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THEME OVERVIEW: LOCAL FOOD—PERCEPTIONS, PROSPECTS, AND POLICIES

Robert P. King

The local food movement has captured the attention of American consumers, producers, food marketers, and policymakers. It has helped many to gain a better appreciation of where their food comes from and has strengthened consumers' sense of connection with those who produce our food. Advocates tout the benefits of a "relocalization" of the food system—benefits that include fresher, healthier, better tasting food; lower carbon emissions due to shorter transportation distances; and the retention of economic activity in the local economy. However, there is often confusion and disagreement about what "local" means, and on closer examination, it is not always clear that local origin is sufficient to guarantee anticipated health, environmental, and local economic development benefits.

This *Choices* theme explores local food from several perspectives. The first two papers focus on perceptions of "local." Michael Hand and Stephen Martinez examine the question of "What is local?" and find that it often means much more than simple proximity to the consumer. Ultimately, they observe, understanding differences in definitions of "local" may help us better understand the range of expectations and aspirations people have for food system performance. Yuko Onozuka, Gretchen Nurse, and Dawn Thilmany McFadden report on survey results that shed light on consumer perceptions of local and their motivations for purchasing local food products. Their most interesting findings concern the social nature of farm-direct purchases. Consumers who buy directly from farmers tend to be more strongly influenced by those around them and are more confident that their actions make a difference for public as well as private outcomes.

The next two papers focus on the prospects for growth of local food markets. Larry Lev and Lauren Gwin take a data centric look at farm-direct marketing of local food products. They find that common perceptions about the growth in farm-direct sales and about the central role of farmers markets are not always borne out by the limited data that are available about this segment of the food system. Robert King, Miguel Gómez, and Gigi DiGiacomo examine the prospects for local foods to gain a greater share of sales in the mainstream supermarket channel. They find exciting possibilities for growth in access to local foods but also note that higher costs due to difficulty in accessing processing and inefficient transportation may prevent local products from emerging from their niche status.

The final three papers examine policy issues related to local foods. Kathryn Onken and John Bernard provide a comprehensive overview of state agricultural marketing programs, which have contributed significantly to growth in demand for and availability of local food products. Looking to the future, they note that these important programs may start to compete with each other and with other local food promotion programs. Shermain Hardesty examines federal and state policies that affect local food markets and asks whether, on balance, they promote or hinder local foods. She notes that assessment of policy impacts is difficult, in large part because—as Hand and Martinez note—the concept of "local" is so entwined with other food system performance objectives. Finally, Kate Clancy and Kathryn Ruhf shift attention to regional food systems, arguing that a regional framework may be more appropriate for achieving the transformations in the food system that local food advocates are seeking. They assert that a regional focus retains a sense of place, yet allows for more flexible product flows and aggregation of product to achieve scale economies.

Taken together, these papers help clarify perceptions about local foods, prospects for growth in their supply

and demand, and policy issues affecting the development of local food systems. One of the most important impacts of the local foods movement has been its success in initiating a rich conversation on food system performance. That conversation will continue.

Robert P. King (rking@umn.edu) is Professor, Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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