Health and Food Activism - Go Local, reject WTO and Global Food Monopoly

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'Locavorism' on the Rise

> Community supported agriculture projects, farmers markets, and other 'local food' systems are on the rise nationwide, according to a first of its kind index based on US government data. And supporting this 'Locavore' movement is a growing army of consumers who recognize the connection between their food choices and the impact they have on communities, the environment, and their own health.

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — A committed "locavore," Robin McDermott once struggled to stock her kitchen with food grown within 100 miles of her Vermont home. She once drove 70 miles to buy beans and ordered a bulk shipment of oats from the neighboring Canadian province of Quebec.

Six years later, she doesn't travel far: She can buy chickens at the farmers market, local farms grow a wider range of produce, and her grocery store stocks meat, cheese and even flour produced in the area. A bakery in a nearby town sells bread made from Vermont grains, and she's found a place to buy locally made sunflower oil.

Nationwide, small farms, farmers markets and specialty food makers are popping up and thriving as more people seek locally produced foods. More than half of consumers now say it's more important to buy local than organic, according to market research firm Mintel, and Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan called the local food movement "the biggest retail food trend in my adult lifetime."

But with no official definition for what makes a food local, the government can't track sales. And consumers don't always know what they are buying. A supermarket tomato labeled "local" may have come from 10, 100 or more miles away.

Strict locavores stick to food raised within a certain radius of their home — 50, 100 or 250 miles. Others may allow themselves dried spices, coffee or chocolate.

"I don't treat it as a religion," said Valerie Taylor, of Montgomery, Ohio, who tries to eat locally when she can but won't go without a salad in the winter or an avocado if she wants it. She estimated 95 percent of the meat and 70 percent of the produce she eats is local in the summer, but not in the winter.

McDermott has eased up after eating locally during a Vermont winter, which meant a lot of meat and root vegetables. She now allows herself olive oil and citrus and in winter, greens.

"In 2006, I felt like a Vermonter of years past," she said. "You know, I was going down into my root cellar and saying, 'I guess it will be potatoes again.'"

Two of the more common standards used by locavores are food produced within 100 miles or within the same state that it's consumed. A new locavore index ranked Vermont as the top state in its commitment to raising and eating locally grown food based on the number of farmers markets and community supported agriculture farms, where customers pay a lump sum up front and receive weekly deliveries of produce and other foods.

Vermont has 99 farmers markets and 164 CSAs, with a population of fewer than 622,000, according to the 2012 Strolling of the Heifers Locavore Index, which relies on U.S. Department of Agriculture and census figures. Iowa, Montana, Maine and Hawaii rounded out the top five.

But the bottom of the index raises questions. Florida, which produces much of the nation's citrus, strawberries and tomatoes, was in the bottom five with only 146 farmers markets and 193 CSAs for 18.5 million people.

"The whole purpose of this is really to stimulate the conversation about locavorism, which fits into the mission of Strolling of the Heifers," said Martin Cohn, a spokesman for the group, which works to save farms in New England.

USDA spokesman Aaron Lavallee said the definition of local varies from state to state and region to region depending on the season. In small New England states, food from 100 miles away could be from another state, while food could travel hundreds of miles in Texas or Montana and still be within the borders.

In cases where produce is labeled "local," with no point of origin, he advised consumers to ask sellers where it was raised.

The locavore movement grew out of consumer concerns about how and where food is produced, following episodes of contamination in spinach, meat and other foods. People committed to it buy locally produced foods to support farmers, because the food is fresher and to reduce the environmental effect of trucking it across country.

But there's more to it, said Jessica Prentice, a San Francisco Bay-area chef who coined the term locavore.

"Really what it's about is moving into a kind of food system where you're connected to the source of your food," Prentice said. "You're buying from people that you know or can meet and you're buying food grown in a place that you can easily drive to and see.

"This is more about creating an oasis really in the context of a globalized food system that's completely anonymous," she said.

But James McWilliams, a Texas State University professor who has written a book critiquing the local food movement, said people often think it solves more problems than it does.

"There's this sense that because a food is local there's automatically nothing wrong with it, and the

fact is even on a local level certain foods are more energy intensive to produce than others," said McWilliams, who is a vegan. "Specifically, animal-based products, even on a local level, while they may be more efficient, pound for pound are still significantly more energy intensive to produce than plant-based products."

The local food movement also doesn't address problems with agriculture on a global scale or the expected increase in demand for food over the next 40 to 50 years, he said.

"I guess the pragmatic side of me thinks well, these locavore values are great and they work really well in places such as Vermont, but they don't work everywhere," he said. "And it's not a universally shared ethic."

The locavore movement has helped create jobs, particularly in rural areas hard hit by the recession, Merrigan said. Orly Munzing, executive director of Strolling of the Heifers, said it also builds community. She has seen its benefits in Brattleboro, Vt., where her group hosts a popular annual parade inspired by Spain's running of the bulls, and also at a farmers market in New York City.

"It's amazing to see these people I've watched walking on Second Avenue ... they don't even say hello to each other," she said. "But I see the same people at that little farmers market, all of a sudden they turn into different people. So it creates a community that is very needed."

McDermott said being a locavore has changed how she and her husband eat. They used to have steak often; now it's only once a year. She grows garlic, onions, potatoes and carrots and freezes large amounts of tomatoes each year.

While local foods tend to cost more than those mass produced, McDermott figures she still spends less. She and her husband buy half a pig with a friend each year and use most of the animal. They eat lesser cuts, making stews and braising meat to make it tender.

"We eat low on the hog," she said.

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US Locavore Index

http://tinyurl.com/7gy4mb9
