

A fresh look at fresh food

By Karen Binder, the southern

CARBONDALE - Most food in the U.S. travels an average of 1,500 miles from "farm to fork."

This fact helped inspire about 50 local farmers and stakeholders in area food production into sharing ideas about how they can work with the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force. The idea is to put more and fresher locally grown and organic food into the region's grocery stores and farmer's markets, restaurants, schools and even the prisons. From dieticians and a chef to growers, the group offered their thoughts on production, infrastructure, consumer affairs and education.

The task force is the result of the [Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act](#), an economic development bill signed into law in August 2007. The goal of act is to significantly improve the way food is grown, bought and sold throughout Illinois, task force spokesman Jerry Bradley said. The three local task force members are Leslie Duram, an SIUC professor and author; Chuck Paprocki, manager of Dayempur Farm near Cobden, and Tom Grant, a local grower.

Saturday's gathering at the Dunn-Richmond Economic Development Center in Carbondale is the first of six state-wide "listening sessions" designed to collect first-hand feedback, explained task force spokesman Jerry Bradley. Also attending were two forces behind the legislation: Jim Braun, a Springfield lobbyist with the Illinois Farmer-Consumer Coalition, and Debbie Hillman, a member of Evanston Food Policy Council in the Chicago.

"We really want to know what you want. You are the experts. What should we be addressing according to you," Duram told the group.

Suggestions varied by business interest, experience and opinion. While one farmer suggested that the task force's mission statement reflect "local food movement" values, another asked how the state could offer initiatives to commercial grocery stores, such as Kroger's and Schnucks, to buy local products.

Commenting that some children believe French fries and ketchup are vegetables, Debbie Buchheit of Lick Creek Beef stressed the importance of nutrition education and how important school lunches are in many students' diets.

By September, the task force will turn a report with recommendations for the foundation of an enhanced state-based food system that will create new jobs, revitalize rural economies and provide greater access to locally-grown food.

"There is plenty of opportunity for growth in this particular sector of the Illinois economy," Bradley noted in a statement.

Studies have shown that 95 percent of the organic produce consumed in Illinois is grown elsewhere.

"Southern Illinois has much at stake when it comes to expanding access to local produce and creating a viable, lasting local-to-regional food infrastructure. Studies consistently show that poverty and a lack of access to quality food is far too common in the lower portion of the state," he said.

karen.binder@thesouthern.com / 351-5080@thesouthern.com / 351-5080