

'Buy local' not the answer to smaller carbon footprint, professor argues

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In 2006, certain cafeterias on U of T's St. George campus began serving meals made from ingredients grown mostly in Ontario – an initiative undertaken with Local Food Plus, an organization that promotes local farmers, and campaigns to reduce Canada's carbon footprint. But at U of T Mississauga, no such food partnership exists – and that may not be a bad thing, according to Professor Pierre Desrochers of geography.

As he argues in a recent policy paper (Yes, We Have No Bananas: A Critique of the 'Food Miles' Perspective), a New Zealand apple eaten in Spiegel Hall has more “food miles” (distance food has travelled from production to consumption) on it than the indigenous McIntosh, but its production may have resulted in fewer greenhouse gases. New Zealand apples, he explains, are grown during our winter months and do not need to spend long periods of time in cold storage facilities.

Desrochers' paper challenges the recent popularity of movements like the 100-mile diet and has made him a virtual pariah to the anti-Agri Business brigade. “The people who protest my paper circle together like musk oxen. They're reluctant to debate or consider the data. They're angry at corporations, but feel powerless to effect change. So they transpose their efforts to something they can relate to: food purchases.”

According to Desrochers, buying locally grown but economically uncompetitive products almost never reduces greenhouse gases. In the U.S., more than 80% of food-related energy consumption comes from

food production, while the transportation segment accounts for less than 10%. Western European consumers would actually reduce their greenhouse gas emissions if they bought milk solids or apples from highly efficient New Zealand producers rather than from highly subsidized and much less efficient local producers.

“Long distance food transportation by highly efficient diesel container ships represents only a tiny percentage of total energy expenditure in agricultural production,” he says. “Cold storage or greenhouses have much more significant expenditures. North Americans somehow forget that we have seasons!”

Desrochers is not against local food production. He says it works in some places, especially in season. But there was a reason our ancestors shifted away from subsistence farming. “Our modern food supply chain is a demonstrably superior alternative that has evolved through constant competition and ever more rigorous management efficiency.”

Desrochers has no illusions of winning over the prevailing (and politically correct) Local Food Plus faction that pronounces: Let’s go the distance so our food won’t have to. “My brother is a Quebec politician who represents an agricultural riding. I don’t know if I can ever convince him that not buying from local producers is the right thing to do!”

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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