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Task force urges local food production

Illinois consumers hungry for local and organic foods

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Farmers in Illinois have no problem feeding their pigs and cows with food they produce, but most humans in the state get their food from elsewhere.

A small group of legislators, educators and farmers are fighting to amend this problem.

Illinois currently imports 90 percent of its food, a fact Leslie Duram took issue with during a gathering Saturday at the Dunn-Richmond Economic Development Center to offer ideas and solutions.

"Often times food may travel as far as 1,500 miles or more before it reaches our kitchen," Duram said. "We need to keep money here in Illinois."

Duram, a professor of geography and environmental sciences as well as a member of the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force, said legislation is beginning to catch up to the issue.

The Illinois Food, Farms and Jobs Act of 2007 was passed unanimously in August to develop a plan for expanding and supporting a state local and organic food system that would increase locally grown food and organic food production.

A multitude of our food is imported from not only California, but countries such as Mexico and Honduras, where health standards tend to be lax.

"Only half percent of the foods that enter our state are inspected," Duram said. "Chemicals we may have banned here may have been used over there."

The majority of food grown in Illinois is used for animal feed and fructose as well as shipped to other states and countries, said Bridget Holcomb, a member of the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. The organization, located in Springfield, promotes farmer education and local food production.

Though there is a growing demand for local and organic foods, farmers don't receive government subsidies to grow crops such as spinach and strawberries that people consume.

Holcomb said it is relatively easy to grow a variety of food domestically even in the winter by using a "hoop house," or cheap greenhouse with a plastic-covered frame.

"Anything you find in a produce aisle can be grown in Illinois," she said.

She said that there are currently 73,000 farms in Illinois, down from 250,000 farms a century ago. The vast stretches of fields dotting the landscape produce inedible foods for humans, as most farmers only have access to corn -non-sweet corn- and soy, she said.

In 10 to 20 years, half the farmers in Illinois will be retired, she said. A looming problem will be finding replacements for the current farmers, or else risk further farms disappearing from Illinois.

Illinois ranks fifth in the nation for lost farmland, according to

<http://www.normeconomics.com>.

Holcomb said consumers purchasing foods from our local farmers makes logical sense because the food is more nutritious, there is less fear of contamination and it can help create jobs in other areas such as processing and distribution.

"The federal policy needs to change," she said. "We need to start providing subsidies for farmers interested in producing edible products for the consumer. We need to implement a 'field to fork' policy."

Holcomb said she hopes the meeting would gather enough local interest and local expertise to encourage local food production and present change in the current laws in the state legislature.

"Our next step will be presenting our case in Springfield," she said. "We have many ideas and perspectives ... hopefully some good will come of this."

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