



## Beyond Local: Part 1

By Brian Snyder, Executive Director

*Editor's note: This is the first of a multi-part series on some of the opportunities, challenges and limitations of local food systems.*

With the release this year of the movie **Food, Inc.**, the advancement of significant food safety legislation in Congress and a host of popular writers calling for reform, the year 2009 may be remembered decades from now as the most significant turning point in the fight to reclaim our food system since 1906, when Upton Sinclair's book **The Jungle** was first published. If so, it comes not a moment too soon, and leaves one wondering what lessons can be harvested from an entire century that fell between these two pinnacles of public outrage.

This time around, the solution it seems everyone is talking about could hardly have been envisioned a century ago, because they never imagined back then that "local food" would be as rare as it is today. But now the idea of eating locally, even from one's own backyard, is on the agenda of every public or private entity with a stake in the matter, from the White House and Wal-Mart to neighborhood grocery stores and elementary schools. But in spite of this apparent success, we immediately have to face the widely anticipated problem that demand for local food is far outstripping supply in

many areas of the country.

There may be a bigger problem though, which has nothing to do with food miles or the number or capacity of smaller farms serving local markets. Once the ball started rolling, the popularity of local food came so quickly that few if any of us who spend most of our waking hours promoting local food systems were able to attain a solid understanding of what "local" really means. If we are to maintain the momentum gained in the past few years, a consensus on such a definition will need to be a priority.

I write these words while sitting at the local county fair where my family shows sheep each year. In the background I can hear the announcements from the market hog show, just a couple hours before the lambs have their turn. County fairs reflect the best of what "local" usually meant in the past hundred years or so, though they currently bear little resemblance to the corresponding events of only a generation or two ago. Oh, you can see the produce of local farms on display, including some of the newly popular heirloom varieties, but the food offered for actual human consumption at local fairs is, for the most part, reminiscent of the factories from whence it came.

And it's no wonder. Listening to the intelligent and well-meaning judges of each show, you hear talk of a modern agricultural ideal that exists only in the minds of exhibitors — animals that grow with maximum efficiency and full of muscle, or vegetables as uniform as possible...just as the big processors would want them. Of course the reality for farmers serving local markets is quite different now and will be even more different in the years to come. Because of how far our society has moved toward the highly touted ideals of modern agriculture, however, such farmers have very few local resources available to help them meet the new demand for a less industrialized food supply.

The most innovative farmers today are looking longitudinally to take the best of what the past century had to offer for use in the future. They are also looking broadly across the latitudes for the best of what exists right now across the country and around the world. They do not pursue a specific ideal of any kind, but diversity of all kinds. With livestock, for

instance, it is not efficiency and meatiness that matter so much as flexibility and hardiness, and a similar point can probably be made for fruits, forages, vegetables and grains.

I am currently most familiar with sheep production, where product quality (taste & nutrition), multi-use strategies (meat, milk, fiber, etc...), grass productivity, labor reduction (e.g. with hair breeds), parasite resistance and — with a definite eye to the future — severe climate tolerance are the traits most real farmers are talking about and trying to secure. Such qualities are certainly not rewarded at county fairs today, and worse, they are not even being presented to 4-H and FFA kids as serious ideas.

Meanwhile, many farmers who wish to make money the old-fashioned way — through good management and marketing decisions — are looking not only outside their home counties, but in many cases to other farmers around the world to find qualities in their livestock and other crops that will help them meet the demand for high quality, locally and sustainably raised food in both the immediate and long-term future.

This idea of what "local" means binds us as advocates for sustainability to other farmers, wherever they may be, who also wish to serve their own communities. It also challenges us to understand their issues and advocate for their wellbeing and financial success as farmers in any way possible, for their viability is inextricably linked to our own.

My personal inclination has been to look locally first for the experiences and influences my own children will need to make good decisions in their own time. Sometimes, however, the most "local" experiences are not geared so much to the local common good at all.

Unfortunately, most fairs in rural areas all around our country are not the places where innovation occurs first, as one might otherwise hope. But I do expect that when the changes now occurring in agriculture are reflected in the competition and celebration that exists at this very local level, we will know for sure that the new food system we have worked so hard to achieve has finally reached its full potential. ■