Assessing Grower Marketing Needs to Capture “Local” Retail Opportunities
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In Arkansas and across the nation, local food marketing has expanded beyond the farmers’ markets and food stands. Through emerging local and regional supply networks, farmers are gaining access to consumers in new and innovative ways. Locally and regionally produced food products are demanded by consumers across the United States at unprecedented levels. This demand is driven by consumers’ desire to support local economies, reduce food miles, encourage sustainable agricultural practices, and have greater access to healthier and fresher produce.

A collection of resources to assist both growers and consumers in identifying “local foods” has emerged to meet this rising demand. One group of resources gaining popularity is electronic marketing networks that gather information from producers and potential customers and give farmers greater access to local and regional markets. Large retail chains are now exploring how electronic markets can be used to increase consumer market share by meeting customer demands for fresher, locally grown foods. These new and emerging direct markets potentially offer benefits to producers by providing known and stable markets. However, before producers can realize the full potential of these new marketing avenues, several barriers must be overcome. Farmers must deal with myriad regulatory and contractual issues that should be addressed to successfully market directly to retail and wholesale outlets.

The University of Arkansas Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability and Applied Sustainability Center along with the National Agricultural Law Center have undertaken a project in cooperation with national retailers, NGOs, CBOs, and other land-grant universities whose goal is to provide risk-management opportunities for producers interested in engaging in these emerging markets.

The goal of our project is to expand marketing risk management education programs for specialty crops to producers across the South, focusing on growers interested in direct marketing of their products. The project includes curriculum development and grower assessments. Preliminary analysis of surveys collected at the two regional grower workshops reveals that 1) producers responding to the survey were primarily engaged in vegetable, berry, and pumpkin production; 2) the two most commonly reported marketing channels used were farmers markets and direct to grocery retailers; 3) 55 percent of respondents indicated they were interested in using an online, electronic direct-marketing system; and 4) producers identified limited product availability as the primary barrier to selling to large retailers.

Consumer Understanding of Buying Local, Fresh, and Safe
Forrest Stegelin

Buying local, fresh, and safe is not just about direct marketing to consumers; there is a much broader cultural curiosity for locally produced goods that extends beyond food consumption. Contemporary food scares; awareness and concern about sustainability; desire for less processed and more fresh foods; and the increased demand for unique, distinctive, and handcrafted goods has elevated interest in the buying local movement.

Part of the fascination of buying locally produced foods culminated in best-selling books which heralded a cultural rediscovery of “real food.” Local is also linked by consumers as a way to support the local community and local agriculture, as well as a way to return to the values of simplicity and relationships and trust.

So what do consumers understand about buying local, fresh, and safe? Undergraduate students in Food & Fiber Marketing surveyed 716 grocery store shoppers in rural south-central Georgia about their thoughts, perceptions, and actions about buying local. The survey results suggest that:

- Consumers are buying products they perceive to be locally made or produced in large numbers.
- “Made or produced within 100 miles” is a popular definition of “locally produced.”

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