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## Coast to Coast, a New Food Network

**Group forms to help farmers, retailers make local connections**

By Patty Cantrell, Great Lakes Bulletin News Service

Brian Snyder, director of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), pointed to the highest-earning farms on a graph about agriculture in his state and asked the audience what types of operations come to mind.

Certainly, he already knew what most people would picture: The typical farms grossing more than \$500,000 are industrial—such as large animal factories that use a low-price, high-volume business model, much like Wal-Mart does in retail.

And [Mr. Snyder's graph](#) also showed how that phenomenon has re-shaped American agriculture: A small number of larger farms now produce more milk, meat, and produce than much greater numbers of smaller farms used to in the past.



But then he poked a hole in that conventional wisdom. He asked his audience to consider new evidence that small farms are now breaking into higher income brackets and building a new local food and farm economy with serious growth potential.

So serious, in fact, that it was the crux of the meeting he was addressing: The inaugural convening of the National Good Food Network, held in Chicago last Nov. 18-20.

The [Network](#), managed by the Wallace Center at Winrock International, is another indicator that the phenomenal growth of farmers markets, farm-to-cafeteria programs, and other “local food” venues has reached a new stage.

The conference was an unusual mix of two different worlds: small-farm organizers and big food distributors. Small farms come from a more face-to-face economy, while the big distributors operate in a highly anonymous, long-distance global economy. But they gathered in Chicago to launch the National Good Food Network because demand and markets for local foods are changing so much that people in both worlds realize it is high time for them to talk about working together.

### **New Models, New Potential**

The conversations at that National Good Food Network conference were about how smaller, local farms are increasingly forming alliances and networks to supply bigger and bigger orders. And they were also about the value of using the extensive distribution infrastructure that companies like conference sponsor Sysco Corporation already have in place to move products.

While such companies have favored big loads from big farms in the past, they're now looking, as Sysco chief Rick Schnieders puts it, for the "romance, memory, and trust" that more customers want and which more local, family-scale farms have.

Says Denis Jennisch, regional produce manager for Sysco in Grand Rapids, "There is a groundswell in the market of people wanting to buy local and keep money in their marketplace."

His remarks reinforced what Mr. Snyder told the audience: local consumers and farmers have the potential to strengthen local economies with their local food purchases.

Inching up his farm earnings graph toward higher income brackets, in fact, were a number of small farms in Pennsylvania; each is a PASA member, and each grosses more than \$500,000 "before they even plant a seed," Mr. Snyder said.

Their trick is their innovative business model, called Community Supported Agriculture. Customers pay in the early spring for generous weekly portions of their CSA's homegrown food throughout the growing season. With more than 1,000 such members each, and with a price of at least \$500 per member share, the farms start their growing season with more than half a million dollars in working capital. Many such CSAs earn more good money by also selling their fresh, naturally raised food to farmers markets, restaurants, grocery stores, and wholesale markets.

Yet Mr. Snyder actually spent more time exploring the lower income brackets on his chart of Pennsylvania agriculture. They showed that, much like in the rest of the country, half of all the active farmland in Pennsylvania is on farms that gross less than \$50,000 per year.

That's a far cry, he says, from what is possible with new, small-farm marketing networks and models like CSA, particularly for farms close to larger metropolitan areas.

"This is our potential," he says. "This land can be profitable when farmed sustainably."

By "sustainable," he means in harmony with nature, neighbors, and the farm family's bottom line—precisely what local food consumers are looking for. It is also what communities need from the nation's farms: a system that makes complete environmental, social, and economic sense.

But to make that happen, regions must re-work their economic development strategies to recognize small farms as excellent business assets and take better advantage of their potential.

### **New Sights and Sounds**

It appears that the idea Mr. Snyder touted in Chicago is catching hold and making a difference in some regions of the country.

One is Loudoun County, Va., a rural area just outside of Washington D.C.

"The present consumer-oriented type of agriculture is very important for us," said Warren Howell, Loudoun County's economic development manager.

In fact, Loudoun County farmers' growing direct-market success is key to reaching the goals in the county's 10-year local agriculture plan, called "the 200,000 Acre Solution," he said.

"We want to be able to have a rural economy that features a lot of the new, like wineries and lots of small truck farms," Mr. Howell said. "That is, market gardens ranging from two to three acres to 100 acres in fruits and vegetables—plus traditional cattle and grain operations."

Loudoun's story is encouraging. In 1997, it set out to double its agricultural output in 10 years in order to strengthen its rural economy and character. The county reports it has done much better than that, raising agricultural output from \$27 million in sales in 1997 to an estimated \$70 million in 2007.

The report's introduction paints an unusually colorful picture of what the "re-invention" of Loudoun's rural economy has wrought:

*"The past 10 years have produced new sights and sounds in rural Loudoun. At night the Endless Summer Harvest lettuce houses look extra-terrestrial. On weekends Crooked Run Farm PYO (pick your own) looks like an international gathering of the world's people, some in native dress, picking apples. Spanish is the language spoken in the vineyards while young urban professionals sip quality wines made from Loudoun grapes and take in the beauty of the surrounding scenery. What is going on here?"*

Mr. Howell's answer to that question: His county is consciously and comprehensively treating agriculture as a local economic driving force.

For example, instead of relying solely on exporting cattle and grain to bring cash into the county to buy imported foods from far-away providers, Loudoun invests in its farms' ability to supply more local food to more local markets. It is a good way to keep money flowing around the local economy.

That's a change from what nearly every other community across the country is doing—exporting hundreds of millions of food dollars every year, and importing the majority of their food from distant global food companies.

And, according to Brian Snyder, there really is no reason to delay hooking up more farms with their local markets. After all, it is a proven path to increased farm profitability.

"How can we continue to focus almost exclusively on exporting farm products," he asked at the conference, "when we are so short on meeting local food consumption, and our land and market potential?"

### **Network Support**

The National Good Food Network's answer to that question is that we do not have to, because it helps farms and communities move in new, more diverse, and profitable local directions.

Besides Mr. Snyder and Sysco's Mr. Jennisch, the Chicago gathering featured a number of others who are leading the move toward more regionally based food systems. They included Scott Exo, director of Food Alliance, a third-party certifier of sustainable growing practices and labor standards; Anthony Flaccavento, director of Appalachian Sustainable Development, which operates the two-state, 60-farm, 600-supermarket Appalachian Harvest marketing network; and Don Schaefer, head of RSF Social Finance, which is launching three new financing funds for sustainable agriculture entrepreneurs.

It is that kind of expertise and real-life experience, said the Network's director, John Fisk, that his organization is dedicated to providing to people pursuing, developing, and expanding new markets for healthy, green, fair, and affordable food.

In fact, the Chicago conference was just one example of what the Network is up to. The organization also recently held its second annual Meet the Buyers reception, at the December Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable, and Farm Market Expo, in Grand Rapids. The [Network](#) also collects and shares best practices, new models, and other information coming out of the innovative, dynamic businesses and communities that are building local and regional food systems.

It's important work, according to Mr. Flaccavento.

"Demand exceeds supply," he said of local food's growing popularity.

And the National Good Food Network is supporting those working to increase that supply and move it to wider markets.

*Patty Cantrell serves as program director at the Michigan Land Use Institute, where she has built northwest Michigan's nationally recognized Taste the Local Difference program. Patty is also a 2008-2009 Food and Society Policy Fellow focused on promoting local food and farming as a New Economy strategy. Reach her at [pattycATmlui.org](mailto:pattycATmlui.org).*