Getting to Know Your Local & Regional Foodshed

Eating locally grown foods is fundamental to creating a sustainable agricultural system. The closer to home we can get our food, the fresher and more nutritious it is, the less we spend on packaging and transportation, and the more we build resilience in our local communities.

Rural Nebraskans generally have a better understanding of where our food comes from (and oftentimes more immediate access to it). For the easily half of our state’s urban residents who are more removed from our food production sources, however, figuring out what’s ‘local’ can be tricky. Is it within 20 miles of where you live? Fifty miles? A hundred? How do you tell?

To try to answer this question, a group of sustainable agriculture advocates have spent the last six months developing a map of our urban ‘foodsheds’ based on Nebraska’s population demographics, distinctive geography and cultural history. Far from being the definitive word on the subject, the map is meant to serve as a ‘think piece’ to help people in Lincoln and Omaha get their bearings in our regional food system and cultivate a sense of place.

The county-line boundaries distinguishing ‘local’ and ‘regional,’ accordingly, are not rigid barriers intended to restrict participation and impede commerce. Rather, they should be seen as ‘mileposts’—alerting urban Nebraskans of the distance their food is traveling to their kitchens and dining tables (and of the untapped agricultural potential that lies close to home).

City dwellers, for instance, may always have to go a hundred or more miles to get the grains and meats needed for their diet. But if they’re going that far to get their eggs and fresh greens, we’re failing the ‘local’ test—because even in an urban environment, we can be raising backyard chickens and growing lettuce virtually year-round.

The goal though is nothing so grandiose as ‘self-sufficiency.’ Even the most dedicated locavore and fresh food enthusiast will never be able to go completely local. (Who of us Nebraskans is ready to forever forego coffee and chocolate, not to mention orange juice and olive oil?) But what we can strive for is a regionally based food system that makes optimal use of our agricultural and energy resources in the most sustainable manner possible.

Food, even in our technology-based world, is still our primary necessity. We still must eat to live. It is the hope of the “Local Food Shift” campaign that defining our local and regional foodsheds will provide one more tool for building a more resilient food system—beginning with what we can grow right in our own pots, yards and community gardens.