



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Local food: Another food fad or food of the future?**

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When anticipating the future, many experts simply examine trends of the past and project them into the future—as if trends continue indefinitely. However, one of the most fundamental principles of science is that everything on earth tends to cycle—whether physically, ecologically, economically, or socially (Culotta, 1991; Pool, 1991). All trends eventually stall out and reverse di-

rection. Some apparent aberrations or blips in trends turn out to be harbingers of impending reversals. Some see the reemergence of farmers markets and popularity of locally grown foods as a passing fad or a blip in a continuing trend toward the globalization of the food system. Others see the local food movement as a harbinger of fundamental change.

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*Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their innate tendencies toward individual self-interest. He wrote of “two tyrannies” in English government, the king and the aristocracy. The two tyrannies in our government today are the market economy and the corporate oligarchy. The pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Together, they have overthrown our democracy and are recolonizing our communities. In rural America, agricultural industrialization has been a primary means of economic colonization. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help awaken people to the need for a new American Revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize our rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are at <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/public/journals/1/Economic-Pamphleteer-Collection-2017.pdf>.*

**Why an Economic Pamphleteer?** The historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written by Thomas Paine in 1775–1776, advocated independence for the American colonies.

To understand the meaning of the *local* food movement, it's important to understand its coevolution with the modern *organic* food movement. Both are rooted in the *natural* food movement of the early 1960s. Following World War II, the mechanical and chemical technologies developed for warfare were adapted to facilitate the industrialization of agriculture. The "back to the land" people responded by creating their own natural food systems. They produced their own foods, bought or traded food with each other, and formed the first cooperative food-buying clubs and natural food stores. The natural food movement was a rejection of agri-food industrialization.

The modern organic movement evolved from the natural food movement. Concerns about the health and environmental risks associated with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides were not the only concerns of early organic consumers. They also were responding to and nurturing a sense of interconnectedness through a commitment to taking care of each other as well as taking care of the earth. An organic *philosophy* was deeply embedded in early organic farming communities. Organic was as much a way of life as a way to produce food.

Organic foods and farming remained on the fringes until the 1970s, when scientists began to confirm the environmental and public health risks of chemically dependent farming systems. Organic foods then grew in popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, eventually moving into mainstream supermarkets. Organic food sales grew at a rate of over 20% per year from the early 1990s until slowing to 8% to 10% annually following the economic recession of 2008. Organic food sales have continued to grow faster than overall food sales, reached US\$50 billion in 2017—nearly 6% of total food sales (Organic Trade Association, 2019).

The original small organic farms and regional organic production standards didn't fit well with industrial systems of processing and mass distribution. During the 1990s, organic farmers were pressured toward larger, more specialized farming

operations. The implementation of national organic standards in the early 2000s opened the way for corporate consolidation of organic production into large operations. Organic foods eventually began to seem like just another niche in the industrial food market. Some organic consumers began to look to local farmers to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their foods. Many farmers who marketed locally continued to use organic produc-

tion practices but didn't bother with USDA organic certification. Their customers knew them personally and trusted them.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, organic food sales and numbers of farmers markets followed similar upward trends (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Services [USDA AMS], 2017). However, the number

of farmers markets continued to grow after the recession of 2008, reaching 7,864 by 2012—50% more than in 2009. Growth then slowed, with the number increasing by less than 12% between 2012 and 2017, with 8,790 markets by 2017 (USDA AMS, 2017). Farmers markets are only one indicator of the local food movement, however. Community supported agriculture operations (CSAs), roadside stands, on-farm sales, and internet transactions are alternative means of connecting local farmers with customers. Food hubs also are an increasingly popular means of allowing farmers to pool their production to access local markets. Local food sales would be a better indicator of the local food movement than just the number of farmers markets, but little sales information is available.

A 2012 USDA special report to Congress estimated total local food sales of US\$6.1 billion (Low et al., 2015). This was less than earlier industry sales estimates, suggesting a possible downturn. However, a 2015 USDA Census Update of "Direct Farm Sales of Food" estimated local food sales at US\$9 billion, 50% higher than the earlier estimate (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2016). Both estimates included local sales to super-

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markets and institutional buyers, as well as direct sales to consumers. The 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, for the first time, provided data for “direct to consumer” sales. Previous censuses had reported only *numbers of farmers* selling direct to consumers. The 2017 census indicated a decline of 10% in the number of farmers selling direct to consumers since the 2012 census, and a 10% drop in direct-to-consumer sales since the 2015 Census Update (O’Hara & Benson, 2019). It’s unclear whether the drop in direct-to-consumer sales might have been offset by increasing local sales to supermarkets or public institutions by fewer, but larger, producers.

The available data suggest there has been a significant change of some kind in the local food movement. One possibility is that local foods, like organic foods, are being co-opted and integrated into the mainstream industrial food system. Many supermarkets now advertise locally grown produce in season. “Local” often means produced in the same state or within several hundred miles. There is less incentive to visit the farmers market or join a CSA if consumers can buy local foods at the local supermarket. Some farmers who once sold directly to local schools and hospitals now sell to mainstream food-service providers who are attempting to accommodate preferences for locally grown foods. In both cases, the products may be sourced through food hubs or from large-scale, industrial producers.

If the local food movement becomes co-opted and corrupted, I believe many consumers will again seek other means of ensuring the ecological and social integrity of their food. A realistic possibility for a resurgence in the local food movement is through online sales. Online grocery sales in the U.S. were estimated at more than US\$28 billion in 2019 and forecasted to reach US\$59 billion by 2023—about 6% of total food sales (Conway,

2020). Amazon has entered the online market with a number of options for online grocery shoppers (Leonhardt, 2019). Increasingly, food hubs are using similar online platforms to make products of local farmers available to local customers.

Online retailing coupled with home delivery of local food would bypass mainstream distribution and retailing. Home delivery resolves the inconveniences associated with farmers markets and CSAs. Online ordering accommodates a growing preference for online purchasing among members of post-baby boomer generations, who will soon be the dominant consumers. Adding small-scale, local processing to the picture would completely bypass the industrial agri-food system, which has co-opted previous food movements. There are no readily apparent economies of scale in online aggregation and distribution of food. For perishable food products

in particular, online sales, assembly, and delivery linking local farmers with local customers could be more efficient than are current regional and national initiatives. In addition, customers would have an opportunity to connect with local farmers of their choice, ensuring the integrity of their food through personal relationships of mutual trust.

There are ways of *networking out*, rather than *scaling up*, which can increase efficiency without compromising integrity.

Riverford Organic Farms<sup>1</sup> in the UK, for example, delivers about 47,000 food boxes a week by filling customers’ online orders with products from farms in their area. Riverford has also been able to accommodate the needs of both small farmers and larger independent growers while maintaining the confidence and trust of their customers (Riverside Organic Farms, n.d.).

Regardless, the dominant trend in the agri-food system eventually will run its course and reverse. In previous columns, I have defended the integration of agroecology (Ikerd, 2018) and food

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.riverford.co.uk/>

sovereignty (Ikerd, 2015) as conceptual frameworks for agri-food sustainability. These concepts reflect the basic laws of nature, including human nature. All things are interconnected: eaters, farmers, farms, communities, and ecosystems. Sooner or later, agri-food systems must conform to the

basic laws of nature. The only sustainable food systems will be local food systems that reconnect people with particular ecological and social places—regardless of whether the current local food movement is a blip or a harbinger of change. 

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