

Organic Agriculture Gives Communities an Economic Boost

By Vera Strader

We already know organic and locally-grown food is good for our environment and good for our bodies. Organic food is produced by growers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and conservation of soil and water in order to ensure environmental quality for future generations.

Now a new book, published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis and the U.S. Federal Reserve Board of Governors, shows that local and organic farming also help revitalize rural economies. The “creation of new or the enhancement of existing jobs and businesses provides a path for economic growth” states the book’s forward.

(www.farmforum.net/2017/08/04/economic-benefits-of-organic-agriculture-highlighted-in-new-federal-reserve-book)

The book also includes articles by experts from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, universities and nonprofits. The chapter on organic agriculture notes that on the average, median household income rises by over \$2,000 in counties with high organic activity. Increased organic agriculture helps create local lower and middle-income jobs and at the same time supports businesses. Growers can sell higher value crops and spend more money in their communities, stimulating the economy. This frequently results in the conversion of more land to organic.

A 2016 study found that Sacramento area farmers who sold at least some of their produce directly to consumers purchased approximately 89 percent of their materials locally, compared with 45 percent by larger, wholesale-oriented farms. For each million in revenue, local farms created nearly 32 local jobs, compared with 10.5 such jobs for those that used exclusively wholesale channels.

A “TECTONIC SHIFT” IN CONSUMER PREFERENCE is occurring reflected in the USDA campaign “Know your farmer, know your food.” When you buy directly from the farmer, you are establishing a connection between the grower and the eater. Sales to local food customers also reduces the distance food is shipped enhancing freshness, nutrition, and lowering costs.

Interest in local food is no longer just for “foodies.” Regional food has become a major driver of retail and restaurant offerings. In one survey, locally-sourced meat and seafood topped the list of “hot” restaurant trends; produce was third on the list. Two-thirds of surveyed restaurant visitors were more likely to eat at an establishment that offers local food. Local food can also be sold through school lunch programs, farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Organic food is grown without the use of most pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge or genetically modified organisms. The USDA has established three categories for organics. “One-hundred Percent Organic” means that the product is made with 100% organic ingredients. “Organic” means the inclusion of 95% organic ingredients, and “Made with Organic Ingredients” designates a minimum of 70% organic ingredients. To convert land to full organic status is a three-year process involving building up soil fertility and eliminating pesticides from the land.

The average age of U.S. farmers now exceeds 58, underscoring the need for new people to enter the field either as a full or part-time career. USDA grants, loans and technical assistance have supported more than 29,000 local food projects across the country assisting both established and new organic growers.

You can find an exceptional list of “Ten Reasons to Buy Local Food and Organic Food” at www.organicconsumers.org/news/ten-reasons-buy-local-food-organic-food. Organic food systems are a win-win for everyone, from farmer to diner, to the meadowlarks in the fields and bees buzzing in the orchards. Good food, sustainably and humanely produced, should have a place at every table.

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