Meals on wheels

Field to fork efficiency is about more than a low odometer reading

By Caroline van Schaik

It started with sweet potatoes: 50 pounds and a question of whether to drive to the school or let a local distributor drop them off with the milk. To save time, the farmer went with the distributor.

Then another reality check: the school ordered baking potatoes from a different farmer, who said she wasn't coming into town until the following week because rising gas prices have forced her to limit her trips. The school waited, and 10 days later the potatoes arrived (again with the milk).

Figuring out how best to deliver, literally, on the growing demand for local food is not an issue for every farmer or every store, restaurant or school. But for those who want on board the "local food" train, getting it to the kitchen is a leading worry. For farmers, it is a myth that being close by means low transportation costs. Fuel efficiency is typically lower because loads are smaller for farmers who deliver directly to their customers, according to a USDA study led by the University of Minnesota's Rob King (*see sidebar below*). Researchers in Iowa (www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/grants/files/2006-M02.pdf) report that the cost per mile of a minivan is almost 15 times that of a full semi-trailer with driver. King's numbers also suggest a financial advantage for farmers who pool their products to deliver through an intermediary firm.

Trying hard to keep the face of the farmer on their food, farmers are spending unknown amounts of money to safeguard the food story there isn't time to tell in a 14-hour day on the road. There surely are better ways.

Here is a real example: go back to that box of sweet potatoes and compare the $5 delivery fee to $30 for fuel ($0.50/mile times 40 miles round trip) and labor ($10/hour), not to mention repairs, insurance, depreciation and financing that are genuine costs to driving any vehicle. It takes only a minute to realize that opportunity knocks for farmers who hitchhike their goods on a truck already leaving town.

A Ziebell's truck makes a delivery to Ridgeway Community School. (*photo by Caroline van Schaik*)

And this jives with findings from a Land Stewardship Project survey conducted in 2008: with "time" named as their number one issue, some 80 percent of farmer respondents said a distributor within 50 miles of their farm would be great. This brings us to Ziebell's Hiawatha Foods, Inc., which was started in 1975 and now delivers food and other products to a myriad of schools and other institutions and restaurants within 50 miles or so of the southeast Minnesota community of Winona, including forays into Wisconsin. Current owner John McCoy is proving to be a willing partner with LSP and the region's sustainable farmers.

These past few months, McCoy has worked with staff in LSP's Lewiston office, along with several LSP member-farmers, to figure out how to get the area's stewardship food delivered on his trucks. Starting with that box of sweet potatoes, so far so good — and good not just for Ziebell's.

Since this need for timely delivery was politely but unequivocally voiced last year by the cook at the nearby Ridgeway Community School (see the Spring 2010 *Land Stewardship Letter*), that institution's kitchen is the pilot destination. Staff members there are learning how to order in-sync with farmer deliveries to Ziebell's as well as Ziebell's delivery schedule, and to incorporate what is available into the school menu.

On the distributor's end, details such as scheduling and labels have been addressed. For farmers, experience this past winter has highlighted the need for an "availability list" and to pencil out the utility of using a distributor versus driving their own vehicles.

It's about 17 miles from the Ziebell's warehouse to the Ridgeway school. That doesn't sound far, but as a back-of-the-envelope calculation, let's say you are a farmer delivering to the school and your vehicle

Transportation, *see page 27…*

Making local efficient

Being closer to your market doesn't necessarily equal a significant savings in fuel costs, but aggregation of farmers' products can compensate for the inefficiencies inherent in the smaller loads of local deliveries. That is one of the conclusions of a recent USDA study.

"Transportation fuel use is more closely related to supply chain structure and size than to the distance food products travel," concluded the study, *Comparing the Structure, Size, and Performance of Local and Mainstream Food Supply Chains*.

Even if you're only driving 20 miles to your market, pooling your tomatoes with five of your neighbors onto one vehicle is more efficient than six of you driving separately to that same market. Such small-scale aggregation can even win efficiency-wise when compared to large semi-loads of products, according to the study.

The report is based on 15 case studies and examines supply chain types for each of five product-place combinations: Twin Cities (beef); Syracuse, N.Y. (apples); Portland, Ore. (blueberries); Sacramento, Calif. (spring mix leafy greens); and Washington, D.C. (milk).

The authors found that farmers who participate in local food chains can earn as much as seven times the price earned by selling through mainstream systems that consist of numerous "middlemen." But there's a catch. Although farmers in direct market supply chains retain nearly 100 percent of the retail price, costs incurred to bring their product to market can swallow up between 13 percent and 62 percent of the net profit.

By building relationships with mainstream processors and distributors, farmers can get their food to eaters more efficiently, concludes the study. Of course, that means less of the retail price will go into the farmer's pocket. But farmers could make up for that through "product differentiation." That may mean capturing more of the consumer dollar by using sustainable practices—such as organic or grass-fed—that eaters are willing to pay more for.

For a copy of *Comparing the Structure, Size, and Performance of Local and Mainstream Food Supply Chains*, see www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err99.

…Transportation, *from page 26*

averages 15 miles per gallon. You make the 34-mile round trip with gas at $2.50 per gallon and your time at $10 per hour for one hour. That equals $15.67 *just* for fuel and labor. No insurance. No repairs or maintenance. No tires. No depreciation.

If you hauled $100 worth of food to that school, you could have had a firm like Ziebell's do the job for something like $10, and saved you the effort. If you sold the same $100 worth of food to each of seven other schools, you'd have made the same single trip to Ziebells, but with that much more product to pay the way to markets you might never choose to drive to yourself.

Especially for those farmers already heading to Winona markets, paying for the trip with more product on board is business at its best. McCoy prefers his trucks to drive full; farmers should aim for the same utility.

Farmers tell me they barely catch a breath on delivery days so that all-important face time would be better spent another day, when you can drive your passenger car around to customers with samples, business cards and a relaxed frame of mind on board.

Next steps down the road

Ziebell's is eager for the volume to pick up — and we are too. McCoy's company will try to be what surveyed farmers asked for — a local distributor going to more markets than any one farmer is likely to cover.

For the moment, cooks place their orders directly with farmers, but that too could change if McCoy realizes that local products could help him sell more macaroni and paper towels. Similarly, it remains to be seen if those potato farmers and others who are primed for spring product take advantage of this marketing opportunity to approach other schools along the way.

There are other considerations behind this practical approach. Every person between a farmer and the eater needs to earn some pennies for their efforts and, as King's study highlights, typically the price comes at the expense of the farmer's take-home. But Johnice Cross, coordinator of the Decorah, Iowa, community farming cooperative, GROWN Locally, insists that a farmer must start with what she terms "a dignity price," and add on from there. The success of the cooperative stands in no small part on the strength of that commitment to a fair price — for consumers, yes, *and* for farmers.

The landscape of our future isn't resting entirely on the axle of a truck. But when we consider child nutrition, obesity, a fair price, resilient communities, grassland birds, clean water and frogs, there's a good deal to be gained by re-evaluating the framework of local food distribution. ❐

Caroline van Schaik works on community based food issues in LSP's southeast Minnesota office in Lewiston. Among other things, she has helped the Ridgeway Community School launch a farm to school initiative. She can be contacted at 507-523-3366 or caroline@landstewardshipproject.org.

Transportation workshops

Few of us grasp the full measure of expenses behind transporting ourselves — or our products — from point A to point B, and an LSP survey proved farmers to be no different. Hidden, ignored, or otherwise, the cost of moving a bunch of rosemary or a side of beef from the farm to a customer adds up. By some calculations, farmers are spending an excessive amount of money and hours that might be better allocated to a shared vehicle, a distributor or other alternative.

As a result, LSP staff members have been hosting workshops to help farmers understand why transportation costs are critical to their farm business and to train farmers to make smarter decisions based on their own calculations. These workshops feature recent research and farmer testimony about transportation costs. Participants have been given the chance to crunch their own transportation numbers using an online worksheet from the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. The workshops end with a discussion of alternatives that might save time, fuel and yes, sanity, without sacrificing what many direct market farmers hold as dear — their face on that food.

Workshops were held in the western Minnesota communities of Litchfield and Morris in April. The next workshop will be in southeast Minnesota sometime in July. For details on the July workshop, contact Caroline van Schaik at 507-523-3366 or caroline@landstewardshipproject.org.

Local Food Forum & Expo features farm to school talk

"Well, I actually disagree with the girls," said 11-year-old Ben Maynard (*third from the right*) during a panel presentation at the 6th annual Local Food Forum and Expo held March 12 in Winona, Minn. Maynard, Chloe Ferguson and Emma Iremonger are fifth graders at Ridgeway Community School, and they described "the good, the bad and the funny" about eating locally grown fruits and vegetables at area schools. The students told the audience that sampling food works best when everyone gets to try some, that Whitewater Gardens' carrots are the best even when they are forked, and that trying new things even when not grown nearby was good. Maynard's point of contention was over whether annuals or perennials should be planted in the school garden.

LSP is a member of the Local Foods Committee of the Winona County Economic Development Authority, which sponsors the Expo each March to engage residents in community food work. For more information on LSP's Community Based Food Systems work in southeast Minnesota, contact Caroline van Schaik at 507-523-3366 or caroline@landstewardshipproject.org. (*photo by Caroline van Schaik*)