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# FoodRoutes Network and the Local Food Movement

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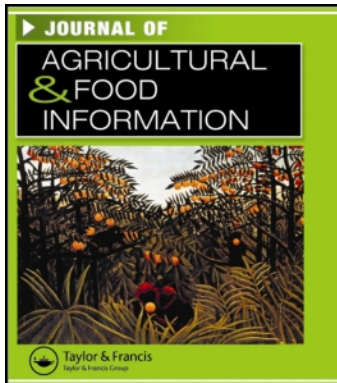
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### FoodRoutes Network and the Local Food Movement

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## **Society of the Quarter**

# **FoodRoutes Network and the Local Food Movement**

MADELEINE CHARNEY

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A movement is sweeping the United States and bringing increased awareness, education, purchasing, and consumption of locally-grown food. This quarter's column features the national nonprofit organization FoodRoutes Network (FRN), which describes itself as "dedicated to reintroducing Americans to their food—the seeds it grows from, the farmers who produce it, and the routes that carry it from the fields to our tables" (FoodRoutes Network (FRN), 2003, "About").

Much of the information in this article is drawn from the FRN website—a dynamic platform from which they provide "timely information, resources, and market opportunities for the food and farming community, community-based nonprofits, the food concerned public, policy makers, and the media" (FRN, 2003, "Mission"). FRN's mission is "to provide communications tools, technical support, networking, and information resources to organizations nationwide that are working to rebuild local, community-based food systems" (FRN, 2003, "Mission"). Another objective of FRN is to communicate with the general public about the "multiple benefits" beyond food production which sustainable agriculture contributes to communities and the environment ("Mission"). Their overarching goal is to "conserve the nation's food heritage while working to re-build the ever eroding loss of farms, food processors, and food producers in the United States as well as internationally" ("Mission").

### GROWTH OF THE LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT

Before describing specific activities of FRN, a wider context will add relevance—the growth of the local food movement in the United States

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and abroad, food security issues, definitions and perception of “local food,” and reasons to be involved in this paradigm shift. First and notable is our nation’s burgeoning appetite for locally-grown products. There are now over 4,300 farmers’ markets generating roughly \$1 billion in annual sales (Open Market, 2008) more than 2,000 of which have opened since the mid-1990s (Brown, 2007). To aid in their establishment and success, the 2008 Farm Bill is offering 85 grants totaling \$3,445,000 to spread the use of farmers’ markets (USDA, 2009). Local food options are also appearing more and more on the shelves of small and large supermarkets alike.

Indeed, even First Lady Michelle Obama is trumpeting the benefits of local food—“a recurring theme of hers during the campaign and since she arrived in Washington” (Burros, February 2009). Part of the White House’s South Lawn has recently given way to an organic vegetable garden, a practice that has been absent from this famed establishment since Eleanor Roosevelt’s victory garden during World War II. Mrs. Obama’s hope is, “that through children, they will begin to educate their families and that will, in turn, begin to educate our communities” (Burros, March 2009).

It is not only the people of the United States who are increasingly concerned with local food and food security. In April 2009 the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization “warned that as many as 1 billion people across the globe will go hungry this year as a result of the recession and increasing global food prices” (Jordon, 2009). Other sobering statistics are presented in a rapid report published by the United Nations Environment Programme entitled *The Environmental Food Crisis: The Environment’s Role in Averting Future Food Crises*. According to the report,

The surge in food prices in the last years, following a century of decline, has been the most marked of the past century in its magnitude, duration and the number of commodity groups whose prices have increased. The ensuing crisis has resulted in a 50–200% increase in selected commodity prices, driven 110 million people into poverty and added 44 million more to the undernourished. Elevated food prices have had dramatic impacts on the lives and livelihoods, including increased infant and child mortality, of those already undernourished or living in poverty and spending 70–80% of their daily income on food. Key causes of the current food crisis are the combined effects of speculation in food stocks, extreme weather events, low cereal stocks, growth in biofuels competing for cropland, and high oil prices. (Nellemann, MacDevette, Manders, Eickhout, Svihus, Prins, & Kaltenborn, 2009, p. 6)

These dire concerns are signaling a “wake up call” for citizens the world over. As people realize the implications of these facts, they are taking more direct action about where their food comes from and how it is produced.

## DEFINITIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF “LOCAL FOOD”

A loose, multilevel definition of local food production may be interpreted as, “concentric circles that start with growing food at home. The next ring out might be food grown in our immediate community—then state, region, and country. For some parts of the year or for some products that thrive in the local climate, it may be possible to buy closer to home. At other times, or for less common products, an expanded reach may be required” (Sustainable Table, 2009). However one interprets the term “local,” the concept has clearly entered the wider consciousness of the people of the United States. In fact, the *New Oxford American Dictionary* chose the term “locavore” as its 2007 Word of the Year (see <http://www.locavores.com> for a full description). The term is used to describe someone who seeks out and eats locally-grown/produced food.

In a Leopold Center survey conducted in July 2007, respondents were asked to define “locally-grown.” More than two thirds of the respondents described local food as that which “traveled 100 miles or less from the farm to point of purchase” (Pirog & Rasmussen, 2008, p. 3). Only a third viewed the definition as “grown in their state or region” (p. 3). It is also interesting to note that respondents from larger western states were less likely to choose the option “25 miles or less” as their definition of local compared to their counterparts across the remainder of the country (p. 3). Overall, these results are a promising sign that citizens are increasingly aware of the reasons to support farms in their near vicinity. The response from the larger states implies that their residents may need more education about local awareness. A further implication is that residents of smaller states might define “local” as commodities grown and produced closest to home. To illustrate this point, FRN programs based in the relatively small state of Massachusetts will be discussed toward the end of this column.

The Leopold Center survey also found that 70% of respondents perceived the U.S. food system to be safe. There was considerable concern with a global food supply chain system—only 15% of respondents viewed such a system as safe, compared to 74% for a local system and 73% for a regional system. Responses to another question revealed that a food safety seal or inspection certification, more information about who has handled and produced the food, and facts on the country of origin would increase respondent confidence in the food supply (Pirog & Rasmussen, 2008).

## REASONS TO SUPPORT “LOCAL FOOD”

There are myriad social, environmental, health, and economic benefits reaped by supporting and participating in the local food movement. Some basic reasons include:

- Eating local strengthens the local economy.
- Locally-grown produce has longer to ripen, is fresher, and tastes better.
- Eating local is better for air quality and pollution than eating organic.
- Buying local food keeps us in touch with the seasons and farmers who grow our food.
- Eating local protects us from bioterrorism (because food grown closer to home is less susceptible to harmful contamination).
- Local food translates to more variety.
- Supporting local providers supports responsible land development (Maiser, 2005).

### FOODROUTES ACTIVITIES

Now we return to FRN's activities, which are based on the belief that the revitalization of local food systems is infinitely more effective when consumers are educated and involved in the process (FRN, 2003, "Buy fresh buy local"). The FRN website contains practical information to empower consumers to be proactive. A page entitled "Learn More" offers a sizable online library containing reports, publications, video clips, and audio files on food and farming. Categories include Local Food Systems, Health and Food Safety, Environmental Impacts of Food Systems, Economics of Food Systems, Global Food Systems, Food and Farm Policy, Food And Society Policy Fellows, Farm to School Resources, Farm to College Resources, Tools for Advocates, and FoodRoutes Publications. Another section, The News Room, shows the latest headlines on a variety of food and farming topics and includes a running column by agricultural journalist, Alan Guebert. The Hot Topics section shows FRN's own news, publications, event listings, organization listings, and more on local foods, your food dollar, health and food safety, and food and the environment. Readers may also subscribe to free FRN announcements by e-mail. Finally, seven pages of web links point readers in a multitude of directions for learning more about food and farming the world over ("Learn more").

In a page entitled "What Can You Do?" readers are invited to take part in the "Buy Local Challenge!" Participants pledge to spend \$10/week or more on local food, inspired by a quote from a recent Maine study showing that when just 1% of consumer expenditures shift to direct purchasing of local food products, farmers' income is increased by 5%. Readers are also urged to "think local" when purchasing winter food stores and to encourage neighborhood markets, restaurants, and educational institutions to purchase more products directly from local farmers (FRN, 2003, "Buy local challenge").

The most robust of FRN's programs is Buy Fresh Buy Local (BFBL). FRN provides support to more than 70 BFBL chapters throughout the United States in the form of communications tools, organizing assistance, and marketing

resources. BFBL chapters then connect consumers to the food grown and produced in their own communities. Outreach events, local food guides, and educational materials inspire consumers to enjoy the benefits of local food and grow to know and trust the farmers who produce it (FRN, 2003, “Buy fresh buy local”) As BFBL chapters proliferate, an expanding network of concerned and involved citizens is invested in protecting the future of the nation’s food (“Buy fresh buy local”). Readers may download for free the Buy Local campaign sheets and Food Cost tag sheets for promoting Buy Local campaigns in their area. And Farm to College sheets can be used to educate colleges and universities about purchasing food locally (“Tools”). The section “In the Field” is an archive of write-ups regarding BFBL activities around the country. Recent highlights (“From the field”) included:

- A tour of several states in the Buy Fresh Buy Local mobile (a Toyota Prius wrapped in the colorful BFBL logo);
- A campaign for supporters to fly 10,000 flags with the BFBL logo across the country;
- Coproducing and selling “Room to Grow,” a music CD of acclaimed singer-songwriter Adrienne Young who serves as FRN’s national spokesperson;
- Cosponsoring a daylong Food and Farm Open House.

## MASSACHUSETTS AS AN AGRICULTURAL STATE

Massachusetts is a good example of a state that is committed to local food and farms. There are currently 7,700 farms in Massachusetts, with a total of 510,000 acres of farmland. The average farm size is 66 acres (National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), 2008). To shed more light on these statistics regarding *actual* farm sizes, there are 2,885 farms with 10–49 acres and 2,199 farms with 0–9 acres (NASS, 2009). In other words, 66% of Massachusetts’s farms are less than 50 acres in size. The upshot is that the majority of Massachusetts’s farms are considered “small farms.”

Another illustration of Massachusetts’ agricultural strengths is the 121 Agricultural Commissions (AgComs) (Massachusetts Agricultural Commissions, 2009, “About AgComs: MA AgComs”). Considering that there are only 351 towns and cities in the state, this number reflects a dedication to the preservation and growth of local agriculture. AgComs are standing committees of town government, which represent the farming community; encourage the pursuit of agriculture; promote agricultural economic development; protect farmlands and farm businesses; and preserve, revitalize, and sustain agricultural businesses and land. One of the activities of the Massachusetts AgComs is starting up local farmers markets (“About AgComs: Overview”).

Massachusetts is also the home to Farm Aid, best known for its annual concert that unites farmers, artists, consumers, and concerned citizens to

support family farms. This nonprofit agency promotes family farms through various media campaigns and provides farmers with an extensive resource network of family farm organizations. It offers grants to farm and rural service organizations and assists farm families in crisis as well (Farm Aid, 2007).

Massachusetts also has several other organizations that run their own Buy Local programs. While not formally affiliated with FRN, these groups work together with the FRN chapters to form a strong network that supports sustainable agriculture. Non-FRN groups are listed at the end of this column.

### “BUY FRESH BUY LOCAL” IN MASSACHUSETTS

FRN has two “Buy Fresh Buy Local” chapters in Massachusetts. The regional chapter is “Buy Fresh Buy Local—Southeastern Massachusetts” which, in turn, facilitated the emergence of a local chapter “Buy Fresh Buy Local—Cape Cod.” Combined, these two chapters provide support for more than 60 farms and farm stands and 35 buyers (Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership (SEMAP), 2009). Both chapters use outreach, advertising, and point-of-purchase materials to connect individuals across Southeastern Massachusetts to the freshest, most delicious locally-grown foods and farm products. Sarah Kelley, Executive Director of SEMAP, which oversees the two chapters, reveals deep satisfaction working with FRN. She notes that “although a chapter signs an agreement to use FoodRoutes materials and logos, there is ample flexibility to respond to local needs.” She continues, “For example, because Southeastern Massachusetts is spread out, using billboards would not be effective. We choose how and where to market through the BFBL campaign” (Sarah Kelley, personal communication, April 20, 2009). The campaign works in concert with their Business-to-Business Network, which connects local farms directly with chefs and other food buyers, thus expanding their net results further. Growers have tools to promote their enterprises and education of consumers is increasing.

### CONCLUSION

FRN strives to create partnerships between community-based organizations across the country through the design, launch, and successful implementation of “buy local” food campaigns and market education initiatives. Evaluation of the effectiveness of these campaigns will provide valuable lessons and tools for other organizations interested in launching similar campaigns (FoodRoutes, 2003, “Mission”). Whether assisting in small or large states, FRN is tapping into rich agricultural community resources and citizens’ energy, spreading much needed information for creating safer food to nourish



healthier humans, more robust economies, and sustainable working landscapes.

If you are interested in starting a local Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter or would like to join one of the existing 72 chapters around the United States, send an e-mail to [Info@foodroutes.org](mailto:Info@foodroutes.org) or call 570-673-3398.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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<http://100milediet.org/>
- Farmers Market Coalition  
<http://www.farmersmarketcoalition.org/>
- Edible Communities  
<http://www.ediblecommunities.com/content/>
- Local Harvest  
<http://www.localharvest.org/>

Slow Food International  
<http://www.slowfood.com>  
World Watch Institute  
<http://www.worldwatch.org>

### Other Buy Local Organizations in Massachusetts

Berkshire Grown  
<http://www.berkshiregrown.org>  
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)  
<http://www.buylocalfood.com>  
Essex County and the Merrimac Valley Buy Fresh Campaign  
<http://www.buyfresh.org/>  
Island Grown (Martha's Vineyard)  
<http://www.islandgrown.org/>  
Northeast Harvest, "Fresh Food Locally-grown"  
<http://www.northeastharvest.com/>