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Myth Buster^{#22}

An ongoing Land Stewardship Project series on ag myths and ways of deflating them.

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Myth: Buying locally produced food will automatically reduce your ecological footprint.

Fact:

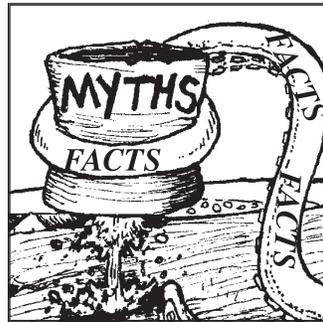
In the ongoing battle to reduce the carbon footprint (the amount of greenhouse gases produced) of each American household, our food system has become a big fat target. No wonder: one estimate is that the food

sector—from planting seeds to dumping table scraps—makes up some 25 percent of our negative impact on the environment. And because our food system has become globalized to the point where it travels on average 1,500 miles to get to say, Midwestern supper tables, how those vittles are transported has become a major focus of food's overall ecological impact (between 2007 and 2004, globalization increased by roughly 25 percent the average distance moved by food).

This has promoters of local food systems excited. Now, not only is locally produced and processed food good for the regional economy and better tasting, but it also utilizes less fossil fuels in the transportation process. Consumers are excited about this as well. A 2007 survey of 500 consumers done by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture found that almost half were willing to pay 10 percent to 30 percent more for food from supply chains that emit half as much greenhouse gas.

However, such a connection between local food, low food miles and lower greenhouse gas emissions is not as automatic as it would appear.

Recent studies have taken a close look at the food miles debate and found that how that food is produced and processed often has a bigger impact on the environment than whether it was flown in from South America or trucked in from the next county. For example, last spring the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* reported that transportation as a whole represents only 11 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions produced by our food system. Final delivery from the producer to the retailer accounts for 4 percent of all the greenhouse gas emissions emitted by our food system.



And it must be kept in mind that not all transportation is created equal. It actually may be more efficient to haul a semi-load of tomatoes from California to Minnesota than to rely on dozens of local farmers' pick-up trucks to transport the same amount of produce to customers. And if a lot of fossil fuels were used to cultivate, fertilize and spray that local produce, that can further increase its carbon footprint.

The fact is our globalized food system has evolved to rely on a globalized transportation system. As Land

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This Myth Buster is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 612-722-6377 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.

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Stewardship Project surveys in southeast and western Minnesota show, it's often easier to get food transported from the other side of the world than from the next county. Intra-regional transportation has been replaced by interstate trucking, barges and intercontinental flights.

This is not to say that we should ignore food miles. After all, as far as greenhouse gas emissions are concerned, for an individual household a completely "localized diet" is like driving 1,000 fewer miles annually, according to the Environmental Science and Technology study.

There are plenty of compelling environmental, economic and even social reasons to consume locally produced food. But giving too much weight to the food miles argument may be a mistake. Also, if we always assume local food has a smaller carbon footprint, we may lose the incentive to fix our regional transportation systems. And all of the other good reasons to support local food systems make it imperative we deal with the issue of transportation.

Already, farmers in different parts of the Midwest are pooling resources so that they can move their product to market in larger, fuel-efficient trucks. They're even utilizing communal refrigerated storage, which can use much less energy than dozens of individual on-farm coolers. It turns out even wasted food can be a major producer of greenhouse gases when it produces methane in a festering landfill.

Sustainable agriculture and energy experts are increasingly calling for a look at the entire ecological lifespan of food, rather than focusing on just one or two things like food miles.

For example, grass-based beef and dairy farms have a much smaller environmental impact than their grain-based, factory farm counterparts. Organic vegetable operations that utilize conservation tillage are also friendlier to the environment. Eating in season reduces the need for energy-hungry greenhouses and refrigeration. Packaging and processing is also a major issue when it comes to ecological impact, and fresh, local food requires less of both.

This is a situation where knowledge is power. Better labeling is one way to increase that power. And as any consumer who belongs to a Community Supported Agriculture operation or gets their produce, meat and dairy products at a local farmers' market knows, meeting the faces behind the food is another way to increase one's carbon footprint IQ.

More information

- To read the recent *Environmental Science and Technology* article, "Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States," see <http://pubs.acs.org/cgi-bin/sample.cgi/es-thag/2008/42/i10/pdf/es702969f.pdf>.
- You can take a personal ecological footprint quiz at www.footprintnetwork.org/gfn_sub.php?content=myfootprint.
- Check out LSP's "Racking up the Food Miles" fact sheet at www.landstewardshipproject.org/pdf/factsheets/11_food_miles_2008.pdf.



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