



Crossroads Resource Center

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Tools for Community Self-determination

Where will our food come from?

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Minneapolis & St. Paul residents spend \$1.4 billion dollars a year buying food. Nestled into the sixth-largest farm state in the nation, and the capital of a food manufacturing and commodity empire stretching from the Great Lakes to the Rockies, the Twin Cities hold an enviable position.

We host an unusually solid core of locally owned supermarkets, and one of the strongest concentrations of coop grocery stores in the U.S. Metro coops invested in urban neighborhoods when big box retailers spurned urban locations as too small, or unprofitable. But this small scale is the favored model now. Meanwhile, coops trained larger markets how to stock wholesome and organic foods, and built wide consumer awareness.

With the emergence of excellent neighborhood cafés and gourmet restaurants, and increasingly visible food reviews from both dailies and alternative press, the region appears poised for a food renaissance.

Yet there are deeply troubling signs on the food horizon, which likely helped impel St. Paul to launch “healthy local food” planning as a core element of its new environmental roundtable. Two of every three Minnesotans are overweight. Diet-related diseases are erupting. Many low-income urban neighborhoods have no full-service grocery store; and residents often pay higher prices for food, especially when welfare payments arrive.

Deep pain is also endured by the state's farmers, who suffered production losses of \$7 billion over the past seven years — a staggering \$1 billion each year. These are deeper losses

than during the farm credit crisis of the mid-1980s, when farmers drove tractors to Washington, DC, and rallied at the State Capitol. Yet this crisis goes almost unspoken.

For several years, I've been studying regional food economies. Working in partnership with citizens' groups in Southeast, West Central, and Northwest Minnesota, I've uncovered sobering trends that should spur concerted planning for the future of our food security.

These studies reveal a deeply startling reality: Minnesota farm regions import billions of dollars of food to eat, while farmers lose billions producing food commodities for export. For the sixth-largest farm state in the nation to suffer such immense losses, amidst one of the most productive agribusiness sectors in the world, raises immense challenges.

My first study, called *Finding Food in Farm Country*, was written five years ago for the Community Design Center and the University of Minnesota's Experiment in Rural Cooperation. That report, covering the seven counties in the southeastern tip of the state, found that the region ships \$800 million away to distant suppliers each year — by farming at a loss, by purchasing farm inputs from distant sources, and by eating food that was produced outside the region. In recent years, those losses climbed to \$1 billion per year.

Tragically, farmers who work at a loss have also helped undermine the region's water quality. One of every five wells tested in the region is contaminated with nitrates, largely from farm chemicals. Two towns have had to dig entirely new wells for drinking water.

Similar troubles plague other regions. West Central farmers lost \$1.7 billion producing commodities over the past 11 years, a loss of \$200 million each year. Yet the region's consumers spend \$250 million buying food from distant sources.

Similarly, the amount Northwestern farmers spend on farm chemicals and fertilizers each year would be enough to pay for all food eaten at home by the region's residents. Growers here have suffered losses of \$2.2 billion over the past 11 years of farming.

These findings are not untypical. America's farmers earned \$39 billion less by selling commodities in 2003 than they had in 1969 (in inflation-adjusted dollars) — despite doubling their productivity. USDA data show that farmers get a mere 10 cents of each dollar of retail food sales.

Food supply is no longer connected to food demand. Twenty-five years ago, I surveyed local grocers and food handlers, and learned that over 60% of the foods eaten in Minnesota came from out of state. The ratio may well be higher now. As the Aldo Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University calculates, food is consumed, on average, 1,500 miles away from the places where it is produced. Moreover, the *Wall Street Journal* reported a year ago, the U.S. poised to become a net food importer on a permanent basis — with imports of our most prized commodities, such as grains and meats, rising.

American consumers, who have taken for granted the availability of cheap foods, may be in for a rude surprise. That illusion has been based on cheap oil, subsidized by the federal government. Now, roughly 17% of all energy used in the U.S. is devoted to bringing food to our tables, for a total energy cost of \$139 billion per year. Our food choices are highly dependent on the price of oil, and upon political and military decisions made far away.

Meanwhile, our access to cheap foods provokes hidden costs. The medical costs of treating obesity in the U.S. are now an estimated \$118 billion per year — about 14% of the nation's food budget.

Turning this around

Innovative local foods projects are springing up all over the Twin Cities. Restaurants like Lucia's are buying fresh foods raised by inner city youth who learned to garden through the Youth Farm Project and Community Design Center. Food Alliance Midwest has engaged more than 85 growers who sell foods certified for healthy production practices to 55 grocers. More than a dozen area colleges, and 15 corporate kitchens, make a concerted effort to buy food from certified regional growers. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and Minnesota Project each work with area hospitals to encourage them to serve healthier foods, raised by local farmers, in their kitchens. Minneapolis contemplates a new farmers' market

fronting the Mississippi River. The Hopkins school district is bringing back fresh-cooked meals to its lunchroom.

Several Minnesota regions have created regional food labels to help shoppers find foods grown on local farms. The fifty growers and processors in the Southeast Minnesota Food Network sold a quarter million dollars of food last year, primarily to metro markets. Western Minnesota's "Pride of the Prairie" and Northeast's "Superior Grown" labels evoke regional loyalties. The Minnesota Food Association works with immigrant farmers to strengthen their market presence.

These are all small efforts to stem immense losses. Yet indisputably, they are the foundation for regional food networks of the future. They remain largely invisible to the Twin Cities media, and most consumers.

As a consumer, there are many things you can do to gain a more secure food supply.

- **Buy local.** Look for the local and sustainable labels mentioned above when you shop, and ask your grocer to carry foods that bear these labels.
- **Eat at restaurants that serve local foods.** A list of local cafés, and savings coupons, can be found in the *Blue Sky Guide*:
http://www.findbluesky.com/coupon_list.asp?category_id=11.
- **Invest in local "value-added" firms.** Southeast Minnesota is now forming a regional investment fund, the Hiawatha Fund. Other regions may do the same.
- **Convince your school, hospital, nursing home and local government to buy local.**
- **Support local foods planning** through the sustainability initiatives for both cities.
- **Support a "food" bill in Congress,** rather than a *farm bill* for 2007, that will direct federal investments toward regional food networks and better conservation practices, and away from commodities.

Ken Meter is president of Crossroads Resource Center. He has taught economics and journalism at the University of Minnesota, and directed the public process and indicators selection for the city of Minneapolis sustainability plan. Data from his farm and food economy studies can be found at <http://www.crcworks.org/rural.html>.