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Greenbelt Foundation poll highlights need for buy local
Let's find the markets -
where they can be found

"The support for local food in the Greenbelt is coming through loud and clear."

That, in the opinion of Burkhard Mausberg, the President of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, translates beyond the boundaries of the government-imposed Greenbelt. The poll, released late last year and conducted throughout the summer by Environics, shows that 88 per cent of the respondents read the labels to determine the origin of the food they are purchasing.

Eight in 10 prefer to buy locally-grown produce and more than half say they buy local at least once a week.

That was also the figure that Elbert van Donkersgoed, the Executive Director of the GTA Agricultural Action Committee, seemed to hinge upon as well when discussing local food in local markets at this year's South-west Agricultural Conference in Ridgetown, Ontario.

"Two-thirds of those surveyed were willing to pay more for

locally-grown foods," he said to a small audience. "The reasons vary from supporting local farmers, the local economy, and the belief that it's fresher. But the biggest thing is that consumers would buy more locally grown produce – if their retailers offered more of it."

van Donkersgoed said his organization put out a questionnaire at a couple of events, including this year's Royal Agricultural Fair and one of the biggest concerns amongst those who responded was that the "distance a food products travels" was a "concern" for consumers.

"Ninety per cent said travel was a concern," he said, about the 1513 participants at the Royal. But all of that being said about the importance of buying local, the reasons for support, and the environmental footprint, it still boils down to a couple of things: price and convenience.

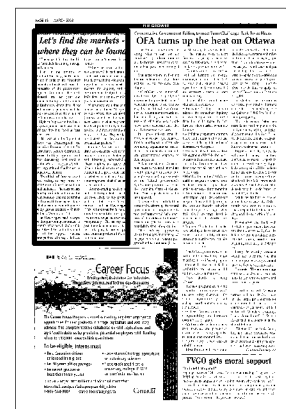
"Consumers want that convenience," he continued. "They want to shop where they are used to (grocery stores), but they want to

have access to what they want – like local produce, fruits, and vegetables – and they are finding that it is not available. They are looking at labels – and they want local or Canadian products."

Farmers' Markets are a big draw for consumers seeking local produce – both van Donkersgoed and Mausberg acknowledged. Those markets are more than niche – it is a chance to meet local farmers and it gives some clarity to whether or not buy local is something more "doable" as far as a label would go.

"An encouraging result of the poll is that respondents said they are more likely to buy products with a label saying 'Locally Grown'," said van Donkersgoed. "This is important for farmers to know because a lot of their products move through the food chain anonymously. The survey suggests there is an economic advantage in keeping the farmers' presence with the product all the way to the consumer."

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Let's find the markets - where they can be found

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"Since imported food is still filling supermarket shelves, the marketplace needs to respond by doing things like dedicating shelf space for locally-grown products."

And, it is the fact that Canadians still, by and large, import products that bothers van Donkersgoed the most.

"We are not feeding ourselves. We are significant net importers – as there is a \$6-billion gap between export and import," he said. "Obviously, that means there are opportunities for import replacements – and it is something we should be actively seeking."

His specific area, the GTA, is a hub of activity of for food and food-related industries. In Toronto alone, he said, there is \$16-billion worth of sales – making such dollar figures the second-largest economic force in the city and, quoting well-known information, making agriculture and agri-food the second largest economic force in the nation.

But, part of that growing Buy Local movement has led to a number "information" items being put forward by both municipalities and those non-governmental groups interested in promoting agriculture and its worth. From Farm Fresh brochures, showing local municipal residents where farmers are located – and what they are selling, to the Ministry of Tourism and its Savour Ontario program, there is much being done to fill the Buy Local gap. There are even magazines, like Edible Toronto, whose focus is on local food and local food production. And, the City of Toronto is considering adopting a local food policy that would see at least 50 per cent of the food it purchases for city-operated daycares, nursing

homes, and other city-run ventures to be locally grown and produced.

One of the bigger groups trying to make an impact between farmer and urban buyers is Local Food Plus, said van Donkersgoed.

“They are working to get farmers together with retailers and restaurants to provide that local food experience – something that the consumer wants,” he said. “Why should local food not be available at your grocery store, cafeterias, universities, and government institutions?”

van Donkersgoed said that the way to get more local food into the hands of consumers requires the re-building of the food-value chain “so that it works for locally grown, locally raised and locally processed food. We need to rethink about the traditional approach to our ethnic and cultural communities. In Toronto, there are whole parts of the city whose residents were not born in Canada. Their language, their culture is in contrast to what our countryside has – where the majority of people speak only English.

“We need to reach out to those in the city because they are not purchasing the food we have, traditionally, grown in the past.

These new residents want a taste of home – and we can provide for that market.”

Other ways to get both consumers and government to contribute to include re-thinking on-farm taxation so that municipalities are no longer compelled to tax (at industrial and commercial levels) value-added agriculture, instead, having the provincial government re-invest back in municipalities to off-set the agricultural/commercial loss; allow for small farm enterprise zones – a natural to encourage newly arriving immigrants an opportunity to farm while providing for future farmers; mixed use agricultural zones that recognize the importance of small business entrepreneurs who work with farmers and others in agriculture, such as welders and mechanics; and allow for new developments or programs encouraging locally grown food.

“We need to accommodate agriculture not view it as something in the way of progress,” he said. “We need to make it an experience – like what others are trying to do in both Europe and British Columbia. It is possible and it is something that provides a future

for our farmers.”

* * *

One poll result that may perk the interest of farmers is this: nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of central Ontarians strongly agree (34 per cent) and somewhat agree (38 per cent) that they would be willing to pay more for locally grown fruits and vegetables. A similar proportion strongly or somewhat agree that they would be willing to pay more for locally raised meat.

* * *

Want to really gage response? Look at Letters to the Editor in dailies and weeklies. More and more, there are often as many as two or three a week that reflect the growing movement towards proper labeling and buying local. For example, here are samples from a few found over the past month:

“I would like to know not only about goods in the produce section but also the country of origin of foods canned or packaged in Canada. By the way, are the dishes and kitchenware from China any safer than their toys?”

Or this one.

“Twenty-six per cent of the tomatoes sold in Ontario every year are imported. Considering all



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Storage Tips

Refrigerate celery immediately to preserve its crispness. Wrap in moist paper towels or store in a plastic bag. Celery can also be cut into smaller pieces and stored in a tray of water.

the forms of transportation needed to make this happen, that amounts to 221 metric tones of carbon compound emissions per year. . . By making small personal changes in our purchasing choices, we can all be a bit more environmentally friendly. The products we choose to purchase can have either a positive or negative impact on local food growers. Purchasing locally-grown products, when possible,

not only benefits the local food grower, but also places less demand on the transportation system, which means less pollution. . . Isn't it ironic that we need to think about returning to a way food was produced, bought and sold not that long ago as part of the solution to controlling climate change. Next time you are at a supermarket, take an extra second to observe the labels of the produce you are buying and you will notice they are from all over the world. Try to support the 'food localism' movement because, by doing so, you will be helping to reduce our ecological footprint and you will support the local farming community."

Or how about this one?

"I often check to see where fresh produce comes from. I've stood beside people picking apples or mushrooms from China and muttered aloud, 'These things are from China. I wonder if they will get recalled.' I have also muttered beside shoppers selecting wrongly labeled tomatoes, 'Wow, these things aren't from Canada at all. They're from Mexico.' . . . Our regulations are going to have to be tougher, better enforced, and also our individually displayed products, like sweet peppers and apples, are going to have to be better labeled if we are to have any hope of educating food consumers."