Environmental Watch

Examining Environmental Claims and Their Costs • October 2007

"Buy Local": A *Feel* Good Approach that Doesn't *Do* Good for People or the Environment

by Todd Myers

Claim

"By getting more locally grown produce into our schools and food banks, we can improve children's health and create new and thriving markets for our farmers."
Priorities for a Healthy Washington 2008, http://www.environmentalpriorities.org/ (Accessed 10/30/07)

"The reasons for eating local offered by both Berman and the more recent advocates are many: Cutting down on the fuel used to transport food could help slow global warming, and a local food system makes it easier to police for food safety, puts more money into the local economy and fresher, better-tasting food in your mouth."
John B. Saul, "The Bounty Around Us," Pacific Northwest Magazine, August 19, 2007, http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=pacificplocal19&date=20070819&query=sustainable+food (Accessed 10/30/07)

Facts

As part of the growing diameter of issues being engulfed by climate change, the "buy local" movement is now a centerpiece of the effort to reduce carbon emissions and help the environment. The movement is not new. In the 1960s, Canned Heat put the reverence for the country to song: "I'm going up the country, baby don't you wanna go, I'm going to some place where I've never been before...I'm gonna leave this city, got to get away."

Now the justification is based around something called "food miles," which is a measure of the distance food travels to get to a consumer. Some argue that the greater the food miles, the more impact on the environment and the more carbon put into the atmosphere.

This, however, is not only bad economics, it is bad for the environment and bad for people. Purchasing food simply because it is "local" reduces the prosperity of individuals. Further, these "buy local" efforts typically focus only on the distance from the final product to the consumer, ignoring the carbon footprint of the many inputs into that product.

Those who shop at Pike Place Market for the freshness of the products may be pleased with their purchase. If they assume that they are reducing their carbon footprint, however, it is unclear that they will have any impact.

Bad Economics

Putting money into "the local economy" is a common justification some use for a number of economic and environmental proposals. Two months ago, we noted that the Sightline Institute argued for increasing the use of renewable energy because Washington sends too much money "out of the region" for petroleum. In that instance, the argument turned out to be patently insincere because they were simultaneously arguing that we should send money out of the region (i.e. Denmark) to purchase windmills for Washington.

But not all arguments to buy local are insincere. In this case the motive appears to be a sincere desire to help local farmers. Setting aside the question of whether Washington farmers are more

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worthy or deserving than Montana or Iowa farmers and the Balkanization implied by that argument, the argument is based in bad economics.

Assume, for instance, that we purchased only local food. Farmers would still use some of that money to buy fertilizer produced outside of a given boundary (let's say Washington for the sake of simplicity). They will buy tractors outside of that boundary. If they want to improve yields, they will also buy seeds from outside the region. This is not to mention other products local farmers will buy with their proceeds, like televisions, computers, flights to Hawaii, etc. As a result, there is no financial impact whatsoever by placing an arbitrary limit on where to buy some goods but ignoring limits on others. This is simply squeezing the tube of toothpaste.

Perhaps we could become more strict. Let's say we put a strict cap and prohibited purchases of any items from outside Washington to prevent this leakage. It becomes clear that we would go without quite a bit. Certainly no coffee or bananas. We would have many more aircraft than we needed (although probably not because we couldn't get the titanium from Russia). We would have no cars. Even if we could make the transformation, we would be without many things and we would use much more labor to produce many fewer things. This would make us all poorer.

Those who support "buy local" efforts admit that it takes more to produce less. In the *Pacific Northwest Magazine*, a family who donated the use of land to local farmers notes that "The land is paid for because I worked my butt off and never went to Disneyland or any other place like it my entire life."[1] However, the farmers who use the land rent-free told *Pacific NW Magazine* that "Even without the land expense...the biggest challenge to the farm is earning a living."[2]

A similar version of this was tried in the Krasnayarsk region in Russia. Governor Alexander Lebed banned food exports from the region. He felt that it made no sense to export food while some in the region were without. The result? The breadbasket became a basketcase. Farmers lost their markets and the money that had been coming into the region, which could have been used to alleviate poverty, was lost.

Placing artificial boundaries on sales makes no economic sense, making those it purports to help poorer by driving up the cost of other goods and services.

Bad Environmentalism

Clearly "buying local" is bad economic policy. Surprisingly, numerous recent studies show it is also bad environmental policy. The primary fallacy is the emphasis on the distance the final product travels to the consumer rather than the cost of the various inputs to a product.

Rich Pirog, a researcher in sustainable agriculture at the University of Iowa, notes that food miles are "not a reliable indicator of environmental impact. What one would want to do is look at your carbon footprint across a whole food supply chain." While he is not as reliable as a researcher from a 100-mile radius like the University of Washington, he points to an interesting example. *Reuters* highlights a comparison between Idaho and Maine potatoes.

> "Take the case of the well-traveled Idaho potato and its closer-to-home cousin from Maine. For a consumer on the US East Coast, the Maine potato seems the

[1] *John B. Saul, "The Bounty Around Us," Pacific Northwest Magazine, August 19, 2007, http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=pacificplocal19&date=20070819&query=sustainable+food (Accessed 10/30/07)*

[2] *Ibid.*

> winner in the local food derby. But Maine potatoes get to market by long-haul truck while Idahos go by train, a more energy-efficient mode of transportation, so they have a smaller carbon footprint even with a larger number of food-miles."[3]

On a global level another study found that New Zealand sheep had a smaller carbon footprint, even when shipped to Great Britian, than locally grown sheep. Scientists found "that lamb raised on New Zealand's clover-choked pastures and shipped 11,000 miles by boat to Britain produced 1,520 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions per ton while British lamb produced 6,280 pounds of carbon dioxide per ton, in part because poorer British pastures force farmers to use feed." Even if some locally grown lamb did have a smaller carbon footprint than New Zealand grown lamb, buying based on "food miles" would not be useful in determining if that was the case.

Closer to home, one King County agricultural expert highlighted the difficulty in measuring environmental impact with miles. The expert noted that dairies were leaving King County, in part due to regulation, but also due to the fact that it is cheaper to ship milk than hay, making it more efficient, and energy friendly, to locate dairies close to the hay. Buying King County milk, therefore would be the environmentally unfriendly thing to do.[4]

These sorts of calculations are complicated and they often lead to counter intuitive results. Those truly interested in reducing their CO_2 footprint with their purchases, however, need to look beyond food miles and simplistic "buy local" campaigns.

Costs

It is clear that a "buy local" approach is rooted in the appeal of a "back to nature" approach that values people who are close to the earth. The policy, however, is more about feeling good than actually doing something for either the environment, food purchasers or even farmers.

Food miles are not a good indicator of carbon footprint because of the wide range of energy costs associated with growing and transporting inputs and products themselves. It should not be surprising that simplistic calculations are often misleading. The emotional appeal of "buy local" programs apparently obscures the reality.

"Buy local" advocates are more honest about the cost to consumers. They admit that bananas, coffee and other products are off limits. What they don't realize is that "buy local" programs are bad even for farmers. While farmers may benefit narrowly from increased sales, the overall productivity and wealth of the community is decreased. If "buy local efforts" are expanded beyond farmers, it only exacerbates that reduction in prosperity for everyone, including farmers.

[3] *Deborah Zabarenko, "Do Food Miles Make a Difference to Global Warming?," Planet Ark, http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=44883 (Accessed 10/31/07)*

[4] *E-mail to the author, 10/25/07*