

A Discussion of “Buy Local” Philosophy

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Our county emphasizes the philosophy of “buy local.” The Climate Action/Energywise Plan states that a supporting action to promote greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction is to “Support the development of community garden programs in unincorporated communities” and to “create a local foods program to support food security, local economic development, health and other benefits.”

It further states that a measure of how well agriculture is doing in reducing greenhouse gases is to measure just “how many community gardens...” and “farmers markets” there are.

This is an interesting philosophy, but there are countless unanswered questions. What is the definition of “buy local”? What do consumers believe that “buy local” means? What does the county’s philosophy of “buy local” mean to our farmers and ranchers?

What is the definition of “buy local”? To some, this means buy food produced within a 100-mile radius. To others, local is within the county or state. Yet local to other markets has been that producers should be within seven hours of the market. There is no universal definition.

What does buying local mean to consumers? In asking this question, one finds a number of consumers assume that “local” equates to freshness, small-farmer grown, benefiting your own community or safer food. This may or may not be true. Again, there is no real answer.

So, what does “buy local” mean to our local farmers and ranchers? Here may be where we get to the crux of the issue from the producer’s point of view. If we look at “buy local” as the yardstick by which our San Luis Obispo County farmers and ranchers should produce to support reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, does this mean only to grow to support community gardens and farmers markets? Should we only transport our produce within the county or a 100-mile radius?

We all like our local farmers markets and enjoy the fresh produce. It is great to meet the producers and to have the community closeness experience. But, farmers markets do not serve the majority of our county’s consumers. Many of us have gardens, even cooperative or community gardens that we enjoy working in; we grow exactly what we want and it is truly fresh. But is it realistic to say that the production for the farmers market and growing community gardens are to be the yardstick by which to measure what or how much our local agricultural producers produce?

Here is one look at the issue. If we carry the county’s philosophy to the ultimate conclusion, and San Luis Obispo County farmers and ranchers produce food only sufficient for local consumption (to protect the county from excessive GHG), here is what we will find.

Based upon the amount of current agricultural production in San Luis Obispo County (from the Agricultural Commissioner’s 2010 Crop Report), the population of San Luis Obispo County, which is

250,000, and the per capita consumption of different foods (from the U.S. Census Bureau, Health and Nutrition Statistical Abstract of the United State: 2012) we find the following numbers.

Commodity	Amount Grown SLO Co.	Ave per capita Consumption	Percent Consumed in the County	Unconsumed Production
Avocados	45+ million lbs	2.5 lbs	1.3%	98.7%
Strawberries	171+ million lbs	7.2 lbs	1.05%	98.9%
Lemons	45+ million lbs	3.3 lbs	1.9%	98.1%
Oranges	15+ million lbs	9.1 lbs	14.9%	85.1%
Bell Peppers	19+ million lbs	9.8 lbs	12.6%	87.4%
Broccoli	161+ million lbs	5.9 lbs	0.96%	99.4%
Cabbage	23+ million lbs	7.5 lbs	8.09%	91.9%
Head Lettuce	109+ million lbs	16.2 lbs	3.7%	96.3%
Spinach	6+ million lbs	2.35 lbs	6.2%	93.8%
Squash	6+million lbs	4.5 lbs	18%	82.%
Beef	55+ million lbs	58 lbs	26%	74.%

Looking at these statistics, what do we propose to do with the 80-90+ percent of the produce that does not go to the local markets? Should the farmers cut back their production to match San Luis Obispo County consumption? If not, where should this remaining production go? Do we have a responsibility to produce food beyond our county boundaries? Do we need to change the commodities we grow to produce different crops for our local market based upon what consumer must buy from outside the area? Will our local farmers be able to make a living by only producing for local consumption or trying to grow new crops less suited to this area? What will it cost our county's consumers if agriculture reconfigures its production to only meet local needs?

Do we have any answers to these and all the other questions that still hang out there? Yes, I prefer a vine-ripened tomato. If the season is such that vine-ripened tomatoes cannot be grown locally do we not eat tomatoes? Maybe. What about bananas or coffee (although some of us should cut back on the caffeine)? What is the true answer, or is there one?

I guess where I am going is, we need more facts from all sides of the spectrum, growers, consumers, marketers before we jump headfirst into any one philosophy and promote that as our county's goal.