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2009 Farm and Rural Life Poll: Farming and food systems in rural communities*

by J. Gordon Arbuckle, Jr., extension sociologist; Paul Lasley, extension sociologist; Peter Korsching, professor; and Chris Kast, research assistant

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, the Farm Poll is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. This article highlights information from the 2009 survey on farm policy and commodity production.

Farming and food systems in rural communities

Adequate access to supermarkets or other sources of fresh, wholesome foods has become a concern in some rural areas over the last decades. At the same time, development of local food systems has come to be seen as a strategy that can address both food accessibility and rural economic development needs.

Access to food and self-reliance

Farmers were asked two questions relating to food accessibility: how far they have to travel one-way to reach a supermarket, and what percentage of the food consumed in their households is produced on their land. On average, farmers reported that they travel 10.7 miles to the nearest supermarket, for a round-trip of about 21 miles. About 25 percent of farm families live less than five miles from a supermarket, while another quarter live more than 15 miles away.

Levels of food produced on the farm for household consumption were generally low. Farmers indicated that on average about 11 percent of the foods consumed in their households was produced on their farms. Around 40 percent of farms produced less than five

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Table 1. Local food

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
—Percentage—						
People are increasingly interested in locally grown foods.....		1	5	19	67	9
The state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell farm products to Iowa grocery stores and restaurants.....		1	6	23	60	10
The state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell farm products to institutions such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons*....	1999	3	15	37	36	9
	2009	1	6	29	55	8
The local food movement could provide important new market opportunities for Iowa farmers		1	4	32	55	8
Farmers' markets have much to offer as an alternative for farmers to increase their incomes.....	1999	3	21	43	30	3
	2009	1	9	29	54	7
Processing plants for alternative products such as fruits, vegetables, and specialty meats should be developed to help Iowa farmers serve local and regional markets*.....	1999	1	7	49	37	6
	2009	1	4	36	53	7
Iowa imports too much food from other states and foreign countries.....		2	11	41	34	13
Most people don't care where their food is produced.....	1999	5	25	19	40	11
	2009	8	37	18	31	5

* These statements were worded slightly differently in 1999; however the meanings are substantially the same.

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percent of the food that the household used, and another 20 percent produced between six and 10 percent of what their households consumed. Only about five percent of participants reported that their farms met more than 50 percent of household food consumption needs.

Local food

The last several years have seen an increased focus on the development of local food systems as a strategy to promote economic growth, improve nutrition and strive for better environmental outcomes. Over three-quarters of participants agreed or strongly agreed that people are increasingly interested in locally grown food (Table 1). Forty-seven percent agreed that Iowa imports too much food from other states and foreign countries. Strong majorities supported efforts to develop local food systems, with over 60 percent of farmers in agreement that the local food movement could provide important new market opportunities for Iowa farmers and 70 percent agreeing that the state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell products in Iowa grocery stores and restaurants.

Several of the questions asked in this year's Farm Poll were also asked in the 1999 Farm Poll, and the comparisons allow us to chart trends in beliefs about local food systems over the last decade. In 1999, 51 percent of farmers agreed with the statement "Most people don't care where their food is produced" compared to only 36 percent in 2009 (Table 1). Another question that was posed in both years asked farmers whether the state should support initiatives to help Iowa farmers sell products to institutions such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals and prisons. Sixty-three percent agreed in 2009, up from 45 percent in 1999. Statements about developing strategies that help Iowa farmers to access local and regional markets for fruits and vegetables were presented in both years. In 2009, 60 percent of

farmers agreed that such initiatives should be pursued, compared to 43 percent in 1999. Finally, the statement "Farmers' markets have much to offer as an alternative for farmers to increase their incomes" garnered agreement among 61 percent of farmers in 2009, nearly double the 33 percent that agreed with the same statement in 1999. Taken together, these results indicate that Iowa farmers are increasingly supportive of and interested in participating in local food systems.

Survey information

Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship are all partners in the Farm Poll effort. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farmers who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll.

Who participates?

The 2009 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in January and February to a statewide panel of 2,201 farm operators. Usable surveys were received from 1,268 farmers, resulting in a 58 percent response rate. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old, and had been farming for 39 years. Fifty percent of farmers reported that farm income made up more than half of their overall 2008 household income, and an additional 20 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from farming. Copies of this or any other year's reports are available from your county ISU Extension office, the Extension Online Store (www.extension.iastate.edu/store), Extension Sociology (www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll.html) or from the authors.

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