

Who Produces Minnesota's Food?

Nearly two-thirds of food consumed in Minnesota is produced out of state

by Ken Meter

The meat manager at my market showed me how Minnesota's food industry may be losing millions of dollars. He pointed out that the beef I was buying could have traveled a thousand miles to get into my cart.

This particular store bought all of its meat from Iowa Beef Processors, an immense slaughter and packaging operation in Iowa and Nebraska. IBP offers vacuum-wrapped, cardboard-boxed cuts of beef. My store gained by getting a product that was easy to handle and had little waste.

Large outfits like IBP and Missouri Beef Packing are located near big feedlots, so it was unlikely the beef I bought actually had made a thousand-mile journey. But the point sunk in: a lot of fuel was burned getting that meat to my plate. A lot of jobs were done outside Minnesota.

A second fact hit harder: Minnesota, eighth-largest red meat producer in the nation, was importing beef.

Chickens at the store came from Arkansas. Winter vegetables were imported. Most of the corn and soybeans we grow go for feed, not food. Who, then, does grow the food we eat?

To my surprise, nobody seems to know. One state official, when asked if the state kept figures on how much food Minnesota imports, replied, "Wow! Nothing like that."

After weeks of poring over computer printouts and crop reports, and after hours of interviews with local brokers and store managers, it seems clear Minnesota is very dependent on other states for food. With milled grain and the dairy industry as very powerful exceptions, most of the food we eat is shipped in.

In turn, most of the land in Minnesota is given over to crops raised for export from the state. What Minnesota farmers do produce actually is not human food but raw material for industrial processing. Only 5% of the state's corn crop goes directly to make foods for humans.

Consequently, this export economy is a highly energy-intensive agriculture. An estimated 60% of the retail price of food goes toward some form of energy.

Of 9,000,000 cwt of produce shipped into the Twin Cities in 1979, only 11% was raised in Minnesota, according to USDA statistics. Over 2,000,000 cwt of the vegetables (44%) were from California. Six percent were from Texas, 6% from Washington and 6% from Florida. Foreign imports amounted to 5% of our produce.

Shipped-in lettuce and oranges are no surprise. But southern states also provide us with the bulk of staples like carrots, cabbage, onions and potatoes.

Texas ships seven times as many cabbages to the Twin Cities as state suppliers provide. California sends us more than nine times the carrots we raise for ourselves. Florida outclasses us in sweet corn by seven times. Only 10% of our onions come from Minnesota-with Idaho, Texas and Washington sending 70% between them. Minnesota provides only 39% of the potatoes unloaded in the Twin Cities.

Squash and parsnips are the only two crops in which Minnesota supplies the majority of Twin City needs.

Meanwhile, Minnesota ships 1,500,000 cwt of potatoes to markets in Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, etc. That's three times the amount we keep here. More than half our onions-our second major truck crop-are exported.

Thirty-five years ago, Minnesota was the 15th largest exporter of vegetables. It sent beets, apples, cabbage, carrots, onions, potatoes, turnips, parsnips and other vegetables to other states. A diverse range of vegetables was raised close to the metropolitan area. But land which once held truck gardens for the urban market now is "seeded" to suburban ramblers and shopping plazas. Even the farms most closely surrounding the Twin Cities now are producing cash-grain crops. There are only 500 growers who now supply the metropolitan market.

"We buy as much local production as we can get," said a produce buyer for Red Owl. "There just isn't enough grown. As a result, 90% of what we sell comes from out of state. We must have supplies 12 months out of the 9 year, but Minnesota products are available only three months. There aren't any big growers or big farms-just small 'Ma and Pa' type operators."

Jack Burns, produce buyer for Byerly's, agrees-"85% to 90%" of their summer produce is imported. "In the winter, almost all comes from out of state," he added. Applebaum's Al Peterson uses the figure of 85%.

Disappearance of local producers, a well-established fact in the produce trade, now is starting to take root in the meat industry. Although beef markets still are fairly local to the Midwest, Minnesota is becoming increasingly vulnerable.

Local buyers disagree on how much meat is imported.

"The Twin Cities used to be the beef capital of the U.S. six or seven years ago," said Gene Elfring of Twin City Meats. "Now, maybe 90% comes from out of state. Labor is cheaper. There's an advantage to buying out of state. Iowa can truck it in cheaper than it can be processed here." One buyer estimates labor costs can vary as much as \$3 to \$4/hr from here to Iowa.

Bob Morical, meat manager for Byerly's, disagrees. "Seventy-five to 80% of our deliveries are local," he commented. His supplier, United Dressed Beef, claims about half its beef is Minnesota-grown. The Livestock Marketing Institute estimates that only 3% of the animals sold at the South St. Paul market are slaughtered in the metro area.

So, while estimates vary, it is clear that the Twin Cities is losing in local processing. Packers are closing down in South St. Paul and Albert Lea. Meat is coming from farther and farther away. Fewer and fewer jobs are left for Minnesotans. And more and more energy is consumed in providing that meat.

Minnesota ranks as the third largest hog producer in the nation, but one buyer says all his hogs "come from Iowa, except for a few. If we're short, we can get some at South St. Paul." Most chicken is imported. Small brokers handle local chickens to small chains. But, as one buyer noted, major supermarkets use southern birds to get quantity.

Minnesota still is the nation's number-one turkey supplier. And it is a prime producer of food and feed grains. But, with 11 million acres of state cropland producing \$2 billion worth of corn and soybeans, fully 85% of our acreage is given over to crops humans cannot eat, except after processing.

Only 6% of the corn and 5% of the soybean crop ever gets processed directly into food for people. Most goes to feedlots, many of them out of state or in foreign countries.

Minnesota's dairy industry still is strong. Local grain is converted into milk and milk products by local farmers and shippers and is largely consumed in the region.

Adding dairy to crops and livestock still puts total in-state farm production used for food for humans at only about 36%. What that means in lost income is impossible to measure, because no one keeps track. But a rough estimate, based on national food consumption, places the loss at \$600 million for the meat industry alone.

Luckily, a handful of people have begun to bolster the state's local produce supply. Dell Christianson, specialty crops instructor at Detroit Lakes AVTI, for example, has developed management and technical systems which help turn produce production into a more profitable effort.

In St. Paul, the mayor's Energy Office has made local food production a major effort. "One of the biggest ways we can save energy is to grow more food locally," says energy director Gary Dodge. His office is searching for urban land for food production and is making compost on a large scale for gardeners. Dodge also has launched a study to determine the potential for cooperative warehouse space at the Farmer's Market in St. Paul

Ken Meter is a Minneapolis freelance writer. He was assisted by Ann Peirce in researching this article. [Published in *The Farmer*, July 18, 1981, page 22]