

# Exploring the Potential for a More Local Food System in the Western Lake Superior Region

by David Syring

**Abstract:** Local and regional food has emerged as an important arena for economic development and for social change. The western Lake Superior region offers significant opportunities and unique challenges for the redevelopment of a robust regional food system. This article summarizes research on several key elements related to possibilities for expanding the local food system in the region. It presents data about the available land base that could contribute to food production in the region; insights based on in-depth interviews with farmers who already grow food in the region, including policy ideas that they offered to support the work of growing more local food; and findings from a regional survey of citizens regarding their willingness to purchase local foods. The author concludes with a discussion of policy possibilities for supporting the regional food system. The research upon which this article is based was supported by grants from CURA's Faculty Interactive Research Program and the University of Minnesota's Healthy Food, Healthy Lives Institute.

Every day, we make a collective decision supporting food systems that challenge our physical, economic, and social health. We are more overweight, less wealthy, and less connected as a community than we could be if more of our food was produced closer to home.

With a population of just under 480,000 people, the western Lake Superior region<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1) generates nearly \$1.2 billion a year in economic activity from food purchases.<sup>2</sup> Of

<sup>1</sup> The western Lake Superior region is a 15-county area located in northeast Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin. This regional designation follows the one developed by the Lake Superior chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association. The rationale for including these counties in the study described in this article is that they share similar climate, cultural histories, and geographic focus distinct from that of more distant urban centers.

<sup>2</sup> This economic estimate is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimate of mean annual consumer unit spending (about \$6,129 per 2.5-person household in 2010). Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Expenditures—2011." Economic news release, September 25, 2011. Available at [www.bls.gov/news.release/cesan.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/cesan.nr0.htm).



Photo courtesy of David Syring

**A locally adapted diet could take advantage of a greater variety of foods than are normally eaten under an industrialized system of production. Winter squash—with its many colors, shapes, textures, and tastes—grows well in parts of the region, and some varieties keep well all year when stored in a cool, dry location. A community root cellar or storage warehouse could make it possible for even those residents with limited space in their homes to store many of the crops that do well in the region.**

course, most of that money goes to companies with no connection to the region, so these purchases do not contribute as much to the local economy as they could. In addition, the current global food-production model emphasizes large-scale commodity production that results in immense quantities of apparently cheap raw materials for the industrial creation of processed products. The resulting system, rich in calories but unbalanced in nutrition, contributes to a growing set of health problems in the United States, as well as around the globe.

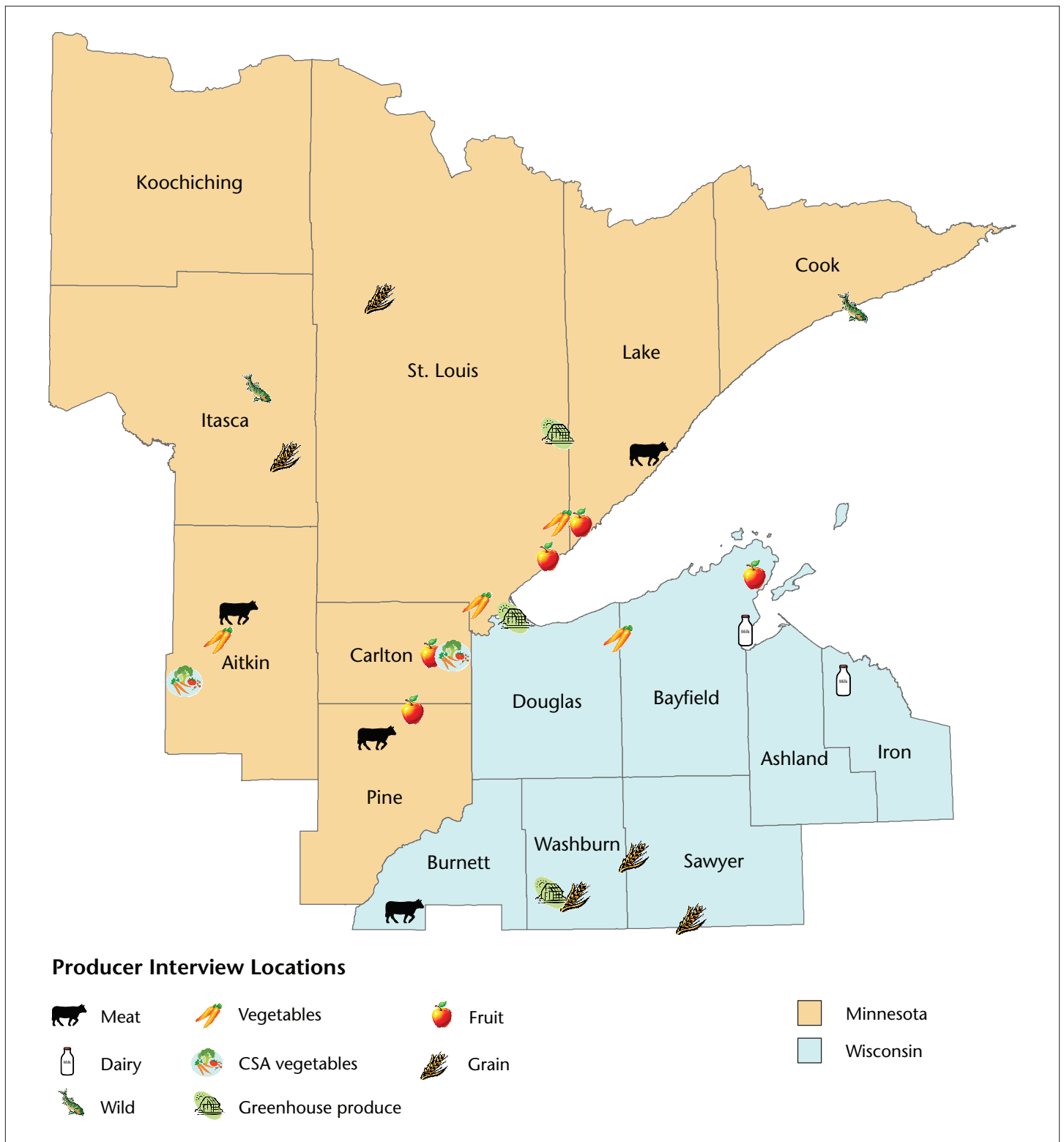
National statistics on obesity and diet-related health problems, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and others, are not promising. In 2009, an astounding 63.4% of U.S. citizens were categorized either as overweight or obese (36.2% overweight,

27.2% obese). This health crisis translates into considerable costs, as obese individuals pay 42% (\$1,429) more per year for healthcare than normal-weight individuals. The mean cost is even higher for recipients of Medicare who are obese (\$1,723). In 2006, extra medical spending due to obesity in the United States was \$40 billion, with projected growth in medical costs due to obesity to grow to \$147 billion per year and beyond over the following few years.<sup>3</sup>

The "Bridge to Health" surveys that have been conducted in the western Lake Superior region every five years since 1995 show numbers that compare slightly favorably to averages for both

<sup>3</sup> E.A. Finkelstein, J.G. Trogon, J.W. Cohen, and W. Dietz, "Annual Medical Spending Attributable To Obesity: Payer- and Service-Specific Estimates," *Health Affairs* 28,5 (2009): w822–w831.

**Figure 1. Producer Interview Locations in the Western Lake Superior Region**



Map created by Stacey Stark, GIS lab at the University of Minnesota Duluth

Minnesota and Wisconsin and to national numbers. In 2010, 51.2% of respondents in the region reported being overweight or obese (33.6% overweight, 17.6% obese). Although this is better than the national average, still more than half of the region's population fits into a category of people with

the potential for diet-related medical problems.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> M.D. Finch, J.F. Peters, J.M. Peterson, A.M. Kinney, and Bridge to Health Collaborative, "Bridge to Health Survey 2010: Northeastern Minnesota and Northwestern Wisconsin Regional Health Status Survey." Duluth: Generations Health Care Initiatives, Inc., May 2011.

Our food system is not an accident, but rather the ongoing outcome of a set of policies that serve multiple interests. As Lang, Barling, and Caraher write:

The best way to understand food policy is as contested terrain, where



actions and implications are tussled among interest groups and social forces from the state, supply chain and civil society ... [F]ood policy is inevitably contested space; it is made not ordained; its possibilities open for negotiation. It may be imposed or inherited from the past, but it can be re-shaped, made more democratically accountable, and made appropriate for the times in which we live, a time of environmental and health threat, yet with great promise and opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

A number of scholars have explored the economic, health, social and environmental costs of this global industrial system, as well as begun to explore alternatives.<sup>6</sup>

The fact is, we can do better than our current system by raising some important questions: What is food for? What kind of food system do we want? How can we improve our health, our economies, and our communities by re-envisioning how we grow, distribute, prepare, and eat the foods that sustain us? How might that vision be supported through creative local policies and practices? In other words, how can we come to remember that eating is one of the most important acts of both agriculture *and* culture?

### The Role of Local in a Global World

Like the concept of “organic” in the 1990s, the word “local” when associated with food has acquired a buzz. Bestselling books have extolled the virtues of eating from a circumscribed area, while acclaimed films have criticized the global, industrial food system. In the popular press, *Time* magazine proclaimed on its cover in 2007, “Forget Organic. Eat Local.”<sup>7</sup> Even First Lady Michelle Obama has weighed in on the value of growing your own food.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> T. Lang, D. Barling, and M. Caraher, *Food Policy: Integrating Health, Environment and Society* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> C.C. Hinrichs and T.A. Lyson, *Remaking the North American Food System: Strategies for Sustainability (Our Sustainable Future)* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); H. Norberg-Hodge, T. Merrifield, and S. Gorelick, *Bringing the Food Economy Home: Local Alternatives to Global Agribusiness* (Sterling, VA, and London, Halifax: Zed Books/Fernwood Publishing/Kumarian Press, 2002); T.A. Lyson, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> J. Cloud, “Eating Better than Organic,” *Time*, 2 March, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> M. Obama, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens across America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).



**Growers in the western Lake Superior region have adapted their selection of crops to local soils and growing conditions. Carrots have been a highly successful crop for several growers, and one can find locally grown carrots for much of the winter in stores such as the Whole Foods Co-op in Duluth.**

Collectively, this interest is well-deserved, as many scholars have demonstrated that small-scale production for primarily local consumption has a better ratio of energy returned for energy input, can result in up to five times as many jobs as large-scale farms, can reduce the energy and environmental impacts of food by reducing processing and shipping requirements, and can improve the freshness (and therefore nutritional content) of food.<sup>9</sup>

Although the benefits of local production, distribution, and consumption of food are numerous, as suggested above, only the most vociferous supporters of localism see local food as an absolute answer to the food needs of any nation, state, or region. The reality is that the globalizing economy will not be replaced

<sup>9</sup> R.M. Netting, *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); H. Raven and M. Brownridge, “Why Small Farmers?” in S.P. Carruthers and F.A. Miller (eds.), “Crisis on the Family Farm: Ethics or Economics?” CAS Paper 28, Reading, England: Centre for Agricultural Strategies, 1996; M.C. Heller and G. Keoleian, “Life Cycle-Based Sustainability Indicators for Assessment of the U.S. Food System,” Center for Sustainable Systems Report CSS00-04, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000; K. Frith 2007, “Is Local More Nutritious?” white paper, Harvard School of Public Health, [chge.med.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/resources/local\\_nutrition.pdf](http://chge.med.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/resources/local_nutrition.pdf).

by local production; rather, local, national, and international production and distribution of food must be considered as part of a continuum of possibilities and choices for communities. For decades, the overwhelming emphasis of food-related policies has been on consolidating production in large-scale growing and processing of food. This emphasis has created an unbalanced system that favors large, profit-driven players, and the health, economic, and social impacts of subsidized commodity production have appeared in our expanding waistlines and rural-community economic decline, as well as in the disconnect from food sources that many people experience. Current interest in local food, and calls for public support for local food, emerge as means of democratizing the playing field for food production. The idea is not to replace all industrial-scale food production, but to enhance the range of options for policies that support diverse approaches to food production.

### Foodshed Assessment for the Western Lake Superior Region

In 2009, my collaborators Stacey Stark (GIS specialist) and David Abazs (farmer and community organizer) and I received funding from the University of Minnesota Healthy Food, Healthy

Lives Institute to conduct a foodshed assessment of the western Lake Superior region.<sup>10</sup> We identified a 15-county region based on physical aspects of the land and climate and on the social and cultural background within the area. About 480,000 people live within this 18.6-million-acre region. Current food production in the region totals more than \$193 million, produced from 5,602 farms. Mean crop sales are \$31,903 per farm, with the average farm size equaling 216.5 acres. However, net income per farm in this region averages only about \$3,500 per year.<sup>11</sup> Under the current system, the few dedicated farmers we have work far too hard for far too little return.

To determine the agricultural potential for this region, we identified suitable land available for food production. First, we eliminated land covered by lakes, rivers, or wetlands (35% of the region). We then eliminated all the land with a 15% slope or steeper, as well as developed land, removing another 9% of the area. After these adjustments, 45% of the region's land in Minnesota remained (6,093,900 acres) and 70% of the region's area in Wisconsin remained (about 3,459,200 acres). We then used county digital soil surveys with a crop-productivity index to further restrict the land to soils with a better than average productivity. Finally, we eliminated areas that were defined as "forest" (any type) by the U.S. Geological Service vegetation and land-use data set. This analysis indicated that the remaining 1.232 million acres in Minnesota and 460,000 acres in Wisconsin met all "suitable" criteria, representing 9% of the total area in the 15-county region (Table 1).

To meet dietary expectations for the region based on the current standard American diet, our estimates suggest that the region would need a little more than 500,000 acres to grow the 84% of the existing diet that *can* be grown in the region (excluding items such as coffee, bananas, tropical fruits, etc.). Therefore, the region appears to have more than three times the amount of land necessary to shift most of its food production to a more local basis.

<sup>10</sup> S. Stark, D. Abazs, and D. Syring, "Defining the Agricultural Landscape of the Western Lake Superior Region: Realities and Potentials for a Healthy Local Food System for Healthy People," 2009. Available at: [www.superiorfoodweb.org/LAFS/HFHL\\_FINALREPORT.pdf](http://www.superiorfoodweb.org/LAFS/HFHL_FINALREPORT.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2007, [www.nass.usda.gov](http://www.nass.usda.gov).

### Experiences of Regional Growers

To further assess the western Lake Superior region foodshed, we interviewed a nonrandomized group of 26 (13 conventional and 13 organic or certified organic) producers of meat, dairy, fruit, grain, community-supported agriculture vegetables, greenhouse vegetables, and wild-harvested foods. We chose farms and interview sites that were distributed across the region (Figure 1). In addition to geographic distribution, we included size of operation, type of product (vegetable, meat, dairy, etc.), organic or conventional grower, and gender diversity as criteria for selecting growers to interview. The interviews revealed a wide range of perspectives and some common threads. Producers identified several strengths of existing food production in the region, including:

- ▶ Dedicated producers who have years of commitment and knowledge of their soils, customers, and climate;
- ▶ Independent and experimental producers who learn effectively both from trial and error and by using available educational resources (i.e., agricultural extension, publications, nonprofit agricultural groups [such as the Sustainable Farming Association], fellow farmers, etc.); and
- ▶ Diverse lands, soils, and microclimates that lend themselves to a variety of crops, production scales, and approaches.

Producers also identified several constraining conditions on the local/regional food system, including:

- ▶ Cool, short growing season and challenging soils;
- ▶ Meager economic benefits of producing food under current commodity-market driven system;
- ▶ Limited labor resources for intensive production;
- ▶ Minimal presence of infrastructure for processing and distributing foods;
- ▶ Limited access to mass-consumer markets; and
- ▶ A population of producers without clear plans or fiscal means for their own retirement and/or succession for their operations.

Growers/producers who have been in business for more than a few years have carefully honed their production to focus on products that they know do well under their conditions, and for which they know they have a viable

**Table 1. Acres in the 15-County Western Lake Superior Region Meeting "Suitable" Criteria to Support Food Production**

County	Acres Meeting Criteria
<b>Minnesota</b>	
Aitkin	125,976
Carlton	81,445
Cook	40,914
Itasca	296,257
Koochiching	0 <sup>a</sup>
Lake	52,209
Pine	251,299
St. Louis	384,293
<b>Wisconsin</b>	
Ashland	43,505
Bayfield	93,171
Burnett	100,044
Douglas	83,248
Iron	12,723
Sawyer	51,942
Washburn	75,124
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,692,150</b>

<sup>a</sup> Soil and land-cover data were not available for Koochiching County.

market. Although certain crops (for example, potatoes) historically have been grown at larger scales in parts of the region, current producers largely focus on higher value products (i.e., greenhouse tomatoes, raspberries, and smoked fish) that can be directly sold to consumers in order to maximize the return on their labor. Most of the producers interviewed reported that they are at or near maximum productive capacity for their circumstances, and few reported intentions to appreciably expand their operations. In fact, many regional food sectors have seen significant decline in the numbers of producers (for example, the number of commercial fishermen on western Lake Superior has fallen from a reported early/mid-20th century peak of several hundred to less than 20, with only a few making close to a full-time living from fishing).



In one telling comment, a grower who has taken a second, off-farm job for healthcare benefits identified insurance as a key issue that prevents more people from full-time farming: “[The lack of health-insurance options for farmers] might be the single biggest thing inhibiting people going into ... [farming]. Pretty much all the growers I know are in that situation where one person works off the farm and has benefits.” Another grower said that if he could find a way to have health insurance, he would be willing to farm for the rest of his life, even with the low rate of income that the current system offers.

The regional growers we interviewed offered a number of other policy ideas to support a stronger regional food system (see sidebar).

### Attitudes of Consumers in the Region

During 2010 and 2011, we conducted research into what the consumers of food in the region think about the idea of local food as a priority. We used surveys at locations in Minnesota (Duluth, Grand Marais, Ely) and Wisconsin (Ashland, Poplar, Superior) where people purchase food and collected responses from 156 citizens. Although our sample was not randomly generated, and therefore cannot be generalized to the regional population, we did endeavor to secure a wide range of opinions by offering the survey in varied locations throughout the region, including conventional grocery stores, convenience markets, and cooperative grocery stores, as well as an urban shelter that provides hot meals to in-need individuals and families. Our sample fairly evenly represented households with mean incomes from across the economic spectrum (ranging from less than \$15,000/year to more than \$100,000/year). The sample was 75% female and 25% male, with 93% of respondents indicating they are the primary food buyers in their households. Our sample was more highly educated than the regional average (73% indicating that they had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 33% of people with such a degree in the Duluth metropolitan area, according to numbers presented by the Duluth city government). Our sample self-identified as 94% white, which corresponds with the ethnic demography of the region.

The survey consisted of four sections, including: current practices/ behaviors related to food purchasing; attitudes and ideas about local food; willingness to make changes related to

## Policy Suggestions Offered by Regional Growers to Support a Stronger Regional Food System

- ▶ Create a tax incentive for people to buy local—perhaps a tax on food based on miles it has traveled, with more locally produced food receiving a tax break (proceeds could be used to support other initiatives to build local food systems).
- ▶ Create a community grain mill to store and grind locally grown grains to be sold to the community.
- ▶ Provide a revolving low-interest loan fund for local farmers to purchase land, equipment, etc.
- ▶ Provide local-government support for creating a meat-processing facility in the region.
- ▶ Establish zoning policies that reserve the best agricultural land for agricultural uses, even in cities.
- ▶ Identify tax-forfeited land with agricultural potential and offer it at reasonable rates to farmers.
- ▶ Support farmer-education programs for new farmers.

**Table 2. Desire for Local Foods and the Perceived Gap between Local Food Supply and Demand**

Survey Question/Response Categories	Pct.
<b>How often do you look at labels to see where a product is made or grown?</b> (Percentage of respondents indicating “Sometimes,” “Frequently,” or “Always”)	88.5
<b>Do you actively seek local foods?</b> (Percentage of respondents indicating “Yes”)	81.4
<b>When purchasing food, I do not care where it is grown.</b> (Percentage of respondents indicating “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree”)	79.5
<b>Would you like to buy more food that is local but find that this is too difficult?</b> (Percentage of respondents indicating “Yes”)	80.1
<b>Is it easy to find local foods at the place where you primarily buy food?</b> (Percentage of respondents indicating “Yes”)	50.6

purchasing more local food; and demographics.<sup>12</sup> In this section, I present only a sample of the findings as related to the potential for developing policies to meet the needs of the region’s citizens.

We asked several questions designed to assess access and desire for local food. Our data suggest that people pay attention to and care about where their food comes from (Table 2). Approximately half of our respondents said it was easy to find local food where they shop, yet 8 out of 10 respondents indicated that

they would like to purchase more local food, but find it difficult to locate a supply. This apparent dichotomy may be due to a few specialty items marked local being displayed prominently, whereas staple foods produced locally appear more rarely. For example, a local pickle maker has successfully promoted her products, gaining highly visible display space in a number of regional stores.

These findings suggest that room for growth in the regional food system clearly exists. Findings from a question designed to assess whether people are willing to pay a premium for local foods suggest that local foods are a priority for consumers, even at a cost

<sup>12</sup> A copy of the survey with all questions we asked can be found on the CURA website at [www.cura.umn.edu/Syring-survey](http://www.cura.umn.edu/Syring-survey).

**Table 3. Response Rates to the Question: How Much Would You Be Willing to Spend on a Local Food Item if the Same Item Costs \$1.00 for a Nonlocal Option?**

	Less than \$15,000	\$15–24,999	\$25–34,999	\$35–44,999	\$45–54,999	\$55–64,999	\$65–74,999	\$75–99,999	More than \$100,000	Pct. of Total
\$0.50	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1.9
\$0.90	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	5.1
\$1.00	4	4	4	2	1	2	4	2	0	14.7
\$1.10	2	5	6	5	5	4	5	6	10	30.8
\$1.50	8	7	6	8	9	1	3	7	4	34.0
Other Amount	4	3	1	3	3	0	2	3	2	13.5

Note: Column headings are household income level. Numbers given are total number of respondents in each category who chose the indicated amount (13.5% of total respondents indicated “Other,” and the amount they listed was usually more than \$1.50). Total number of respondents = 156.

and regardless of income level (Table 3 provides a nuanced look at these data). The data indicate that more than two-thirds of respondents would be willing to pay at least a 10% premium for local food, and about half would be willing to pay a 50% premium for local items.

### Local Food Policy Potential for Local Units of Government

In many communities, the food economy is second only to healthcare in terms of size, so cities and regions should consider food systems as critical arenas for policy work. The Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program ([www.fns.usda.gov/wic/fmnp/fmnpfaqs.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/fmnp/fmnpfaqs.htm)) offers a highly visible, successful example of a public policy that simultaneously supports local growers, provides increased food security to low-income families, and improves nutrition. In 2011, this \$20-million federal program provided food vouchers to low-income households for purchases to be made at farmers’ markets, resulting in \$15.7 million in revenues for growers. Although this scale of program may only be possible at the national policy level, the model implemented by the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program was pioneered by state-level policy in Massachusetts that cost only several thousands of dollars.<sup>13</sup>

Few communities have created coherent or meaningful policy approaches to food. However, some innovative local governments around



Photo courtesy of David Syring

**Season-extension techniques such as high-tunnel hoop houses are essential for producing some crops in the region. Here Dr. Randel Hanson (Department of Geography, University of Minnesota at Duluth, at right) works with students (from left) Joanna Schlegelmilch, Sheamus Johnson, and Kevin Moris in a high tunnel full of tomatoes as part of the University’s Sustainable Agriculture Project. Providing farmers with funds to build such structures could significantly expand the amount of food produced locally.**

the country have been active experimenters with policies to support local food systems.<sup>14</sup> We surveyed the literature available regarding local policies throughout the United States and Canada and found the following:

- ▶ A growing number of communities have created food-policy councils as advisory bodies to consider the impacts and policy possibilities related to food production, distribution, and consumption. Food-policy councils are effective for bringing together a large group of stakeholders to chart strategic directions for local policies related to food in terms of health planning, economic development, education,

<sup>13</sup> M. Winne, *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> The Leopold Center, “Local Food, Local Policy: A Case Study on Engaging Policy Makers in the Development of Their Foodshed,” *Leopold Center Progress Report 17* (2007): 74–75.



agriculture, social services, etc.<sup>15</sup> Food-policy councils can take many forms, including arising through grassroots community efforts, being created by local units of government, or some combination of these. The councils that have been most effective work in close collaboration with elected officials and government staff to discuss what is politically, economically, and socially feasible in the community related to food policy. In our survey of regional food consumers, 69.3% of respondents indicated being at least “somewhat interested” in participating in a food-policy council.

- ▶ A concept related to food-policy councils is a connecting body, sometimes identified as a “good food network,” to bring together growers, local- and sustainable-food advocates, entrepreneurs, and large community anchor institutions to develop new business models to increase the scale and availability of local, sustainably produced food. The National Good Food Network ([www.ngfn.org/](http://www.ngfn.org/)) serves as an umbrella resource and incubator for regional and local networks. Community members in the western Lake Superior region have recently created a good food network ([www.goodfoodnetwork.org/](http://www.goodfoodnetwork.org/)) as a focal node for regional food-system development. This effort would benefit by local and regional government bodies offering support and partnership to this network. Since 2008, the National Network has been supporting the work of “regional lead teams” throughout the country. A regional lead team located at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University ([www.leopold.iastate.edu/](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/)) supports work in the Upper Midwest. The Center has a policy initiative ([www.leopold.iastate.edu/policy](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/policy)) that local governments and nonprofits in the Upper Midwest should consider as an essential resource for developing local food systems.
- ▶ Food security for underserved communities also offers an important arena for policy development. The

Community Food Security Coalition ([www.foodsecurity.org/](http://www.foodsecurity.org/)) provides support for such groups. Examples of community groups working on this include the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network ([detroitblackfoodsecurity.org/](http://detroitblackfoodsecurity.org/)) and the Hartford Food System ([www.hartfordfood.org/](http://www.hartfordfood.org/)). University of Minnesota Duluth professors Adam Pine and John Bennett have studied the problem of limited food access in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Duluth, and offer several policy recommendations in their report.<sup>16</sup>

- ▶ Public schools offer a unique arena for effective policy making related to food and nutrition. Children must be fed while in school, and locally produced, highly nutritious foods improve health for children, while strengthening local economies. Overlapping rules and programs at the federal, state, and local levels make change in school food offerings complicated, but opportunities for change do exist. The Food Policy Council of the City of New Haven, Connecticut, for example, has created “A Primer on Federal, State and Local Policies that Impact School Food” ([www.cityofnewhaven.com/Government/pdfs/NHFPCSchoolFoodPolicyPrimer.pdf](http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/Government/pdfs/NHFPCSchoolFoodPolicyPrimer.pdf)). It includes four recommendations for action. The first two relate only to federal policy, but the second two offer suggestions applicable to the western Lake Superior region. First, at the state level, encourage schools in the state to participate in the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program and the state’s Farm-to-School Program ([www.farmtoschool.org/MN/programs.htm](http://www.farmtoschool.org/MN/programs.htm); [www.farmtoschool.org/WI/programs.htm](http://www.farmtoschool.org/WI/programs.htm)). Second, at the local level, establish and implement a plan to successfully transition to a self-operating school food-service program that optimizes existing resources, infrastructure, and expertise to economically serve fresh, healthy food.

## Conclusions

Findings from the research described in this article indicate that the western Lake Superior region has both high

interest in local foods and adequate land resources to grow a large amount of the food consumed in the region. The data indicate that a clear opportunity exists in the region. The primary obstacle to expanding local food is a lack of supply, which is tied to the low rate of economic return for growers—the fact is, farming at present in the region requires dedicated idealism to a way of life. Although such idealism is to be commended, it cannot be the only reward for the risk and hard work required to grow food in the region. The most obvious leverage point for expanding local food production would be in increasing the potential for farming to be an economically viable livelihood for regional growers. The region lacks a middle infrastructure to get food from growers to consumers at a rate of return that rewards growers for their work. Creating a policy body to systematically address this problem would help move the region toward more local options for healthy food, and toward creating economic opportunities for current and future growers.

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<sup>15</sup> Examples of particularly effective food-policy councils can be found in the following communities: Toronto ([www.toronto.ca/health/tfpc/](http://www.toronto.ca/health/tfpc/)), Chicago ([www.chicagofoodpolicy.org/](http://www.chicagofoodpolicy.org/)), Cleveland ([ccfoodpolicy.org/](http://ccfoodpolicy.org/)), and Minneapolis ([www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/sustainability/homegrown/dhfs\\_hg\\_Food\\_Council](http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/sustainability/homegrown/dhfs_hg_Food_Council)).

<sup>16</sup> A. Pine and J. Bennett, “Food Access in Duluth’s Lincoln Park/West End Neighborhood,” 2011. Available at [tinyurl.com/d-umn-edu-foodaccessduluth](http://tinyurl.com/d-umn-edu-foodaccessduluth).