LOCAL FOODS AND THE FARM-TO-TABLE MOVEMENT

The farm-to-table movement leapt into the mainstream in the early 2000s, as food activists around the country strove to develop strong connections between restaurants and local farming communities. As a result of these efforts, today the American Farm to Table Restaurant Guide lists restaurants located in more than 30 states and the District of Columbia. Four of the top ten trends for 2015, as identified by the National Restaurant Association, are related to local foods, with locally-sourced meats and seafood edging out locally-sourced produce in the list of hot trends. A standardized definition of “local” is lacking, but that has not dampened enthusiasm for local and regional foods. Consumers seek local and regional foods not only from restaurants, but also in farmers’ markets or from their food retailers; furthermore, many have advocated the use of local foods in the burgeoning farm-to-school movement. This year, for the first time, Congress requested a report on local and regional food systems, signaling that policy makers are paying serious attention to the growth in consumer demand for locally produced food.

The perceived benefits of local and regional foods are numerous. Locally and regionally produced food is fresher and tastier when it reaches consumers. Because of the relatively short shipping distances, farmers are able to produce and market foods that are not able to withstand the 3,000 miles much of the traditionally produced and marketed food must travel. Thus, heritage and heirloom varieties of livestock and produce are re-emerging as niche products on restaurant menus and in specialty markets. The benefits of local and regional foods extend beyond the consumer’s palate, as purchasing food raised nearby supports local farms and possibly brings economic benefits to local communities. Furthermore, farms that market locally and regionally tend to be smaller than the average U.S. farm; this segment of the farming industry tends to be more economically vulnerable, thus the farm-to-table movement provides direct support to a group that struggles to maintain viability. Many consumers report that they seek out local food in order to support nearby small- and medium-sized farms, and that they appreciate the opportunity to understand where their food comes from and, possibly, know the farmers producing their food.

In many ways, the farms that produce for local and regional markets have unique characteristics. The farms marketing locally and regionally are clustered in the Northeast and the West. Viability of such farms—said to be those located in the rural-urban interface—is dependent on selling their products for a high price, to consumers in urban centers. Farms growing fruits and vegetables account for 29 percent of all local food farms, yet their sales comprise 51 percent of all local food sales, indicating that the bulk of local food sales are for fresh produce. The farms selling to local retailers and local restaurants, so-called “intermediated sales,” typically have higher sales than the local food farms selling directly to consumers. Yet, fewer than 50 thousand of two million farms in 2012 sold their products in the intermediated local channels.

The statistic revealing the extent of farms participating in local and regional food markets points to the main challenge facing the farm-to-table movement: Procuring locally and regionally produced food requires a significant amount of effort on the part of chefs and buyers. A variety of available tools can help buyers locate desired products: MarketMaker, funded by land grant universities and the USDA, currently links buyers and sellers in 20 partner states. Regionally based sourcing is facilitated through local networks (such as the New Mexico-based non-profit organization Farm to Table) or extension services of the land grant university systems (for example, Colorado State University). These internet-based networks have significantly expanded opportunities; prior to their establishment, farm-to-table sales were only possible when chefs and farmers, or chefs and farmer agents, were in constant communication; chefs needed to expediently ensure that needed, high quality ingredients were available, and farmers (and their agents) wanted to make sure they had willing buyers for their perishable products. Despite such advances in marketing, procurement outside of the traditional channels remains challenging; farmers face costly obstacles to increasing the quantity supplied to the direct market channels, such as meeting specific food safety practices for on-farm production and handling along the supply chain.

The perception that locally and regionally produced foods are better for the environment stems from the idea that lower food miles automatically confers a smaller carbon footprint. However, the emissions associated with bringing local food to market may be higher or lower, in comparison to food shipped globally or nationally. The amount of emissions ultimately depends on the mode of transportation and the quantity in a shipment. For example, a shipment of agricultural products across the nation in railcars emits fewer emissions than products driven 150 miles in a small truck. An often overlooked aspect of the environmental sustainability of local food production is the use of energy intensive chemical inputs, such as fertilizer; if a product is not well suited to the local climate, local farmers may actually increase environmental damage by increasing their usage of inputs.

While it is well accepted that agricultural production disrupts the agro-ecosystem, largely through use of synthetic chemicals that reduce biodiversity and contaminate water, the extent of degradation depends on farm management practices. Understanding the environmental consequences of production by farms selling to local and regional markets, in comparison to traditionally marketed food, would require studying their use of synthetic and non-synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, as well as other practices such as crop rotation and tillage. But the assumption that many consumers make—that a smaller or closer farm will necessarily have a lower environmental impact—is not based in science. The environmental degradation associated with food production and marketing depends on how the food is produced, marketed, and transported, and deserves additional research before reaching definitive conclusions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Consumer demand for locally and regionally produced food appears to be at an all-time high: There is growth in schools’ and institutions’ use of locally and regionally produced food, new food distribution businesses are capitalizing on consumer demand for local food, and new farm-to-table restaurants continue to open. Yet farmers are responding slowly to the market demand and are seemingly reluctant to increase production levels or to shift large amounts of their production into local and regional markets. Their rationale is that marketing to new customers has a steep learning curve, and is risky.

Supply limitations will dampen further growth in the market, and may in fact result in higher prices for locally and regionally produced foods. Increasing the use of locally and regionally produced foods ultimately depends on an increase in supply. In other words, farmers must be convinced that the local and regional markets are profitable in the short term and will remain so in the long term. Market supply will increase if buyers provide farmers with a consistent market for specialized products, for which they receive good prices. Buyers also need to be committed to farmers, who will be assuming a significant amount of risk by entering into new local and regional markets.

Local food systems possess many opportunities for farmers, restaurants and consumers, including supporting local economies, consuming fresher food, and increasing profit opportunities for participating businesses. Yet, additional research is needed to understand how to adopt these practices in ways that enhance sustainability.