

A Case for Using Locally Grown Food on Campus

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What is Locally Grown?

Most all food was locally grown for the entirety of human history and therefore has never needed to be differentiated. Now that we have a global system of food distribution we often do not know where the food has come from. Defining food that is locally grown is a rather recent event. As issues with the global system become more apparent to the general public, the need to define local food will become more important. At this point in time it is up to the individual to decide what is locally grown to them. The simple answer would be to make an arbitrary radius from your home. The better way to think about locally grown is as a tier system. A persons number one priority should be to find food grown within their town, or even their own backyard. Secondly is to buy from producers within an area about the size of most counties in Wisconsin, preferably ones that use sustainable agricultural practices. From there regional and nationwide obviously become less desirable. Beyond simply buying what is local, the sustainability of how it is grown should be taken into account too. For the University this would include following guidelines set by the Food Alliance. What this means in general terms is supporting farms that protect both the ecosystem and being aware of social justice. In practice it means eliminating pesticide use and creating a fair and safe working environment for all employees. UWRF needs to have a program that encompasses all the afore mentioned guidelines.



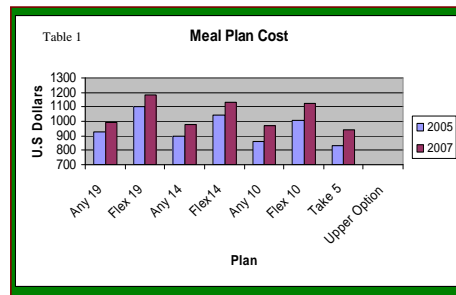
Why Campus Needs Locally Grown

Locally grown is a recent idea. It is an answer to the globalization of food markets. As demand for cheap food increased after World War II, large agribusinesses began to centralize food production. This has caused numerous problems with society and the environment. The number of farmers in the U.S has gone from 6.8 million in 1935 to 1.9 million in 1997 (Ref. 5). This can be seen Throughout the St. Croix region. Those farmers that do still exist are often subject to the rule of multinational agribusinesses, not their own management. Furthermore those who do stay independent are often in constant financial strife due to the pressure from agribusiness. Basically, farmers are driven away from running their own business.

Environmentally there are many downsides to the large global food system. Today, most of the food that Americans eat travels around 1500 miles (Ref. 5). This raises not only the amount emissions but reduces the freshness of the food. On the farm, large corporate producers often do not manage the land in a sustainable way. The geography of the fields are often not taken into account, for instance. Large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are used to increase production. Corporate farms are often centralized which causes these chemicals to become more concentrated in areas. Diseases in the end product, such as Mad Cow Disease and outbreaks of E.Coli in spinach, have become much worse as agribusinesses centralize food processing and farms. Where once if an outbreak occurred it would be localized and stopped quickly, in today's global system it can spread throughout the world. Finally, there are the many consequences of using genetically modified foods. This kills not only diversity within a crop, but many times has unforeseen consequences. This often includes the killing of insects not targeted by a genetic modification. So why does the University need locally grown. Simply because our current system is unsustainable and will not continue to support itself.

Locally Grown Monetary Issues

Many worry about the price associated with moving back to such a local system. There are a few ways of looking at this. Normally there is a price premium with using a local food system. This is mostly due to the large subsidies that are given out to large companies by the government. Secondly, there are so-called hidden costs of food such as environmental degradation due to unhealthy farm practices. There is a price paid in social justice as well. Many humans are treated unfairly and underpaid in order to raise margins on farms. Furthermore, there is continuing research showing that antibiotics given to animals are increasing resistant strains (Ref. 3). Finally, as fuel prices rise at ever increasing rates, the current food system will no longer be able to produce artificially cheap food. This means **higher prices** for students and faculty eating at our University Center. Take for instance the rise in prices from Fall 2005 to Fall 2007 (Table 1).



Locally Grown at UWRF

With our current food service contract there is already locally grown being used. The idea is already there, but the quantity is not as good as UW-River Falls is capable of. The area is fortunate to have a large amount of agriculture that could replace food being brought in from long distances. There are over 100 producers that sell direct within western Wisconsin. Within River Falls there are two meat producers as well as a blueberry producer (Ref. 1). On our own campus we have a producer in Falcon Foods. There are also many organizations within Wisconsin that promote supplying colleges with local foods. The farm-to-college program is an organization that connects local producers with colleges. Furthermore there are many good examples to follow. UW-Stevens Point, Northland College, and The University of Minnesota all have programs that could be similarly modeled to meet our needs. Beyond all the resources at our disposal, UWRF is also in a very good spot for change at the moment. In May of 2008 a new food contract will have to be signed. As a campus we could demand that more sustainable foods be used by the next food contractor. In fact there is a proposal demanding more locally grown food already in the hands of top University administrators. With all of these resources and benefits to the university, there is no reason not to demand more of our food service.

Meeting The Strategic Planning Goals

As part of the UWRF Strategic Planning Goals, using more local foods is an integral part of making campus more sustainable. Part of goal 2.3.3 is "Pursue Aggressively other sustainability opportunities in areas such as...local food sourcing..." (Ref. 7). Furthermore, other goals could be met such as 2.1.3, 2.2.2, and 2.2.3. With research being continually done on this subject, reaching goal 2.1.3 is already well on its way to being met. By promoting sustainable and locally grown foods on campus people can learn to infuse these foods into their own life. Not only buying locally grown, but maximizing the use of in season foods could be promoted. This would also help the University reach its goal as becoming a model for sustainability. It could also help expand this idea into the community of River Falls. This would also show that we are living the promise of not only our Strategic Planning Goals, but also that the campus is moving towards meeting the President's Climate Commitment as part of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (Ref. 2). What adopting locally sustainable foods can do for the college is invaluable. Not only does it put the University on its way to meeting goals, but also on the right path ethically.

The St. Croix Institute for Sustainable Community Development at UWRF will also benefit greatly. The institute was created to not only to research sustainability issues, but act on them as well (Ref. 4). Part of this will be implementing plans on campus that support sustainability. By backing a plan for local food the Institute could lead by example on this issue. This will give the Institute the start it needs to not only make a difference on campus but around the region. Implementing this will create a network of local food sources that could expand beyond the University. There will also be a model in place for future cafeterias in the area to use. Since food is one of the basic human needs, it is of great importance that it is produced sustainably. Producing a local food plan on campus allows the Institute to continue to spread the ideas of sustainability throughout the community.



How Everyone Can Help

There are many opportunities on campus to make a difference. In the case for local food, there are also many options to take action. First would be adopting local and sustainable food into your own life. The more people that convert back to a sustainable system the more the price for these foods will drop. Secondly, write the chancellor to tell him you support sustainable food procurement. Supporting the proposal being circulated by administrators would be an excellent way to tell the chancellor exactly what the students and staff at UWRF want. Giving this proposal support will give it the backing it needs to be included in the next food service contract. Finally, spread the word. Tell people of the negative consequences the current global food system is having on them, their families, and their friends. This is a community cause and therefore everyone should be involved.

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