

Local view: Can our region feed itself?

By David Abazs
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When last year's fall harvest ended, my research on food systems began. I joined Stacey Stark and David Syring, researchers at the University of Minnesota Duluth, and we were awarded a university-sponsored Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives grant to assess a locally adapted food system for the western Lake Superior region.

Our research was driven by key questions: Can we feed ourselves within this region? Do we have enough land to grow the food we need? What would a healthy local diet look like? What would a local food system mean for our economy, health, the environment and our western Lake Superior communities?

Western Lake Superior consists of eight Northeastern Minnesota and seven Northwestern Wisconsin counties. The region covers 13.4 million acres, an area larger than nine states. Its population is 479,856, according to the 2008 census. And it spends more than \$1.26 billion on food every year. As of 2007, total farmland covered more than 1.2 million of its acres; there were 5,602 farms, a loss of 974 farms since the last agriculture census in 2002. The loss represents a continuing downward trend in farm numbers.

Farm products sold in 2007 totaled more than \$193 million, making farming a significant regional economic engine with numerous community benefits. However, according to 2007 census data, the difference between the products sold and the cost of production averaged only \$3,417 of income per farm (excluding government subsidies). This economic reality led our research to include interviews with a variety of farmers throughout the region to get a "soil"-level perspective into the future of food production and its potential for greater profitability.

Despite the best efforts of farmers, almost all of the food we eat in our region comes from somewhere else. Therefore, nearly all of the

\$1.26 billion spent on food here leaves our region. The potential for job growth as a result of building a local food system is huge. In just one example, the Standard American Diet (SAD) reveals that, on average, each person eats 243 pounds of meat per year. The greatest share of this total is 63 pounds of beef. In looking at production estimates, we would need about 68,291 beef cows to meet our local beef consumption. At 440 pounds of usable meat per animal, we would need 683 beef farms, each producing

100 head per year, which is far beyond what we currently have in this region.

Looking further into the Standard American Diet, it is obvious we cannot grow some of the foods we normally eat; bananas and other warm-

weather crops, for example. If we were going to envision a local food system, what fruits would provide daily-recommended consumption level?

As part of this Healthy Lives grant project, a group of doctors, nutritionists and dietitians are developing a healthy local diet. In comparison to the global sourcing and excessive caloric intake of a SAD diet, a local diet would provide a healthy, balanced and locally grown option. This doesn't mean we would have to give up bananas or coffee (people have traded for these specialty crops for centuries,) but how much land would be needed to locally grow 25 percent, 50 percent or 75 percent of our food? What would the total economic benefit be? How would the environment be affected? What would it mean to health-care costs and quality of life?

Answering these questions and building a local food system would translate into welcomed economic and ecological benefits.

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