

## General Overview of Alternate Farming Methods (Small-medium scale farming)

### Regional and local markets

According to a survey by the USDA in 2008, 5% of farms in the U.S. are local, and these markets are growing rapidly. This market earns about \$5 billion a year—very small sales compared to conventional agriculture revenues. Regional and local markets include farmers markets, CSAs (Consumer Supported Agriculture: direct-to-consumer programs where consumers buy a “share” of a local projected harvest), farm stands, urban farms, diversified farming, etc. According to 2007 Census, most farms that sell directly to consumers are small farmers who earn less than \$50,000 in total sales.

Although many associate local and regional farms with “fresh or quality produce,” local and regional agriculture does not mean that farming methods are sustainable or that food production methods are small-scale, organic, etc. For instance, a local farm could be a factory farm who supplies meat to the nearby community. What is “local” or “regional” is not defined by government and can be interpreted differently. The USDA states that local can mean up to 25-350 miles between farmer and consumer.

For a variety of reasons, regional and local food markets are viewed favorably:

- Local food systems usually rely upon a small supply of sustainable family farms. Many small farms use sustainable practices, e.g. minimized pesticide use, composting, less pollution due to minimized transportation, minimal packing and more.
- Local and regional food markets reportedly make it easier to trace a source of a food contamination; as conventional food production tends to go through a wide variety of processes over vast geographical areas, making it hard to identify a point of contamination – thus they are good for food safety.
- Products are usually healthier - sold when fresh and raised sustainably with fewer antibiotics, pesticides, and other contaminations in product.
- Smaller farms are more likely to support their local economy, e.g. buying input materials from local businesses.

### Government Support of Alternative Farming Methods

Government agencies have a variety of programs in place that provide support to local and regional farm markets, specifically grant and training programs for community farm markets and rural agricultural markets. However, many of these grant programs are underfunded and are weakened by inconsistent government support policies. In order for new current farmers to transition to an alternative farming method, they need financial assistance, insurance and credit. While the newly passed Farm Bill has tried to level the playing field for all farmers in terms of eliminating direct subsidies to commodity farmers and extending crop insurance to most farmers, regardless of crop grown, some challenges to small farmers remain, including the availability and cost of agricultural credit which may be harder for small farmers to obtain and may carry higher interest rates. There are still concerns that organic farms do not use time efficiently (too much time spent on producing a crop) and yield is not sufficient as with conventional farms.

### Support of Environmentally Sound Practices in Federal Subsidized Insurance

Federal crop insurance requires farmers to comply with conservation goals in order to receive a discount on their premiums. There are two main components to conservation in the federal farm bill: wetlands conservation and high erodible lands conservation.

According to a report by the USDA Deputy Secretary in 2011, farmers have saved 295 million tons of soil per year—soil that has been held in place and kept from entering our rivers, lakes, and streams. Further, an estimated 1.5 million to 3.3 million acres of vulnerable wetlands have not been drained as a result of compliance.

### Support of Best Management Practices in General Farm Subsidies

A variety of voluntary conservation programs exist within the USDA. Programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) can help farmers implement cost-effective, environmentally beneficial production methods such as grassland and wetlands management, integrated pest management and the sustainable management of manure. In the past, these funds have been heavily used to subsidize short-term, technology-heavy “fixes” to the pollution problems of industrial livestock and crop operations.

In addition to EQIP, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is in place to protect highly erodible cropland and other environmentally sensitive land. However, the funding for this program can be unstable and inconsistent. For some farmers, the payment is not enough and they would rather take the risk of farming on their highly erodible land for a bigger profit. Furthermore, many argue that the popularity of more sustainable methods of farming reduces any need for the CRP, e.g. better methods for tilling soil.

The CRP is very popular among environmental groups which point to waterfowl recovery in several states as a result. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also credit it as to why Dust Bowl conditions haven't returned to the Great Plains in recent years despite droughts that were as bad as in the 1930s.