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Iowa's Local Food Systems: A Place to Grow

By Laura Krouse and Teresa Galluzzo

You could easily live your whole life in Iowa without eating an Iowa-grown meal. This may seem surprising, because Iowa is a leading agricultural state. But the majority of fruit and vegetables we buy are travel weary, journeying 1,500 miles to our plates.¹ Think about how produce reaches Iowa: Idaho potatoes summiting the Rockies, New Zealand apples sailing the Pacific, and Chilean grapes voyaging thousands of miles. All these products can be and historically have been grown and processed in Iowa.

Iowans' interest in purchasing food grown closer to home has recently increased. This has led to the germination of local food systems across the state. For example:


- 🍎 By 2004, the number of farmers' markets had increased 60 percent from the previous decade; Iowa boasted 180 farmers' markets, more per capita than any other state.²
- 🍎 There are at least 38 community support agriculture (CSA) arrangements in Iowa, up from the first three initiated in 1995.
- 🍎 Several Iowa restaurants and grocery stores feature locally grown food for its freshness and quality. For example, Rudy's Tacos in Waterloo purchases 66 percent of its food locally.³
- 🍎 Schools, universities, hospitals and nursing homes have begun to serve locally grown food. For example, Allen Memorial Hospital in Waterloo purchases 30 percent of the food it serves locally.⁴

Iowans' desire for locally grown food could be motivated by a variety of benefits.






- 🍎 **Environmental:** Locally grown food requires much less transportation, which means less global warming emissions. Calculations from a Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture model show if Iowans purchased 10 percent of 28 select fruits and vegetables from local sources, five to 17 times less carbon dioxide would be emitted than if they were purchased from the global food system.⁵ There is also a decreased need for packaging local food, which reduces the resources and landfill space consumed. Further, production of local food could reduce soil erosion because a diverse mix of crops could be rotated. The reduction of genetic diversity could also be slowed as varieties of crops and livestock valued for taste, nutritional value, pest resistance and local suitability could be produced rather than those few designed to have a long shelf life or uniform appearance.
- 🍎 **Health:** Local fruits and vegetables usually reach consumers more quickly and more often at the peak of freshness. Thus, locally produced fruits and vegetables can have higher nutritional values.
- 🍎 **Social:** Farmers' markets and CSAs create new spaces within communities for people to socialize. In fact, sociologists estimate people have 10 times more conversations at farmers' markets than supermarkets.⁶
- 🍎 **Security:** Most of our food is currently transported long distances leaving us vulnerable to strikes, attack, spikes in fuel prices, food-borne illnesses, and other disruptions.

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 **Economic:** Growing and selling more food locally would benefit the state's economy. One study found that if Iowans met 25 percent of their demand for 37 different fruits and vegetables with products grown in Iowa, the net value added to the state's economy would be almost \$140 million in sales, \$54 million in labor incomes and 2,031 jobs.⁷

Iowa producers and consumers are beginning to appreciate these benefits. However, barriers to developing Iowa's local food systems were revealed by surveys conducted by Laura Krouse over the past year. Recommendations to expand Iowa's local food systems include:

-  Increasing financing for local producers through targeted loans and cost share for beginning farmers as well as farmers transitioning to local production.
-  Supporting state local food programs that provide education, technical assistance, and policy advice in such institutions as the Iowa Department of Land Stewardship, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Iowa Food Policy Council.
-  Increasing local processing capacity by providing start-up funds for infrastructure in several locations around the state that could handle produce, dairy and meat.
-  Increasing marketing networks and fostering links between producers and distributors.
-  Increasing Iowa's commitment to local food by encouraging private companies and state organizations to develop a purchase preference for local food, encouraging state employees to become members in CSAs, creating an Iowa grown label, and increasing support for sustainable agriculture education.

To continue the growth of local food systems, Iowa's leaders need to be progressive in implementing policies that encourage profitable local food systems. To get started, lawmakers could recall and honor the previous state slogan, "A Place to Grow," and make it apply to the food Iowans eat. It will require a long-term commitment, creativity, foresight and risk-taking, but as local food systems grow, Iowans will reap the rewards.

¹ Pirog, Rich, Timothy Van Pelt, Kamyar Enshayan, and Ellen Cook. 2001. Food, Fuel, and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions. The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, June. Available at http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/food_mil.pdf.

² Otto, Daniel and Theresa Varner. 2005. Consumers, Vendors, and the Economic Importance of Iowa Farms' Markets: An Economic Impact Survey Analysis. Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, March. Available at <http://www.agriculture.state.ia.us/pdfs/FarmMarketReportMarch2005.pdf>.

³ Gomes, Jason and Kamyar Enshayan. 2005. Documenting the Costs and Benefits of Whole Animal Local Meat Purchases by Three Northeast Iowa Institutions. University of Northern Iowa Local Food Project and Center for Energy & Environmental Education, March. Available at <http://www.uni.edu/ceee/foodproject/report.pdf>.

⁴ Practical Framers of Iowa. 2001. Expanding Local Food Systems Marketing to Iowa Institutions: Descriptions of Five Local Projects, Key Issues and Suggestions for Success. December. Available at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/FSMIP/FY2000/IA0288casestudy.pdf>.

⁵ Pirog et al. 2001.

⁶ Halweil, Brian. 2003. "The Argument for Local Food." World Watch. May/June, Vol 16, Issue 3.

⁷ Swenson, Dave. 2005. The Economic Impacts of Increased Fruit and Vegetable Production in Iowa. Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, September.

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