



The city in the country: Growing alternative food networks in Metropolitan areas

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Abstract

Alternative food networks (AFNs) are commonly defined by attributes such as the spatial proximity between farmers and consumers, the existence of retail venues such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) and a commitment to sustainable food production and consumption. Focusing upon processes rather than attributes, this paper identifies two place-based processes that both promote and constrain the emergence and development of AFNs. Urbanization and rural restructuring are critical to the development of AFNs. AFNs are not a “thing” to be described, but rather emerge from political, cultural and historical processes. The interactions of urbanization and rural restructuring produce AFNs that are differentiated and marked by uneven development that does not necessarily support all farmers participating in the network. This indicates both the fragility and the dynamism inherent in AFNs that are tied to metropolitan development and change. Paradoxically, increasing urban demand for seasonal, and organic produce grown ‘close to home’ and the processes of rural restructuring which emphasize small-scale sustainable family farming and its direct food linkages to cities do not necessarily enable all farmers to consistently make a living from season to season. Evidence for these claims comes from an in-depth, qualitative case study reliant upon participant observation, in-depth interviews and draws from a statewide farmer survey and a regional consumer survey in Washington State.

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1. Introduction

Alternative food networks (AFNs) represent efforts to respatialize and resocialize food production, distribution and consumption in North America, Europe and Australia. In conceptualizing and defining AFNs, researchers grapple with a diversity of processes and locations that produce and sustain AFNs in particular places and times (Morris and Buller 2003; Sage 2003; Maxey 2006). They conceptualize AFNs in relation to rural and regional development, various forms of capitalist restructuring, and as an ecological and social vision and discourse embracing environmental awareness and progressive social goals (Watts et al., 2005; Hassanein, 2003; Goodman, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Feenstra, 1997). These conceptualizations reveal a variety of positionalities and include claims that AFNs exist along a spectrum of ‘strong’ to weak’ in terms of their social and

environmental objectives (Watts et al., 2005), that they do not exist at all (Holloway et al., 2007) and to what degree and how they counter (or do not) large scale, industrial agriculture and the conventional system of commodified food provisioning (Smith and Jehlicka, 2007; Allen et al., 2003; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002). Recent research also interrogates whether and to what degree AFNs address the objectives of social justice and inclusion, ecological sustainability and economic viability (or alternatives to capitalism) within a broader social movement that considers food as a human right rather than as a commodity (Hassanein, 2003; Goodman, 2004; Hinrichs, 2003; Slocum, 2006).

This paper identifies two key processes shaping the development of AFNs in metropolitan areas. In so doing, I argue that considering both rural and urban contexts are important in understanding the diversity and contingency of AFNs. This diversity and contingency arises from a particular constellation of ecological, political, economic and socio-cultural processes rooted in place. Drawing from

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David Harvey's work on dialectics (1996) I argue that AFNs emerge from processes-in-place that constitute and sustain them. Drawing from Marxist theory, Harvey's dialectical approach is rooted in historical-geographical materialism and what he identifies as the principles of dialectics (Harvey, 1996, p. 48). For Harvey, dialectical thinking emphasizes processes, flows and relations over analyses of things, structures and systems. Thus, 'things' like AFNs are constituted out of multiple, contradictory processes and relations, which they internalize in place and through time. These processes are not inherently specific to any particular scale, but emerge instead out of particular material and spatial development trajectories that incorporate the historical, political, economics and social dimensions of globalization, regional development and local change.

Urbanization and rural restructuring are two such processes, and their interactions produce contradictions and tensions for people involved in AFNs. Specifically, this paper goes on to explore how it is that farmers are enabled and constrained by these processes. The interactions of urbanization and rural restructuring produce AFNs that are differentiated and marked by uneven development that does not necessarily support all farmers participating in the network. This indicates both the fragility and the dynamism inherent in AFNs that are tied to metropolitan development and change (see also Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006).

In a case study analysis of a metropolitan region, I identify rural restructuring and urbanization as central processes for the emergence and development of AFNs through the analytic offered by grounded theory in qualitative methodology (Charmaz, 2000). This inductive mode of analysis aims to generate theories from empirical data (Cope, 2005). As rural regions in proximity to metropolitan areas restructure from agro-industrial forms of production to smaller scale family farms, urban growth creates demand for seasonal, locally grown foods as well as spaces for residential and business development. These processes simultaneously promote and constrain the emergence and development of AFNs. Rural restructuring in metropolitan settings entails, among other things, the rise of small-scale farms dedicated to supplying nearby cities and towns with seasonal foods sold in venues such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA).¹ At the same time, agro-industry continually relocates in search of cheaper land, labor and water farther from densely urban centers to rural areas located both within and outside national borders. Increasing urbanization and gentrification fuel demand for organic, seasonal, and locally grown food and different modes of food provisioning such as farmers markets—especially from wealthy and middle class consumers—as development and

residential construction changes the landscape and triggers farmland preservation activities, zoning regulations, and urban growth management policies. These politically infused activities create both opportunities and challenges for small-scale family farms active in AFNs, because as the urbanization and agrarian restructuring create both opportunity and demand, they also increase labor time and the potential for burnout, while revenues do not necessarily or consistently increase. Paradoxically, increasing urban demand for seasonal, and organic produce grown 'close to home' and the processes of rural restructuring which emphasize small-scale sustainable family farming and its direct food linkages to cities do not necessarily enable all farmers to consistently make a living from season to season. Evidence for these claims comes from an in-depth, qualitative case study spanning two metropolitan counties based upon participant observation and in-depth interviews with a range of people active in the production and provisioning aspects of the AFN. This research aims to contribute to further conceptualizing AFNs by identifying urbanization and rural restructuring as key processes that construct and sustain them. AFNs are entangled in these processes while anchored to specific and dynamic agro-ecologies. Small farmers experience this entanglement in their everyday practices of growing food and selling it through venues such as farmers markets and CSA.

In the following section, I situate this argument within the current research stream that conceptualizes AFNs. I then describe my research methodology and present my case study in paper's next three sections which outline the processes of rural restructuring, urbanization and the experiences of small farmers active in producing for the region's farmers markets and CSA.

2. Defining alternative food networks

AFNs are defined in four major ways: (1) by shorter distances between producers and consumers; (2) by small farm size and scale and organic or holistic farming methods, which are contrasted with large scale, industrial agribusiness; (3) by the existence of food purchasing venues such as food cooperatives, farmers markets, and CSA and local food-to-school linkages;² (4) by a commitment to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable food production, distribution and consumption. The first attribute defines AFNs in terms of shorter distances between where food is grown and where it is purchased and eaten. Farmers in AFNs grow food in proximity to people buying and eating the food they grow (La Trobe and Acott, 2000; O'Hara and Stagle, 2001; Renting et al., 2003). AFNs minimize transport distances, oil consumption and bypass middlemen in the distribution chain. This form of direct marketing allows farmers to capture and keep more profit,

¹CSA means that consumers pay \$350–450 to farmers at the beginning of the growing season and then receive weekly deliveries of seasonal produce throughout the growing season.

²Farm-to-school linkages provide fresh produce from local farms to school dining rooms.

and it conserves fossil fuel both in production and transport. Direct marketing brings farmers and eaters face to face developing the bonds of trust and cooperation (Carolan, 2006; Sage, 2003; Jarosz, 2000).

A second defining feature of AFNs is that farms dedicated to producing food within these networks differ from conventional agribusiness in farm size, scale and production techniques. Farmers who sell the majority of the food they grow to markets, institutions and individuals within AFNs practice organic cultivation techniques, although their food may not be formally federally or state certified.³ Alternative agriculture stresses organic, holistic and environmentally conscious food cultivation (Kloppen- burg et al., 2000). These practices do not depend upon synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or genetically modified seed. Rather than contracting their food sales with brokers, wholesalers, corporations, processors, or supermarkets, farmers in AFNs are increasingly adopting on-farm vertically integrated structures that involve the farm and the farm household directly in distribution and retail activities that occur near the farm. For example, a farmer may process the berries she grows into jams and jellies for sale at her on-farm roadside stand while also transporting and selling berries and jams to multiple, regional farmers markets throughout the week. AFN farms are highly diversified and can grow a half-dozen or more fruits and vegetables. The majority of these farms are small in terms of acreage (under 50 acres) and in terms of revenue (most cannot solely support farm families). They rely upon household labor, apprentices and interns and, in some cases, upon seasonal farm workers. Larger farms may employ year round workers and enable their owners to earn their livelihoods solely through farming.

Throughout the late 1990s, agro-food studies defined food systems in dualistic terms. The global food system was characterized by agribusiness control, large-scale monocropping dependent upon mechanization and chemical inputs, global sourcing and marketing strategies, and considerable distances between points of production and consumption (Friedmann, 1993; Krebs, 1992; Lezberg and Kloppenburg, 1996; Jarosz, 1996; Grey, 2000; La Trobe and Acott, 2000). It is also defined by its lack of sustainability due to its negative environmental impacts, its dependence upon large amounts of oil in production and transport, its contributions to the erosion of small-scale family farms, and its negative health outcomes (Krebs, 1992; Nestle, 2002). In contrast, regional or local food systems were everything that globalized food system were not and were couched in opposition to globalized food systems (Lezberg and Kloppenburg, 1996; Clancy, 1997; Feenstra, 1997). While recognizing that the two systems can be intertwined or combined in different and distinctive ways (Morgan and Murdoch, 2000), academic

research, as well as popular accounts, continues to emphasize the distinctions between the two systems characterizing local food systems as oppositional responses to global systems (Grey, 2000; La Trobe and Acott, 2000) or as alternatives (Nestle, 2002; Pollan 2006; Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002).

As researchers moved to ask what was alternative about AFNs, some noted that AFNs did not stray far from a market oriented model that was not necessarily progressive or just (Allen et al., 2003). As Qazi and Selfa (2005) have shown, relationships and conceptualizations of local, AFNs are not necessarily progressive and may well be exclusionary. The question that continues to dog the movement is how to articulate and address the issues of equity, class, gender, food security and race (Goodman, 2000, p. 217; Slocum, 2006).

A critical examination of the 'local' in local food systems and networks reveals that 'local' and 'localization' are not necessarily oppositional to globalization and global food systems (Hinrichs, 2003; Jarosz and Qazi, 2000; Watson, 1997). Local food systems may employ industrialized production techniques, exploit farm workers and still produce organic food. 'Local' is a construct, and local food systems cannot be assumed to be uniformly 'good' or progressive, because they emerge from a complexity of contingent, place-based social, political and ecological processes (Qazi and Selfa, 2005; Winter, 2003; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). As Hinrichs (2003, p. 34) notes, the localization of food "may involve defensive, perhaps subtly exclusionary protection of a region constructed as discrete, homogenous, static and beleaguered." Her example of an eat-local campaign in Iowa reveals that eating local food can support both conventional food networks and alternative ones. DuPuis and Goodman (2005, p. 368) argue for an examination of the 'politics in place' in order to understand the ways localization is deployed in relation to global processes and forces rather than in isolation or opposition to them.

Just because farmers and consumers can meet face to face does not necessarily personalize these relationships in the support of a progressive vision of the moral and social significance attached to knowing where food comes from (DeLind, 1999). On the other hand, constructing a system as local may well help to trump commodity fetishism due to its emphasis upon locale and the conditions of production (Allen and Kovach, 2000).

Critical inquiry into the political economy of organic agriculture reveals that, in terms of its practices and organization, it can and does mimic conventional industrial agriculture in its structure, capitalization and organization and falls short of agro-ecological ideals due to market competition, geophysical and climatic differences, crop specificities and technologies (Klonsky, 2000; Guthman, 2004). Even though differences do exist between small and large farming operations, the workings of capitalism and the stress upon productivity temper these differences (Guthman, 2000; Goodman, 2000). That said, however,

³Both my qualitative research and the survey research involved a interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers from the University of Washington and Washington State University.

important scale-specific differences exist between farms active in AFNs and large farms producing for national and world regional markets. The most prominent differences are the dependence of small farms on apprentices, interns and household labor, the importance of nearby metropolitan retail venues for their food, and that for some farmers, their motivations for farming do not necessarily privilege economic objectives (Trauger, 2004; Pedersen and Kjaergard, 2004).

Vertical integration and crop diversity or monocropping are not scale dependent; both large- and small-scale farms exhibit these structures and cropping practices. Recent research on organic agriculture suggests that the boundaries between organic and conventional, industrial agriculture will grow increasingly porous as agribusiness moves to increase its market share in organics in response to growing consumer demand and as organic regulation may increasingly encompass nonorganic foods and additives (Guthman, 2004; Condor, 2006). At the same time, small farms in AFNs are not necessarily capital intensive, nor are they necessarily reliant upon mechanization or upon accumulating profit. Distinguishing features include barter and self-provisioning remain which may be defined as alternatives to market capitalisms (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

As a third defining feature, farms active in AFNs primarily sell their food in venues devoted to the support of local farms and which feature organic, seasonally grown produce as well as grass-fed beef, nuts, and processed foods such as salsas, bread, jam and cheese. Food cooperatives, farmers markets and CSA are venues lying outside the economically concentrated domains of supermarket chains and discount stores, which rely upon international sourcing and high volume discounts and comprise the dominant venues for grocery shopping in the US (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002). With the exception of food cooperatives, AFN venues are largely seasonal. The seasonality of these venues has been explored in popular works detailing how individuals and families in Canada and the eastern US have managed to eat locally year round (Kingsolver, 2007; Smith and Mackinnon, 2007). Critical views of farmers markets, CSAs and community food security movements indicate that they can be exclusionary in terms of class and race and issues of food security (Guthman, 2003; Slocum, 2006; Hinrichs, 2000; Goodman, 2000). However, federal programs in the US make it possible for poor women with children and food stamp recipients to purchase food at farmers markets with federal subsidies, and farmers markets and urban gardeners donate thousands of pounds of produce to local food banks (Lovejoy, 2007). The role of the state is critical in insuring equitable access to food in AFNs as well as providing the space for farmers markets and helping to promote them. The alterity of farmers markets is not a static attribute and can be subject to cooptation (Kirwan, 2004).

And finally, these networks express social and environmental values about how and where food is grown, distributed and eaten and the social relations that underpin

these cultural and economic practices. These values center upon food quality, economic support for local small farmers, environmentally sustainable food production, and a concern that the conditions under which food is grown and consumed are socially conscious, just and equitable (Grey, 2000; Kloppenburg et al., 2000; La Trobe and Acott, 2000). Increased face-to-face interaction between growers and eaters enhances not only farmer income, but engenders trust and cooperation within a community and is also an important way to educate consumers about where their food comes from, including the environmental and social conditions of its production. However, the social and environmental commitments defining AFNs may not be shared equally between farmers and their customers (DeLind, 1999). Trust and cooperation can also be politicized (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005), and these values may not be the major driver of food consumption choices. Lockie et al. (2002, p. 37) note that consumers are faced with a range of competing discourses on food, nutrition, environment and politics along with a diversity of desires, beliefs and preferences as well as issues concerning availability, cost and convenience. Political and environmental values are not necessarily dominant in food choices (Lockie et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2002).

AFNs are also conceptualized as embracing fair trade movements and transnational small farmer and farm worker social justice movements that construct food quality in terms of its accessibility, health giving attributes and its social objectives (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). Pertinent research examines the role of reflexivity in both production and consumption as significant in differentiating AFNs from conventional food networks (Stock, 2007; DuPuis, 2000), while also asking if a politics of consumption can actually effect wide-ranging transformation of unjust and inequitable social relations of production (Bryant and Goodman, 2004). Hassanein (2003) posits that negotiations, strategies and visions of socially, ecologically and economically sustainable relationships constituting the agro-food movement result in incremental changes that reveal the potential of AFNs to restructure food production and consumption.

Van De Ploeg and Renting (2004, p. 238) note that AFNs are “not immune to processes of expropriation and subsumption that are inherent to globalized capitalism” even as they create viable alternative practices and consumption patterns. Venn et al. (2006) indicate the great diversity existing among AFNs in both popular and academic discourses. They note that perhaps the term AFN is no longer sufficient to convey the depth and diversity of this growing sector. They argue that there is a plurality of operations and power relations in a food supply system. Therefore, “there is no such thing as a singular alternative food economy, there are important discourses surrounding being different and doing things differently (Venn et al., 2006). This research also suggests that understanding the differences among AFNs does not lie solely in their attributes, and that AFNs are not

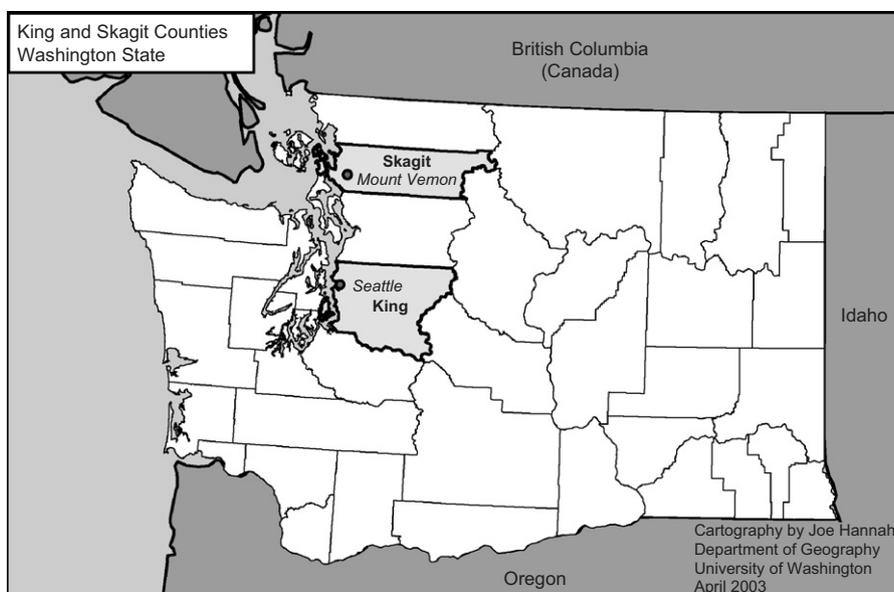


Fig. 1.

necessarily always driven by food producers, but may encompass other agendas such as rural development, seasonal ways of eating and considerations of equitable food access, for example. Differential, place-based processes which constitute AFNs, and in which they are embedded, may also provide some insight into their development and their sustainability. In their study of tomato processing in Toronto, Canada, [Blay-Palmer and Donald \(2006\)](#) relocate the study of agro-food to an ever-changing metropolitan region in order to develop an argument that this new food economy is a driver of metropolitan development. This idea is also echoed in the context of urban development on the West Coast of the US:

The smart regions ... will be those that get their act together to promote local food production, a critical step in a perilous global economy to bolster physical health, conserve open lands, save dollars, and assure a new self-sufficiency ([Peirce, 2005, p. 1](#)).

This suggests that there is a need to better understand urban-rural politics and social relations uniting producers and consumers as well as an understanding of AFNs as a politics of place ([DuPuis and Goodman, 2005](#)).

3. Research methodology

This study centers upon an AFN that encompasses Seattle, Washington and nearby Skagit County ([Fig. 1](#)), a county reclassified as a metropolitan county in the 2000 US census. I conducted 22 h long, in-depth semi-structured, audio taped interviews with wholesalers ($n = 1$), farm suppliers ($n = 2$), farmers ($n = 9$), farmers' market managers ($n = 3$), food cooperative workers and executives

($n = 3$), food bank managers ($n = 1$), and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in preserving farmland and farm life ($n = 3$) in order to gain their particular perspectives upon the emergence and development of AFNs. I chose interviewees based upon their prominence in my two county study site, drawing specifically from the listings in the *Tilth Producers Directory*, the most comprehensive guide to participants in AFNs within the state. The farm suppliers, farmers and NGO representatives, one farmers market manager, food cooperative employees, the food bank manager are all based in Skagit County. The wholesaler is prominent in supplying restaurants and food cooperatives in King County; two major farmers market managers, and the food cooperative executive are all based in Seattle. I asked questions about agrarian change and urbanization, individual work histories, working conditions and individuals' views and experience about AFNs. The interviews were transcribed and then thematically coded with an eye toward understanding and identifying the larger processes critical to the emergence and development of AFNs from these multiple perspectives as well as the working experiences and histories of AFN participants. My identification of urbanization and rural restructuring as key processes producing AFNs emergences from my interviews with those actively working in the network. My analysis draws from the grounded theory approach ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)). This approach stresses analyzing 'upward' from coded interview data and is thus useful in theory-buidling from an inductive position. The knowledge generated by this approach is necessarily partial and limited; I do not claim this study is complete or exhaustive.

The nine Skagit County farmers I interviewed are active in farmers markets and CSA, as well as selling produce to

brokers and wholesalers. I aimed for a diverse, but purposeful sample of farms located in Skagit County that spanned larger, conventional farms of 50 acres or more to small farms of only several acres that drew the bulk of their incomes from participation in AFNs. I interviewed men ($n = 5$) and women farmers ($n = 4$) of all ages and experience levels. The majority of farmers were of Euro-American heritage—only one farm owner was Latino. There are two male farmers who are highly economically successful in this AFN who refused my request for interviews. From 2001 to 2005, I participated and observed the workings of this metropolitan AFN by attending farmers markets regularly in both counties, attending meetings of Washington Tilth Producers, a NGO dedicated to the promotion of small-scale sustainable agriculture devoted to serving local and regional markets, and was active in a nongovernmental agency dedicated to the preservation of farmland in Skagit County. My positionality as a researcher can best be described as that of a partial insider. I am an active member of a food cooperative and a CSA subscriber, and I buy food at Seattle's farmers markets and at roadside stands in King and Skagit counties. My positionality influences this study, because I actively support the AFN I describe, and I continue to buy food from a number of farmers I interviewed. I care about how farmers in the network are faring, because I respect their work and want to help sustain their livelihoods. This position makes me especially sensitive to the challenges they express.

A mail survey of 1201 Washington farmers and a telephone survey of 471 consumers about food purchasing and eating practices within King and Skagit counties provide background information for these interviews.⁴ In March 2002, a stratified sample of 3718 farm households (out of a total of 29,051 Washington farms as of 1999) received questionnaires designed to elicit information about farm marketing and management practices. The completion rate was 32% or 1201 completed surveys. In addition, a consumer survey, also conducted in 2002, was to determine, among other things, the extent to which consumers in four counties within the state (including King and Skagit counties) actually purchased food from local farmers. The overall sample size was 4157 for four counties with a total 946 respondents who completed the survey. The response rates were 21% in King County ($n = 238$) and 22% ($n = 233$) in Skagit County. The very low response rates for both of these surveys underscore the necessity that these survey results be viewed as partial and limited. I do not claim that the interview data or the survey data provide complete and exhaustive evidence as to the emergence and development of metropolitan AFNs. I stress the partiality and the limits of this evidence. Both surveys were analyzed as to the frequency of farmer and

consumer responses, and I use them as a useful backdrop to my qualitative case study. The strength of this methodology is that it provides information about agricultural production and food consumption at state, regional and local levels, which is helpful in understanding rural restructuring and urbanization in their relationship to the experiences of people who actively participate in AFNs.

4. The city in the country I: Seattle's alternative food network

The scale of analysis for AFNs is primarily situated at the national, state and provincial level and largely emphasizes either production or consumption (Sage, 2003; Baber and Frongillo, 2003; Hinrichs, 2003; Robinson et al., 2002). Recent work on Western European AFNs has expanded in scope to cover selected EU members in order to make a broader argument about changes in rural development policy and practices and the role of AFNs within these changes (Marsden et al., 1999; Renting et al., 2003).

The emergence and development of AFNs across the US depends upon ecological conditions and agrarian histories within and across state and county boundaries. For example, Washington State has a diverse array of crops and farming practices ranging from federally subsidized agro-industrial wheat production in the eastern part of the state, a highly valued globalized apple industry located in the central and north central areas, and a growing number of small-scale family farms devoted to participation in AFNs concentrated in the northwest region of the state. Washington State ranks third in the nation as to the monetary value of fruit and vegetable production, while California, with more farms and larger acreages, ranks first. According to the US Department of Agriculture classifications (USDA, 1998), the majority of Washington farms are small farms in both size and revenue.⁵ Over half of the state's 35,939 farms are less than 50 acres and 69% of all farms earned less than \$25,000 in revenue in 2002 (USDA NASS, 2002). Of the 163 farms listed in the *Washington Tilth Producers Directory* (2005–2006), a NGO comprised of the state's farmers and citizens who are active in AFNs, 48% are located in one region of the state, largely within the proximity of King County and metropolitan Seattle.

According to the statewide farmer survey research results, fewer than 10% of responding Washington farmers sold their food at farmers' markets or other direct marketing venues. Less than 5% of farmers sold to food cooperatives, restaurants or institutions (i.e. schools, hospitals, etc.) or were involved in CSA. At the state level, these responses reveal that there are a small number of farmers actively involved in AFNs. However, when

⁴Both my qualitative research and the survey research involved a interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers from the University of Washington and Washington State University.

⁵The USDA defines small farms as those farms earning less than \$250,000 annually. Over half of Washington farms are on less than 50 acres (USDA, 2002).

statewide responses are compared with responses at the county level, some interesting differences emerge. Skagit County, while classified as a metropolitan county, has one of the largest areas of prime farmland left in proximity to a major city. The Department of Agriculture (USDA NASS, 2002) classifies over 80% of Skagit County farmers as small. According to the farmer survey, over 60% of the Skagit County's farms had revenues under \$50,000 in 2001, with about 54% earning less than \$25,000 annually. Clearly, these farms provide some income to farming households, but most cannot constitute the sole source of livelihood for farm families. Comparing and contrasting Skagit County's farmers responses with statewide responses suggests some important differences at the state level and among specific counties as well as providing a more detailed (but not exhaustive) description of metropolitan agriculture on the state's west coast (see Table 1). This comparison also demonstrates why conceptualizing an AFN solely at the state level may be regionally inaccurate since cropping patterns, farm size, consumption patterns and environmental conditions vary within states and provinces.

The percentages of Skagit County's farmers participating in farmers markets is over double that of the state's farmers, and their sales to restaurants are almost three times greater than the state's average of 3.3%. Overall, proportionately more Skagit County farmers participate in forms of direct marketing that define AFNs than do Washington State farmers as a whole. In their attitudes to marketing and farm policy, Skagit County farmers tend to favor local markets and employ environmentally conscious farming practices such as crop rotation, maintenance of buffer strips and the use of manure as fertilizer in greater proportions than Washington farmers as a whole.

Until the 1980s, Skagit County was known for its dairy farms and for its processing vegetables and potatoes. Processing plants began moving out of Skagit County due to cheaper labor, land and water costs found in the

industrialized agrarian landscapes of the central portion of the state, as well as in Mexico. Dairy farms held in the family for centuries have gone out of business as the milk industry consolidates, and organic milk production concentrates in Oregon. There is some concern among organic farmers about the loss of manure as a source of organic fertilizer as the number of dairies continues to decline in the county. Many of the large-scale processing vegetable producers are unsure of what to grow now that the processing industry has relocated to other parts of the state, while others, such as potato farmers, formed regional alliances, which emphasized high quality and place in their marketing strategies.

Regardless of farm scale and cropping mix, Skagit County's farmers are focusing upon diversifying their operations and moving to high value crops such as organic produce that are directly marketed to consumers as to wholesalers, brokers and retail outlets such as Costco. An emphasis upon quality and locality-based food is not limited to AFNs. These attributes are also advertised in marketing of conventionally produced foods such as potatoes. There is a move to develop and deepen niche markets, expand value-added products such as cheese and jams and intensify direct market avenues. This emerges from a plurality of initiatives from individual farmers, farmer cooperatives, environmentalists, county extension agents, community advocates and organizations and residents dedicated to the growth and development of AFNs as well as to bolstering more conventional forms of agribusiness in the region and in the state. As one farmers association director notes,

We are in a place where we are trying to transition away from those contract crops to some other things that are higher value where the farmer or producer can get a higher percentage of the retail dollar.

County extension agents, and farm preservation advocates stress vertical integration, value-added production and direct marketing to particular niches such as organic arugula or fava beans to young urban professionals as crucial economic strategies for both conventional and alternative farmers. Vertical integration and value-added production have been hallmarks of globalized, industrial agriculture since the turn of the century (Jarosz and Qazi, 2000; Magdoff et al., 2000). Direct marketing holds appeal to small-scale farmers willing to restyle themselves as business people and farmers, but the approach may hold less appeal for farmers over 50 years old who possess large acreages once devoted to growing processing vegetables such as carrots and peas. Larger scale vegetable producers do not always see a place for their farms within AFNs. As one large-scale vegetable farmer noted:

We can supply metro Seattle with (all the) fresh produce that they need off of 10% of the acreage that we're already farming. That's not going to support us. Twenty

Table 1
Skagit farmers compared to Washington farmers

	Skagit county N = 110	Washington state N = 1201
<i>Marketing methods, 2001</i>		
To wholesalers, brokers (%)	50.00	47.40
To grocery stores	14.50	6.40
To farmers markets	13.73	8.28
To community supp. Ag.	2.91	1.79
To food cooperative	8.74	2.31
To restaurants	9.71	3.32
<i>Marketing strategies for 2002–04</i>		
More direct marketing to consumers (%)	40.38	25.13
Diversify products grown	30.77	23.85
Market directly to stores/restaurants	15.38	4.86
Use product labeling (e.g., place-based or 'green')	16.35	5.88

acres of cauliflower is the total amount of cauliflower that metro Seattle is going to eat for the entire year.

Due to the size and scale of these farms, farmers seek out national and international markets, because of the volume they produce. But as one large-scale farmer observed,

(that means) going head-to-head with Imperial Valley (California) and Mexico and everywhere else.

As the vegetable seed industry is increasingly globalized and concentrated, some larger seed farmers in Skagit County compete with farmers growing spinach seed in Denmark and cabbage seed in South Africa. They are feeling squeezed as companies relocate their contract breeding operations, and yet say that their own farms are too large to be able to only supply local markets. They note the asymmetries in government subsidies within conventional agriculture in this regard. One large vegetable farmer observes,

...as we get squeezed more and more, I am thinking that it might be OK to pay a farmer a living wage and keep him in business. If you grow commodities, that's where you are. Wheat, cotton, soybeans, corn, sugar, they get their check. But with produce, we don't get anything from it—just grief.

There is also a tension between farming and residential development. According to one former farmer who now works for a farm supply cooperative,

The cost of raising crops in Western Washington is too high. ... The only thing that will be grown is the stuff that (farmers) can get a high end return on. ... More and more there will be a division of acreage into 20 and 40 acre lots that wealthy people from metropolitan areas will be putting fences around and raising a few horses and cattle so that their kids can have the country environment.

This comment points to the ways in which the agrarian landscape is moving from a 'working' landscape of production to one of esthetic consumption. In contrast to the previous generation of farmers, employees of farmers supply cooperatives observe that the majority of their customers are part-time farmers who have small acreages and do not rely on farming as their sole source of income. The largest organic acreages are in the agro-industrial regions of the state, located at a considerable distance from the highly populated west coast and producing for national and international consumption. This also signifies the uneven rural restructuring of the agrarian landscape as larger farms give way to suburban development and small-scale farms in proximity to a rapidly expanding cities and suburbs. Globalized fruit and vegetable companies relocate in search of ever cheaper land, labor and water resources, and processing factories relocate in proximity to these resources. One farmers market manager observes that as farms and farmland are further displaced outside the city's boundaries, the numbers of farmers markets increases as the urban demand for fresh, locally grown fruits and

vegetables grows. He estimates that the average distance for local food to markets is about 100 miles while farmland acreage is dropping precipitously. One organic produce buyer for a larger local wholesaling operation observes that protection of farmland is key to local food systems and the "spread" of the system has increased over the years. Food sources for Seattle were formerly much closer to the city. Now that demand is increasing, the 'local' sources are much farther away. This observation points to a key contradiction: urbanization increases demand for fresh, locally grown foods, while the distance, time and fuel to in-city farmers markets also increases.

There is considerable ambivalence among farmers as to the sustainability of their production and marketing activities at the state level. According to the statewide survey, over 35% of the farmers were neutral as to whether or not consumers in their localities should have more locally grown produce available for purchase. Even though most agreed that direct marketing was a useful sales technique, 38% were uncertain about its impacts. This ambivalence and uncertainty about the benefits of local food and directly marketing to consumers is further detailed by the experiences of three very different farmers working in the same AFN in Skagit County and all farming on less than 50 acres. I focus specifically on these three farmers, because they are active within an AFN and depend upon their farms for a substantial portion of their revenues. I do not claim that all small farmers active in AFNs have similar experiences. Rather my aim is to reveal the ambivalence that small farmers express about producing for local markets, especially farmers markets, because it may be inaccurate to assume that farmers active in AFNs consistently succeed and unquestionably benefit. Small farmers who did not share the views of these three farmers are those who primarily participated in CSA and did not travel to urban-based farmers markets and/or had larger acreages in close proximity to the city. Larger farmers I interviewed marketed nationally and internationally and were more concerned about currency exchange rates, price volatility and volume sales at these scales; large and small farmers are ambivalent about local sales and direct marketing to consumers for different reasons. For example, one large potato farmer who sells both organic and conventionally grown potatoes to local wholesalers as well as to Costco, a national discount store, says,

There is no way to move a significant amount of produce direct marketing for a modern farm... You've got to reach out through wholesalers and chain stores.

5. The difficulties and challenges of farming in an alternative food network

Adele Simpson⁶ has been farming organically in Skagit County since the late 1970s. She started out as a farm

⁶All farmers' and farm names are pseudonyms.

worker and now owns her own farm and grows raspberries, blueberries and mixed vegetables on five acres, as well as nursery stock on about 10 acres. She sells most of her produce through CSA, at two farmers markets, and to an organic home-delivery business in Seattle. It has been a very difficult growing season. If it were not for her husband's full-time position off-farm, they would have had a hard time making ends meet.

Adele's fine produce and commitment to the ideals of sustainable agriculture and AFNs draw good numbers of loyal customers. Middle class consumers who buy food strictly according to price frustrate her. Friends are not necessarily loyal customers:

I have tried to sell more locally, and I have some pretty loyal people who will buy from me. But even some of my closest friends, who earn enough money that they take a cruise every year...won't buy from me. I have a friend whose husband is a fisherman; we trade for fish with them every year. She has two young children. She didn't want to trade for organic potatoes, because I was charging too much for them. I said to her, I am going to give you these, because you shouldn't buy chemical potatoes to feed your children. It is different with potatoes. Commercial potatoes are sprayed 30–60 times. They are drenched! And they are a root crop and they absorb it. She won't spend the 70 cents a pound to trade for a bulk box of potatoes. These are my friends, my circle of friends. It drives me nuts. That's why I go to Seattle. And I drive by myself so I get stuck in rush hour traffic—three and a half hours sometimes it takes to wade through that muck. It can be bumper to bumper ... all the way. Is that sustainable? Me burning all that fuel to take \$1000 worth of produce to Seattle?

Adele Simpson reveals a paradox within the food network. Consumer demand for fresh, top quality, organically grown fruits and vegetables is highest in the Seattle metropolitan area. Farmers drive over 200 miles into the city to sell food in Seattle's farmers' markets. However, Adele points to the problem of urban congestion and the difficulty of meeting production and sales costs this way. Diseases hit both her raspberry, squash and onion crops and lowered the volume she counted on for her farmers market and CSA customers. Adele's narrative reminds us that the vagaries of agricultural production and the costs of labor time and fuel necessary for the success of direct marketing can erode farm income. She's getting older, and her body feels the stresses and strains of farm work. She feels an obligation to educate younger people about alternative agriculture. She fulfills this obligation through her active participation in apprenticing workers on her farm and encouraging young farmers to grow for the network. She is politically active regionally and nationally and remains a strong advocate for AFNs. And yet, she feels the economic and physical pressures of sustained small-scale farming in an AFN.

Miguel Cortez has been farming since he was 14. He worked alongside his parents and siblings as a farm worker in the fruit fields of central Washington. Now he and his brothers own their own farms. Currently, he farms nine acres of organic mixed fruit and vegetables. He became interested in small-scale farming because of the back to the land movement of the 1970s. Currently, he grows and markets to Seattle's farmers markets but is discouraged due to the costs and the labor demands of direct marketing. Growing a diversity of crops for nearby markets has proved unsustainable for him in the current growing season. One issue is the fierce competition he experiences as a small farmer pitted against large volumes of organic produce coming in from California. He notes,

What is really hurting the Washington organic farmer is the California organic farmer. Their stuff comes in two months before ours and when we start to harvest ours, they drop their prices so low that we can't even sell (ours)....

Due to competition at the farmers market, prices were too low for his family to break even this year. He observes:

We grew asparagus, carrots, radishes and snow peas last year. We had the carrots and the peas, but there were several farmers that also had those products. It was pretty much \$1 a pound, next to nothing. You've got to pay your gas and you've got to eat. It is hard work. When we get to the market, we kind of see what people have, and we'll either match it or be underneath it

... You are only going to get \$800–900 for the market... I'll be bringing my asparagus from eastern Washington and I'll have to trip up there and trip back and so on. Since you figure \$800, well it probably cost me \$300–400 to get it set up, then my time and my wife's time and the travel time, fuel and the van and insurance and it goes on and on. So maybe you make \$400 for the weekend.... You figure \$2000–2500 per month, which is okay but not great. If it was just me and her, then that would be okay. But we have 5 kids and we're starting to think about college.

Miguel and his extended family have long-standing experience in growing Concord grapes. Prices have stagnated and dropped due to international competition from places like Chile and Argentina. He says, "My dad sold Concord grapes on the conventional market for \$250/ton 30 years ago. This year it was \$220." As a farmer dedicated to the ideals of the AFN, Miguel's family cannot afford to buy the produce he sells at the farmers market and they depend upon their garden to meet their needs for vegetables and fruit. Like Adele, the extra labor, fuel and time demands do not necessarily insure the long-term viability of working in the AFN. In his words:

Our customers are college students (who) shop at the food coops and then wealthy people, because they can afford whatever. But others don't care. Even us, we eat a

lot of conventional foods, because it's all we can afford. We also eat a lot of our own stuff and from out of our garden. Being an organic farmer is hard and it is getting tougher every year.

Miguel speaks to the class and ethnic dimensions of the local food network, indicating that his own family could not afford the prices at farmers markets. Locally grown organic foods are primarily purchased by well educated and well-paid urban consumers, although a wide diversity of people buy food through these networks (Weatherell et al., 2003; Govindasamy et al., 2002; Guthman, 2003; Lockie et al., 2002).

Despite progressive efforts to make fresh, locally grown produce available to a wider range of community members by locating farmers markets in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, instituting federal and state subsidies enabling elderly and poor people to shop at farmers markets, and supporting initiatives to source locally grown foods in schools and other state institutions, most people on fixed or low incomes do not eat much locally grown organic foods unless they grow their own or unless it is available through food banks. In 2001, local farmers participating in Seattle's farmers markets donated over 40,000 pounds of food to food banks in the city (Curtis and Chris, 2002).

Miguel eventually plans to concentrate upon growing organic asparagus and concord grapes as a way to survive.

Kathy Sacks is a young single woman who has moved from intensive gardening in a metropolitan area to small-scale organic farming by way of an apprenticeship in Skagit County. Recently, she relocated to a small rural community near a national forest in eastern Skagit County and is looking forward to her first growing season. She is passionate about growing food and views farming as an important part of her identity and her relationship with other people.

To me (small-scale farming) represents a means to becoming more self-sufficient. Also, I love food and I love to eat. And I love to cook and to cook with people and to share food and give food and feed people.

She is living in a working class rural community; her neighbors do not have a lot of money and food. Services and material goods are bartered among neighbors, friends, and customers. Kathy operates at the margins of agrarian capitalism and therefore her first year is dedicated to subsistence agriculture for herself and for the provision of good, fresh food for those living in her immediate environment. Her sharecropped land is less than 5 acres.

My main customers so far are a barter situation. I am living on the property of a Seattle couple and using some of the land here in exchange for food. ...My aim in selling what I grow is to continue to support my life here, and my needs are so small—I'm debt free, my expenses are minimal—that is what I think about when I think about charging for food. I basically just want to cover my expenses.

As a young, single woman who lives simply, Kathy does not feel the need to profit from her work now. She is passionate and idealistic. This is an exciting chapter in her life and she is challenged by her work in the AFN focused close to her home.

I am trying to think about how I am able to support myself. But do it in a way that I feel is really fair and equitable. ...The idea of having more than a few acres is just not appealing to me at all. I am not heavily machine oriented.

She further redefines 'local' to exclude Seattle as a market area for her:

We don't have a Seattle to go to and even in growing food in a small rural area, are you really supporting your local, rural economy when you take your food into the nearest big city? ...Wouldn't it be so much more direct if you focused on feeding the people right near you?

Kathy raises important questions about growing 'locally' and what growing food means to her. Clearly, her path may not be possible for many growers like Miguel Cortez who are trying to put children through college. And how will Kathy be feeling at the end of, say, five growing seasons?

These three farmers active in the AFN raise important questions about the sustainability of direct marketing for small farms and illustrate why so some small farmers are ambivalent about the impacts of direct marketing upon their livelihoods. For Adele, social relationships do not necessarily boost the demand for her food. Farmers markets sales demand more competition with large-scale organic operations in neighboring California triggered Miguel's change of farming strategy, pulling him into a concentration on two crops, and a combination of conventional and organic forms of production. Miguel notes the risks involved in diversified production for farmers markets and how pricing competition from neighboring farmers and from California exerts a downward pressure on his income. He also raises questions about the generational and class-based nature of organic food consumption. His family cannot afford to buy the very food they produce but they do consume fresh, organic produce thanks to their garden. He cannot solely support his family through participation in AFNs and also relies upon conventionally produced concord grapes and mono-cropping organic asparagus for household income. Kathy envisions her contribution to her community in terms of reciprocity that does not involve capital accumulation. She relegates the commodification of food to the margins of her concerns. She wants to rework the channels of exchange and distribution through land stewardship and reciprocity. She aims to give some of the food she grows away. The sustainability of this approach over time emerges as an issue.

The rapid expansion of farmers markets in the urban corridor on the state's west coast, the growth of CSA and the increasing demand for locally grown produce is both an opportunity and a challenge for small-scale producers committed to alternative forms of distribution. Some face some difficulties in sustaining their livelihoods and the quality of their lives due to the increasing fuel demands to bring their food to farmers markets and the increased time it takes to load, unload, display and sell their produce in addition to the demands of cultivation. According to my interviews, those farmers participating in CSA close to their customers did not experience this challenge since their customers came to their farms to pick up their weekly boxes. A sole emphasis upon direct, local marketing strategies can increase self-exploitation—particularly evident in small-scale operations selling primarily to farmers markets and involved with forms of CSA that demand transport to customers based in the city. According to one small farmer, “I worked the farmers’ market for a couple of years...burnout is inevitable.” Larger scale family operations, which involve extended families as part of the labor pool, do not suffer from this form of exploitation, because of the larger family labor pool and the reliance upon seasonal paid labor. However, they too must continually innovate and participate more intensively in specialty crop production and marketing, value-added products and direct forms of marketing. The pressures vary according to farm size and scale, crop mix and growing practices, labor demands and the needs and desires of individual farmers and their families.

The benefits of participation in AFNs are unevenly distributed among participating farmers and depend upon farm size and scale, family household composition and ages, crop mix, and the changing patterns in the weather and plant diseases. The assumption that local, alternative food systems are necessarily beneficial and sustainable for all who participate in them simply because they are ‘local’ or ‘organic’ is inaccurate. Based upon my interviews, it appears that farmers with diversified operations of between 2 and 16 ha (5 and 40 acres) are particularly vulnerable, because they rely so heavily upon unpaid family labor. Labor demands upon the farm family increase with the added responsibilities and costs of value-added processing, marketing and transport that are necessary for the participation in farmers markets.

6. The city in the country II: Urbanization and demographic change in Seattle and king county, Washington

King County's population exceeds 1.7 million and has grown by over 16% in the last decade ([King County Annual Growth Report, 2003](#)). It ranked as the 13th largest US county in 2002. Average household income is high at \$53,200 in 2000—much higher than state averages. Nearly 40% of Washington State's jobs and payroll are located in King County, making it the “economic engine of Washington and the Pacific Northwest” ([King County](#)

[Annual Growth Report, 2003, p. 4](#)). Over 40% of King County residents are college educated, while nearly half (47%) of Seattleites have a college degree ([Morrill, 2002](#)).

Households comprising single people are “unusually prevalent in greater Seattle and especially in the city of Seattle, which is matched only by San Francisco ([Morrill, 2002, p. 81](#)). The Seattle metropolitan region is extremely attractive to young adults. Just over 30% of the city's residents are 25–39 years old. The rise of young, upwardly mobile urban professional households fuels the demand for locally grown organic food and artisan cheeses, wines and breads. This demand is manifest in the phenomenal growth of farmers markets in Seattle neighborhoods, suburbs and in smaller, nearby towns. According to the [Washington State Farmers Market Association \(2005\)](#), there are currently 84 farmers markets in the State, up from 53 in 1994. The largest concentration of farmers markets in the state is clustered around the major metropolitan areas proximate to the Interstate Highway Five corridor running north and south near western Washington's coast. The majority of farmers active in AFNs in the state also farm within this corridor ([Tilth Producers of Washington, 2005](#)).

A well-educated urban middle class drives the interest in social sustainability of rural landscapes and environmental conservation and protection and drives demand for organic produce grown close to home. With its population of well-paid young professionals, Seattle has a concentration of individuals and groups dedicated to the progressive politics of socially sustainable food production and consumption. NGOs such as Seattle Tilth, Cascade Harvest Coalition and Skagitonians for the Preservation of Farmland are dedicated to organic urban gardening and to supporting Washington farmers and farm products as well as to AFNs provisioning communities and institutions such as schools. Memberships are drawn from the metropolitan middle class, which is largely white and well-educated.⁷ College and university students' interest in AFNs in the area also fuels demand for locally grown organic food in groceries, restaurants and in school food services. Puget Consumers Cooperative (PCC), a regionally based food cooperative chain has instituted a farmland preservation fund and also actively promotes on-going food drives aimed at stocking regional food banks. PCC concentrates upon relationships with specific growers who can supply all eight of the region's stores. This mandates a certain size and scale of operation for participating farms. Food cooperatives smaller than PCC often depend upon one or two local farmers to supply the majority of their fresh produce.

According to the consumer survey, roughly 16% of respondents shop at farmers markets, 13% at food cooperatives and only 3% participate in CSA. Overwhelmingly, the majority of King County survey respondents shopped at grocery stores and preferred to shop there. However, over half preferred to shop at farmers

⁷Participation by other ethnic and racial groups and classes occurs in the related activity of urban community gardening.

markets, and 58% stated that supporting local farmers figured into what they bought and ate. Over 75% of the respondents indicated that they were willing to pay from 10% to 20% more for local food. Over half of the 258 survey respondents from King County were women and 58% had college degrees or more advanced education, and nearly half (47%) earned \$50,000 per year.

Urbanization contributes both economically and politically to the development and emergence of AFNs. First, it fuels consumer demand for food close to home and contributes to the growth of organic gardening and farming, farmers markets and CSA. AFNs provide an alternative to supermarkets and provide additional markets for farmers such as seasonal farmers markets. Second, urbanization and food politics come together through the establishment and growth of governmental and NGOs and agencies dedicated to supporting farmers and farmland preservation, farmers markets and making locally grown produce available to senior citizens and the poor, continuing to provide alternatives to globalized food in a variety of ways to a wider group of people, especially through the promotion of individual or community gardens. But as Allen et al. (2003) point out, these organizations do not necessarily privilege social or environmental justice issues as their objectives.

Agriculture in the region has historically developed from practices based in agro-industrial forms of production serving the urbanizing region but also destined for national and international marketing. As cheaper labor and resources became available in other areas of Washington State and in Mexico, farmers began emphasizing organic (certified or not), directly marketed, specialty crop production directed to middle class and wealthy people. This process is not linear or uniform, and it involves farmers along a wide-ranging continuum of farms—from conventional agribusiness operations to the tiniest of CSAs. At the same time, the growth of urbanized King County and Skagit Counties contributed to the growing demand for high quality, fresh produce sourced from nearby farms. The unusually high levels of education and income in metropolitan Seattle feed the demand for more farmers markets and CSAs in the area as well as the availability of locally grown foods in supermarkets and grocery stores. The move from conventional, industrial agriculture to the increase in small-scale alternative farms supplying the AFN comes about due to regional rural restructuring as large-scale agribusiness moves out of the area and as the pace of urban development and housing demands increase, along with the demand for high quality, organic, locally grown produce.

7. Conclusion

AFNs are not static objects or sets of relationships. They emerge from political, cultural and historical processes, and they develop out of the interactions between rural restructuring and urbanization in metropolitan regions.

They are also part of the visions and discourses of local food cultures and their varied politics. According to this case study, AFNs are reliant upon the processes of agrarian political and economic change as agro-industry continually relocates, as farms near cities become smaller and as cities and suburbs grow. Urbanization yields more farmers markets and increases demand for local produce in line with a variety of economic and political agendas and consumer beliefs and desires. This may be especially pronounced in cities with well-educated residents who have high incomes and, in the case of Seattle, where politics have a particularly liberal cast. Discourses and trends about the value of eating fresh, local food also fuel the popularity of AFNs in the region (McDonald, 2007). However, the growth of AFNs does not necessarily mean that they include all urban residents or that they are necessarily driven only by social justice concerns.

This study indicates that the globalization of food is part of the development of local food systems. Globalization contributes to rural restructuring, which may help spur the development of small farms in proximity to urban areas. This can come at the cost of dismantling preexisting agro-industrial production networks operating on the national or international scales, such as seed and vegetable production and processing in this particular case. This can be devastating to large-scale farms, but provide opportunities to small-scale farms in provisioning nearby metropolitan regions as urbanization drives demand for local foods higher. But as this demand increases, small farmers may find their labor time increases as well and that securing their livelihoods is not a given even though demand for local grows. While they may privilege the principles of social and ecological sustainability, many farmers are working harder and just getting by due to the increased labor and time demands of direct marketing as well as competition from industrial organics (see also Sage 2003; Pedersen and Kjaergard, 2004). But at the same time, as one farmer notes, “In some ways the gentrification of Seattle is going to be the savior of the urban fringe farmer” (McDonald, 2007, p. A11). As we have seen, the response to this observation is both yes and no.

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