"Improve the economic well-being of agriculture and enrich the quality of farm family life."

Let's Talk About: *Food Miles and Local Food*

Food Miles

The term "food miles" refers to the distance food travels from producer to consumer. Food miles purportedly measure the carbon footprint of food production and distribution. To promote environmentally sustainable agriculture, several interest groups have pushed for product labeling indicating food miles traveled. However, industry, academic, and governmental research shows that food miles do not adequately indicate the environmental impact of food production.

Food Miles Inadequacies

- The impacts of food production and transportation involve complex trade-offs. A single indicator based on miles traveled is not a valid indicator of sustainability.[i] Food sourced from locations where production is large-scale and efficient often travels long distances to consumers. And, due to efficient high-volume transportation methods (e.g., rail and ocean vessel), CO2 emissions (per ton of food) are actually less than emissions from moving a small quantity of local food if several car and truck trips are made.
- Growing food locally may require a considerable amount of carbon producing energy compared to growing in ideal, and sometimes distant, environments where production is less energy-intensive.
- In 2007, researchers looked at the environmental impact of flowers flown into the U.K. from Kenya. Studies showed that flowers flown in from Kenya use less energy than flowers grown in the U.K. because heated greenhouses are not required.
- In a study examining the impact of locally produced lamb in Britain, researchers found that lamb raised on New Zealand's clover-chocked pastures and shipped 11,000 miles by boat to Britain produced less pounds of carbon dioxide per ton than British lamb, in part because poorer British pastures force farmers to use imported or energy intensive feed.[ii]
- Water use, harvesting techniques, fertilizer outlays, renewable energy applications, transportation, type of fuel used, the amount of carbon dioxide absorbed during photosynthesis, packaging, storage procedures and dozens of other cultivation inputs contribute to the carbon footprint of food production and distribution.[iii] Miles traveled is merely one small indicator of emission.
- Exclusively looking for low food miles fails to take the welfare of developing nations into consideration. Only eating local foods alienates developing nations that use agricultural exports and foreign markets as a means of generating income.
- Locally produced foods certainly afford farmers new opportunities and provide consumers with an increased supply of fresh and nutritious food. Depending on the locally produced item, climate,

and energy used, local food is not necessarily better for the environment than conventionally produced and distributed food.

Local Foods

In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from food miles to local foods. Local foods minimize "the distance between production and consumption, especially in relation to the modern mainstream food system." Local foods can be marketed as such if the product's "end-point purchase is within 400 miles from its origin, or within state boundaries."[iv]

- In a recent survey of Americans who shop locally for food "82% cite freshness as the reason, 75% cited supporting the local economy, and 58% cited knowing where the product came from."[v]
- Some estimate that buying local food keeps 65% of each dollar spent within the community[vi]
- Buying directly from farmers allow the consumer to develop a relationship with the farmer and learn about production practices[vii]

To feed a growing world it is important to analyze the costs and benefits of food production and utilize all available food resources. While local foods provide connectivity with the local farmer and provide economic benefits to the local community, global food production is vital. Certain regions of the world can grow specialized products much more efficiently than local growers can. Global food trade fills the void for seasonal production.

The Illinois Farm Bureau, along with its partners, is working on programs that motivate production, marketing, and distribution of local and regional foods. IFB also supports efforts to develop new local marketing points for specialty crops. IFB also supports promoting the use of Illinois-grown produce in Illinois schools and state-funded institutions.

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[i] Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. *The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development.* 2005.
[ii] New York Times. *Food the Travels Well*. 2007.
[iii] New York Times. *Food the Travels Well*. 2007.
[iv] Brain, Roslynn. "The Local Food Movement: Definitions, Benefits & Resources." *Utah State University Extention Sustainability.* 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.
[v] Brain, Roslynn. "The Local Food Movement: Definitions, Benefits & Resources." *Utah State University Extention Sustainability.* 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.
[vi] Brain, Roslynn. "The Local Food Movement: Definitions, Benefits & Resources." *Utah State University Extention Sustainability.* 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.
[vii] Brain, Roslynn. "The Local Food Movement: Definitions, Benefits & Resources." *Utah State University Extention Sustainability.* 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.