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Buy local, and community may reap benefits

By Tom Watson

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Planning to cook up a steaming pot of chili on a brisk fall night, you open a can of organic kidney beans and stamped on top is "Product of China." It begs the question: Can food from so far away really be "green"?

As organic products increasingly travel thousands of miles to our tables, the "buy local" movement has picked up steam.

Because transportation consumes fossil fuels, purchasing locally produced food and other products — from clothes to toys to furniture — typically helps reduce global warming. Buying local also supports area farmers and manufacturers.

Many variables come into play when comparing organic and local products (and, of course, some products are both). An organic food ingredient grown in China, for example, may have environmental and health advantages for Chinese farmers, since they were not exposed to pesticides. But it appears that food produced closer to home, even when not organic, has significant benefits overall.

Long organic journey

The demand for organic foods has exploded in North America. Production has not kept up, however. Even though the United States is one of the top three nations in organic food production, the U.S. still imports eight times more organic food than it exports, according to John Feffer, co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.



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All types of organic ingredients for products sold in the U.S. and Europe — beans, nuts, herbs, fruits, vegetables and meats — now often come from China, Turkey, Brazil and many other countries, says Organic Monitor, a London-based industry research firm. Organic foods have also been embraced (critics say co-opted) by Wal-Mart, Kraft, and other retail and food industry giants.

The local connection

Northwest consumers have found an appealing alternative in their own backyard. Once few and far between, farmers markets now operate in more than 70 neighborhoods and communities in the Puget Sound area. Nine of these stay open through December, including popular markets in Ballard, the University District and West Seattle.

Many area grocery stores now also highlight local foods. And the influential "100 Mile Diet" concept (www.100milediet.org) was introduced by a Vancouver, B.C., couple who lived for a year on food produced from within 100 miles.

Even when some fresh items are out of season, consumers enjoy many choices. Farmers in King County alone produce more than 200 varieties of fruits and vegetables, including many grown organically.

Not just food

The buy-local premise makes sense in theory for other items as well. But products such as clothing, furniture and housewares are generally produced locally only on a very small scale. Even Northwest-based companies often manufacture their products in China or other distant locales.

Products made from recycled or reused materials are more likely to be made locally, partly because the raw materials can be procured at little or no cost. For example, Alchemy Goods (www.alchemygoods.com) in Seattle makes bags and accessories from old inner tubes, seat belts and plastic signs. Also based in Seattle, the Sustainable Group (www.sustainablegroup.net) produces binders, folders and notebooks from recycled paper.

Still controversial

Recently, the buy-local movement has faced increased scrutiny. Buying locally could result in the loss of badly needed jobs in impoverished nations, some critics say. Making a product on a small scale can consume more resources than mass production, offsetting any benefits from reduced transportation. And fertilizers used on non-organic, locally grown foods contribute to global warming, as do the extra car trips by consumers visiting farmers markets.

While not dismissing these objections, buy-local proponents emphasize the positives. Farmers markets

help keep local small farms alive. Consumers can stay healthier by eating fresher food. And local producers and manufacturers tend to be more accountable.

In today's world, no one purchases all his food and goods from local sources. But the buy-local movement has at least started people thinking about the life stories of products.

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