

Public Perception & Buying Habits of Locally Grown Food

NRCA Student: Chloe Hansen¹

Community Partners: Gabe Marmolejos², Land Heritage Coalition of Glastonbury

¹Connecticut River Academy; ²UConn Agricultural & Resource Economics



ABSTRACT

Globalization of food production and supply has led to the decline of local, small farms in the United States. However, the state of Connecticut has seen a sharp increase in the number of farms during the past decade. Americans have been more health conscious with their food as obesity rates have increased. Many health conscious Americans like to know where their food originated from, and how it was grown. As a result, public perception of small, local farms has been positive.

The purpose of this project was to understand public perception, purchasing habits, and awareness of food that is grown on local farms in central CT. A survey was developed and modified using a focus group. A survey was given to participants in East Hartford and Glastonbury. I observed that the public perceived local food as being healthier than food of unknown origin. Furthermore, I found that multiple factors influenced the purchase of local foods, such as cost, distance, discounts, and variety. In order for shoppers to buy local foods, there needs to be more awareness of where their food was grown. According to the survey, a majority of the public supports local farms and food, but cannot distinguish them from non-local foods.

GOAL

To evaluate the factors that affect the public's food purchasing decisions of locally grown foods in central CT.

METHODS

Data collection consisted of 2 steps:

1. Creation of survey
 - Created 35 survey questions on: 1) food purchasing habits, 2) healthy lifestyle choices, and 3) factors determining if a person buys local versus non-local.
 - Ran a focus group of 10 participants to receive feedback on the first version of the survey.
 - Modified survey based on focus group feedback. These 10 participants' answers were not included into the data.
2. Distribution of Survey
 - Staff from Connecticut River Academy and staff and students at Goodwin College were approached to take final survey.
 - 30 participants completed survey.

INTRODUCTION

For nations worldwide, food supply and production has become globalized (e.g. 68.7% food supplies comes from foreign sources, 69.3% of crops are grown for foreign markets; Khoury et al. 2016). But, globalization of food supply and production systems comes at a cost to local economies and global environments. Indeed, buying local food supports the economy of the town and state where consumers live. In Connecticut, agriculture is worth \$3.5 billion and provides more than 20,000 jobs in state (Bauman 2010). Furthermore, by supporting local food sources, we reduce negative impacts on the environment associated with large-scale food production and global transportation. For instance, food grown outside the United States travels, on average, 1,500 miles before it reaches its destination (Local Harvest 2016).

According to a census taken in 2012 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there were 5,977 farms in the state of Connecticut (Grant 2014). However, not everyone may be aware of these farms, where to purchase these local products or where their food from the grocery store originates.

RESULTS

Food Purchasing Habits (Table 1):

- Most are aware of locally-grown food sources in CT.
- Most know where to buy organic.
- Most have purchased local foods recently from numerous sources.

Perception of Local Foods & GMOs (Table 2):

- Almost all participants agreed that it is important to support local farms.
- Participants have a positive perception of food grown at local farms.
- Mixed perception on GMOs

Option Questions (Tables 3 & 4):

- Participants preferred locally grown groceries when:
 - Local food source was closer than supermarket;
 - 75% of shopping list completion was possible; and
 - Discounts were available.
- Participants preferred supermarket when:
 - Supermarket was closer than locally grown food;
 - Only 50% of shopping list completion that used a possible locally grown food source; and
 - Discounts were available.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of participants indicated a positive perception of locally grown food, such that ~80% claimed to have bought locally grown food in CT within the last 6 months and 97% agreed that supporting local farms is important.

An interesting finding that will require further investigation is the mixed public perception regarding the health value of genetically modified food (GMOs). There are valid arguments to supporting and opposing GMOs (Davies 2014). Supporters of GMOs claim that yield on crops that have been modified have increased. Opposition of GMOs claim that crops lack genetic diversity to fight off virus and pests. But these claims are not related to the direct nutritional value of GMOs to humans.

An important finding was that no single factor governed why people of central CT buy locally grown food; rather, many different factors (i.e. distance, discounts, and variety) affect the purchase of locally grown foods. This is important for a farmer who wants to increase sales. It is important to farmers who want their product on display, to acknowledge the factors shoppers consider when purchasing food.

Table 3. Percentage of participants who chose one of the following two options (n=26)

	Closest Locally Grown	Preferred Supermarket
Weekly grocery \$ per person in household	\$70 per person	\$40 per person
Distance to market	5 miles from home	10 miles from home
Grocery list completion rate per one stop	75%	100%
Discounts and promotions	Yes	No
Offers GMO food	No	Yes
Percentage of participants who chose these options (n=26):	62%	38%

Table 4. Percentage of participants who chose one of the following two options (n=26)

	Closest Locally Grown	Preferred Supermarket
Weekly grocery \$ per person in household	\$70 per person	\$50 per person
Distance to market	10 mile from home	5 miles from home
Grocery list completion rate per one stop	50%	60%
Discounts and promotions	No	Yes
Offers GMO food	No	No
Percentage of participants who chose these options (n=26):	27%	73%

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to the Land Heritage Coalition of Glastonbury, Inc. for providing me with a scholarship that allowed me to participate in the NRCA. Thank you to Michele Saulis for recommending me to NRCA. I also want to thank Laura and the whole UConn staff who helped making NRCA possible. Lastly, I want to thank my community partner, Gabe, for making my project possible.

Table 1. Response to Food Purchasing Habit Questions (n=30)

Survey Questions	Yes	No	I don't know
Have you bought food directly from a CT farmer in the last 6 months?	50%	50%	0%
Have you purchased organic food within the last month?	77%	16%	6%
Have you bought food grown in CT in the last 6 months?	83%	67%	10%
Do you know where to purchase food grown in your town?	67%	33%	N/A
Have you purchased food from a farmers market in CT within the last year?	56%	43%	0%

Table 2. Responses to Perception of Local Foods & GMOs Questions (n=30)

Survey Questions	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Do you think that local farms produce healthier quality food compared to food from a fast food restaurant?	93%	7%	0%
Do you think supporting local farmers is important?	97%	0%	3%
GMOs (genetically modified food) are healthy for consumption.	33%	13%	53%

REFERENCES

- Bauman, D. 2015. Connecticut Agriculture a \$3.5 Billion Industry. UConn Today. Retrieved February 25, 2017.
- Davies, P.J. 2014. In Support of GMO Crops. GMO Answers. Retrieved February 27, 2017.
- Grant, S. 2014. Let It Grow: Connecticut Leads Farm Growth In New England. Hartford Courant. Retrieved February 5, 2017.
- Khoury, C.K. et al. 2016. Origins of Food Crops Connect Countries Worldwide. Proceedings of the Royal Society B 283: 20160792.
- Local Harvest. 2016. Why Buy Local? Local Harvest. Retrieved February 25, 2017.