

New group's goal: Food reform on California's front burner

Stacy Finz

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Michael Dimock, the strategic adviser for the new California Food Policy Council, visits a greenhouse at Singing Frogs Farm in Sebastopol. Dimock and his colleagues on the council intend to inform voters and push legislators on food policy issues. Photo: Michael Short, The Chronicle



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A new statewide coalition is putting pressure on politicians to pass progressive food and farm legislation in the hopes that it will "fix" California's health, environmental and economic challenges.

And it's doing it the old-fashioned way: tracking legislators' voting records and

spreading the word.

In its first report, released Wednesday, the [California Food Policy Council](#) analyzed 27 bills that they say were critically important in 2013 to California food reform. Of those, 11 made it to the floor for voting, and five were passed and signed by the governor.

"A lot more can be done that hasn't been done," said [Michael Dimock](#), the group's strategic adviser and president of [Roots of Change](#), a nonprofit dedicated to revamping food policy. "We think California is a bellwether for food and agriculture policy and Californians are more interested than ever in local food systems."

It won't be long before voters in this state are backing candidates and legislators based on their food and farm platforms, Dimock said. The California Food Policy Council hopes to be a significant resource for voters as well as to politicians and policy circles that need guidance on what the public wants. Legislation such as making food stamps available to [Medi-Cal](#) recipients, taxing soda and supporting more farm-to-fork programs are just a few of the types of bills they're monitoring.

Many areas represented

The council is made up of representatives from 19 community organizations, including the [Berkeley](#), [Oakland](#), [Marin](#), [Richmond](#) and [Los Angeles](#) food policy councils; the [San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance](#); and the [Orange County Food Access Coalition](#). [Roots of Change](#), a [Public Health Institute](#) program, is providing financial support for the coalition, which was founded in March.

Since then, the organization has been tracking bills. Of the 79 bills introduced last year that dealt with food issues, the council identified 27 that were especially important and narrowed it down to 10 that it felt held the highest priority.

They include successful bills such as San Francisco Assemblyman [Phil Ting](#)'s AB551, which allows cities and counties to establish urban agriculture incentive zones by offering reduced property taxes to landowners who farm their city land, and Menlo Park Assemblyman [Richard Gordon](#)'s AB224, which requires food safety regulations for community-supported agriculture (CSAs).

The bills that failed include Berkeley Assemblywoman [Loni Hancock](#)'s SB283, which would have made drug felons eligible for CalFresh benefits (food stamps), and Los Angeles Assemblywoman [Holly Mitchell](#)'s AB459, a requirement that 50 percent of the food offered in vending machines on state property meet accepted nutritional guidelines by 2015.

A welcome addition

Ting said he welcomes the group's interest in the legislative process and thinks it's good that it's tracking voting records.

"It's important to have transparency," he said.

As to whether the council has enough influence to bring about change, Ting said: "No one starts out as big as the [Sierra Club](#) or the [ACLU](#) or the [NAACP](#). But Californians are more and more concerned with where their food is coming from, and (the state) is bound to lead the way on these issues."

[D'Artagnan Scorza](#), a member of the council who is also executive director of the [Social Justice Learning Institute](#) in Inglewood (Los Angeles County), said he thinks the report has significant influence.

"By tracking each legislator, I now know who will respond favorably to my concerns and who I need to educate," he said.

If Scorza could have any food policy wish come true in 2014, it would be to pass a law that would zone urban land for agricultural use.

"It's a big challenge," he said, adding that of the 38 parcels in Inglewood that would qualify for an urban-farm tax reduction under Ting's legislation, none is even zoned for farming. "We need to produce food for people who can't get fresh vegetables and fruit. And we need to make it affordable."

Sending a simple message

Brenda Ruiz, a chef and member of the council, said it's simple: "We need policies and practices that produce healthy, safe and abundant food for an affordable price."

Ruiz looks at the California Homemade Food Act, a law enacted in 2013 that makes it legal to sell certain foods made in home kitchens, as a tremendous boon to the state.

"Before, if you grew your own tomatoes and canned them, you couldn't sell them to your neighbor," she said. "Even though we're the breadbasket of the nation, we still have hunger, food deserts and schools that can't access clean, potable water. And farmers are challenged to get into the industry due to so many regulations."

That's why she's optimistic about the role the council will play in monitoring Sacramento.

"The person on the street is not a policy expert," she said. "But the California Food Policy Council is a pathway for the voice of the everyday man to be heard. We want to be that go-to place for legislators to see what California wants."

Scorecard

To view the California Food Policy Council's first report on legislation and how lawmakers voted on food policy, go to <http://bit.ly/1eFObot>.

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