

Food Forward MI: The Food Safety Edition

Have you ever watched the news and heard of a spinach recall or wondered how a melon could hurt you?

This past weekend my family and I went out to a restaurant and after staring at raw meat on the main floor through most of our meal, I finally had to ask for a server to clear it before we reached the dessert course. So what are food safety precautions and is hand washing and sanitary food preparation technique enough? How much trust can Michiganders place in those who grow or raise our food (let alone prepare it) and what does this have to do with community development?

Food safety is an important piece of local food system development with not only health implications, but also economic and environmental consequences.

As communities begin to see value in local food procurement and increase their demand, a bottleneck can start to form. In last month's blog food hubs were discussed as a way to aggregate and distribute local food products at a greater volume and more efficiently than farm markets. However, as this volume increases, standards must be put in place – similar to chain stores such as Meijer and WalMart - to ensure quality control. At the same time, participating in this type of certification can be too costly for many small and mid-sized farmers ultimately keeping them out of the wholesale market. Due to this, many small and mid-sized farmers are unable to grow their business to meet institutional local food demand. Unfortunately, this also means that the strawberries in a child's cafeteria or salad greens at the local hospital are likely shipped from out of state with additional carbon emissions, decreased freshness and increased preservatives.

When you buy at a farmers market you are making a trust call based on the vendor's appearance and/or your relationship to them.

Making a purchase at a local farmers market is good for the vendor and typically good for the consumer. There is an implied trust and intangibles are exchanged such as sense of community and goodwill. However, there are not food safety standards present other than Cottage Food laws. Cottage Food law allows small-time producers to create "low-risk" food products in their own homes using their own ovens and counters. "Low-risk" items include baked, pickled, dried and other types of food products. They may also sell fresh, raw fruits and vegetables. In contrast, state law requires larger scale producers to create their products in state licensed kitchens and cut raw fruits and vegetables must have been prepared in a licensed kitchen. Including farm markets, road side stands and direct sales to consumers and retail outlets, Michigan ranks number four in the nation with \$58.8 million in consumer sales according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Small scale "buy local" economic impacts.

According to the Consumers' Price Index, on average, the farm market purchase per person is \$.56, which includes both seasonal and non-seasonal items. Today, there are at least 339 farmers markets of all varieties in Michigan. While many of the state's markets are seasonal – running from the spring to fall – there are also a number of year-round markets. A study of southern and western US farmers markets have shown that 140 jobs were created in a single year that could be attributed to market activity. The USDA also found that 5.4 jobs were created per farmers market (Service Report 73). While these dollars add up, it is not necessarily enough to help small scale farmers build their capacity to enter new markets with the additional burdens of food safety policies and procedures that may require further management staff supports.

GroupGAP – a new way for small and mid-sized farmers to share the cost and risk of food safety certification.

Due to federal regulations (2011 Food Safety Modernization Act) and pressure from large buyers, it seems that regardless of size, in the near future all farms may be required to have some type of food safety certification. Getting out in front of this, Michigan was one of six pilot states to participate in a Group Good Agricultural Practices (GroupGAP)

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study conducted by the Wallace Center at Winrock International in partnership with the USDA. In Michigan, this effort was led by the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems in partnership with the Upper Peninsula Food Exchange and Michigan Integrated Food and Farming Systems. Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) are those specific methods of growing and processing agricultural commodities to reduce incidence of food borne illness. Typically, to become GAP certified, a farm incurs a fair expense, must maintain significant paperwork and conduct certain on-farm and paperwork-related processes. Combined, this can be a barrier for entry into the institutional market for farms less than 100 acres. Through the pilot findings of the GroupGAP study, researchers noted that these on-farm and quality management system audit expenses can be shared amongst group participants thereby reducing barrier to wholesale market entry for small farmers. As of the end of 2015, the USDA is currently working to unroll GroupGAP nationally for 2016. Through models such as this, small and medium scale farms are better able to enter institutional markets, build their business and reliability while increasing local, healthy food access.

How does increased food safety improve community well-being?

As customers have less time to seek out groceries, local food aggregation and distribution will become more important. Trust bonds will be replaced with food safety certification so that foods may be traced down to the date and row of harvest so that if a recall is necessary a small farmer will sustain less damaging impacts to profit. Ultimately, this will help reduce the bottle neck for local food procurement and allow more farmers to enter the market additionally improving local access for institutional sourcing. This supply chain development is the necessary foundation from which to get a locally grown apple to a child's plate within the K-12 system or in a senior center's cafeteria. However, it is not possible without supporting policy and decision making at the governmental level. Check back next month for federal and state actions adopted to help build local food infrastructure and access.