

A Case Study Accessing the Feasibility of a Local Food Label among Producers and Consumers

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Abstract

Local food labeling programs provide transparency and help consumers select products that will benefit the local food system. Establishing a local food label can increase consumers' ability to make informed decisions about food purchasing and provide transparency and benefits (e.g., financial and physical health) to the community. This exploratory research project collaborates with a local community organization and university researchers to determine the feasibility of implementing a local food labeling program in the Greater Wilmington North Carolina Region. Three different methods were used to collect data on a labeling program's feasibility: consumer surveys, consumer focus groups, and key informant interviews (chefs, grocers, and farmers). Findings suggest that most respondents recognize the importance of local food, favor creating a local food label and that consumers are willing to pay more for local food. Key informants indicated the importance of having an informed customer, and both consumers and producers expressed concerns about how the label would be implemented. Definitions of local tended to vary across respondents. Specifically, the salient factor of spatial distance in what constitutes "local" ranged from county to state reference/preference points.

Keywords: Local Food, Local food systems, Community partnership, Food councils, Public sociology, Food citizenship, Mixed-Methods research

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Introduction

The type of food to purchase is an important decision that consumers make and has implications for their health, the health of the environment, and their local economy. Twenty-first-century consumers are trending toward a social awareness regarding the food they are bringing home (Lockie and Halpin 2005; Mansfield 2004; Noll 2014). Specifically, there is a growing awareness that food items may travel long distances before reaching the consumer, referred to as food miles, which strikes some conscientious buyers as problematic (Lang 2005). Consumers consider

many factors when deciding what food to purchase, so they may choose local over organic because it has traveled fewer food miles. The origin, health, sustainability, and ethics of food production and consumption are becoming increasingly important to consumers, as is evidenced by this type of information becoming more available to the general public (Eli et al., 2016).

While there are various alternative food movements, the current study's focus concerns the local food system or the local food movement, which is often contrasted with conventional or extensive

agriculture. Local food is essential for the health of the local economy and residents, and these health concerns are a significant predictor of decisions to purchase local food (Kumar and Smith 2018). Those who value health are more likely to purchase local food because they consider it more nutritious due to a shorter supply chain. Environmental concerns also play a significant role in consumer decisions to buy local food as local food is generally better for the environment (Kumar and Smith 2018). Also, local food supply chains reduce transportation distances (see Trivette 2012) and may be less likely to be disrupted due to national or global issues, such as the current pandemic. Additionally, conventional agriculture generally uses commercial pesticides to focus on high yield at the least cost to the farmer, at the expense of the environment (Caracciolo and Lombardi 2012).

One way to address the need for retailer/consumer transparency and communication is through food labeling. Government bodies, non-profit organizations, and food corporations have implemented food labeling to communicate their consumer-minded practices to purchasers better. While various bodies have prioritized different aspects of food production, such as organics and environmental impact, the locality is essential. This importance is made apparent through regional food labels being granted legal protection by legislation in Europe (Parrott, Wilson, and Murdoch 2002). A local food label would give consumers the information they need about local food to direct their purchasing power towards what they deem important (Hatanaka 2020). Given that both academic research and public interest in local food have increased in recent years (see Feldmann and Hamm 2015), this paper contributes to local food research through a case study looking at the importance of a local food label. For this case study, we define feasibility as the capacity to effectively implement and maintain a local, long-term food label in the immediate local food supply chain and market. To determine feasibility, key informant perspectives are needed (see Chazdon and Lott 2010), and to obtain key informant opinions; in-depth interview methods are utilized. These key informants include farmers, grocers, and chefs. Information was also gathered from consumers who purchase local food using both surveys and focus groups. Findings demonstrate a desire for a local food labeling system that would be affordable for farmers and grocers and clearly labeled with details concerning the product's locality for consumers. As is found in the literature, there was significant variation in local definition, which is vital to consider when creating a local label.

Theoretical & Empirical Framework

Local food and the local food system are important in many ways. Specifically, local food systems are thought of as ways to improve the health of people, community, economy, and environment, although more research is needed in this burgeoning area (Deller, Canto, and Brown 2017; Deller, Lamie, and Stickle 2017; Faison and Leverette 2018; Lamie et al. 2013; Trivette 2012). Areas with local food activity usually have better public health outcomes. Still, these outcomes also depend on other factors such as how health and local food are measured, and it may be that healthier populations are driving the demand for local food (Deller et al. 2017). These better public health outcomes include access to healthy food (such as in the case of food security) and people adopting healthier dietary patterns (Deller et al. 2017).

Additionally, local food systems can promote more robust, more sustainable local agriculture (Trivette 2012). By purchasing local foods through local food systems, consumers can keep more money in the local economy, and local farmers can enhance their profits and scale their operations (Deller et al. 2017; Lamie et al. 2013). In short, people feel good about supporting local farmers and their local economy when buying local products, as indicated by a consumer survey (Ostrom 2006). One of the reasons for this enjoyment stems from building connections with farmers and knowing where the food is coming from (Lamie 2005; Migliore et al. 2014; Ostrom 2006).

The reasons why people choose to buy local are more complex than previous research has shown. For example, these decisions are not based purely on economic (cost of food) or social factors (such as community-mindedness—they care about their community, so they buy local), but are intertwined with factors, including positive views towards local food and ease of access to this type of food (Adams and Adams 2011). Thus it is important to consider how local has been defined and highlight specific examples of local food labeling.

Defining Local

It is difficult to define the term local in agriculture because no government body oversees that term's use, so perceptions of the term's means vary among consumers and producers (Feldmann and Hamm 2015). These discrepancies can be seen in consumers using the word local to talk about food miles and include ethical, sustainable, and community factors related to food production (Adams and Adams 2011). Because there is no set definition of local, it often has different meanings in various food supply chains. However, despite these differences, the minimum purpose of local is a product produced or manufactured within the country (Dunne et al. 2011).

In some cases, the locality may be defined simply as being grown or produced in the United States

(Dunne et al. 2011). This country of origin concept can be broken down into province, region, or state, and in other cases by sub-state regions, such as within a county (Blake, Mellor, and Crane 2010; Darby et al. 2008). Often language such as “nearby” is used to specify this particular definition. Also, specific boundary markers are used to identify local foods in grocery retailers, making local labeling more effective at the state level. However, these boundary markers are usually vague, using terms such as “village” or “town” (Darby et al. 2008). Consumers perceive foods purchased from small co-ops or fresh markets to be local and foods purchased from large grocery retailers to be non-local. While this perception may influence consumer decisions, local food can be found at some large grocery store retailers (Blake et al. 2010).

Retailers and consumers may define local differently, causing discord between buyer and supplier. This discrepancy in the definition may also lead to the unintentional deception of consumers who may perceive the food labeled “local” as grown in-county. At the same time, a retailer may define it as produced in-country (Dunne et al. 2011). Since local is so loosely defined, it is essential to understand how those who will be using a food label define local.

Some farmers recognize the importance of localism and prioritize the local connections they can achieve through alternative farming methods (often environmentally sustainable and/or organic) (Stock 2007). Farmers may want to highlight their local products since there has been an increase in consumer demand. Relatedly, chefs and grocers may like to highlight their local products for these same reasons. As consumers learn about the importance of local food, having a local food label that will allow them to identify where they can buy local food will further enable them to support the local economy and local food growers and producers.

Knowledge of where food comes from is essential not only for infrequent grocery purchases but also at restaurants. Having this information can allow consumers to make decisions with their food dollars that can potentially influence change in production (Wilkins 2005). However, even though more certification programs provide information to consumers about sustainability and ethics, these programs do not necessarily make the connections between producers and consumers or give them additional knowledge of sustainability and ethics, as some had hoped (Lozano-Cabedo and Gómez-Benito 2017). Additionally, retailers play an essential role in deciding what products to stock, so even if consumers want to purchase certain types of food, they may not be available (Lang 2005). This disconnect between procurers, retailers, and consumers highlights the need for some system that will give consumers the

information they desire about their food, whether at a restaurant or grocery store, on time. All of these goals could potentially be accomplished by a local food label.

Food Labeling

Consumers are operating under a lack of complete information about the food they purchase, which can be addressed through a label (Welsh and MacRae 1998). Consumer preferences continue to move toward socially responsible and origin-based products in grocery stores, not just farm stands, and food labels increasingly reflect consumer priorities (McCluskey and Loureiro 2003). The consumer must perceive the food's quality to persuade them to purchase it, but various criteria are often determined depending on the consumer base. Specifically, the main focus of food products and their quality is differentiated by “how” or “where” food is made (Hu et al. 2012).

Products can have a variety of labels, including local, organic, and fair trade (which is a “... trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade” (World Fair Trade Organization 2020). Consumers are willing to pay more for organic products and products from small family farms nearby, just based on the label (Feldmann and Hamm 2015). However, many consumers may not know organic or local definition due to a lack of transparency by labelers (Hu et al. 2012). Identifiable and specific boundary markers such as locations' names make local labels more effective on the market compared to other labels such as organic or sustainable (Darby et al. 2008).

Consumers will buy foods labeled local mainly due to ideological adherence (their belief in the importance of local food), so labelers have a responsibility to do so ethically (Dunne et al. 2011). While conviction and ideology are important influences on prioritizing local labeling over other kinds of labels, the most influential aspect of implementing local labels is arguably the positive impact on the economy (Edwards-Jones et al. 2008). The Local Food System Vitality Index piloted in Lexington, KY, evaluated different aspects of a local food system performance, and found local food labels, while highly rated by consumers, were not significant predictors of local food system vitality (Rossi, Woods, and Davis 2018). So, despite the positive support of the local labels by consumers, this finding may indicate that local food labels have less impact on the food system itself. These discrepant findings are prime examples of why further research into the underlying mechanisms of food labeling is needed to understand its impact on local communities better.

Existing Labels

Some regions have implemented a local food label successfully. For example, in North Carolina, there is the Appalachian Grown Certification and the Piedmont Grown Label. Regarding cost and accountability, local labeling programs are usually free or low cost (for example, \$25 per year) to farmers, and independent third-party checks are the most efficient way to maintain certified entities' quality. The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), the certifying body for the Appalachian Grown Certification, defines local as counties within 100 miles of Asheville, NC and is free to producers must have their farms certified yearly (ASAP Local Food Strong Farms Healthy Communities 2020). The Piedmont Grown label encompasses 37 counties in the Piedmont region and involves a farm certification (Piedmont Grown 2020).

In sum, locally grown, produced, and manufactured products enhance local economies, provide trackable nutrition information, and create consumer feelings of safety (Blake et al. 2010). Since consumers may have problems identifying local food, a local food label could assist consumers in this aspect and would likely be a viable solution to this problem.

Current Study

This case study aimed to determine the feasibility of a local food labeling system in New Hanover County, North Carolina. This study's three research questions included: (1) What does support for a local food label consist of among consumers who have purchased local food? (2) What does support for a local food label consist of among chefs, farmers, and grocers who grow/sell at least some local food? and (3) How is local defined among these groups? Investigating the level of support for a local food label is important because, as the literature review shows, while consumers are increasingly becoming more concerned and informed about their food's local nature, there remains a disconnect between producers, retailers, and consumers and a demand for more information.

University researchers received funding from the American Sociological Association's Community Action Research Initiative and their university to conduct this research in partnership with the Cape Fear Food Council (CFFC). The Cape Fear Food Council is a local food policy council made up of non-profit organizations, businesses, government, and community residents (Cape Fear Food Council 2020). The issues that the food council addresses mainly focus on food access, food waste, and farming. The Cape Fear Food Council is a potential overseeing body for a local food labeling system. The council is interested in creating a transparent way of labeling

foods in the food supply chain that incorporates accountability. Having a local food label will give area consumers the ability to choose where and how they spend their money and potentially contribute to changing the local food system (Hatanaka 2020).

Data and Methods

A multi-methodological approach was utilized to determine whether there was support for implementing a local food label in New Hanover County. This research was exploratory, meaning that we are researching something new. This is the first step in determining the interest and feasibility of implementing a local food label in this region. Research examining the support for a local food label has never been conducted in New Hanover County previously. Additionally, to our knowledge, this is the first study to cohesively examine support for a local food label among consumers, farmers, grocers, and chefs. Consumers and producers were consulted to determine buyer practices and supplier willingness to participate in a local food labeling program. We wanted to know not only what consumer views on local labels were but how a label may impact those who provide food to consumers (farmers, grocers, and chefs) as both consumers and producers are integral parts of the food system.

One reason to focus on those already familiar with the local food movement is that they are already engaging with the local food scene. Previous research has focused on these consumers who tend to purchase local food, referring to them as "more-than-active" food citizens in comparison with "conventional eaters" (Carolan 2017:197). Once we establish if this group would benefit from a food label, we can extend our research to additional groups (Welsh and MacRae 1998). Surveys were administered at two farmers' markets, a consumer focus group was conducted, and key informants were interviewed in the Summer and Fall of 2017. This study was approved by IRB#17-0307.

Surveys

To address the first research question (support for local food label among consumers) and third research question (how local is defined), the first method of data collection was a 19-item paper survey distributed to consumers on-location at two local farmers' markets (one time at one market, and two times at the other market). The technique of surveying farmers' market customers has been implemented in previous food-related research (Adams and Adams 2011). A research assistant stood in a part of the farmers' market where there was heavy foot traffic and asked patrons

to complete a survey. The research assistant provided the respondents with a clipboard and the paper survey, and after the survey was completed, the participant returned the survey to the research assistant. The participant then had the opportunity to enter their name into a drawing for a \$25 gift card to the grocery store of their choice to incentivize participation. That list of survey participants' names was kept separate from the surveys (which did not have participants' names on them).

Examples of survey questions included where the participants purchased their food, what their definition of local was, and Likert scale questions asking about their level of agreement (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) with questions such as "I would be willing to pay slightly higher retail prices for foods that are certified local," "I actively seek locally sourced products and food establishments," and "A local food label would encourage me to buy local foods at higher rates." Once all the survey responses were collected, the survey data was entered into a database, and the data were analyzed using Stata 14. We only asked three demographic questions: age (since we thought age might indicate support for a label), number of people in the household (since this may mean spending more on food), and income category (since this may tell us if they have the resources to spend more money on higher-priced food). Sixty-eight respondents completed the survey across both farmers' markets. This low response rate may be because patrons were rushing to complete their shopping trip and did not have time to take our survey and low market attendance (which is why we went to the second market twice). We analyzed the survey data using the statistical program Stata 14.

Focus Group

Consumers who participated in the survey were asked if they would like to join in the second data collection method: a focus group at a local restaurant to provide deeper insight into their buying habits. This method expanded on research questions one (support for a local label) and three (definitions of local) by providing additional detail that was not captured in the surveys and allowed researchers to examine, in more detail, some of the preliminary information gathered from the surveys. Due to the limited response from consumers at farmers' markets to sign up for the focus group, members of the Cape Fear Food Council also recruited consumers for the focus group. Those who participated in focus groups were provided a meal from the local restaurant, and the focus group began after the meal was finished. While we had a list of participant names to ensure that all of those who said

they would attend the focus group were present, we did not keep that list with the field notes, and we did not indicate who was speaking in the field notes. We had a total of nine participants in our focus group.

In the focus group, participants were asked about their definition of local, how influential local is in determining where they purchase food (both groceries and restaurant purchases), and their overall thoughts about the label, including pros and cons. The moderator asked the focus group questions about their food priorities and purchasing behaviors, including questions such as: "What is the most important thing that influences your food purchases other than cost?", "How would you define a local product?" and "Would a local label/certification change your buying habits?". We did not gather demographic data from the focus group participants. However, they all have some connection to local food or knowledge since they were either at the farmers' market or connected with the Cape Fear Food Council.

The research assistant took detailed field notes throughout the focus group, including typing out direct comments from participants. The moderator also took notes during the session. We decided not to audio record the focus group because we wanted participants to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and for them to be able to converse naturally. Because we used a structured interview guide, we were able to take detailed notes during and immediately after the focus group that was later analyzed.

The lead researcher and research assistant first compared the notes they took during and immediately following the focus group to code the qualitative data. If there was a point that one researcher missed or had a different interpretation of, this was discussed to clarify the notes before coding began. Then, both the researcher and research assistant analyzed these field notes and coded for common themes that arose that determined participants' interest in and desire for a local food label. After the initial coding was completed, the researchers discussed the common themes found and identified five of these themes.

Interviews

The third method of data collection used to answer the second (support for local label among chefs, farmers, and grocers) and third (definition of local) research questions were in-depth interviews of key informants in the food supply chain. We conducted in-depth interviews with twelve key informants, which included farmers (4), chefs (4), and grocers (4) who were recruited by email in collaboration with the Cape Fear Food Council through a purposive sampling technique. This technique helped ensure adequate representation from across all categories of individuals

involved with local food consumption and production. Each respondent was asked in-depth interview questions regarding their willingness to participate in implementation, maintenance, and compliance with a potential food labeling program. The research assistant and the primary interviewer took field notes throughout each of the in-depth interviews.

Audio recordings were not used during these key informant interviews because we wanted respondents to feel comfortable expressing their candid ideas concerning the local food scene's current state. We used a structured interview guide to record detailed notes during and immediately after the interview on the answers and compare and contrast notes between the lead researcher and the research assistant. Recent research (see Rutakumwa et al. 2020) has shown similarities between transcriptions and notes were taken immediately after an interview, so we are confident that we could capture the information conveyed in these interviews. After the conclusion of the interview, the field notes were typed. Once all the interviews were completed, the researchers used the same coding process described previously in the focus group section. Although we had their contact information to schedule the interviews, we did not link their names to their responses or include details such as their restaurant or farm's name. We did not collect any demographic data from our key informants.

As compensation for their time, in-depth interviewees received a \$20 incentive in the form of a grocery store gift card. All respondents were asked: "How far do you consider to be local?" The types of questions farmers were asked included: "Would you be willing to pay a small fee in order to certify your products?" and "Is labeling your products in retail locations important to you?" Questions for retailers (chefs and grocers) included questions like: "Would you be willing to pay slightly higher market prices to stock locally labeled food products?" and "How important is it for your business model to stock locally sourced foods?"

Because the purpose of our research was to examine ideas about local food labeling from those who were at least somewhat familiar with local foods, we recruited our participants through farmers' markets and connections with the Cape Fear Food Council using a purposive sampling technique. Some focus group participants had indicated their interest while taking the survey, and others heard about the focus group opportunity through Cape Fear Food Council email. The key informants were identified through contacts with the Cape Fear Food Council. This purposive sampling technique helped us gather sufficient representation from respondents who were already participating in the local food movement. All participants supported local food somehow, whether

through purchasing local food for their consumption, growing food locally, or serving it to their customers.

RESULTS

Surveys

A total of 68 surveys were completed. Respondents' age ranged from 19-70, with the mean being 39. Out of the 66 respondents who answered the income question, 29 had an annual household income of less than \$50,000, 24 had annual household incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 13 had an annual household income of more than \$100,000. The number of people in the household (including the respondent) ranged from one to four, with the mean being 2.4 people.

To determine what support a local food label looked like among those who purchased local food, we first examined the data that contained information about their food purchasing behaviors. As expected from our sample of local farmers' market patrons, most people were more likely to purchase local products and sought out locations that sold those products. Of the many Likert questions that respondents were asked, most responded with a 3 (neither agree nor disagree) or higher (5-strongly agree), indicating that participating in this behavior was common. The statement "I tend to eat at local restaurants over larger chains" had the highest mean support at 4.62, but none of the responses had a mean below 3.60 which was for the question "Local foods are healthier than non-local foods." Table 1 contains more detailed information about how common it is for respondents to seek out and pay more for local food.

When asked about their favorite grocer, 13 respondents selected a local store (our local co-op, the farmers' market, and two grocery stores that emphasize local sourcing). At the same time, 82 selected a more traditional grocery store (e.g., Food Lion or Walmart-some respondents selected more than one store). Most survey respondents agreed on the need for a label and indicated that it would encourage them to purchase more local foods. Additional analyses exploring reasons for support for the statement "New Hanover County is in need of a local labeling/certification system" were difficult since none of the respondents indicated a lack of support for a local label. Therefore, it was hard to determine the factors that made it less likely for someone to support the local food label, making sense since the surveys were conducted at farmers' markets where people likely already supported local food.

When considering our third research question about local food, the definition of local varied among survey

respondents. Twenty-four respondents defined local as being grown or manufactured/processed in New Hanover County, while 51 chose North Carolina as a whole. Additionally, some respondents selected both geographic regions as their definition of local.

Table 1: Responses To Survey Questions.

Survey Question	Mean	SD	Range
I tend to eat at local restaurants over larger chains	4.62	0.73	1 - 5
I am more likely to purchase local products than large scale agricultural products	4.51	0.73	3 - 5
A local food label would encourage me to buy local foods at higher rates	4.32	0.76	2 - 5
New Hanover county is in need of a local labelling/certification system	4.28	0.77	3 - 5
I actively seek locally sourced products and food establishments	4.18	0.88	2 - 5
I would be willing to pay slightly higher retail prices for foods that are certified local	4.12	0.91	1 - 5
It is important to me that the restaurants I eat at use locally grown foods	4.12	0.8	2 - 5
I read the labels on foods in great detail before making purchases	4.04	1.09	1 - 5
I prefer to shop at smaller co-ops than large grocery stores	3.71	0.96	1 - 5
Local foods are healthier than non-local foods	3.60	1.00	1 - 5

Focus Group

The researchers identified five common themes that arose during the focus group: food purchasing behavior, support for/perspective on the label, the utility of the label in a grocery store as compared to a restaurant, barriers to label implementation, and definitions of local. We describe each of these themes in detail below.

As with the surveys, before we explored support for the local label, we wanted to talk to focus group participants about their food purchasing behaviors. Participants reported more than just local when determining their purchasing habits. For instance, organic was the most common other factor considered, and just because an item was labeled local did not mean participants would purchase it. The food also needed to be high quality and have a competitive price, which shows that higher prices did not deter all consumers. However, consumers stress that they wanted to know what they were paying for, so having a clear local label would assist in that process. Overall, broad support for the label was found during the focus group. The group raised essential considerations to be taken into account and additional suggestions that were not previously thought, like using the label for other products besides produce if it met the label's criteria. There was also a consensus that the label should include an educational component to know what they were purchasing when they bought something local. This component may describe the benefits of local food to individual farmers, consumers, and/or the local economy.

Participants saw more utility of the label in grocery stores than for restaurants, especially since they saw a difference between eating at a local restaurant and expecting that restaurant to source everything locally. There were also concerns with how the label would be implemented in restaurants. For example, would a certain amount of food have to be purchased locally to have a local label for the whole restaurant? Or would certain dishes be labeled local? Finally, the majority of participants agreed that they cook at home more often than eating out, so having the label in grocery stores would be more impactful for them than having the label at restaurants. These were all factors that contributed to more support for labeling in grocery stores as compared to restaurants.

A few barriers were brought up during the conversation. For example, implementing the label in grocery stores run by large corporations was brought up by participants. These stores may have their own labels or be resistant to introducing a label in only the regional stores. There may also be opposition to the label depending on the local region it encompasses in that some might feel it is too broad, others too narrow. Finally, the label's spirit is supporting smaller local businesses. A prominent business like Smithfield (a local meat manufacturer) might be technically local, so it is essential to have strict definitions when creating the inclusion criteria.

To address our third research question, we asked about the definition of local, which elicited a variety of responses. Following what previous studies have found (e.g., Ostrom 2006), various definitions of local

arose, although there were some commonalities among them. The most common definition of local was at the state level.

Interviews

To address our second (support for label among chefs, farmers, and grocers) and third (definition of local) research questions, we interviewed farmers, grocers, and chefs. As expected, they had somewhat different perspectives on both locality and labeling, so this section is organized by type of key informant. However, several common themes emerged from the key informant interviews.

The four farmers that were interviewed were very supportive of a local labeling program. One of their main selling points to grocers and farmers' markets is the local aspect of what they produce, so having a label would aid in that process. Locality is something that they all prioritized in their businesses. In terms of implementation, as long as the program was free or low-cost, they were interested in participating, which is understandable as these were all small farmers with limited economic resources. The farmers were all willing to invite people to their farms to see how local they were. One farmer said that the label would be more important in the grocery store setting than a farmers' market where he is able to communicate individually with his customers. Another farmer highlighted the importance of consumer knowledge around the label. These findings highlight the fact that there needs to be more than just the label put in place. Consumers need to be able to recognize the label and what the label represents.

A similar positive reaction to the labeling program was heard from the grocers. Two of the grocers prioritized local as the main foundation of their business, while the third recognized its importance, although it was not the main priority. Support from the grocers for the label mainly had to do with transparency and informing the consumers. There was concern that some retailers may mislead consumers about the origin of their product. There was hope that this label, with its associated regulation, would prevent that from happening. Informing the consumer was also a priority. Suppose the consumer sees the local label at their particular retail establishment. In that case, they may investigate its meaning to learn more about the local food system and then change their habits to purchase more local food. They all stressed the importance of the information associated with the label, which could be delivered through a website, app, and/or in-store brochure.

A more mixed reaction was heard from the chefs interviewed—all of the interviewed chefs source at least some of their products locally. Two of the chefs have an explicit focus on local and prioritize that in their food procurement. The other two chefs support

local, but it is not the main focus of their restaurants, and they have to prioritize other things like cost. Two of the chefs expressed solid support for the local label. They thought it was important for the consumer to have consistency and transparency and that the label could help the consumer know where their food is coming from. The other two chefs expressed tentative support for the label and expressed concerns, which mainly focused on regulation. They wanted the label to stand for something and not just be another term used in marketing, like farm-to-table, that would mean little without the proper vetting. For example, the chefs pointed to instances where a restaurant could claim to be farm-to-table without sourcing any of its food locally.

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion

The results from this mixed-methods case study indicate broad support for a local food label amongst our respondents, who are already involved in local food in some way, whether through purchasing, growing, or selling local foods. While this research was exploratory and there was no attempt to construct any theoretical perspective relating to a local food label, the current findings support previous research regarding "food citizenship." Specifically, Wilkins (2005:269) defines food citizenship as "the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially, and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system." A local food label allows consumers to be more informed about the products they are buying and thus more empowered to make explicit decisions concerning their food consumption which can have broader impacts in their community (referred to as "purchasing power"), especially regarding sustainability and economic development (Hatanaka 2020; Lozano-Cabedo and Gómez-Benito 2017; Welsh and MacRae 1998; Wilkins 2005). Also, as noted by Welsh and MacRae (1998), food is a unique commodity because everyone comes in contact with it due to its necessity for survival. Given this necessity, consumers have a right to the knowledge of how and where their food was grown so that they can truly act as "rational consumers," unmanipulated by corporate control or sly marketing tactics (Welsch and MacRae (1998: 246). While a food label may seem like a small step in creating a significant change in the local economy, Wilkins (2005) argues that individual consumers' small decisions are the first step that will lead to significant policy changes regarding local food systems.

Survey data indicated that the respondents who supported a local food label were also willing to pay higher prices for local products, which is in-line with the findings of the review of previous research conducted by Feldmann and Hamm (2015). The results also revealed that those who supported local labels might not only shop at stores that place a heavy emphasis on local; in fact, most survey respondents shopped at larger chain stores as well. Support for a local label was demonstrated by the majority of respondents who said that they would purchase more local food as a result of the label, which again would enable them to purposely use their purchasing power to further the goals of food citizenship through the principles of supply and demand (Renting, Schermer, and Rossi 2012). Also, in addition to using their purchasing power, increasing the number of consumers seeking out local foods can send implicit and explicit signals to the marketplace, from acts as simple as requesting that local food be freshly available in-season and available through processing when out-of-season (Wilkins 2005).

Participants in the focus group were generally supportive of the idea of a local food label, which is also in line with the review of previous research by Feldmann and Hamm (2015). Local was valued, but so were other concepts like organic. Organic foods' importance provides an interesting contrast to the key informant interviews with farmers who recognized that organic was an essential label for consumers but also were familiar with the costs and burdensome certification requirements. For example, several farmers reported following the organic practices without being formally verified as such. Additionally, helpful suggestions were made that will be useful during the implementation process, such as focusing on grocery stores, providing additional information on the labeling program that is easily accessible to consumers, and barriers to consider during the process. Achieving this type of information is also helpful in increasing food citizenship. It helps foster open communication and closes the gap between producers and consumers of local food, which has plagued modern agri-food systems (Hatanaka 2020).

The key informants that were interviewed were generally supportive of the idea of a local food label as well. However, support varied based on the type of informant (farmer, chef, grocer). There was a consensus that additional information should be included in the label. Whether this information was delivered in the form of a website, app, or brochure that was available where consumers purchased their items, having an informed customer was necessary, which is in line with previous research showing that the increased use of supplemental information accompanying a label, mainly through technological

applications, has expanded in recent years, indicating an increase of influential ethical consumers (Eli et al. 2016). Additionally, scholars have argued that marketers could use items like a "sustainability index" or a "journey map" that could give consumers a more tangible representation of the impact they are making when purchasing local foods (see Kumar and Smith 2018). To accomplish the goals of the local labeling program, consumers need to understand what the label means as well as the importance of buying local, which is supported by this study's finding where the farmer thought that the label was needed mostly where they could not "reach" the consumer (in the grocery store as opposed to the farmers' market) and other previous research describing farmers' acknowledgment that their consumers are seeking additional information (e.g., Mansfield 2004). Through the provision of these information outlets, it may be possible to stave off the decline of American farming primarily attributed to the "passive, uncritical, and dependent consumer" (Wilkins 2005: 269).

In terms of the third research question on how local is defined, much like what is found in the literature (Blake et al. 2010; Darby et al. 2008; Dunne et al. 2011; Ostrom 2006), we had a variety of responses when we asked about respondents' definitions of local, with significant variation in distances. Knowing how those likely to use a local food label define local can help us move forward when we implement the label. We want to use a definition that aligns with how most perceive local and include information about why we selected that definition.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides vital information concerning implementing a local food labeling program, it is not without limitations. The target for data collection was respondents who were already interested in local food, so it is not generalizable to the general population of the region. This population was targeted because the local food label's feasibility among those familiar with local foods was deemed necessary. This purposive sampling technique excludes unfamiliar or uninterested in local food, so the strong support that we have found for the labeling program needs to be tempered with this in mind. In the survey results, this homogenous sample made it challenging to determine what factors increased the likelihood of support for a local food label since everyone supported it to some degree. Also, regarding focus groups, a disadvantage to using these groups is that those with a minority opinion might not feel comfortable sharing their views if everyone seems to have a different idea.

Additionally, the sample size in all three methods of data collection could be of concern. With these

limitations in mind, it is essential to remember that this study's primary goal was to obtain a baseline look at support for this local food labeling program among those already interested in local food, which was accomplished. This project's limitations should not overshadow its overall conclusion that those familiar and interested in local food support a local food label to make this type of food more easily identified and accessed by consumers.

Because the purpose of the grant funding for the current project was to involve a community organization in our research, dissemination and action were an essential part of this project. This research's findings were shared with the Cape Fear Food Council and community members in a town hall-style event. Community members will be invited to be involved in the actual process of creating the label moving forward. The hope is that the local food label can give consumers the information they need to make choices that will increase market demand for local food by creating food citizens (Hatanaka 2020; Lozano-Cabedo and Gómez-Benito 2017; Welsh and MacRae 1998; Wilkins 2005). Meetings such as this can bridge gaps between consumers, retailers, and producers and are really at the heart of the food citizenship movement. Specifically, these venues allow for candid conversations to be had where consumers can voice their needs and concerns to producers and retailers who can, in turn, engage in conversation about how those needs can be met realistically. These types of food citizenship feedback loops are essential to creating and maintaining a thriving local food movement.

The Cape Fear Food Council has taken the results of this research and decided to create a local food guide. A local food guide will increase demand for local food and interest in a local label, with the overall aim of increasing food citizenship (Hatanaka 2020). The goal would be to have the local food guide available on the CFFC website in PDF form to be accessed by consumers looking for local food. This would include grocery stores that stock local products, restaurants that utilize local food, farmers where one can purchase local food directly, and other related local options. Even though there was strong support among respondents for a label, the general population of the area also needs to be supportive before a local food label can be implemented, so educational and outreach opportunities like the food guide are an important first step.

While local food labeling is one way of encouraging local food consumption, other solutions, including policy changes that can make it easier for local food to be grown and sold, may also increase local food consumption and are worth considering in future research (Faison and Leverette 2018). The

development of local food markets can increase the purchase of local foods, but that depends on factors including local conditions that would support certain types of markets (such as roadside stands) over others (such as traditional farmers' markets) (Godette, Beratan, and Nowell 2015). General local food marketing/branding efforts can also promote the local food system and consumer demand, like the "Buy BC" label in British Columbia (Wittman, Beckie, and Hergesheimer 2012).

Conclusion

The support for a local food label is a key indicator of local food's importance in the Wilmington, North Carolina region. Not only does local food keep more money in the local economy and allow farmers to make more money, but it also can lead to healthier, more informed consumers and reduced transportation distances (Trivette 2012). Given the current disruption in the food system due to COVID-19, local food may matter even more now than it has in the past. The Cape Fear Food Council is continuing to promote local food purchases with the hope that the demand for local food will spur the broader acceptance of the local food label and give residents, retailers, and producers an increased opportunity to experience and participate in food citizenship.

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