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QUOTE-WORTHY

“Expanding the local-food movement ... will require finding more ways to bring product into the cities.”

Stuart Meltzer, Page 16



Wes Jarrell, a farmer and professor at U of I, headed the task force behind the Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act.

LISA FREDKO

## Putting the local in 'locavore'

The 'farm to fork' movement is gaining ground, but can it go mainstream? *Stories by Christina Le Beau*

**A**griculture is Illinois' largest industry, generating more than \$9 billion a year from commodities like corn, soybeans and hogs and another \$13.4 billion in food processing, which happens to be the state's largest manufacturing activity. So why does 96% of the food eaten in Illinois come from elsewhere?

That's the question at the core of legislation signed by Gov. Pat Quinn last year. The Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act is basically a stimulus package aimed at increasing the amount of local food bought and consumed in Illinois.

The legislation—via a series of new state purchasing rules and other incentives—seeks to increase local-food purchasing to between 10% and 20% of total food con-

sumption by 2020 and to recruit and train 20,000 state residents to work in agriculture.

"This is not about being a radical locavore or being a survivalist. It's about looking at every possible opportunity to enhance the local-food economy," says Wes Jarrell. A fruit and dairy farmer and natural resources professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he chaired the task force behind the legislation. "You can keep regional and national and global lines open, too. You just shouldn't assume you have to get all your food from somewhere else."

The task force estimates that increased local-food consumption eventually could add \$30 billion a year in increased sales and wages to the state's economy. The legislation—so far as anyone can tell—is unique nationwide.

What's not unusual nationwide is the small percentage of food purchased where it's grown or raised. (In urban areas, that generally means within a 2.5-

mile radius.) Nationally, only 3% to 5% of food dollars are spent on local food. In Illinois, that means roughly \$46 billion of the \$48 billion spent on food each year goes out of state.

That's true even with an increased interest in local foods and growth in farmers markets and subscription-based farms, known as CSAs (for community-supplied agriculture), in which consumers pay farmers upfront for a season's worth of produce.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and California-based

### A TASK FORCE ESTIMATES THAT INCREASED LOCAL-FOOD CONSUMPTION EVENTUALLY COULD ADD \$30 BILLION A YEAR TO ILLINOIS' ECONOMY.

Local Harvest Inc., which keeps a directory of local and organic farms, report 5,274 markets currently in operation, nearly double the count a decade ago, and 2,500 CSAs, twice as many as in 2006. In Illinois, the number of farmers markets grew to

270 in 2008 from 97 in 1999. CSAs, meanwhile, were up to 68 in 2008 from 14 in 2000.

Most agriculture is focused on government-subsidized commodity crops, so local food systems can't produce the volume needed to feed local populations. And even if they had the volume, they'd lack the infrastructure to transport, process, package and distribute enough food to make a dent in the overall market.

There are notable exceptions: Berkeley, Calif., Burlington, Vt., and Madison, Wis., among

them. But in most places, local food is all about solo farmers delivering a few boxes of produce to restaurants or standing in parking lots hawking eggs on Saturday mornings. To scale past that, local farmers and producers need to commit

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# 'Farm to fork' movement is gaining ground in Chicago

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to growing jobs and the economy right along with that food.

"We're facing a chicken-and-egg situation: Farmers are not going to drastically convert to local foods without an infrastructure in place, but the infrastructure doesn't develop without the farmers committing to converting," says Jim Braun, a former Iowa farmer who lives in Springfield and coordinates the local-foods council created as part of the new legislation.

The act calls for more financing opportunities and increased training to bring more farmers into the field. It also encourages municipalities to lease publicly owned land for farming and to offer businesses sales tax breaks or tax credits for buying local foods.

It suggests ways to streamline regulations that can hinder food-related economic development. And it allows state-funded and state-owned cafeterias (like those in schools) to pay a 10% premium for local food. That's significant because, until now, the lowest bid had to prevail.

Because most of the 28 million acres of farmland in Illinois are planted with commodity crops, it might seem like a profit-killer to bring produce back to a level that could support a local-foods economy.

Iowa State University economist Dave Swenson says the opposite is true. In a study released in March by the university's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Mr. Swenson reports that replacing corn and soybean acreage with fruits and vegetables could be more profitable for Midwest farmers—generating hundreds of millions of dollars—and lead to more jobs. One finding: Increased fruit and vegetable production for the 28 largest metro areas in the Midwest could create 6,694 farm-level jobs, compared with 1,892 jobs under corn and soybean production.

That's entirely possible, says Tim Lenz, a Strasburg farmer and president of the Bloomington-based Illinois Corn Growers Assn. And since it takes less acreage to grow profitable produce than it does to grow profitable commodity crops, corn and soybean farmers wouldn't have to lose out, he says.

The problem is that, in most places, there's little incentive for farmers to step outside their comfort zone, and there's no government support for a switch. But legislation like Illinois' could be a catalyst.

"It's not just that we have a dominant pattern of farming. We have a dominant pattern of farmers, as well," Mr. Swenson says. "What we have to do is bring in new kinds of farmers. And if you have policy that supports that, you move a long way toward making that type of change possible."

Two of farmer and U of I professor Wes Jarrell's goats.



LISA PREDKO



LISA PREDKO

## Getting 'green' harvest to a store near you

Packing, driving, distributing. Food is the sexy part of the local farm system, all those luscious tomatoes and juicy berries. But without a fast, efficient way to get the goods from farm to buyer, there's little chance of growing a true local-foods economy.

That's why Illinois, spurred in part by the Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act signed by Gov. Pat Quinn last year, has seen a surge of interest in creating distribution networks for locally grown and raised foods.

Several groups have grants to study networks in other states and to assess collaborative ideas like the creation of a central packhouse, where local growers would send fresh fruits and vegetables for washing, prepping and packaging.

A few companies have rolled out their own initiatives.

Chicago-based Goodness Greenness, for instance, which says it's the largest privately held organic distributor in the country, has committed to buying and distributing the harvest from about two dozen farms with 500 acres under cultivation within 500 miles of Chicago. That's twice what it handled in 2009, which could double its local-foods business to about 25% of sales.

"With 'local,' 250 miles is what we think of as the sweet spot, but we're willing to go 500 miles and call that 'regional,'" President Bob Scaman says. "We've always been organic, but our end consumers have had a pent-up demand for local, so we've spent a number of years looking at ways to increase that availability."

Global food distributors like Sysco Corp., of Houston, are

getting in on the act, too, in Illinois and nationwide, adding local foods in response to customer demand.

Even specialty distributors like Bensenville's Fortune Fish Co. have stepped up. Fortune, which specializes in seafood, in April added deliveries of greens, mushrooms and other produce from about 10 local growers, a number that should triple in peak season.

"Without an established distribution network, the supply is somewhat limited to product from growers who have the time and equipment to transport their goods," says Stuart Meltzer, category manager for the new program, called Fortune Farm Direct. "Expanding the local-food movement to feed the majority of Illinois will require finding more ways to bring product into the cities."

Workers at Chicago-based Goodness Greenness package produce from local farmers.