

Small Farm-Consumer Connections for Community Food Security

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I'm going to talk today about the other side of the agricultural system and the ways in which farmers might better connect with consumers for greater social benefits.

I. Small Farm Marketing Issues*

(This section contains excerpts from my master's thesis, entitled "Environmentally Sound, Economically Viable, and Socially Just?: A Case Study of Organic Farming in Santa Cruz County." 1997.)

Small organic farmers have led the way in creating a production system which does not rely as heavily on petrochemical products that deplete natural resources and pollute the environment, but instead relies on a more holistic and ecological management approach. In the last twenty years, the efforts of these farmers and sustainable agriculture advocates has contributed to a growth in farmer consciousness about the importance of innovation and process, public awareness about the benefits of sustainable agriculture and a corresponding growth (20% per year) in the market for organic foods.

While this growth is clearly desirable, large-scale organic farms may very well be appropriating the growing market which these small farmers created.

The growth in demand for organic foods has created changes in natural and mass market retailing which may reduce the feasibility of small growers selling directly to small regional stores. With large companies dominating food distribution, small farmers are kept out of the market because they can't supply in the quantities that a Safeway or other chains need for all of their stores. Now with large companies beginning to dominate the retailing of health foods, small farmers are finding more and more that they can't go into the local cities and towns and sell direct to the stores anymore because purchases are made by a central buyer.

At the same time, the growth of consumer concern for organics and sustainably-produced food in the market may provide other entry points for small biologically-based farms such as through farmers' markets, community supported agriculture, and direct to restaurants and local institutions such as schools.

While direct marketing provides farmers with the potential to capture a higher percentage of revenues for their product, my research on small farms in Santa Cruz County indicates that the proportion of small farms that utilize these direct channels is low. Reasons include transportation or labor issues (many small farms don't have the high-school-aged family members working on the farm in the summer anymore), concerns about management of farmers' markets, or often, lack of information about how to create their own direct marketing opportunities.

In the strawberry industry, Miriam Wells found that knowledge sources were often tied to grower access to particular marketing strategies, such as participation in grower/shipper organizations. For instance, Anglo growers rely heavily on information from grower/shipper organizations through which most Anglo growers market their fruit. She notes that to be asked to join a grower/shipper operation, "they must also have social connections to member growers."

Similarly, what is now called the 'organic and natural foods industry' grew up as a mostly-white middle-class movement and as such growers within such social networks may have better access to entering it than do low-income Latino farmers and other small farmers who have not been exposed to it. Thus, programs designed to support small farmer transition to organic methods must also address the need for equitable access to marketing

information in order to facilitate the transition of lower-income, minority, and long-time conventional farmers to organic production and marketing.

II. Consumer Access Issues

These problems of access to markets relate to the lack of access that low-income communities and communities of color have in access to organic food in their local stores. This is a result of both lack of resources and lack of access to information and I think we need to address both of those as well. In a food secure community, everyone would have a living wage, good public transit systems would allow people to get to food stores that are close by, food available in stores would be sustainably produced and would contribute to rather than detract from good health, and people in poor communities and communities of color would have access to the same information that middle-class white folks have that indicates that organic is better, farm-fresh is tastier, etc.

As Undersecretary Richard Rominger noted a year ago at the Ecological Farming conference, the USDA organic standards comment process demonstrated the level of concern over food issues and specifically, of consumers in support of more sustainable production practices. Even a recent study funded by Philip Morris and publicized by the Farm Bureau indicates that consumers are very concerned about pesticides. However, Rominger also refers to organic certification as an issue of "choice". My experience in low-income communities in Los Angeles leads me to understand how vitally different "choice" is from "access".

Low-income people and people of color are hit hard by dietary diseases caused by poor diet. For many people in low-income communities, there are few "choices" to eat organic in a landscape dominated by fast food. One group of residents in the Community Coalition in South Central LA found more than 50 fast food restaurants and only 1 sit-down restaurant in their neighborhood.

For up to 700,000 children who eat a school lunch in the Los Angeles Unified School District paid for through the USDA National School Lunch Program, there is no "choice" to select an organic option. This means that while middle-income consumers living in areas where organic food is sold in supermarkets and health food stores are accessible, people living in low-income neighborhoods are forced to "choose" products that are more likely to contain genetically modified soy, corn, or other ingredients or that have higher pesticide residues.

I'm very concerned about the creation of a two-tiered system in which poor people are dealt less nutritious, more chemical-laden foods and people who have access to information and alternatives will select from higher-quality, less toxic food. And I think the true cost/benefit analyses (which include environmental externalities such as air and water pollution) will show that it is vital to the health of our nation to expand sustainable production processes so that it is not simply a "niche" market but the mainstream.

III. Community Food Security Strategies

FARMERS' MARKETS

In the 1970s, inner city activists who recognized the need for access to fresh produce in low-income communities in Los Angeles saw common cause with small farmers who were shut out of the market by regulations which disallowed direct sales from farmer to consumer. They helped create one of the most vibrant farmers' market systems in the nation and helped to break down the barrier that kept small farmers and inner-city residents from benefiting each other.

In L.A. today, farmers' markets predominate more in middle and upper income communities than in the low-income neighborhoods they started in. And organic farmers are more prevalent in markets where consumers can pay the so-called "organic premium."

THE FARMERS' MARKET SALAD BAR

We developed the Farmers' Market Salad Bar to address some of the issues small farmers and low-income families face as a result of these issues. The program now operates in nine schools in two school districts and is expanding to additional schools and districts.

THE PRIMARY GOALS OF THE PROGRAM ARE:

- To improve child nutrition by making healthy, fresh, and tasty food available, especially in schools with a high proportion of students eligible for free or reduced meals;
- To provide regional farmers with an additional market for their fresh produce by utilizing the farmers' market system to assure a more convenient access system for institutions such as school food services;
- To develop alternative systems so that farmers not selling through farmers' markets could sell direct to school districts and other institutions (this is still in progress);
- To connect classroom nutrition and environmental education with experiences in the school cafeteria, garden, and trips to the farmers' market or farms in order to create an environment where children can learn by doing and by eating!
- To determine if this could be a model for other schools and school districts.

In the spring of 1997, the Occidental-UCLA Community Food Security Project began working with the Santa Monica Unified School District food service staff and school staff at McKinley Elementary School, (where 50% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals), to discuss redefining their existing salad bar which suffered from low participation.

We held focus groups where students said they felt the food available in the salad bar was not fresh (e.g. browned lettuce and dried out carrot sticks). Students had many ideas for items which could be added to make the salad bar a more appealing option.

Based in part on focus group findings, the project identified its central premise: namely, that the school children would be more likely to select a "healthy meal" such as a salad bar if certain features were structured into the program's development. These included:

- the availability of fresh, tasty, high quality produce associated with farmers' markets and farm-fresh produce (fruits and vegetables grown for taste rather than durability);
- the ability of the students to select the items themselves (that is, for the salad bar to be operated as a typical restaurant salad bar) with adult monitoring for USDA requirements;
- adult presence in the cafeteria that supports healthy choices;
- actively seeking and implementing student and parent ideas for item selection and preparation techniques (e.g., lettuce sprinkled with lemon was preferred by Latino students, a majority of students preferred cucumber spears to slices);
- an aesthetically pleasing presentation;
- education about seasonality, farmers' markets, and local and regional farming.

While these factors would contribute to increased student participation, to succeed the program would also require:

- a high level of participation and support from parents, teachers, the principal, school-site staff,
- and the school district's food services staff;
- the interest and support of farmers;
- food and labor costs incurred from operating the farmers' market salad bar to be comparable to other meal options.

Working closely with the Santa Monica farmers' markets and school district food services, we began developing a system whereby the school district could easily purchase farm-fresh produce for the salad bar through the farmers' market.

Meanwhile, we began working closely with students, staff, and parents at McKinley Elementary to involve them in decision making, curriculum and program development.

To begin to connect students with farmers' market produce and farmers, we helped facilitate farmers' market and farm tours where students could meet farmers, learn about the growing cycle and growing methods.

On September 17, 1997, after a one-week summer trial, a farmers' market fruit and salad bar was launched at McKinley Elementary School as part of the school's regular food service lunch program.

Fresh produce is ordered from farmers on a biweekly basis at two local farmers markets. Farmers sell the produce at a discount from farmers' market prices. The program tries to purchase from organic farmers as much as possible, especially those items which contain the highest levels of pesticide residue such as celery and strawberries. Students also take tours to the farms and the market to meet the farmers who grow their produce.

Market managers helped launch the program by conducting outreach to farmers, leading guided tours of the market for students, holding Family Days with discount coupons to introduce students and their families to the markets, and in the first year, delivering the food to the school cafeteria.

At McKinley, student participation has grown significantly from previous years when items were pre-cut and pre-packaged. While the salad bar averaged 25 students daily before farmers' market produce was featured in the salad bar, under the new program, 70 to 100 students per day chose the salad bar over the hot meal. Ultimately, we plan to work with parents, students, and the school districts to include farm-direct and healthy food in all the meals served.

Each day, between 1 to 3 parents work with cafeteria staff to prepare the salad bar items, and may help to provide monitoring during the lunch hour. They have been crucial in providing insight into food choices, especially on culturally acceptable items and techniques. At McKinley during the first year, the program coordinator met with a group of Latina mothers who provided their insights as to how the salad bar could be improved. They suggested, for instance, that the bar include lemons for students to squeeze on their lettuce. Immediately, more lettuce was consumed by Latino students and the lemons are now a big hit with all of the students.

We also work to integrate the school garden into the program. With the help of the school gardening angel, each class plants and harvests a crop. Students learn about gardening organically and how that sometimes impacts the appearance of the fruits and vegetables. Some schools have had more difficulty starting and sustaining gardens. These gardens should be better supported as they provide a direct link between children and their food.

Ultimately, we would like the salad bar to highlight an item from the school garden each month. The times it has happened, students were very excited to see the food they had grown displayed and eaten by their classmates. Compost for the garden was made, in part, with waste from daily preparation of the salad bar.

CONCLUSION

The program has succeeded beyond our hopes. Each day, at eight schools in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, students can choose a farmers' market Salad Bar for lunch. And, on any given day, between ½ and 1/3 do. That is nearly three thousand salad bar meals per week plus another 100 or so meals purchased by teachers and parents to eat from the same salad bar. Last year, small farmers earned over \$25,000 through purchases made by the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified school district for the program.

Even though the costs of a Farmers' Market Salad Bar meal are about equal to that of other meal options, the cash-strapped school district has had difficulty finding funds to pay for the additional staffing costs associated with both preparing and monitoring the Farmers' Market Salad Bar as well as conducting nutrition education in conjunction with the program. USDA funds that allow matching funds to be applied to nutrition education through a program called the Nutrition Network in California should recognize the nutrition education value of a "learning by doing" approach such as providing children the option of a healthy farm-fresh meal.

In the fall of 1999, we finally gained permission to pilot the program in LAUSD. The program was launched at Castelar Elementary (which is located in Chinatown) in November and has met with great success with hundreds of children selecting a farmers' market salad bar meal over the other meal option. With the new school at LAUSD also serving a Farmers' Market Salad Bar lunch, the total number of these meals served in the LA area is up to four to five thousand. At Castelar, one class has drawn pictures and created skits that they used to introduce the program to their classmates at a school-wide assembly.

The program will be expanded to two other schools in the next few months and if successful, to several more in the next year. We will be working with the LAUSD and other organizations to better integrate it with physical activity, nutrition and environmental education, and gardens.

A team of UCLA researchers have applied for funding to conduct an evaluation of the impacts of the program on student diet. This study will compare data from their baseline studies which showed that nearly 50 percent of African-American and Latino students are obese or overweight.

The program has gained the attention of the undersecretary of Food and Nutrition Services at USDA, is being replicated in Berkeley Unified School District, and is gaining national attention.

And we have begun to work with others around the state to determine what barriers need to be overcome for other districts to purchase locally, use produce from school gardens, increase the sustainability of school gardens.

IV. Recommendations

The challenge now and what USDA can help with is how to expand successful marketing options such as this one so that they become the norm rather than the exception to affect a shift from structures which benefit industrialized agriculture to those that support localized/small scale agriculture.

The following policy actions would support small and minority farmers as well as low-income communities:

Support the process of farmers learning how to reduce their reliance on chemicals and become sustainable.

Jules Pretty of the University of Essex in the UK points to sustainable agriculture as a "process for learning" rather than a set of technologies to be imposed. In such a model, the farmers become the "experts" rather than looking to pest control advisors for solutions. The Community Alliance with Family Farmers has developed the "Lighthouse Farm Network" in which farmers come together monthly to share information on production and marketing practices and hear speakers on topics from farmer testing of foliar sprays to community supported agriculture.

Studies by the Organic Farming Research Foundation indicate that USDA has done little to aid the growth of organic farming methods and even less to ensure that organic farmers lead the formation of the research. Western SARE is now developing funding for farmer-initiated research projects but which farmers will access these pots of money? Will it be the small immigrant farmers or the larger university-educated farmers? To democratize the research process, organizations such as the Rural Development Center in Salinas should help coordinate research design processes by immigrant farmers. And cooperative extension units should be more sensitized to the need for this outreach.

Ensure that agricultural extension reach out to immigrants who are the next generation of farmers. We need to find ways to encourage them to stay in farming, help them own rather than lease land, and help them develop innovative production and marketing practices that will enable them to reduce off-farm inputs as well as forge linkages with consumers who are vital to preserving farmland.

Two farm families come to mind when I think of how we need to rethink the ways we support small farmers: Lucia & Mario Trevino of Oxnard and Joel & Maria Espino of Ontario. Mario is one of the first farmers to sell through farmers' markets in Los Angeles and has been farming in California for nearly 25 years. I remember when he and Lucia decided to keep going to the Gardena Farmers' Market (which is located in a very demographically mixed community with many low-income households) even though sales at this market had plummeted in recent years because they wanted to provide access to people in that community and one of the first farmers' markets in Southern California. In the last 5 years or so, both of these families have lost some or all of the land they were farming to development. The Trevinos could not find suitable land in all of Ventura County and ended up moving their farm to San Diego County (several hundred miles away) while maintaining their home (which they own) in Oxnard and sending their children to the schools there.

Since they don't own their land, farmers such as these don't have reason to invest in their land or consider transitioning to organic farming (though they do use some biological methods and both families are concerned about pesticides since their children are also out in the fields). These farmers need help reaching the people who benefit from their activities so that farmland is preserved.

USDA Food and Nutrition Services should encourage school districts to buy direct from small and local farmers. And provide support for those districts willing to try it by providing funding.

We have been working with Undersecretary Shirley Watkins and several others at USDA to develop the "Farm-School Connection" but to date, there has been little or no funding assigned to the program. One way USDA could kick start the process is through a series of regional workshops with farmers and school food service officials.

Encourage a re-skilling of food preparation by providing training to school food service staff in nutrition and in working with students.

Just as we encourage utilizing the knowledge of those who are closest to the land-farmers and farm workers-- through sustainable farm management strategies, we also urge placing more power and valuing the knowledge that people who work with children in schools have. One way to do this is by providing cafeteria staff training in child nutrition and food systems issues and to encourage them to engage youth in the process of selecting their meals. They should also be able to ensure that student feedback on how to provide healthier and appealing meals impacts

what is served. And they should have a say in what is served. This is real food and nutrition education in action.

Re-establish on-site cafeterias with full kitchens so that meals can be prepared fresh and on-site and students can impact and be involved in meal preparation.

Ensure that state-by-state marketing regulations do not prohibit small farmers from utilizing a variety of structures to coordinate their sales to institutions such as school districts.

In California, there have been different interpretations of the direct marketing regulations and whether farmers can sell produce that is not "standard pack and grade" direct to school districts.

Institute purchasing preferences for locally and organically grown food for school cafeterias.

To provide for democratic participation in the decisions which have the potential to make massive changes in our food system and the environment, I would urge a moratorium on GE crops, dissemination of existing knowledge about the effects of such technology-both on human health, the environment, and socio-economically.

In my view, biotechnology would intensify and indeed bring a whole new dimension to the problem of taking knowledge and power away from consumers and farmers and putting it into the hands of a few huge institutions, in this case, corporations.

Consumers have been voicing concerns about this new technology-sometimes out of real evidence on the risks to human health (e.g., unknown allergies) and environment (e.g. Bt resistant pests)-and other times simply out of the lack of access to information of this new technology - how it works, who controls it, who will regulate it, and what will it do to the structure of our food system?

Farmers risk losing even more control over the knowledge of how to grow food. In the green revolution, knowledge shifted from on-farm to off-farm. In sustainable agriculture, it's the process that's important.

Let an informed public (including farmers) comment and decide on how and whether this technology should be used and the direction our research should be headed.

In sum, government policies should aim to help small farmers and consumers connect with one another for community food security.