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Research Update: Classifying Primary Agricultural Producers in Local Foods Marketing Channels: Using the Organizational Species Concept to Understand Strategic Profiles

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For the past 30 years, social movements have emphasized food distribution systems that provide for proximal, socially embedded transactions as alternatives to the industrialized food system that has come to be conventional in many Western economies. These systems—whichare known as local and regional food systems in the United States and short food supply chains in Europe—allow multiple modes of distribution, including consumers entering the place of primary production to make purchases, purchasing directly from producers at markets or over the Internet, arrangements where intermediaries act as guarantors of source identification and social embeddedness, and third-party certification schemes that convey information across value chains. Each of these distributional frameworks can be expected to have differing costs and benefits to firms at the primary production stage. However, it is naïve to presume that all primary agricultural producers (PAPs) will adopt the same strategic mix of various channels. Classifying PAPs in a meaningful way helps develop an understanding of agent behaviors and can inform policy choices about system-level outcomes.

In this update, I create such a classification, applying the *Organizational Species Concept* and attendant methodology developed by Entsminger and Westgren (2019) to PAPs using data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2015 Local Foods Marketing Practices Survey. My classification centers on morphological traits of PAPs, including resource endowments, operator characteristics (as proxies for experience, networks, and barriers to access), production choices, channel diffusion, and proximity of sales to the farm gate. I use strategic orientations in the form of channel and product reliance to validate the groupings.

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Results indicate the presence five to eight species of PAPs engaged in U.S. local and regional food systems. These species show differences in the strategic mix of distributional channels chosen. Moreover, preliminary analysis indicates that factors of gender, status as a racial or ethnic minority, and organic certification are associated with differences in both morphological characteristics and strategic choices.

These findings show that meaningful differences among PAPs lead to the selection of different distributional strategies, which in turn has implications for policy objectives on scaling up local and regional food systems and achieving more inclusive marketing arrangements.

Keywords: channel choice, distribution strategies, farmers, food systems, local foods, organizational form, organizational species