



# Alternative Regional Food System Models: Successes and Lessons Learned

## A Preliminary Literature Review



### Research Questions:

- What alternative models of coordinated regional food systems currently exist that can be used to inform the development of FSEP's mission, objectives, and process of developing a sustainable and economically viable regional food system? Nationally? Internationally?
- How would these alternative models affect the current systems of institutional, societal, and individual power?

### Initial Findings

To date, our team has reviewed existing regional food systems within Iowa, western and northern Michigan, and upstate New York with the objective of identifying trends of successful regional food systems as well as specific challenges that have proven to be significant barriers to others. Findings from this literature review will be used to develop recommendations in support of the Food System Economic Partnership's mission to inform future efforts to develop food system networks and collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, and to promote entrepreneurial opportunities within a five-county region of Southeast Michigan.

### Successes

In general, several key characteristics were identified as being paramount to the success of locally supported regional food systems, including reasonable prices, high quality products, convenient accessibility, and partnerships among producers, distributors, and other stakeholders (Palan, 2005). The communication of product availability and specific health benefits of consuming local products was also found to be critical in establishing and maintaining successful food systems. Through various surveys and focus groups,



research has shown that preferred communication mechanisms for conveying information and education about food systems include television, newspapers, signs or displays inside grocery stores, and information from public health officials, doctors, and food professionals (Palan, 2005). Not surprisingly, word-of-mouth is also a popular way to convey information about local food

products and their availability through retail establishments.

As noted within the literature, some agricultural regions have attempted a shift from wholesale production to service-oriented agritourism to mitigate impacts to small farms (e.g., tariffs, labor costs, subsidies, demands on land uses) and to develop a stable niche for local food products within their communities. For example, owners of small farms western and northern Michigan have worked to develop a regional identity to attract new customers to their farms through retail and entertainment ventures. Often these efforts are in an attempt to save a family farm or to retain agricultural lands in production.



Despite continued competition with supermarkets that purchase at wholesale prices, these small farms have been able to capitalize on comparative advantages by offering more individualized services and diverse agricultural products through purchasing linkages and information sharing with neighboring farms. Purchasing linkages are when one farm supports other neighboring farms through the purchase and resale of items not otherwise produced on-site. This provides agritourism visitors with a broader selection of products at a single location. Cooperative agritourism has also been observed in England, where groups of 15-20 farmers have joined together to market a particular regional farm-based identity. These efforts contribute to the local tax-base, employment opportunities, consumers'



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choices, and strengthened rural communities. However, it is clear that the most successful agritourism ventures benefit from being located within regions with strong place-based identities near large, urban, tourist-generating areas. (Che et al., 2005)



Another mechanism that is common for promoting regional food systems are community-based farmers' markets. As evident from the growing number of farmers'

markets (the total number has more than doubled in the United States from 1980 to 2000), these small retail operations are a popular way of selling local products (Griffin and Frongillo, 2003). In fact, in recent years many small-scale farmers have transitioned from selling at farmers' markets for supplemental income to establishing these sales as their primary retail operations. When vendors work cooperatively instead of competitively, these retail outlets help to foster informal networks and provide social benefits such as the sharing of information and education through personal interactions between consumers and producers.

Farmers' markets can also provide economic benefits for regional food systems and their small-scale producers through the development and marketing of a specific regional niche or identity, by drawing more customers than typical roadside stands, and by providing an outlet for farmers to experiment with new products or to transition to larger ventures at minimal risk. However, research has shown that successful farmers' markets and vendors place special emphasis on the values and norms that reflect their ethics, honesty, and cooperativeness in their selling environment and willingness to serve their customers. Additionally, it is believed that larger volumes of customers may be attracted through better marketing practices such as brand names or point-of-origin labels, larger varieties of available products, educational opportunities such as cooking demonstrations and free samples of uncommon products, and improved accessibility for elderly or disabled populations. (Griffin and Frongillo, 2003)

### Lessons Learned

While many regional food systems have experienced tremendous success, some systems have been limited

by numerous barriers. For example, producers, distributors, and consumers may be fragmented based on their geographic locations or proximity to urban areas. This reduces the convenience factor for distribution and can also reduce the availability of a wide variety of products – both of which were previously identified as key characteristics of successful regional food systems. Research has also shown that local populations may be familiar with the types of products and processes associated with a regional food system, but less knowledgeable about a system's positive and negative outcomes, including its social and environmental impacts (Palan, 2005). This has the potential of influencing the success of a local or regional system and signals the need for additional research and/or community education.

One recurring problem that has been identified in various alternative regional food system models is the challenge of marketing the system and its particular components. Objectives such as finding and maintaining an identity or niche are often confounded by changing consumer trends; competition with supermarkets, larger farms, and dealers who bring in outside products (that may be of lower quality); seasonal trends; the location, accessibility, and hours of retail outlets such as farmers' markets or restaurants; and distributor contracts (which can prevent buyers from making any significant local purchases).

Other facets of the success or failure of particular regional food systems include farming challenges such as weather conditions and crop diseases; rising costs for fuel, seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers; transportation costs and distance from producer to markets; the economy; and labor challenges due to financial constraints and disinterested younger generations (Griffin and Frongillo, 2003). In addition, a limited local supply of fruits and vegetables, processing infrastructure, delivery problems, and pricing issues can be problematic for the sale of local products (Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2005).



A more complete discussion of macro-scale barriers to



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regional food systems, such as global market forces, international trade tariffs, and the pervasive culture of pre-processed foods, has not been included in this summary.

### Future Directions

As evident by the previous discussions, much of the literature reviewed to date has focused on the producer and consumer aspects of regional food systems. As we continue our review of existing regional food system models, we plan to include information from other aspects of regional food system stakeholders, such as distributors and restaurants.

### References

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Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. "An internship program to help institutional food buyers develop links to local farms in northeast Iowa." *Leopold Center Progress Report* 14 (2005): 9-10.

Palan, Kay M. *Examining Awareness of and Support of Regional Food Systems in Iowa*. Report prepared for the Regional Food Systems Working Group of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Alces Foundation, 2005.

The Local Food Masters' Project Team consists of five University of Michigan graduate students from the School of Natural Resources and Environment and the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Our objective is to work with FSEP throughout the 2006 calendar year to provide research support and tools to begin to realize the organization's preliminary goals.

Primary outcomes will include: 1) a review of local food system research focused tightly on issues and components of local food systems germane to the Southeast Michigan region; (2) a profile of the community food system within the five-county area; (3) an in-depth analysis of the viability of an intentional local food system in the region with recommendations for increasing access to and promoting efficient, effective distribution of local foods; and (4) an organizational assessment of FSEP during its first year in existence. In support of FSEP's mission, outputs will inform future efforts to develop food system networks and collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, and to promote entrepreneurial opportunities within a five-county region of Southeast Michigan.

### For More Information:

To submit additional resources or to provide feedback, please contact the University of Michigan Local Food Masters' Project Team at [foodsys@umich.edu](mailto:foodsys@umich.edu).