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NEW WEST FEATURE

Challenges of a Colorado Local Food Initiative

Even in a county that's largely supportive of local farmers, getting a quarter of your produce locally can be difficult.

By Brendon Bosworth, 5-12-11

Mark Guttridge peeled back the white fabric draped across the floor of his hoop house, a greenhouse roughly 100 feet long, 30 feet wide and 12 feet high, with plastic pulled tight across its metal frame. He unveiled three neat rows of leafy vegetables – dark green spinach, bright lettuce and bok choy obviously thriving in the tunnel-like warm environment.



Mark Guttridge. Photo by Brendon Bosworth.

"We just planted these in the last week of January," Guttridge said.

It was a cool afternoon in early April, with clouds hovering over Guttridge's 30-acre Ollin Farms. The farm faces a suburban development and is flanked by Highway 119, which connects Longmont with Boulder.

Guttridge is a regular at the Boulder County Farmers' Markets, where he and his wife Kena sell their produce on Wednesdays and Saturdays in the warmer months. He also sells directly from a stand at his farm and supplies 120 families signed up for his community supported agriculture program with boxes of vegetables each week.

Guttridge's operation is an example of a localized food chain. His vegetables are grown, sold and bought within Boulder County's borders.

Besides locally grown produce being fresher than imported food and healthier than industrially processed foods, there is also a social value attached to buying and selling local food, Guttridge explained.

"There are obvious health benefits, there are obvious flavor benefits, but the subtle thing that drives it all, to me, is this idea of community and being able to share things with your neighbors," he said.

Building up Boulder County's local food system – increasing the capacity for food to be grown, processed, distributed and sold within the county – is a goal of Boulder-based nonprofit organization Transition Colorado. The organization's outlook is informed by the global Transition movement, a grassroots effort tied to the Transition Network in the United Kingdom and focused on strengthening communities dealing with what Michael Brownlee, cofounder of Transition Colorado, refers to as a "convergence of global crises."

With his silvery hair pulled into a neat ponytail, 64-year-old Brownlee has a contemplative mien that melds with an unmasked pessimism about these impending crises: peak oil (the point at which global oil production hits its apex and begins to decline, resulting in rising fuel prices), global warming and economic instability.

Re-localizing the food economy dovetails with localizing manufacturing and energy production and is key to curbing consumption of resources, he said during an interview around a small conference table at the organization's headquarters, a three-level house in Boulder.

"We're not saying we want everything to be produced within a 100-mile radius," he said. "We're saying we want to shrink the local food shed, our food shed, to be as local as possible."

Transition Colorado has a goal of steering the county toward 25 percent food localization by 2020. To outline the economic benefits of achieving this goal and map out the strategies for reaching it, Brownlee has enlisted economist and author Michael Shuman to compile a report on the county's food

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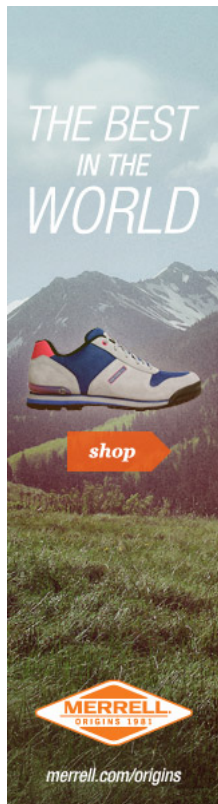
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economy.

Shuman, who holds a bachelor's in economics and international relations as well as a law degree from Stanford University, has written similar reports for the state of New Mexico and a cluster of 16 counties surrounding Cleveland in Northeast Ohio. He is the director of research at Cutting Edge Capital, a B-corporation that helps small and mid-size businesses raise capital. He is also director of research and development for the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, a Washington-state-based organization that supports and connects networks of locally owned, independent businesses across the country. The alliance incorporates about 22,000 businesses in the United States, Shuman said over the phone.

Twenty-five percent localization means that the gap between the current level of food production and complete self-reliance – the point where the county is producing enough to meet local demand – is closed a quarter of the way, with no drop in exports, Shuman explained.

While localization involves shrinking the distance food travels from its origin to consumers' plates, it also involves increasing local ownership of enterprises in the local food system, he said.

"One of the things that I try to emphasize in these studies is that there's a temptation to focus on fresh food and how much of fresh food that is grown gets into consumers' hands and that's the end of the study," said Shuman.

"And in point of fact, that part of the food system is a tiny percent. The vast majority of the food system is restaurants and grocery stores and the distribution points and the transportation system and the purchasing from institutions. When you start to take those things into account, you have a much richer picture of what your strengths and weaknesses are."

For Boulder County, Shuman will use an economic modeling tool that is used by government agencies and universities to calculate how a move to 25 percent localization could benefit the county.

In the counties he assessed in Northeast Ohio, which have a combined population of 4.1 million, Shuman calculated that a move to 25-percent food localization by 2020 could result in the creation of close to 28,000 new jobs. Theoretically, this means that one in eight of the more than 214,000 unemployed residents could find work, he said.

Shuman's Ohio study projects that the shift would generate \$868 million in additional wages each year and bring in more than \$100 million dollars in taxes for the region.

Shuman's report identifies various challenges to achieving this goal in Ohio. These include acquiring land for new farms, training staff for new food businesses and promoting a culture of local food buying among consumers. The study also highlights the need for a formidable \$1 billion in capital for building infrastructure and getting businesses off the ground.

Brownlee is under no illusions as to the challenges facing his organization's efforts in Boulder County. Besides upping the amount of food grown within the county, other changes include building food-processing facilities, such as canneries and slaughterhouses, and creating a better system for distributing food from local farms, he explained.

A benefactor who prefers to stay anonymous, but lives in Boulder County, has donated \$1.5 million to start a fund to support the development of small farms and food processing, distribution and storage businesses in the county that are fundamental to the food system, Brownlee said.

"We're also looking for ways to expand this fund," explained Brownlee.

"Following the slow money principle, we want to encourage increasing local investment in the local food system."

Brownlee admitted that the region's short summer growing season makes it tough for farmers to produce a variety of crops year-round, but said growers are using greenhouses and experimenting with hydroponics to combat that problem. At the same time, there are some crops, such as citrus fruits and bananas, that are unlikely to ever be grown in the county on a large scale, he said.

In fact, bananas account for more than half of all the fresh fruit imported to the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They are brought in from Guatemala, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia and Honduras. In general, fruit is something that tends to travel long distances to supermarkets. Nearly half of the fresh fruit Americans eat is imported, with 30 percent of fresh and frozen fruit shipped in from Mexico, according to the department's 2010 figures.

A trip to a mainstream supermarket is a reminder of this situation. Outside the Whole Foods on Boulder's Pearl Street, a sign indicates that the organic

cantaloupes on sale are grown in Mexico. Labels on fresh produce inside the store reveal that organic oranges and tomatoes also hail from Mexico. Many of the leafy greens, especially the organic variety, come from California.

Whole Foods does buy and sell local products, but defines local as something that takes seven hours or less to travel to the store, explained Tawny Duckworth, marketing team leader at the Boulder store.

Duckworth said she could not share the breakdown of how much local food Whole Foods buys and sells, but gave a tour of the shop and pointed out the locally made products. These include certain brands of pasta, milk, yogurt, cheeses, eggs, breads, hummus, lamb and two types of fish – rainbow trout and tilapia.

For fresh produce the local season runs from the beginning of June to the middle of September, Duckworth explained. During that period Whole Foods sells more than 4,000 pounds of tomatoes each week from Dooley Farms in Longmont, she said.

“We can’t be 100-percent local,” said Duckworth. “We can offer it and highlight it and go big with it to the best of our ability, but at the end of the day we do have to offer things from across the globe.”

Also limiting the variety of produce available in Boulder County : More than half the farmland is used for pasture for livestock and 40 percent is used for growing crops, according to the 2007 agriculture census.

Among the crops that can grow well in the region’s climate are sugar beets, corn, barley and wheat, said David Bell, manager of Boulder County Parks and Open Space agriculture division, in a telephone interview. The county has 25,000 acres of Open Space land, 13,000 of which is irrigated, available for farmers, who can lease the land, said Bell. This accounts for 18 percent of total farmland in the county.

The larger farmers will probably tell you there’s a reason they’re growing these crops – because they’ve proven themselves over time, he said.

“Our farmers aren’t actually growing what the consumer wants a lot of the time,” Bell explained. “They’re growing wheat and the consumer wants flour. They’re growing cattle and the consumer wants hamburgers. So, we need that middle piece – that processing – that piece that helps convert the raw product to something they can use.”

Reliable figures on the amount of food that is grown and bought within the county’s borders are hard to come by, largely because most calculations are based on data from the 2007 agriculture census. One study [\[PDF\]](#) indicates that Boulder County residents spend \$662 million on food each year, and less than \$62 million goes to food grown within the county. Food systems analyst Ken Meter, president of the [Crossroads Resource Center](#), a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis, did the study for the Colorado State University Extension. Meter calculated that county farms sell just 0.1 percent of the food local people need directly to consumers.

Another study puts this number far higher. About 16 percent of what Boulder County residents spend on fresh produce each year goes directly to farmers, according to a recently released [Colorado State University Extension report](#). The report’s figure is based on estimates of spending derived from a national survey of shoppers’ preferences for where they purchase fresh produce.

Only about 2.5 percent of county residents’ total spending on produce goes directly to farmers at the farmers’ markets, said Adrian Card, an extension agent at Colorado State University in Longmont.

Card’s job involves educating and advising small farmers. He is also the coordinator of the [Boulder County Food and Agricultural Policy Council](#). This 13-member body advises Boulder County’s commissioners on agricultural policy, with a focus on promoting a locally based food and agricultural system.

Market farms – those that sell at the farmers’ markets and through community supported agriculture programs – account for a small amount of total agricultural output in the county, Card explained.

“You could put them all on one 500-acre farm, with probably 100 or 200 acres to spare,” he said.

Due to the United States’ supplies of shale oil and natural gas, Card does not share Brownlee’s misgivings about an energy-constrained future – which he said is sometimes used as a misleading motivation for food localization.

He is, however, “on board” with the premise of trying to foster an enhanced local economy, but maintains that it’s important to have a primary export economy that brings new dollars into the area.

“When we make purchases outside of the area we’re losing dollars, so that cycling of purchases locally is a good idea,” he said. “If we can sell externally and buy internally that’s probably one of the better case

scenarios.”

Producers who are engaged in wholesale, commodity-type production are doing something just as valid as those growing vegetables for sale at farmers’ markets and through community shared agriculture programs, he said.

County boundaries are pretty arbitrary in an economy and the food shed, Card said. He gave an example of people who argue for a diet based on food sourced within 100 miles from where they live.

“For most of us in Colorado that’s pretty limiting. It doesn’t even get us Western Slope peaches in Boulder County,” he said. “You know, what about 500 miles? What about a broader view on things?”

The best thing to do is to make food localization a market-driven proposition, he said.

“If it pencils out for all parties involved and the transaction makes sense, if we can help facilitate that, that’s great, but if we’re trying to push a square peg into a round hole – probably there’s not going to be a lot of winners in that scenario.”

Brownlee maintains that one indication of an increased awareness of food localization in the county is that the number of restaurants actively buying local food has increased from eight in 2006 to more than 80. He could not quantify exactly how much food each establishment purchased from local growers, especially since orders change with what’s seasonably available, but said that Transition Colorado sourced its information directly from farmers.

Brownlee envisions a future where many small farms, ranging from 4 acres to 50 acres in size, provide for the needs of Boulder County’s residents. This is a vision that resonates with Guttridge.

“The biggest dig against local and organic is, ‘You’ll never feed the world’ because you can’t do this kind of farming on 1,000 acres,” said Guttridge.

“My response is, we don’t need three 1,000 acre farms. We need 1,000 3-acre farms. And that’s how you feed the world – start off feeding your neighborhood and keep growing it from there. I mean I have no interest in feeding the world. I have an interest in feeding Boulder County,” he said.

On a Saturday morning on the second weekend of April at the Boulder County Farmers’ market, Guttridge and his wife were doing a brisk trade in the lettuce, spinach and bok choy they had harvested from the hoop house. The couple brought 300 pounds of leafy greens to the market and by lunchtime had sold at least three-quarters of it.

One of Guttridge’s regular customers, Israel Anderson, who runs a data recovery business in Boulder, said he looks to buy local produce out of concern for the environment. Although the 32-year-old New Zealand native doesn’t believe in global warming, he worries about the toxic nature of fossil-fuel pollutants.

“I buy from farmers, whenever I can, where I know what they are doing or I’ve seen their farms,” he said. “I know where the food is coming from and know that the person behind it is totally dedicated to producing the cleanest, most pure food available.”

A hobbyist naturopath and advocate of a raw-food diet, Anderson was preparing for a 20-day raw-food “intensive cleanse” the following day. He admitted there were some foods he requires, such as fruits, that could not be bought from local farmers so early in the growing season.

“There are compromises that you have to make,” he said. “As you want to be a true local foodist, your diet is going to be a little limited. You know, no avocados – I can’t live without avocados.”

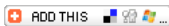
Pushing her daughter in a blue stroller, Mary Karr-Petras left Guttridges’s stand with a \$6 bag of spinach. The 40-year-old editor of Quilter’s Newsletter said she visits the farmers’ market once a month or every six weeks, depending on her cash flow, and likes supporting the local farmers.

The produce tastes better, since it’s fresher and not picked before it’s ripe, like imported fruits and vegetables, she said.

“The peaches and the tomatoes here in the summer time are so much better than what you get in the supermarket,” she said.

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Comments

By Tom Prugh, 5-13-11

Great article. A question that's always bothered me is prompted by this paragraph:

Twenty-five percent localization means that the gap between the current level of food production and complete self-reliance – the point where the county is producing enough to meet local demand – is closed a quarter of the way, with no drop in exports, Shuman explained.

If we now live in a nonlocalized market that imports and exports foods from far away, then localizing the foodshed will increase jobs here--but decrease them in the places we now import food from. So, if every place wants to do as Shuman suggests--localize but not reduce exports--how can that possibly work? Something's got to give...

By Nick, 6-23-11

It's always great to see other local food initiatives taking root (pun intended) across the country. Here in Flagstaff, AZ we are starting a large local foods initiative. However, we too have the challenges of a short growing season which keeps local food prices very high. Check out our blog post about our local foods initiative! <http://bit.ly/m2ssGR>

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