



DIETRICH GEHRING

From Field to Fork

AFT's Growing Local Campaign

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, California farmer Alex Weiser was struggling to make his family's 160-acre apple orchard work. Wholesalers weren't paying a price that allowed the family to make a profit, so Weiser was forced to unload the apples to juice producers at bankruptcy-inducing rates.

The family could have thrown in the towel and sold the farm to developers. But instead the Weisers decided they needed to diversify and sell their products directly to customers. Before long, customers at Los Angeles-area farmers market were snapping up—and raving about—the Weisers' apples.

The farm's success at a variety of southern California farmers markets drove interest from restaurant chefs who wanted its produce. That in turn brought in wholesalers who supplied those restaurants. The farmers markets, even though they represent a minority of the family's sales now, are the key to the success of the operation.

Today the Weisers will consider producing whatever their customers are clamoring for. They are famous for their potatoes—up to a dozen varieties in a year—and their melons. “We have a 25-year-old bond with our customers,” Weiser says. “When the state had a frost one February, many of the chefs held a benefit for farmers. That's the kind of relationship we have.”

Those types of connections—between consumers who appreciate the value of local food and the farmers and farmland that grow it—will be forged through a new campaign from American Farmland Trust called “Growing Local.”



At left: Youth in Schenectady County, New York, grow organic vegetables for donation to local food pantries and for sale locally. They are involved in an agriculture and community service program called Roots and Wisdom that teaches young people about the importance of local farms and food.

“Growing Local is really about making the connection between local farms, local food and the farmland that they depend on,” says AFT’s Julia Freedgood, director of the new campaign. “We’re at a ‘tipping point’ of public demand for local food, which will help AFT harness support for local farms and farmland protection from the consumers who appreciate the opportunity to buy fresh and local food.”

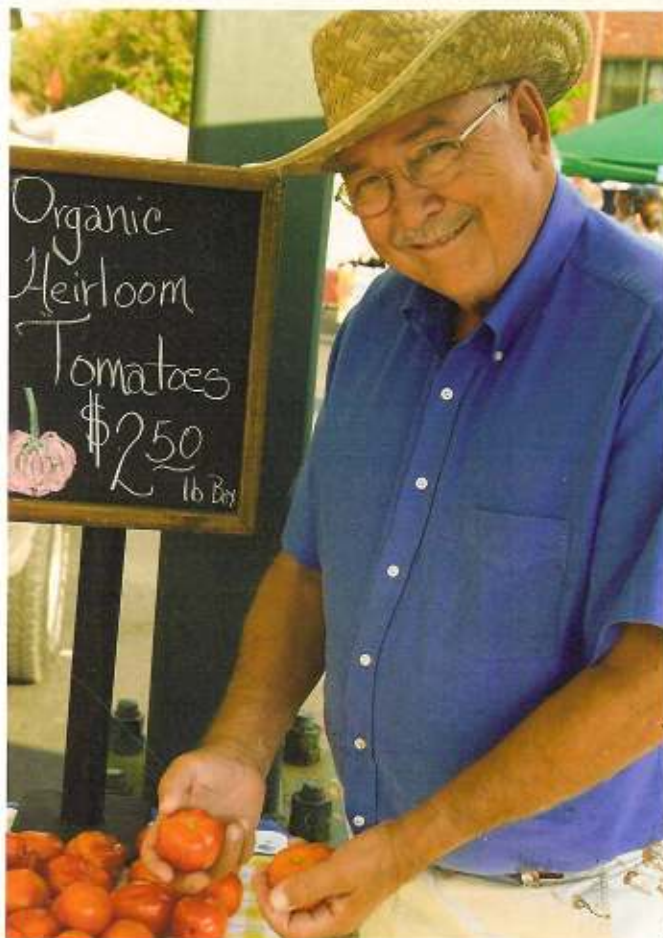
Although selling locally is not a reality for all farmers, especially for those in rural areas where population centers are few and far between, it is helping farmers like Weiser stay profitable in a challenging global marketplace. Consumers are eager for a new way of eating: farmers markets surged 150 percent from 1994 to 2006 in the United States, and the number of “community supported agriculture” (CSA) farms tripled in the past five years.

“There’s a lot of energy in the country right now about getting back to your own community, and investing in the resources in your own community,” Freedgood explains. “From AFT’s standpoint, that resource is well-managed farmland and all the great things it provides to communities—fresh local food and economic opportunities and also clean water and air and even renewable energy.”

Outside Buffalo, New York, a group of farmers who formed their own cooperative—Eden Valley Growers—to sell vegetables to local consumers have a motto: “Homegrown is homeland security. Support locally grown produce.” As the farmers understand well, homeland security is just one reason of many to support the growing trend of locally produced foods—and it’s a good one.

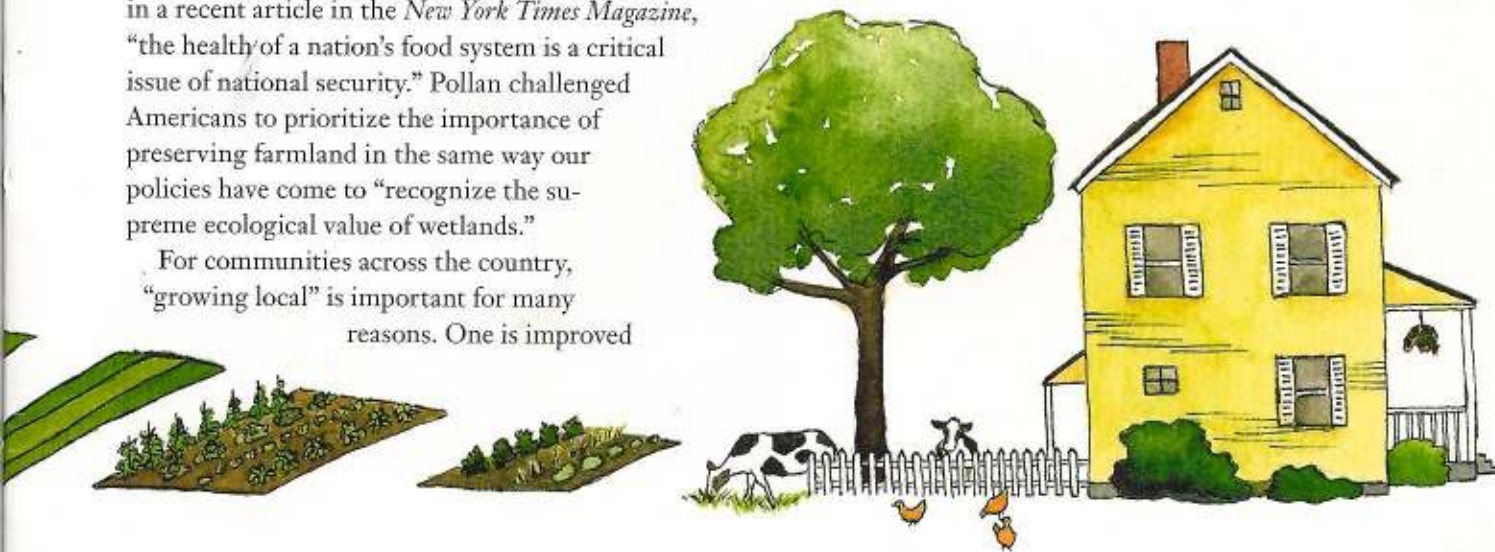
As noted author Michael Pollan aptly pointed out in a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, “the health of a nation’s food system is a critical issue of national security.” Pollan challenged Americans to prioritize the importance of preserving farmland in the same way our policies have come to “recognize the supreme ecological value of wetlands.”

For communities across the country, “growing local” is important for many reasons. One is improved



Consumer demand for locally grown food is on the rise.

food quality and security—we do not have much control over imported foods, for example. Local food from local farms provides more variety and in the case of produce, freshness, which improves taste and shelf life. Because local produce is handled less, it can be picked ripe and does not have to stand up to the demands of long distance shipping. And in an era of ever-increasing energy costs, it will become harder and more costly for our



AFT's Growing Local Campaign: Up-Close

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Farms near metropolitan areas produce 86 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables and 63 percent of our dairy products. Despite burgeoning demand for local food, these fertile lands are the most desired and most threatened by suburban sprawl. Concerned citizens are calling for the public health benefits of fresh local food and for improving their carbon footprint by reducing "food miles."

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Farm and ranch land is the foundation of healthy farms, healthy food and healthy communities. The growing public demand for local food provides a great opportunity to galvanize support for saving the land that sustains us. New markets and infrastructure will help develop robust regional food systems that give producers new opportunities to engage directly with consumers and improve farm profitability. Improved regional food systems will help the environment and provide access to healthy food in areas that need it.

WHAT IS AFT'S PLAN?

AFT will continue its cutting-edge work on planning for agriculture at the municipal, county and state levels. AFT will conduct demonstration projects and build public support for policies and programs that connect farmland protection to agricultural viability and regional food and energy security. AFT also will develop a tool to quantify the benefits that farms bring to communities, including fresh local food, economic development, clean air and water. Using this and other tools, the Growing Local campaign will educate the public about the link between working lands and the economy, food security, energy independence and the environment.

WHAT SETS AFT'S CAMPAIGN APART?

Although there are many efforts underway across the country to promote local food, AFT brings an important connection to the farm community and the resource base on which it depends—farmland. For more than 30 years, AFT has been a national leader in farmland protection and conservation. Through the Growing Local campaign, AFT will leverage this leadership position to advance policies that promote local farms and food, while protecting farmland.

communities to depend on food from far away.

"No farms, no food. That's a message people get," Freedgood says of AFT's popular slogan. "The stakes have never been higher. If you don't have local farms and farmland, you don't have local food. First we have to raise public awareness of the importance of our agricultural resources and then turn that awareness into action so we can be food secure, energy independent and sustain healthy communities in the future."

Across the country, AFT is working hard to protect the farmland that is the lifeblood of local agriculture. The Growing Local campaign will work to ensure that local farms thrive and agricultural land stays available for future generations of farmers. Throughout New York, for instance, AFT has been working with farmers like Eden Valley Growers on community-oriented plans that identify critical local farming resources—from the land to agricultural infrastructure—and develop strategies to protect them. Such strategies include farm friendly planning and zoning, public education about the importance



A woman picks fresh organic carrots.

of local farms and food, and the protection of working lands with conservation easements.

In California, AFT recently released a report on the San Francisco "foodshed": the farmland within 100 miles of the Golden Gate Bridge that produces 20 billion tons of food, including more than 80 different agricultural products. The study found that there is enormous potential for the city to feed itself from local farms, but there are significant challenges to making that a reality, which AFT along with city and agricultural leaders are now working to address.

And in New Jersey's Burlington County—a strong farming area in the shadows of Philadelphia—AFT is working with the Office of Farmland Preservation to craft a series of model ordinances that support local food production from the county's farms, which are threatened by development. AFT also made recommendations on how to improve access to local food by food stamp recipients who want to shop at the county's farmers market.

(For more information on the San Francisco foodshed study, the Burlington County project, and recent

Growing Local activities in Connecticut and New York, see "Around the Country" on pages 4, 5 and 6.)

These are just a few of the projects that have launched AFT's Growing Local campaign, which Freedgood says is critical at this time in history. "It's never been more important to save our farms. I really do believe we've got to do this now," she says. "We can't continue to squander our agricultural resources. Our communities, and our world, depend on them."

American Farmland Trust would like to extend special thanks to the following foundations that have played a key role in supporting the development and launching of the *Agriculture & Environment* and *Growing Local* campaigns:

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
New York Community Trust
Wallace Genetic Foundation
Farm Foundation

A Bounty Worth Protecting: Five Ways You Can Help

The stakes could not be higher. More than one million acres of agricultural land are developed each year, and demands on American farmland are increasing rapidly. Yet this land is at the heart of solutions to our nation's most pressing needs for food and energy security, economic stability and sustained environmental quality. AFT needs your help to save the land that sustains us. Here are five ways you can lend a hand.

- 1. Take Action.** Contact your legislators and decision makers through AFT's online Action Center at www.farmland.org/action to show your support for policies that help keep farmers and ranchers on the land. Join AFT's Action Network to receive e-mail updates and urgent action alerts about important farm and food policy issues.
- 2. Choose Local Food.** Buying local helps you eat well, save fuel and reduce your carbon footprint. Keep your food dollars local by shopping at farmers markets, farm stands and stores that stock local food. Dine at restaurants featuring foods from local farms or join a CSA farm that allows you to buy "shares" in the farm's production. Make a commitment to buying local by taking AFT's "Keep It Local" pledge at www.farmland.org/action.
- 3. Grow a Garden or Get to Know Your Farm Neighbors.** Learn more about the specific challenges facing farms in your community and find out what you can do

to help. Visit AFT's Farmland Information Center at www.farmlandinfo.org or call (800) 370-4879 to learn more about protecting farmland, helping farmers stay on the land, supporting farmers markets and community food systems, and much more!

4. Educate Your Community.

Write an editorial for your local paper about the importance of farms to your community. Tell your local officials that farm-fresh food, open space, a healthy environment and wildlife all depend on local farms and ranches. Get involved in decisions made by your local zoning board or planning commission. Encourage your supermarket to buy local farm products.

- 5. Support AFT.** Help us launch our new *Agriculture & Environment* and *Growing Local* campaigns. Your donations now will help us support local farms and food around the country and reach more farmers and ranchers with solutions that address pressing environmental concerns. To learn how you can make a donation to AFT, please visit www.farmland.org/support or contact American Farmland Trust at (800) 431-1499.

