

# Conversations Conferences



on Nebraska  
Environment  
and Sustainability

## White Paper: Food

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Food is essential for life. We need food for simple survival. Many of us are fortunate enough to be able to choose from a wide variety of foods that are available to us through a well developed system of growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, and consumption. This “system” approach to putting food on our table is easy, plentiful, and cost effective. But is it the only “system” that we should be focused on?

The current industrialized food system has developed over the years in response to consumer demand. We want a wide variety of foods to be available to us in our local grocery store, all the time, in every season, in the quantities we want, at a low price. Our foods, wherever they are grown, enter the “system” and “travel” miles to get to our front door. Varying estimates are made on “food miles”, but one number that is generally accepted is that currently our food travels, on average, 1500 miles before we consume it. Nebraska is a great food producing state. But even food grown here, may enter the existing system, go through processing, packaging, etc., travel the miles, and then end up right back here where it started.

We are beginning to see attributes attached to foods, based upon how the food is grown, show up in the current industrialized system. Organically grown foods are one example of an attribute that defines the food through the process under which it was grown and processed. It generally does nothing to reduce the “food miles”, but certainly has an impact on the overall use of chemicals and commercial fertilizers. Organically produced foods have to meet USDA specifications to be labeled as such. Consumers generally perceive that producers used no herbicides and pesticides during the production process, and used only organic fertilizers for soil health.

In recent years, we have seen a resurgence of interest in “eating locally”. This food system approach attempts to connect local food producers to local consumers. The perception is that fresh, locally produced food is better for you nutritionally. Consumers may have the opportunity to get to know their local food producer, actually see their growing practices, understand better how their food is grown, and at the same time support that local farmer economically. This local food system allows consumers to select the type of production system that they want to grow the food they consume.

Our food production is intertwined with many dynamic forces. It is farms both large and small, it is jobs on and off farm, it is rural Nebraska communities. On average, farmers in the United States receive around 10 cents for every dollar spent on food. The remaining 90 cents goes towards processing, packaging, marketing, and transportation. Commodity production from Nebraska helps to feed a world population. High production at a low cost is an important component in the current food system, to supply the needs of the market. At the same time, local food producers are just as important to the dynamics of jobs, retention of farms, sustainable communities and Nebraska’s way of life.

As we think about our food systems for our Conversation Conferences, I think we have a variety of questions to think about for our discussions. What kind of food system is best for Nebraska? How do we meet the needs of a variety of people in a variety of situations (economic, nutritional, location) with how our food is produced and delivered? Food produced in alternative production systems generally is sometimes more expensive. How does that impact the low income family? Can local food systems provide all the foods we need? Are all production systems “sustainable”? Who gets to define sustainability? What is sustainable for one farm, may not be seen as sustainable for another. Is there a need for both types of food systems for Nebraska, for the United States, and for the world? How does food security enter into the discussion for any type of food system? How do the food systems affect the environment and the sustainability of our land, water, energy, food and materials?