

Illinois Consumers talk about...

Local Produce

Introduction

The information in this series was gathered by The Lab for Community and Economic Development in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. LCES talked to six focus groups in Illinois to ask people about their perception of and concerns about foods, specifically genetically engineered foods. The six focus group locations included three rural areas and three urban areas throughout northern, central, and southern Illinois: Rock Falls, Rockford, Latham, Champaign, Waterloo, and Carbondale.

Produce Benefits

"The roadside stand is typically locally grown, so sweet corn during the summer here is much better coming from a roadside stand..."
[Champaign participant]

"When I go to a roadside stand, it's to find fresher and more flavorful in-season produce at a lower price than what I can get in the grocery store."
[Carbondale participant]

"I'd go to a farmers' market if it was more convenient just because the food's not juiced with all kinds of chemicals. I'll buy strawberries at Wal-Mart during the off season, but when the season comes in, I'm out of Wal-Mart and getting fresh ones I'll pick myself."
[Rockford participant]



Focus group participants said they chose to buy locally because local produce was better quality, fresher, and had more flavor. In addition, consumers could buy products that they could not get at grocery stores. "We have [in the area] wild blackberries and raspberries, and people go crazy buying them from us because you could not ship them; they wouldn't last."

Shoppers still wanted clean, nicely displayed, produce, but they were more forgiving when it came to small cosmetic blemishes on locally produced fruits and vegetables, but insisted on tougher standards for store-bought produce.

Social Benefits

“For me, it’s just knowing the people. It’s just a comfort level there with people that I know, and I trust their product. What it comes down to for me is knowing the individuals.”

[Rock Falls participant]

“It feels better because you feel like you bought something from someone in the community as opposed to giving your money to Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is just a billion dollar corporation, but the guy down the street is someone you might know.”

[Waterloo participant]

“If you’re buying from a chain store, where does that money go? If you can buy locally, you’re putting money right back in and investing in your own community.”

[Carbondale participant]

“When I go to a roadside stand, it’s to find in-season produce at a lower price than what I can get in the grocery store...”

[Carbondale participant]

Economic benefits: Focus group participants shop locally not only for quality produce but to support local farmers. Illinois residents like buying produce knowing that the money goes back into the community rather than an anonymous, already-thriving corporate grocery store chain. The focus group participants' were mixed about the personal economic benefits. A few said that shopping locally was noticeably cheaper than at larger stores, but others said that the food was “not always cheaper, [but] it’s good” (Champaign resident).

Trust and comfort. Both rural and urban Illinois focus group participants discussed how frequenting the same provider also helps to choose better products. Consumers feel that getting information about local produce directly from the farmers who grew the product is more reliable than getting information from grocery store clerks. Furthermore, a number of group members said they repeatedly return to specific vendors, learning who to trust to produce good produce. “I find myself [trusting] more and more. They give me a melon and I take it ... I don’t even question whether it’s going to be a quality product anymore.”



Problems

"If I'm going to go make a salad, I'm going to go to the grocery store. I'm probably not going to go to a farmers' market to buy local lettuce and local tomatoes."

[Latham participant]

You know, as far as roadside stands and farmers' markets, you can get so many different products that you cannot get in a grocery store because of perishability. I think farmers' markets and roadside stands are really becoming popular because you can buy things like paw paws and berries. People go crazy buying them from us because you could not ship them; they wouldn't last."

[Rock Falls participant]

"The bigger store is more convenient. If you don't have the cash on you, there are all different ways to pay, like check or credit card. With some of the roadside stands, they'll either be willing to take your word on your check being good or else you just have to have the money."

[Waterloo participant]

The most severe drawback to local shopping were convenience and limited choices for local produce. Most road stands will only accept cash, while local stores will take checks and credit cards. Buying locally at orchard or farms also depends on how close those farms are. As one participant pointed out, Decatur residents visit orchards and farms more often than Latham residents simply because local produce options are either too far away or don't exist. Further, local produce suppliers are obviously limited by the seasons, while grocery stores bring in food staples — such as lettuce and tomatoes — all year around.

But, while local food outlets do not have the wide range of foods, local produce providers have *more* variety than grocery stores, for example, paw paws, wild blackberries, and raspberries.

In a somewhat bitter irony, all the rural focus group said that buying local produce is harder to do than it used to be. One participant said that local providers do not necessarily grow "everyday foods," so residents end up turning to grocery stores for their daily shopping needs.



Conclusions

Illinois focus group participants cited freshness, superior quality, price, and unique selection as incentives for purchasing produce locally. Participants also enjoyed shopping locally because it enabled them to put money back into their own communities and to develop relationships with their local produce providers. These contacts helped them in obtaining quality produce. However, the participants also verbalized recurring problems such as convenience (including payment options) and limited produce selections (although some disagreed). Overall, the produce-specific, social, and economic benefits satisfy consumers enough to keep them buying at local outlets.



Implications



The research indicates that despite minor problems, consumers prefer shopping locally in order to get:

- Produce-specific benefits, such as fresher, better tasting foods
- Social benefits, including supporting their communities and forming relationship with produce providers
- Economic benefits, which allow shoppers to spend less without a decline in quality

The report was sponsored by C-FAR ILLU-45-0237.

Data collection and transcription was conducted through the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development; initial analysis and report preparation by Shaunna Barnhart; summary preparation, editing, and final report preparation by Kywana Austin and Lauren Bell under the supervision of Ann Reisner, Department of Human and Community Development. Photos: USDA-ARS photo services, page bottom right. University of Illinois, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, Information Technologies and Communication Services, page 1 middle right, page 2 bottom right, page 4 middle right, bottom left.

University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.