of all citizens to eat the food of their choice." Gandy serves as the Master for the Halcyon Grange in North Blue Hill, which passed a Resolution for Food Sovereignty in February of this year. "It is time citizens start defending our rights against big government and big business."

Dan Brown, farmer from Blue Hill, noted during the discussion on the Ordinance that this comes down to whether or not small-scale food producers can earn a livelihood. "They come to me, close my doors, and I'm back to driving truck." And losing even more farms and food producers, says Brown, means local people have less access to local food. "Shut me down, then people don't get their tomatoes, their milk."

Brown's personal experience with the Maine State inspection program has revealed inconsistencies in which operations are deemed legitimate and under what terms. According to Brown, the state inspector responsible for his county has offered to license Brown's home kitchen in a way that would "bend the rules." "He said to me, 'couldn't you put your cats outside between 10am and 2pm? If you tell me you will I'll believe that you do all your cooking between those hours.'"

When Brown asked if only selling dairy products to his customers who have signed a contract would satisfy the Maine Department of Agriculture he was told that such contracts were not legal, despite at least one other Maine farm operating in this manner. Five years of frustration and worry from not knowing whether he will be in business tomorrow has taken its toll on Brown, yet he is not giving up. "Either arrest me, prove what I'm doing is wrong in a court of law, or leave me alone."

The Local Food and Self-Governance Ordinance has drawn national attention, with emails and phone calls pouring into Western Hancock County from around the U.S., Canada, and as far away as New Zealand. Farmers, ranchers, and artisan food producers have contacted local residents wanting to know how and why this ordinance came to be, and whether or not it could happen where they live.

Heather and Phil Retberg, whose diversified family farm in Penobscot has been a coalescing force for the local effort, has found comfort and camaraderie in the show of support. "A farmer who has given up her award winning cheese operation under incredible pressure from the FDA has connected to our work here," said Heather Retberg, "and a friendship is forming across the country because of it." She also noted the importance of the more lighthearted comments she has received, like the farmer from Virginia who called to assure Retberg that "we believe the same things as y'all do."

As of press time the Maine Department of Agriculture had not returned requests for comment.

The Local Food & Self-Governance Ordinance can be viewed at www.localfoodlocalrules.wordpress.com.

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