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Locally grown produce isn't so local, UCSB research team finds

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If you like strawberries, they're grown fresh in Santa Maria.

But when you buy them at the local supermarket, they're not quite so fresh, having been warehoused in the San Francisco Bay Area before being shipped back to Santa Barbara for sale.

So how do you like them strawberries?

In a paper recently published in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*, UCSB environmental studies professor David Cleveland and his co-authors, all of them current or former UCSB undergraduates, found that what supermarkets claim to be local produce isn't so local. They discovered that more than 99 percent of the produce grown in Santa Barbara County is exported, and more than 95 percent of the produce consumed in the county is imported, some of it from as far away as Chile, Argentina, and New Zealand.

"What's obvious from our research is that a sea change is required to counter growing problems in the globalized food system. Such a change would include strengthening local food distribution hubs and demanding that the food corporations provide the data to verify their claims about 'local food,'" Dr. Cleveland emphasized.

"If you happen to be a fan of fresh strawberries and other fresh fruits and vegetables, the good news is that the situation is slowly improving," Dr. Cleveland told the News-Press. "People are waking up to the fact that our food system is broken; that it's creating lots of environmental and social problems and robbing many of us of the nutrition we require.

"Many organizations across the country, including community colleges, hospitals and even the military, are turning to locally grown produce to improve the nutrition of those they serve," he said.

Santa Barbara County grows nine times the amount of fruits and vegetables that it consumes and ranks in the top 1 percent of all U.S. counties in value of agricultural products, with 80 percent of that value in fruits and vegetables.

That's why there are many efforts under way here to localize the food system, Dr. Cleveland said.

"The Santa Barbara Public Health Department, the Food Bank and the s'Cool Food Initiative are working to help get local food to people who need it and education to those who may not know how to cook it," Dr. Cleveland said. "In addition, UCSB's Residential Dining program is not only purchasing most of the fresh fruits and vegetables it serves to students from farms within a 150-mile radius of Santa Barbara, but over 25 percent of that is also sustainable and organic."



NIKOLAI ROBIN/NEWS-PRESS/PHOTOS

Above, UCSB environmental studies professor David Cleveland is shown in the garden plot for his small-scale food production class at UCSB. The professor and his study team found that 99 percent of all produce grown in Santa Barbara County is exported, and that 95 percent of all produce consumed is imported. Below, Dr. Cleveland inspects one of the plants.



Dr. Cleveland and his research team also studied the environmental effects created by the transportation of produce from farm-to-retail, commonly referred to as "food miles." Surprisingly, the study found that if all produce consumed in Santa Barbara was grown in the county, it would only reduce agrifood greenhouse gas emissions by less than 1 percent.

The study indicated that most of the agrifood greenhouse gas emissions came from other parts of the system, especially from the production of animal products.

"So, while reducing food miles is a necessary strategy for reforming our food system, it's not sufficient," Dr. Cleveland said. "In addition, there is also a danger that it can obscure the real goals or even replace them, luring us into the 'local trap.'

"I see two parts to this trap," the professor continued. "First, it gives the corporations currently controlling our global food system the ability to use 'local' as a green cloak to hide their goals, which are often directly opposed to those of most localization advocates. Second, it can make achieving goals more difficult when money and time are spent to localize in ways that don't benefit the local community."

Dr. Cleveland's research and teaching at UCSB has focused on small-scale, sustainable agriculture. He has worked with farmers around the world, including Ghana, Mexico and Pakistan.

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