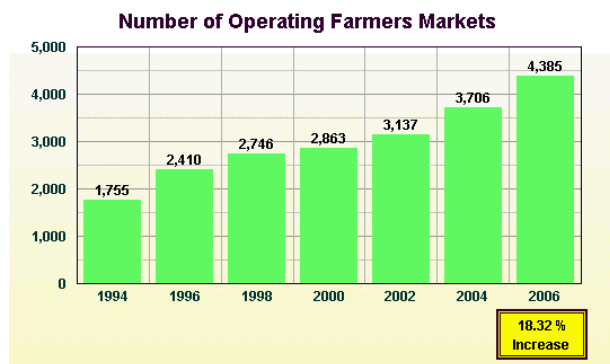


The Case for Local and Regional Food Marketing

SUMMARY

Communities across the United States are enjoying healthier food grown by local farmers; and farmers are reaping better returns and helping to revitalize rural and urban communities by selling close to home instead of through distant markets. Local marketing has expanded beyond farmers' markets and farmstands, although these are still popular and the number of US farmers' markets is growing rapidly. New regional supply networks are linking farmers with their customers in innovative ways and taking advantage of opportunities for marketing to institutions such as public schools, hospitals and universities. In the process, they are bringing a host of other benefits to communities within the networks. But significant barriers must be overcome to increase the potential of these new marketing mechanisms and expand them to meet the needs of underserved farmers and customers.



Source: Agricultural Marketing Service, US Department of Agriculture

Nutrition, health, and food safety are high on the national agenda, as obesity has increased dramatically. At the same time, producers are concerned about market profitability; and agricultural policy makers are concerned about the small numbers of young and beginning farmers and disappearing farmland—both essential to maintain the American legacy of farming.

Consumer demand for healthier, more sustainably produced food is increasing; but many regions lack the infrastructure to satisfy this market. Demand for organic food has outstripped supply and demand for locally produced foods continues to grow as well, boosted by at least 1035 public school districts which are now purchasing some amount of local and regional food. This

number has increased since 2002, when only 400 public schools were buying local or regional food.¹

Consumers', producers' and policy makers' interests can be met simultaneously through local and regional marketing of high-quality, healthy food. Shorter supply chains that deliver products grown in the region have strong appeal for a number of reasons, such as

- ◆ better and more stable farm incomes that keep existing farms in business and attract new farmers.
- ◆ more wealth retained in rural communities.
- ◆ new jobs created in food production, processing, distribution and retailing.
- ◆ better access to healthier, more diverse foods that help to prevent obesity and diet-related diseases.
- ◆ increased supply of healthy, local food in underserved communities.
- ◆ enhanced product traceability and accountability of producers to consumers.

Local and regional food marketing also has environmental advantages, such as lower carbon emissions and more opportunities for diversification and sustainable production. And it is less vulnerable to widespread contamination and disruption from natural catastrophes.

To increase the scope and impacts of existing local and regional marketing networks and to meet consumer demand, the following federal policies are especially important:

- Support feasibility studies for increased local and regional food marketing.
- Identify infrastructural gaps and other barriers.
- Give small-scale and mid-scale farmers the tools they need to meet growing consumer demand for local and regional products.
- Expand the essential infrastructure for local agricultural production and the processing and distribution of produce, meats, dairy, and other products.
- Support mechanisms and access to information that farmers can use to aggregate regional supply in order to access high-volume markets such as large institutions.
- Ensure that farmers and consumers who have been underserved by farm and food policy benefit from these steps.

BENEFITS OF LOCAL & REGIONAL FOOD MARKETING

Higher and more stable farm incomes

Local and regional food systems significantly enhance the producer's share of the final retail price because there are fewer exchanges between producer and consumer. In addition, they are better able to maintain information through the supply chain; and consumers will pay extra for that information. Increasingly, customers are seeking higher-quality foods that come with a guarantee of healthy and responsible production practices. Organic is the best known of these types of production practices, and growth in sales of organic food has been 15-21% per year over the past few years, compared with only 2-4% for total food sales.² Other labeling claims such as grass-fed, free-range and antibiotic-free are also gaining attention.

The reasons for changing consumer preferences are diverse, including food scares, dissatisfaction with tasteless products that have been shipped long distances, and increasing concerns about obesity and diet-related diseases. But agricultural producers who succeed in satisfying these preferences usually have a couple of things in common: they provide more information about their products, and serve consistently high quality so that there is a continuous "value chain" from grower to customer. While high-quality, information-rich products often appear first in direct-marketing venues and pricey restaurants, markets that serve thousands instead of hundreds of people—food service, public schools, supermarkets, restaurant chains—are opening up. This creates opportunities for many more producers to benefit, but tremendous challenges stand in the way.

Since 1935, the US has lost 4.7 million farms as technology, machinery and synthetic chemicals have substituted for human labor. This decline has been most pronounced among socially disadvantaged farmers (who belong to groups that have been discriminated against historically because of race or ethnicity). Socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers—African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and others—tend to be small-scale and have limited resources. Between 1989 and 2003, the number of farms in the US stayed the same but the number of very-large farms (with sales over \$500,000) increased dramatically.³ As large-scale farms dominated food and feed markets, local infrastructure for selling, processing and storing products from small-scale farms fell into disrepair or disappeared.

The decline of small- and mid-scale farms and farmers has been pushed along by federal commodity payments

that favor very large farms, and the growing power of food and agricultural firms that now control most aspects of the food chain. For example, four companies control 83.5% of the beef-packing industry, 66% of pork packing, and 80% of soybean crushing. Two companies sell 58% of US seed corn, and four companies control 29% of the global commercial seed market.⁴ Farmers producing commodity crops often find themselves squeezed between low prices that the giant buyers offer and high prices that seed and other input companies set. US farmers earned less producing crops in 2002 than they did in 1969, despite doubling their productivity.⁵ But they have to pay much more now for energy, labor, and inputs; so they are eager to find ways to make a higher profit on their products.



Photo courtesy of Appalachian Sustainable Development, <http://www.appsustdev.org>

Local and regional marketing networks with short supply chains put more of the sale price into farmers' pockets because they combine the two best strategies for higher profits from small farms: cut marketing costs by direct marketing, and add value to products. A recent study in Maine showed that shifting just 1% of consumer expenditures to direct purchase of local foods would increase farmers' income in the area by 5%. If all Maine residents spent \$10 a week on local food, \$100,000,000 would go back into farmers' pockets and the Maine economy each growing season.⁶

If southeast Minnesotans bought 15% of their food from local sources, it would generate as much income for the region as two-thirds of farm subsidies.⁷



If Oklahomans put just 5% of what they already spend on groceries each year toward food bought direct from local farmers, it would buy a pound of vine-ripe tomatoes every week through the growing season and cost less than many people spend on soda pop. But it would increase the income of individual farms anywhere from several hundred to tens of thousands of dollars.⁸

More jobs and wealth retained in local economies

Doubling or tripling the amount of fresh produce that farmers sell in fresh produce markets in Michigan could generate up to 1,889 new jobs across the state and \$187 million in new personal income.⁹

Farmers in southeast Minnesota sold food worth \$912 million on average each year between 1997 and 2003, but not to feed their own area. Instead, the half billion dollars spent on purchasing food in this region went primarily to producers and companies in other areas. Farmers spent another half billion outside the region on farm inputs. At least \$800 million flowed out of southeast Minnesota each year as a result.¹⁰ Farmers bear the brunt of this net loss; and rural economies—many without significant economic activities except farming—lose out on processing, distribution, marketing and other related employment opportunities.

Every dollar spent at an Iowa farmers' market generates \$1.58 in additional sales, and every dollar earned by vendors translates into \$1.47 in income to others. For every 100 farmers' market jobs, 145 additional jobs pop up elsewhere in the state's economy.¹¹

Local and regional food networks are able to support a diverse farm structure and contribute to the community and local economy in important ways. Back in the 1940s, studies of California farming communities showed that in towns surrounded by smaller family farms, the income circulated among local business establishments and generated jobs and community prosperity—a phenomenon known as the local multiplier effect. This community wealth led to more local businesses, more paved streets and sidewalks and more schools, parks, churches, clubs and newspapers. On the other hand, towns dominated by large corporate farms employed fewer local people.¹² Similar studies since the 1950s have supported these conclusions.¹³

Money spent at Community Supported Agriculture, a type of direct farmer-to-consumer sale, resulted in a local multiplier of 250%, compared with just 140% when the same amount was spent in a supermarket.¹⁴



In Iowa, the total net impact of increasing fruit and vegetable purchases from local sources by 10% would be \$302.4 million in new industrial output, \$112.6 million in labor income, and 4,094 new jobs.¹⁵



Photo courtesy of Greenmarket Program, Council on the Environment of New York City

Improved access to fresh produce

Fruits and vegetables grown close to the point of consumption can ripen to peak flavor before they are harvested, and interesting varieties that would be damaged by long-distance transport can be sold in local markets. If produce is eaten soon after harvest, it often has better nutritional value, in addition to better taste, because fewer nutrients are lost to oxidation. But both storage time and temperature influence nutritional quality of fresh produce,¹⁶ so farmers need equipment to adequately control the temperature of their produce after harvest to maintain high quality.

The average US diet falls far short of the recommended amounts of fruit and vegetables in the federal Dietary Guidelines, and four of the top six leading causes of death in the US are related to diet.¹⁷ Only five vegetables—iceberg lettuce, frozen potatoes, fried potatoes, potato chips, and canned tomatoes—make up almost half of total vegetable consumption.¹⁸ Children and adults with healthy weights tend to eat significantly more fruit than their obese and overweight counterparts,¹⁹ and high fruit and vegetable consumption reduces the risk of many chronic diseases.²⁰

Access to high-quality nutrient-dense food varies widely across the US and by income level. Poor people often have less access to healthy food than those with higher incomes because they live in places without good retail markets or they lack transportation. In addition, healthy foods such as vegetables and fruit usually cost more than refined grains and food with added sugars and fats.²¹ Not surprisingly, low-income and socially disadvantaged populations have higher incidences of obesity, overweight and diet-related diseases.²² So improving access to healthy, high-quality food is especially important for these people.

Local food is not necessarily more expensive for the consumer. A study of prices at an Oklahoma farmers' market found prices for over twenty items to be less or comparable to prices for fruits and vegetables in nearby supermarkets.²³

The US has a shortfall of acreage needed to meet its fruit, vegetable, dairy, and whole grain diet demands, despite being one of the most productive agricultural countries in the world. For people in this country to meet the fruit, vegetable and whole-grain recommendations of the US Department of Agriculture from local supply, domestic crop acreage would need to increase by about 7.4 million acres.²⁴ But making this transition would require more labor, since these crops tend to be more labor-intensive than row crops, and infrastructure to process and distribute the produce.



Photo courtesy of Appalachian Sustainable Development
<http://www.appsusdev.org/>

Greater accountability and choice

Farmers who sell directly to their customers can get immediate feedback from them about the types of products they want to buy and their concerns about food quality, food safety, and production practices. This feedback helps farmers to adapt quickly to changes in consumer preferences. Local food systems allow greater trust in the authenticity of a product's origin, which is especially important with new attention to product traceability.²⁵

Likewise, customers who have access to local and regional food networks have more opportunities to

influence the choice of food available, and often they appreciate more direct connection with farmers and knowing about farm production practices. Community-based projects in Boston, New York and other major metropolitan areas are helping local and regional farmers to meet the needs of immigrants who retain preferences for traditional foods and varieties from their home countries. Ethnic marketing in Massachusetts has introduced crops such as calabaza, recao and taioba to rapidly-growing Latino and Brazilian populations, while farmers pocket extra income.²⁶

Decreased vulnerability to widespread contamination and disruption

When distribution and processing are highly centralized, tracing contamination and removing contaminated goods from the market can be very difficult. US residents saw how easily microbial contamination can spread during the September 2006 contamination of *E. coli* 0157:H7 in pre-cut spinach. During this outbreak, three people died, and more than 200 became sick. The plant thought to be responsible washes over 26 million servings of salad every week, and is one of two plants in the US to process 75% of pre-cut salads. New York Times contributor Michael Pollan summarized the situation: "In effect, we're washing the whole nation's salad in one big sink."²⁷

The Congressional Research Service and Government Accounting Office released reports after the attacks of September 11, 2001, warning that concentration in production and processing makes the US more vulnerable to agro-terrorism.²⁸ Any food product that goes through large-scale production, processing, distribution and storage—including soft drinks, fruit and vegetable juices, processed tomato products, and grains—could be at risk for deliberate contamination, with catastrophic consequences.

Since local and regional production and distribution networks have short supply chains and retain information about products, tracing any problems back to the source is relatively simple. Such systems do not commingle products from across the nation and production is on a small scale, so contamination is contained and easier to handle.

Diversification and sustainable production

Most farmers who market directly diversify their production to meet consumers' wide-ranging interests. Planting a variety of crops is more labor intensive, but allows farmers to spread out their production and marketing risks. Multi-cropping, intercropping, and crop

rotations—typical practices of a diversified farm responding to year-long customer demand—help to maintain nutrients in the soil by incorporating crops with various nutrient needs, rooting depths and nitrogen-fixing capacities. These practices also may reduce pest pressure, which means that diversified farmers can reduce their use of synthetic pesticides.²⁹ In addition, when animals are raised in conjunction with crop production, their manure can be recycled and used as a fertilizer. Integrating crops and livestock can thus reduce the need for chemical fertilizer and avoid huge challenges of proper disposal of livestock waste from concentrated livestock operations.

Direct markets also encourage entrepreneurial innovations and let producers try out new varieties. This means that local and regional markets can promote crop genetic diversity, which is threatened by reliance of the global food system on just a few crops and varieties.³⁰ Retail food chains have found markets an excellent place to scout for new products—an important opportunity for some producers to make new business contacts.

Fewer food miles, less global warming

Products travel shorter distances in local and regional food chains, which can translate into less global warming if production and processing are also energy-efficient. Currently, the average distance food travels from farm to supermarket has increased dramatically over the last few decades: estimates range from 1,500 to 2,500 miles.³¹ This increase in food miles increases pollution. In 2003, the transportation sector accounted for about 27% of total US greenhouse gas emissions—up 2% since 1990, and the largest percentage increase of any sector during that period.³² Local and regional food marketing can cut down transportation-related emissions.

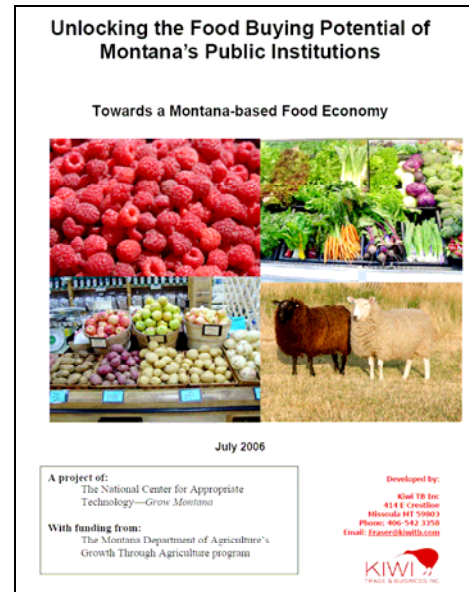
Producing and transporting 10% more of the produce in an Iowa-based food system would result in savings ranging from 280 to 346 thousand gallons of fuel (depending on the production system and truck type), and a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 6.7 to 7.9 million pounds.³³

STEPS TO A LOCAL OR REGIONAL FOOD MARKETING SYSTEM

What do local and regional marketing efforts require for success? State, regional and federal policies can make a big difference in supporting and facilitating local food systems, especially if integrated closely with each other. Important *federal* policy priorities that will help to realize

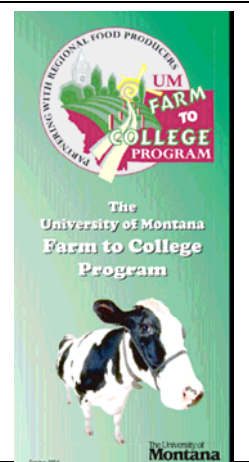
the benefits of local and regional food marketing include the following:

- ◆ **Support feasibility studies that determine regional market trends, what current farmers and ranchers can provide, and the potential for meeting a larger share of the market through local and regional production.** Reliable information about a region's production capacity and the gap between food supply and demand is the first step toward creating a local or regional marketing system.



Feasibility study in Montana to identify new marketing opportunities for the state's farmers.

Food purchases by the main campuses of the University of Montana (UM) and Montana State University account for the two single largest food expenditures by public institutions in the state—approximately \$7.6 million in 2004-2005. University Dining Services at UM started the Farm to College Program in the spring of 2003, and by Fiscal Year 2005 purchased about \$403,000 of local products from 45 vendors—13% of its total food budget.³⁴



- ◆ **Identify infrastructural gaps and other barriers that prevent local and regional farmers from marketing more of their crops, livestock and value-added products within the region.** Documenting gaps is essential to developing a strategic plan to address the most important barriers in a cost-effective way.

- ◆ **Give small-scale and mid-scale farmers the tools they need to meet growing consumer demand for local and regional products, such as financing and technical assistance to make the transition to crops customers want and more sustainable production methods.** While farmers and ranchers receive significant support for marketing products overseas, similar assistance does not exist for marketing of products domestically. Given all the advantages of local and regional food networks, such government support makes sense.
- ◆ **Expand the infrastructure needed for local agricultural production and the processing and distribution of locally grown produce, meats, dairy, and other products.** Without slaughterhouses, grain mills, other processing facilities and warehouses that will work with smaller-scale, independent farms, there is no way to bypass centralized control over food processing and keep more of the wealth in farmers' hands and in their communities. Grants, loans, training, and other incentives can help to build or restore businesses and facilities that support local and regional food systems.

The Appalachian Sustainable Development Project in Abingdon, Virginia, invested \$500,000 to convert an old tobacco shed into a packinghouse and purchased three refrigerated trucks. This small investment has resulted in more than 75 products from former tobacco farmers—including grass-finished meat, free-range eggs, and produce—reaching over 600 supermarkets in the region.³⁵



Photo courtesy of Appalachian Sustainable Development
<http://www.appsusdev.org/>

- ◆ **Support mechanisms and access to information that farmers can use to aggregate regional supply in order to access high-volume markets such as large institutions.** Many institutional markets are too large to easily work with independent farmers who can supply only small amounts of produce. Efficient marketing requires cooperatives or brokers that can help to aggregate supply, preferably farmer-owned or

community-controlled so that benefits stay in the region and help provide decent incomes for farmers.

The Oklahoma Food Co-operative organizes monthly orders of locally produced food. The Co-operative has sold just under half a million dollars' worth of food since its opening in 2003. When farmers sell to the Co-op, they receive 95 cents for every dollar Co-op members spend, instead of the 19 cents or so that most farmers receive from a food dollar.³⁶

- ◆ **Ensure that farmers and consumers who have been underserved by farm and food policy benefit from these steps.** Underserved farmers, including socially disadvantaged, women, and beginning farmers, benefit particularly from local and regional markets because they can accommodate small-scale producers. Also, many underserved farmers grow fruits, vegetables, and other products that are commonly sold in local and regional markets.

These steps to strengthen the value chain for local and regional marketing rely on additional measures that support diverse, sustainable, local and regional food systems:

- ◆ **Keep farmland in working farms.** Local food systems can succeed only when family farmers can stay on the land. Keeping farmland in a community is fiscally beneficial for municipalities, since working farmlands generate more public revenues than they receive back in public services.³⁷
- ◆ **Enforce existing restrictions against excessive concentration of buying power and tighten up legislation to allow fair competition for smaller-scale processors, distributors and retailers.** When only a few large companies control a very large proportion of processing, distribution, and retailing, smaller-scale producers cannot access markets and real competition disappears.
- ◆ **Support training, resources, assistance and credit for beginning farmers and youth interested in farming and food-related careers.** Services tailored to the unique needs of beginning minority farmers, immigrant farmers and youth are especially valuable because they have not been provided adequately in the past.
- ◆ **Accommodate needs of small-scale and mid-scale enterprises in food processing regulations.** Often regulations are made with large-scale operations in mind, and smaller-scale processors have problems or face prohibitive costs in trying to comply with rules that are not even necessary at their scale of operation. Regulations should allow smaller-scale and

independent processors to remain in business, while still ensuring that food quality is high.

- ◆ **Facilitate the development of convenient local and regional retail outlets for small-scale and mid-scale farmers.** Marketing serves an entire community, and it is reasonable for federal policies to facilitate retail outlet development. A critical step is to ensure that farmers' markets established with federal funds serve minority farmers fairly. In some Southern states, the only farmers' markets available discriminate against black farmers by buying their produce at lower prices.³⁸
- ◆ **Compensate farmers for protecting the environment and maintaining the cultural and aesthetic values of working farmland.** Compensating farmers for these services would help them to stay in business, and allow them to charge prices for their produce that are more affordable to low-income customers.
- ◆ **Educate the public about advantages of buying locally and regionally grown food.** Public educational campaigns are needed to counteract the large amounts of money spent by the private sector to promote purchase of foods that bring high profits back to businesses but are not necessarily healthy and do not have other community benefits.
- ◆ **Fund the establishment of local and regional food policy councils.** Food policy councils bring together diverse stakeholders to plan and implement the food system that fits local needs best.



About this publication:

by Molly D. Anderson, FFPP Research Coordinator

This is one in a series of Issue Briefs of the Farm & Food Policy Project (FFPP), written to support new initiatives introduced to the 2007 Farm Bill. FFPP is a diverse alliance of family farm, sustainable agriculture, rural, public health, anti-hunger, environmental, faith-based, and other groups with a commitment to address the full spectrum of public needs addressed by this critical piece of legislation.

FFPP participants have endorsed a shared declaration of policy goals and options, *Seeking Balance in US Farm and Food Policy*, and invite others to join them.

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