

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Ask Laura Newsletter Column
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Q: I hear so much about 'local foods' and 'local food systems'. What exactly does that mean?

A: An excellent question, but one not so easily answered. The bottom line is that there is currently no one 'set definition' for local foods and local food systems. Many think of both in terms of geography, for example location, region or distance that 'food' or agricultural products travel to market. Others may think of local in terms of farm size, for example small or mid-scale farms; or type of market, for example farmers' markets or community supported agriculture. Still others, when attempting to characterize local foods and food systems, may include production method, for example organic or sustainable agriculture. One thing most everyone agrees on, however, is that local foods and local agricultural products and markets are part of a growing segment of the overall agricultural industry. That said, it is also important to note that local foods and markets are still small in value when compared to the total value of all agricultural production in California (and the U.S.).

Recent reports highlight the increasing consumer demand for local foods and products marketed. Consumers express many reasons for this demand, which range from wanting to know the source of the farm products they purchase, the quality and variety of the products, and a wish to support local farmers and businesses, among other reasons. The March 2013 Economic Report of the President mentions local food and farm businesses and states that "local goods are also good for the economy", citing a USDA study indicating that local produce farms and markets support higher numbers of jobs than do those that market products outside the local or regional economy.

In addition to the snapshot of local foods and food systems noted above, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program at UC Davis works on issues and topics related to communities and food systems. They define a sustainable community food system as "a collaborative network that integrates sustainable food production, processing, distribution, consumption and waste management in order to enhance the environmental, economic, and social health of a particular place".

If you are interested in learning more about local foods and food systems, here are links to some of the reports mentioned above:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cea/economic-report-of-the-President/2013>

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err128.aspx>

<http://webarchives.cdlib.org/sw1tx36512/http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err97/>

<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/sfs/def>