

## Finding Sustainable Food Systems in Florida

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We all enjoy our foods everyday as a basic act of sustenance both personally and socially. We would like to believe that our foods are safe, abundant and affordable. Almost everyday, however, there are new headlines about food safety and security that question these assumptions. Conversely, maybe our foods are coming from a runaway system that needs repair? For example, when can we provide our children with the freshest and nutritious food at their school lunches or provide ourselves with a wide range of food choices to reduce our personal carbon footprint? Will these possibilities ever exist in Florida? Yes, there's an opportunity to learn about solutions from a variety of community groups and programs of sustainable food systems to make them a reality.

The concept of a food system or foodshed defines the area that provides the many steps from growing food in the field to delivering it to you at your table or favorite food vendor. In the USA an industrial food system has been developed where one farmer feeds 144 people but the average food item travels 1,500 miles from the producer to the consumer (1,2). In addition, studies are indicating that the industrial food system is not capable of continuing without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It's like the system of blood vessels that extends to every part of our bodies. This food system has effects on public health, educational achievement, economic vitality, community development, wages, environmental health, and even US financial and foreign policy (3).

The concept of a sustainable local food system is the alternative model that provides practical solutions. It promotes sustainable agriculture to supply a greater diversity of locally-grown foods to you as consumers. For example, a 2008 report states that reducing the distance food travels will reduce your food carbon footprint by 11% and eliminating the industrial food production practices will reduce it by 83% (4).

Today the principles of sustainable food systems are being applied in projects across Florida. For example, the New North Florida Cooperative Association in partnership with Florida A&M University pioneered in 1995 a successful Farm to School program of direct marketing by minority, family farmers to the school lunch programs in 15 school districts in Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi (<http://www.farmtoschool.org/state-home.php?id=23>). Today similar programs have been initiated at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and in Sarasota and Manatee counties school districts in partnership with UF/IFAS Extension.

In Palm Beach County the Localecopia Project was initiated in 2007 by the Breakers Hotel to promote locally-grown foods from small farmers for the hospitality industry. The project is a membership alliance among growers, consumers, and citizens that is promoting local

economic development through a growers' cooperative, local food distributors, and renewable energies (<http://www.localecopia.org/>).

These stories are only an introduction to the diversity of groups, approaches and projects that are bringing sustainable food systems to Florida. On August 1 - 2, 2009 you can learn more about such projects at the first Florida Small Farm and Alternative Enterprises Conference in Kissimmee, Florida (<http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/floridasmallfarmsconference/index.htm>). This event invites you to attend and learn with our small farmers how to sustain agriculture in Florida. We hope to see you there.

(1) American Farm Bureau. 2008. Farm Facts Highlights.

(2) Pirog, R. 2003. Checking the Food Odometer. 2003. Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Iowa State University.

(3) Kellogg Foundation. How To Talk Food Systems. <http://www.wkkf.org>

(4) Weber, C. and H. Matthews. 2008. Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States Environ. Sci. Technol., 42 (10): 3508–3513.

- **Photo Caption (taken from UF/IFAS Photo Archive webpages)**

**Picture Name:** IFAS Extension faculty are working to increase food safety. By following food safety guidelines, farmers and packing facilities are improving their processes, but consumers must be aware of how to select, store and serve fresh produce in order to minimize [04277S](#)

- **Recommended Modifications of Photo Caption**

**Picture Name:** Florida offers a wide variety of seasonal and regional fresh produce for sustainable local food systems. [04277S](#)