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What's for Dinner?

Grant makers come to the table to support local food

By Debra E. Blum

Jon M. Jensen of Cleveland's George Gund Foundation has a theory about tomatoes. If residents of northeast Ohio bought more locally grown tomatoes instead of those shipped in from California and other faraway places, he says, fewer dollars would leave the Cleveland area, which would benefit both local farmers and the entire local economy.

Such thinking, says Mr. Jensen, who oversees Gund's environmental grants, is in part what is behind the foundation's debate over whether to add a new area of grant making — one that would focus on promoting locally produced food.

The foundation, which has long supported efforts to preserve area farms in the face of the region's sprawling development, is now contemplating how to save farmers, too. And that consideration, says Mr. Jensen, has prompted the foundation to consider joining a budding philanthropic movement around the country in support of efforts to increase the production and availability of fresh, healthy, and affordable local food.

"In our more-traditional thinking about the environment, we cared about farmland preservation," Mr. Jensen says. "We weren't thinking about the farms and the farmers and their roles in the welfare of the whole area. Now, we see the obvious — that local food is good for the environment, our health, and our local economy — and we are looking at ways the foundation can help."

'Central Focus of Our Lives'

Gund is not alone in its quest to put food on its grant-making plate. A growing

number of foundations that focus on an array of causes — such as health, social justice, hunger, and urban planning — are dedicating more and more attention and money to issues related to local-food systems, a term that encompasses all aspects of food, from its start on the farm to when it reaches the fork. And this year's debate over the farm bill, the federal law that sets the country's agricultural policies, appears to be drawing more interest and advocacy dollars from the nonprofit world than ever before as the bill faces a five-year renewal.

"Food is such a central focus of our lives; we interact with it at least three times a day," says Oran B. Hesterman, who last month was appointed to head the Fair Food Foundation, in Ann Arbor, Mich., which will become the first national grant maker to focus exclusively on local-food-system matters. It will hand out as much as \$20-million a year to start. The money will come from a couple in Michigan who have asked to remain anonymous.

Since 2002 the number of grant makers belonging to a national group, called the Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders, has nearly quadrupled to 30. And grant makers in different areas of the country — in California, Illinois, and the Northeast — are banding together on their own, pooling resources and money to take a stab at local-food issues from different angles.

No data exist on how much foundations are spending on local-food issues overall, but Mr. Hesterman, who previously oversaw a grant-making effort called Food and Society at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Mich., and other experts say it is a fast-growing segment of grant making.

Kellogg has committed \$15-million to Food and Society.

Supporters of efforts to promote local food say that turning the production, distribution, and consumption of food back into more of a local affair would reduce many social concerns at once, such as pollution, obesity, and land use. The shorter the distance food travels from soil to table, for instance, the less energy needed for packaging and transport. The fresher, less-processed the ingredients, the healthier and tastier the meal. And the more financially sound America's small-farm operations, the better the chance of conserving threatened farmlands.

Environmentalists, farmers, restaurateurs, and local activists around the country

have been talking for decades about the benefits of local food and the importance of preserving an alternative to the industrialized, centralized food system that prevails in the United States.

And some foundations have been backing efforts tied to sustainable agriculture — the notion that farming can be both eco-friendly and profitable — since the 1980s, when so many small and midsize American farms were plagued with financial troubles.

But despite the high profile of at least one of the organizations helping family farmers — Farm Aid, started in 1985 by the country singer Willie Nelson — grant making related to farms and food was long considered an obscure niche of the environmental movement, if it was considered at all.

"For the last 30, 35 years I've been haranguing foundation boards about agriculture or the farm bill and they'd go to sleep," says Martin Teitel, executive director of the Cedar Tree Foundation, in Boston. "Now I can talk about farming, and local food and its deliciousness, and our connection to the food supply, and where agriculture and culture and justice and health meet, and everybody is listening."

Much of the change, says Mr. Teitel, is consumer driven. The burgeoning interest among consumers in eating locally produced food for health, political, economic, and environmental reasons, he says, is partly responsible for moving foundation support of small-farm operations and local-food systems from the fringe to the mainstream.

"Our grant making is changing because our grantees are changing because our culture is changing," Mr. Teitel says.

Where Food Comes From

The number of farmers' markets in America last year was two-and-a-half times greater than in 1994, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a growing number of hospitals and schools are making a push to serve fresher, more-nutritious food. In addition, more and more national companies, like Wal-Mart Stores and the food-supplier Sysco, are responding to consumer demand by making promises to obtain more of their produce locally.

Behind the eat-local phenomenon are several factors, says Mr. Teitel and other observers, like greater consumer savvy about nutrition; the rise of the organic-food movement; increased awareness about the relationship between energy use and climate change; and the exploding popularity of cooking shows and their celebrity chefs, who are more often calling attention to the taste and origins of food.

At the same time, a handful of recent big-release books and movies, like *Fast Food Nation*, have introduced questions about America's eating habits and food-industry practices to a wide audience.

Two high-profile incidents of tainted food last fall — one involving bagged spinach shipped around the country, and the other concerning green onions distributed to Taco Bells in a handful of states — have also contributed to mounting curiosity about food.

"People are saying, Hey, I wonder where my food comes from, where it's been, and how it got here," says Karen K. Gerlach, a senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in Princeton N.J. "There's a lot more awareness and concern."

Robert Wood Johnson has recently joined with five other national grant makers interested in health issues to explore how they can promote an agenda they call Healthy Eating-Active Living.

No grants or financial commitments have yet been made, says Ms. Gerlach, but one of the tasks expected to be at the top of the group's to-do list will be providing support for local farms and improving their links to consumers.

"Agriculture is not a typical health-funder issue, but the availability of nutritious and affordable food is," Ms. Gerlach says. "Farms are now on our radar."

A 'Hard Sell'

Officials at nonprofit group that work on local-food issues say they ought to be taking advantage of that kind of openness to their concerns. But they also know they still need to introduce themselves and their issues to potential new supporters.

"The problem is we don't have our own funding category," says Timothy J. Schlitzer, executive director of the FoodRoutes Network, in Arnot, Pa., which coordinates a national marketing campaign, called Buy Fresh, Buy Local. "The idea of local-food systems can still be a hard sell because the subject area crosses so many boundaries that it doesn't fit neatly in traditional funding categories."

Georgia Organics, a charity in Atlanta that promotes local-food production and consults with farmers on organic agriculture, applied in January for a foundation grant to pay for its work helping Emory University to serve more locally grown food on campus.

Alice Rolls, executive director of Georgia Organics, suspects that the application, which was rejected last month, failed to make a clear case connecting the Emory project with the broader health, environmental, and community benefits of local food.

"We have to help funders take that mental leap" to better understand the issues, Ms. Rolls says.

Mr. Schlitzer at FoodRoutes suggests that local-food groups carefully tailor their message for different foundations — touting the nutritional value of fresh food when dealing with health foundations, for example — and be prepared to help potential supporters "connect the dots," he says, between their interests and a strong local-food system.

"We need to demonstrate how many doors there are into their arena, but not let that diversity dilute the meaning for individual funders," Mr. Schlitzer says.

Ms. Gerlach at Robert Wood Johnson says her foundation discovered local-food systems in its quest to get at the causes of the nation's obesity epidemic. Officials at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, in New York, say the organization's interest in social justice led to its support of local-food projects that focus on issues such as fair wages for farm workers.

At the Chicago Community Trust, interest in local food spilled over from the foundation's hunger-fighting programs into its grant making related to health and community development. And at the William Penn Foundation, in Philadelphia, it

surfaced as a useful linchpin between two separate grant-making priorities of the foundation: farmland preservation and the rejuvenation of old, urban neighborhoods.

William Penn is now supporting a local nonprofit group looking to start a farmers' market in an abandoned open-air retail space in the city.

"We've identified farmers' markets as a revitalization tool," says Geraldine Wang, the foundation's director of environment and communities, adding that farmers' markets "stand at the intersection of different issues that are important to us — the environment, jobs, communities, urban life, conservation."

Film Festival

The more foundation officials like Ms. Wang linger on the topic, in fact, the more connections they draw between local food and any number of grant-making topics. Even the arts can fall under its purview.

Last year, the Kellogg Foundation gave a two-year, \$220,000 grant to the New York group Arts Engine for the addition of a new category to its annual film festival.

The festival, called Media That Matters, now gives out a Good Food Award for movies that focus on the issue of food and sustainability, and Arts Engine packages the best submissions on the topic into a DVD and teachers' guide to distribute at schools, colleges, and universities.

"The films draw attention to food issues in ways that remind us of the relationships between food and so many other issues we face as a society," says Enrico Cullen, an Arts Engine spokesman.

He says last year's Good Food Award winner was about a Michigan town's fight to preserve its identity and livelihood — asparagus farming — in the face of global competition and U.S. subsidies to foreign growers.

The message of the producers of the film, says Mr Cullen: Buy local.

That concept is what is on Mr. Jensen's mind at Gund these days, too. In January, the foundation awarded money to a local farmland-conservancy group to work with researchers at Ohio State University on a study to measure the amount of food produced within a nine-county area of the state. And Gund is watching closely a one-year-old local project, called City Fresh, operating on money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that aims to increase low-income consumers' access to locally grown and processed foods.

"There's a lot of jumping into this area of local-food systems," Mr. Jensen says, "and we are doing some analysis to get ready to be among the next ones."

That analysis is not always so formal.

Mr. Jensen frequents a farmers' market near the Cleveland suburb where he lives, sometimes chatting with vendors and other shoppers. Last summer, he says, a common refrain was disappointment that by 2 p.m. on Saturdays, the market would be sold out.

"There was lots of demand and there were hard-working, struggling farmers trying to meet the demand, but facing any number of challenges," Mr. Jensen says. "I was starting to see the opportunities to get involved."