

Guelph Mercury

Canada's farms not suited to 100-mile diet

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It's harvest time in Ontario – a time of bounty and plenty for lovers of local food. But where Canadian agriculture is concerned, it's not all about buying local and the 100-mile diet, even though everyone seems to be getting in on that action.

It's true that local food is growing in popularity and the 100-mile diet is a hot trend. The media is talking and writing about buying local, the number of farmers' markets and local food stores is growing and the provincial government is providing funding and support for a wide variety of pick-Ontario programs and initiatives.

But there is a flip side to all of this as well that we shouldn't ignore. And it's a side that perhaps more accurately depicts our agri-food industry and the majority of Canada's farmers. Not everyone grows products that can be sold locally or can be directly consumed by the Canadian public.

Farmers markets, for example, are terrific for allowing consumers to interact with farmers and growers and to buy locally grown foods. But they don't represent the bulk of the sales. In fact, in Ontario, farmers' markets account for only about one per cent of sales for fresh fruits and vegetables, according to the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association. This means the bulk of Ontario's fresh produce still goes through wholesalers, food service and major retail chains.

I'm not convinced that the 100-mile diet can work in a realistic way for most of us in a country like Canada. Due to the nature of our climate, we aren't able to grow food year round - as in more southern regions - and there are many foods we need in our diet that we simply cannot grow here at all. Some parts of southern Ontario or certain regions in Quebec or British Columbia can perhaps come closest to feeding us locally for most of the year, but even they can't do it all.

Canada is also a big country that covers a vast area, and outside of major urban centres, population and infrastructure become pretty sparse pretty quickly. But that size, that climate and our fertile soils also allow us to grow much more than we can eat or use.

We are a small market - with only about 33 million people - but we have a lot of farm land and there is a global need for farmers to grow staple crops like corn, wheat and soybeans.

Our agricultural sector – and by extension our broader economy – depends heavily on access to export markets.

According to statistics from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Canada's agri-food exports in 2008 totalled more than \$38 billion and Canadian agri-food products went to almost 200 different countries around the world last year.

This includes food-grade soybeans to Japan, pork and beef to the United States, grain to China, flax to the European Union, and oilseeds to Mexico.

Crops like corn and soybeans are also increasingly being used to create new "bio-products," made from a plant-base instead of using petroleum-derived ingredients. This opens up new market opportunities for Canadian farmers and is helping build a greener economy here at home. Bio-products include things like car parts, adhesives, lubricants, plastics and rubber, paints and solvents, foams and beauty products. These bio-products are better for the environment and they are helping us lessen our dependence on the world's depleting fossil fuel stocks.

All of this is not to say that supporting buy local programs and encouraging consumers to support our farmers isn't important. It is. But it shouldn't be mistaken as being representative of Canada's whole farming sector.

And the 100-mile diet - as much as it promotes local foods - doesn't truly reflect the global nature of Canadian agriculture.

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