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Iowa's Local Food Systems: A Place to Grow


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 and many more including meat, dairy and eggs 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. Iowans' desire for locally grown food could be motivated by a variety of benefits:

 *Economic:* Growing and selling more food locally would benefit Iowa farmers and the state's economy. One study found 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.²

 *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 this produce was purchased from the global food system.³

 *Health:* Locally grown food reaches consumers more quickly and more often at the peak of freshness. Thus, local food can have higher nutritional values.

 *Security:* Locally grown food requires limited transportation, unlike most of our food, which travels long distances leaving us vulnerable to labor strikes, attacks, spikes in fuel prices, food borne illnesses, and other disruptions.



Farm to School Programs

Some Iowa schools and colleges already purchase food locally. A few of these include:

- Nevada Comm. School District
- South Hamilton Comm. School District
- Decorah Comm. School District
- De Sales Catholic School
- Luther College
- Grinnell College
- University of Northern Iowa
- Iowa State University
- University of Iowa

At least 18 other states also have farm to school programs. Using these existing programs as models, Iowa schools would benefit and Iowa farmers and food processors would get a boost.

To continue the growth of local food systems, Iowa's leaders need to be progressive in implementing policies that encourage their development and profitability. In particular, efforts could be expanded in Iowa's schools.

These efforts could be fruitful because every place in Iowa has the two necessary ingredients: schools and farmers. A program could be established to help connect and coordinate schools and farmers. If schools purchased more food locally, not only would area farmers benefit, students could eat healthier lunches and have more opportunities to learn about nutrition and farming.

Many other policies and programs would also help local food systems grow. Read our February 2007 report at www.iowapolicyproject.org for an examination of Iowa's local food systems and more recommendations for how to expand them.

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

³ Pirog et al. 2001.

The Iowa Policy Project

**For the full report, see
www.iowapolicyproject.org**

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Mount Vernon. See our reports at www.iowapolicyproject.org. Contributions to the Iowa Policy Project are tax-deductible.

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