



Big demand for small farms: Local foods craze shakes up model of agriculture.

By GEORGINA GUSTIN St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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ELSAH, Ill. — Amy Cloud sits in the shade at the edge of a field brimming with spring vegetables. The day hints at summer's heat, just around the corner, and the bugs are starting to harass.

But the farm can't wait, so it's back to work. Besides, Cloud says, she wants this kind of life — one of hard work, uncertainty and modest means. "I can't imagine doing anything else."

Cloud and her husband, Jose Lara, started their Three Rivers Community Farm in 2007 on 12 acres they leased above the village of Elsay, a picturesque smattering of stone cottages at the edge of the Mississippi River. They saved \$10,000, borrowed \$10,000 more, bought used equipment and operated on a shoestring.

Today, the couple is doing remarkably well by farming standards — they're out of debt and making a livable income. And perhaps more remarkably, they're not alone. Buoyed by demand for locally grown produce, entrepreneurial small-scale farmers such as Cloud and Lara are on the rise.

"We're seeing more and more successful smaller farmers," said John Ikerd, professor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri. "What we're talking about is fundamental change."

From 2002 to 2007, nearly 300,000 new farms were started in the United States, most of which were small and operated by younger farmers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture census, conducted every five years, shows the number of small farms earning less than \$50,000 has risen 6 percent over the past decade. The increase, analysts said, stems from growing consumer demand for fresh, local produce and a desire to connect with farmers.

"Call them hobby farms, quaint, backward, hippies," said Keith Bolin, a conventional commodity farmer in Illinois and head of the American Corn Growers Association. "You hear it all. But to me, they seem sustainable and growing, and you can't deny the success."

Local or regional sales by farmers to household consumers, while a tiny fraction of the overall \$300 billion in farm sales, rose 49 percent to \$1.2 billion in 2007, according to the census. In Missouri, the direct-to-consumer sales shot up 74 percent over the past 10 years. The rise comes in large part from local farmers markets, which have increased from 1,755 in 1994 to 4,685 in 2008.

"It's a growth sector in agriculture. It's real," said Mary Hendrickson, a professor of rural sociology at MU. "These small farms are seeing an opportunity."

The concept of "local" food has generated such cache that large corporations are taking notice. Food giant Frito-Lay now advertises that potatoes for its chips are "locally grown." The company recently launched an online "chip tracker" that allows consumers to find out where their chips were made.



www.foodandsocietyfellows.org



John Deere, the world's leading manufacturer of farm equipment, is seeing shifts in demand, so the company is pushing smaller-scale product lines.

“This rural lifestyle and part-time farmer market is growing,” said Barry Nelson, a company spokesman. “One of the fastest growing markets in the U.S. right now is that small-tractor market.”

The growth in small farms suggests a nascent movement away from large-scale agriculture toward local “food systems,” composed of small-scale farmers and cooperatives with regional distribution, advocates say.

But before such regional food systems can make significant contributions to the food supply, some obstacles need to be cleared. “There's a lot of catching up to do,” Hendrickson said. “We need to think about mainstreaming local food, and we'll need infrastructure.”

That means setting up distribution systems, with collection points for small farms, warehouses, packing and sorting facilities, and trucking to nearby markets.

“There has to be some sort of support for distribution and marketing because this is where a lot of these small farms run into trouble,” said James McWilliams, a history professor at Texas State University who has written extensively on the local food movement.

While advocates hope the country is at the cusp of an agricultural revolution that will lead to a patchwork of small farms providing food regionally, some concede that's unrealistic.

But it's clear that a return to a landscape with more small farms can have a substantial effect on local economies — something that many states are trying to capture via small-farm-friendly legislation. The Illinois Local and Organic Farm Task Force, established by lawmakers in 2007, for example, estimates smaller farms could bring as much as \$30 billion in annual economic activity. An Iowa State study concluded that the net impact of increasing fruit and vegetable purchases from local sources by 10 percent would yield nearly \$113 million in labor income and nearly 4,100 new jobs.

“The reason that local food and local banking and local whatever will come back is we're learning that life is about relationships, and there's value in that,” said Bolin, the commodity farmer. “People who are getting involved in the local food movement are understanding that now.”

For small-scale farmers, the math seems pretty clear. Ikerd said a commodity farmer typically takes home 10 to 15 percent of his gross income and is often saddled with debt. Smaller, diversified farmers take home 50 to 60 percent and have lower operating costs, though the payoff is relatively low and labor more intensive.

