

Moving Towards a Healthy Food and Farm System Reducing food miles and increasing local benefits

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Harvesting hay for livestock is an important part of a healthy local food system.

Let us focus on *opportunity* in this time of environmental and economic crisis. When the price of gas goes up (crisis), people get creative about saving gas (opportunity). When there is a big storm (crisis), people stop to help their neighbours (opportunity). When Maple Leaf had their processed meat recall (crisis), direct sales of Nova Scotia-produced meat went up (opportunity). The trick is to turn the crisis-generated opportunities into long-term, durable opportunities.

The food and agriculture crisis is three-fold. First, our local farm and food system is threatened. Farmers are not earning enough money, and our food processing sector is unraveling. Second, imported industrial food is increasingly suspect. Recently spinach scares and tainted meat – and even milk products adulterated with melamine – are causing us to wake up to the value of knowing and trusting who we buy food from. Third, the cost of gas went way up, and could increase again in a post peak oil world. Our whole global agricultural system is vulnerable because it is so energy-intensive. It is built on the assumption that there will be plenty of cheap energy sources for transport trucks to bring food everywhere; for growing food using lots of cheap fertilizer (made with natural gas); and for processed food (frozen, then microwaved) for everyone.

Happily, this crisis is fueling an increase in demand for locally-grown, ecologically-produced food. Here is the opportunity to build a healthier, more durable, local food and farm system! To replace the imported products we can grow here with our own home-grown food. To reduce the transport of food long distances, and associated environmental costs. To build viable farm and food businesses that are supported by Nova Scotians.

Benefits of a Relocalized Food System

- **Increase the % of our food dollar that goes to local farmers**

In 2007, EAC's Food Miles Project estimated that of all the money people spend on food in NS, less than 7% of it filtered back to Nova Scotian net farm income. A more locally-based food system could improve this situation. Buying local food directly from farmers increases the percentage of our food dollar that pays for the *quality of the food* rather than shipping, advertising, packaging, and preservatives.

- **Rebuild our food self-reliance**

- **Fruit**

Nova Scotia is known for its orchard and berry fruit production, and we used to be very self-reliant in these fruits. Much of the wealth in the Annapolis Valley was built from apple orchards. Apple production has declined over time, and now we produce about four times as much as our fresh apple consumption. (Many apples are used for juice and cider.) Ironically, we import about half of the fresh apples we eat, which means we are importing and exporting apples at the same time. With blueberries, we produce about twenty times what we eat, and we import very little. Now we produce about 60% of the amount of strawberries we eat, but we used to produce 140% just 30 years ago. Years ago, we produced about the same amount as we ate in pears, but now barely 20%. Plums, less than 20%. We have the capacity and knowledge to produce most of what we eat in northern fruits, and it is possible that we could regain that self-reliance if we act quickly.

- **Vegetables**

Only a short time ago (in the 80s), we produced more beans, beets, cabbage, and carrots than we ate in this province. Now (aside from carrots) we produce far less than what we consume. We know we have the potential to produce a much greater share of what we eat in almost all the northern vegetables.

- **Meat**

In 1997 we were 80% self reliant in pork. Now we are closer to 15% self reliant. In a dozen years we have lost most of our pork producers. There has been a general acknowledgement that a 'commodity approach' to pork production isn't working for NS producers. In other words, our producers can't compete with global pork production (and can't produce pork at the global price). So, we're going to have to produce and sell pork

differently – possibly free-ranging in the summer, and selling directly to consumers to cut out the middleman. Selling directly can give both producers and consumers a better price. A win-win opportunity.

Lamb is a meat that is highly ecological because the livestock are fed mostly pasture and hay, crops that keep the soil covered and increase its organic carbon content – particularly when sheep manure is returned to the soil. Unfortunately we import close to 83% of the lamb we consume. Lamb imports travel an average of 18,000 km, and the carbon footprint associated with this transport is very high (nearly 2.5 kg of greenhouse gas emissions per kg of meat). If we substituted all imported lamb with locally-produced lamb, we could increase farm cash receipts by an estimated 9 million dollars. The by-product from lamb production – wool -- could generate a potential natural insulation business, creating additional energy savings.

Beef is a fascinating story too. It defies reason that Nova Scotians import roughly 90% of the beef we consume. Mostly from Alberta. In trucks. We import an estimated 26 million kg of beef every year from feedlots in Western Canada, when we could produce all the beef we need right here, and it could be grass-fed – providing us with a much healthier and more ecological product. Eliminating just the *transport* of this beef would be the equivalent of taking at least 6,000 cars off the road per year. Replacing imported beef with local beef could inject at least 90 million dollars into rural communities. This is an example of economic stimulus that reduces greenhouse gas emissions at the same time.

In 2006, only 23% of the meat in retail grocery stores (Superstore, Sobeys, and Co-op) was produced in Atlantic Canada, yet we are perfectly suited to produce all the meat we consume right here in this region. We would have to increase and improve our processing facilities, but that would provide much-needed employment and economic stimulus.

- **Generate employment in rural areas**

In 2004, the latest year an estimate is available, Nova Scotia agriculture generated 10,281 direct and indirect Person Years of Employment (total hours of employment divided by 2,000 hours to give an equivalent of a full time job) (Roberts et al 2005). If Nova Scotians bought more local food, this number could be increased substantially. As an example, if we replaced all beef and lamb imports with locally-grown, we could generate an estimated 2,000 jobs in rural Nova Scotia.

It is ok to have some imported food so we have variety in our diets. But imported food destabilizes our local food system if it is too prevalent, and it does not generate local economic, social, and environmental benefits the way local food does. Imported food has costs that we don't often think about. The transportation of food, which accounts for approximately 30% of transport trucks on our highways, wear on publicly funded roads, produce greenhouse gas emissions, congestion, pollution, and accidents. As well, the effects of imported industrial food on our health is borne by our tax dollars.

Citizens *can* influence what food is available in grocery stores by making their preferences known. Do we really want New Zealand lamb, Mexican tomatoes, or apples from Washington State? The greatest benefits of a healthy local food system are better food, viable farms, the ability to have a meaningful connection with food production in the province, and ultimately the ability to support and influence farming here.

Jen works with Marla MacLeod on EAC's Food Miles Project – a collaboration between EAC and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture.