

It takes a community to sustain a small farm

5 JAN 2010 4:16 PM BY [STEPH LARSEN](#)

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These days it seems the most popular person to be in the food system is the “local farmer.” Farmers markets are popping up everywhere, and their size and popularity grow all the time. Local food is trendy—even [the First Family](#) is in on it.

But as anyone who has ever raised grain or livestock can tell you, the farmer is not the only person in the chain of players from her farm to your fork. In addition to producers, your food chain includes processors, distributors or transporters, and retailers.

In other words, to have a truly local food system, we also need local butchers, bakers and millers, local truck drivers, local grocers, and a community that supports them in all their efforts.

In the world of farm and food policy, we’ve paid a lot of attention to production end of the food system. It’s an obvious place to start. We have programs within the Farm Bill to [develop new or “beginning” farmers](#), help them [secure loans](#) and [down payments](#), and [transition to organic agriculture](#). But most products aren’t made to eat directly out of the field. Even salad greens or apples, things we typically eat raw and straight from the field, must be washed and sorted before your local farmer will sell them.



As [Tom Philpott pointed out](#) in early November, the infrastructure for small-scale processing is woefully inadequate, having suffered decades of atrophy and consolidation—to the point where an otherwise profitable farmer can be driven out of business because she has no where to take her pigs for slaughter, her grain to be milled, or her tomatoes to be “sauced.”

Small-scale, certified community kitchens, like [this one in Montana](#) or [this one in Tennessee](#), are beginning to fill some of this need. There are a few [mobile slaughter facilities](#) gaining traction, but not enough to meet demand and too new to measure their long term viability. Not many community colleges offer classes on how to humanely kill and butcher an animal anymore. In the Midwest where I live, there used to be a local “meat locker” in every small town—now there are hardly any. How will we supply the food system with local meat or local flour if there the nearest facility is too far away or doesn’t exist at all?

I believe the answer lies in the example we have set for ourselves with beginning farmers. Society is beginning to see farming as a dignified and profitable profession again, and with that comes market demand for good farmers, respect for the profession, government programs to

encourage new farmers, and training and educational opportunities. We need similar opportunities for small-scale butchers, millers, bakers, and other types of processors.

Local food distribution has received even less attention than processing, and it is a complex piece of the food chain we'll have to get creative about if local food will be available in grocery stores. In Nebraska, where I live, the distributor serving most of the rural grocery stores has a weekly buying minimum. A grocer won't even consider buying produce from a local farmer if it will put them below their minimum because the distributor levies a fine.

Challenges like buying minimums and aggregating products from multiple farms crop up when dealing with local foods. [Some models](#) are attempting to overcome these challenges, but we'll need more ideas to fit the diversity of situations in which they arise.

Retailing healthy, affordable food has also gained attention lately in the term "[food desert](#)," but it's an issue worth repeating. We all need a grocery store nearby, unless you are one of the few that produce all your own food. Without a grocery store, people will not want to live in our communities and neighborhoods, which makes them less vibrant and more vulnerable to failure. Grocery stores are [more than food retail](#), however—they are often the focal point of a town or neighborhood where people go to see friends, swap recipes, and catch up on local gossip.

Local ownership of a grocery is critical so that food dollars continue to circulate within the community. Additionally, a locally owned grocery store is more likely to purchase from a local farmer than a store owned by an impersonal, profit-driven corporation. In order to have more local grocers, we need to teach young people entrepreneurship in addition to community pride and loyalty. Again, our treatment of beginning farmers gives us a good example of policy solutions to encourage more young people to enter the grocery business.

I used to think there were four distinct pieces to a local food system: production, processing, distribution, and retail. Now I realize there is a fifth: community. Without an involved community of customers who believe in what the local farmer, miller, distributor, and grocer is doing, none of them will last very long.

Community is important in another sense as well. Most of the farmers who grow our food live in rural places, and they want to live in active, thriving communities too. Therefore, if we care about local food systems, we should all be concerned with the survival of rural communities regardless of where we live. Rural development is often the red-headed stepchild of the Farm Bill, receiving little attention and even less funding. For local food to expand, we need to give respect and resources to rural communities and their residents.

If growing a local food system is our goal, it must begin with vibrant communities, then follow with genuine opportunities for careers everywhere in the food chain. Expanding our policy solutions beyond producers will help the idea of local food move forward from a trend to a permanent fixture of our food system.