

IDEA #4: CREATE A LOCAL FOOD BILL¹

Colleen Kimmett[©]

Most governments tend to view farming as an activity best left to market forces. Sure, it will drop some dough on trade missions (to *help sell* made-in-B.C. beef to Asia) or adaptation (like helping Okanagan growers *replace* apple trees with grape vines) but to intentionally shape a sovereign food system? Isn't that, like, Maoism? The state of Illinois sees things a little differently. Facing an economy devastated by the recession and collapse of the auto industry, the state has actually embraced its strong agricultural base as an economic life raft. The city of Detroit's burgeoning urban farming scene has been widely covered by major publications like the *New York Times* and *Fast Company*.

And in August 2009, the Illinois House of Representatives *passed* a less publicized but indeed landmark piece of legislation that could help create a whole bunch of Detroit's across the state. It's called the Local Food, Farms and Jobs Act (House Bill 33990) and it put into law three main policies to help create a strong state-wide food system. First, the law creates a council that is funded to implement a "grown-in-Illinois" certification and labelling program. Second, the law creates an arms-length agency to help identify gaps in, and support, the infrastructure requirements of an in-state food distribution system. Third, the law directs all state agencies (hospitals, schools, prisons) to purchase 20 per cent of their food locally by 2020, even if they have to pay a premium for it.

The act is the result of two years of work by a state-commissioned advisory council whose first question was to figure out why, in a state home to 76,000 farms, only four per cent of the food consumed there is actually from there. What it found was that, while local food systems are flourishing at a community level (think farmers' markets and CSA's) large commercial buyers find it hard to source local food in the quantities they require. "Illinois' predominant farm and food system," the task force *found* "is designed to serve distant markets, not link farm production with in-state markets."

Local Food Plus: A Model for Canada

North of the border, an organization called Local Food Plus (LFP) (<http://localfoodplus.ca/>) is trying to tackle this same problem with a similar approach: identify local sustainable farmers, and connect them with large commercial buyers. LFP has created a certification and labeling system for local sustainable food, and it's made some inroads with large institutions like the University of Toronto (which has one residence buying 22 per cent of its food from local sustainable sources) and the City of Markham, which recent signed on to procure 10 per cent of its food from local sources.

"These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," executive director Stahlbrand *told* The Tyee. "We write the language that goes into the requests for proposals for food service contracts. It helps to scale up the whole system, it helps to educate the public through these institutions, it's a part of how these institutions can meet their climate change requirements." But it's all voluntary; nobody has to work with Local Food Plus, and it definitely requires a champion from within the organization that is willing to fight for this policy, says Stahlbrand. LFP is also targeting individual consumers with a recently-launched campaign

¹ The Tyee, December 23, 2010

called *Buy It to Vote*, which asks people to shift 10 dollars a week of what they'd spend on groceries to local, sustainable food.

"If 10,000 people in B.C. were to do that... you would have offset enough greenhouse gas emissions to be the equivalent of taking 400 cars off the road for good," says Stahlbrand. "You would have pumped enough new money into the local economy to create 100 new jobs." New jobs? Dollars pumped into the local economy? Lowered greenhouse gas emissions? Sounds like a great campaign strategy for B.C.'s new premier. But instead of just paying lip service to the province's farmers, let's get him or her to put it in writing.