

Local Food Plus: A Model for Food Citizenship in North America

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This article was written by Kathryn Cooper in December 2008. This month, along with our regular fare, we're showcasing some of our best, in celebration of three years of WorldChanging Canada.

The price we pay at the grocery store **is not the true cost of our food**. Our food systems allow many major costs to be externalized. These externalities include transportation, soil degradation, irrigation-related groundwater depletion, and pesticide and fertilizer misuse. This means that eventually, taxpayers foot the bill for these, without ever making the connection between faux food policy and its social and environmental tolls.



According to the **Worldwatch Institute**, the value of global trade in food has tripled since 1961, and the tonnage of food shipped between nations has grown fourfold, while population has only doubled. In North America food typically travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from farm to plate, as much as 25 percent farther than in 1980. Cheap oil, subsidies, corporate consolidation and technical innovations have tipped the balance in favour of large scale production agriculture. Many people argue that there is no alternative for our rapidly expanding global population.

A new non-profit certification program called *Local Food Plus* (LFP) is now helping shoppers separate sustainably grown apples, canned tomatoes, eggs, milk and meat from mass-produced, processed imports. According to Rod MacRae (agricultural consultant and Professor at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University), Local Food Plus is dedicated to rebuilding local, sustainable, supply chains from farmer to consumer. This is done by introducing farmers who produce locally grown, sustainable foods to the food processors, supermarkets and food service companies operating at universities and in cities.

This local food concept got its start with the **Toronto Food Policy Council**, an organization that brings agriculture into municipal politics. Local Food Plus founder Lori Stahlbrand, formerly a consultant for the World Wildlife Fund, was originally inspired by a number of U.S. and



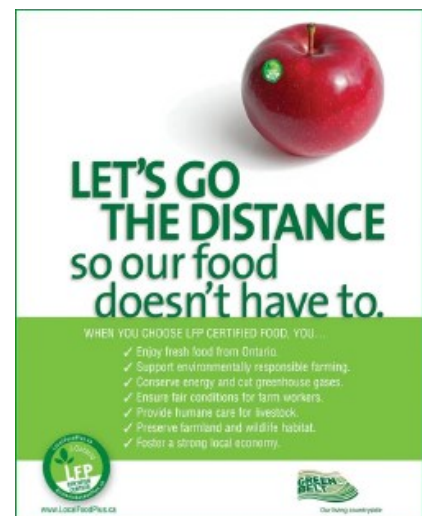
European projects, including the **Food Alliance's** approach to sustainable agriculture and food practices. The Food Alliance program, which has been around for more than 10 years, certifies agriculture and processing facilities for labor, animal welfare and the environment.

Local Food Plus has expanded on this model by adding energy and proximity to the list of sustainability requirements. LFP-branded products have a responsible **backstory** involving production, processing and transportation practices that respect biodiversity; fair and safe labour practices, humane animal husbandry, and conservation of water and soil. The producers are also working to eliminate or reduce synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, hormones, antibiotics, and genetic engineering. Today it is possible to find sustainably and locally grown produce, meat, grains, eggs and milk in a number of local grocery stores, restaurants and institutions. The program has the flexibility to accommodate a fuller range of sustainable production practices than the organic standard. Some LFP farmers and processors are certified organic, but many are not.

Third-party certification provides a new level of transparency and accountability beyond what the government and the marketplace currently provide. LFP's research shows that branded products command up to a 10 percent product premium. The decreased input, transportation and packaging expenses keep the consumer price from skyrocketing.

Independent retailers, restaurants and institutional foodservice customers have been the first to sign onto Local Food Plus products. Public institutions like the **University of Toronto** and the **City of Markham** have adopted Local Food Plus products as part of their emerging sustainable purchasing policies. Hometown grocers like **L & M Foodland** (PDF) have also signed on. According to Dale Dropf, vice President of L & M Foods, LFP certification and marketing helps the grocer answer growing consumer demand for "safe, local, sustainable food."

The best part is that LFP is a model transferable to any jurisdiction. It is, for McRae, a type of food citizenship (see PDF), encouraged by a new model of "organizational ecology." Local Food Plus, through its efforts, is helping to re-balance a current market failure. While this program is still in its infancy and is likely to further evolve, LFP represents an interesting potential precursor to a new economic model: one based on values and sustainability.



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