

## 08-10-05 Local Agriculture and Climate Change

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Excerpt from: "Going Local on a Global Scale: Rethinking Food Trade in the Era of Climate Change, Dumping, and Rural Poverty." by **Kirsten Schwind**, Food First Program Director

### Trade Fuels Climate Change

Advocating for local food requires reexamining the deeply held economic theory of competitive advantage, which holds that each region should specialize in producing only what it can produce most cheaply, then trade with other regions for everything else. However, traditional economic calculations do not account for the true environmental cost of trade. For example, the potentially cataclysmic impacts of climate change mean that the environmental costs of transporting goods long distances are much higher than previously thought.

Most food travels hundreds, even thousands, of miles from farm to plate, and the fossil fuel transportation infrastructure we rely on for all this trade emits greenhouse gasses that are contributing to climate change. Climate change is raising sea temperatures and flooding coastal areas, and has the potential to increase crop failures, cause mass extinctions, and spur more destructive weather patterns such as hurricanes—all with profound implications for agriculture and human habitation. Since the full consequences will not be felt for years after the greenhouse gasses have been emitted, it is exceedingly difficult to predict and price future ecological damage and add it to the energy costs of today's food system. Thus even prices that are adjusted to include current energy subsidies or minor "climate change taxes" are not reliable indicators of the ecological and social price of fossil fuel-driven global trade.

Buying local food can make a big difference to the environment. For example, in 1920 Iowa produced a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, but now most of its fruits and vegetables are shipped from elsewhere. If Iowans bought just 10 percent more of their food from within the state, they could collectively save 7.9 million pounds of carbon dioxide emission a year. The Japanese environmental organization Daichi-o-Mamoru Kai (the Association to Preserve the Earth) found that if Japanese families consumed local food instead of imported food, the impact would be equivalent to reducing household energy use by 20 percent; the biggest impact would come from eating tofu products from soy grown in Japan instead of in the US. And researchers in the UK have calculated that purchasing local food has a greater positive impact on the environment than buying organic food that is not local. While some food trade is inevitable, such as tropical products like coffee that are staples in colder climates, a surprising amount of trade is duplicative and ecologically wasteful. For example, Heinz ketchup eaten in California is made with California-grown tomatoes that have been shipped to Canada for processing and returned in bottles. In one year, the port of New York City exported \$431,000 worth of California almonds to Italy, and imported \$397,000 worth of Italian almonds to the United States. This sort of unnecessary trade mortgages our children's planet for profits today.

This article can be read in its entirety at: <http://www.foodfirst.org/backgrouders/goinglocal>

