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'Eat local' is common sense for the future

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Re: The economic fallacy of 'eat local, buy local,' Harvey Enchin, Sept. 28

The public's growing preference for locally grown food is about fresher taste, more nutritious food, and an economic reality that is clear -- buying local food is better for our economy.

Buying and eating locally allows the public to participate in owning its regional food economy. When we choose local, we keep British Columbia farmers farming, keep agricultural land in production, and ensure better quality labour standards for our workers.

The average North American dinner travels up to 2,400 km from farm to plate, with the average meal containing ingredients from five countries in addition to our own. Food transportation has a significant and growing impact on congestion, accidents, climate change, noise and air pollution -- all of which factor into the province's economic health.

A 2002 study by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Iowa State University found that conventional truck-delivered food used four to 17 times more fuel and released five to 17 times more carbon dioxide emissions than regional and local food distribution systems.

On an international scale, the import and export of food has tripled in the past 20 years. Food is now the largest component of air freight, and air transport is the most polluting and least efficient form of transportation.

We have reached a situation where B.C. is importing tomatoes from California and Mexico while exporting B.C.-grown tomatoes. Even if the "theory of comparative advantage" can somehow justify and support this, neither our climate nor our common sense can.

B.C. has about 20,000 small and medium-sized farms. We meet less than half of our population's food needs, but it is estimated that our moderate growing climate could allow us to meet nearly 80 per cent. What Enchin does not mention is the power of regionally based food systems to protect against crashes and whims of the global marketplace.

Buy local campaigns are certainly not "attempts to disrupt international trade." Not only are business alliances like Get Local attracting profitable and internationally renowned restaurants and retailers, but the provincial government is also investing in the promotion of eating locally to increase growth in B.C.'s agriculture industry -- a must if future generations of British Columbians are to enjoy a secure food future.

Tara McDonald is executive director of Your Local Farmer's Market Society, which helped start Get Local, an alliance of businesses that produce, sell and serve locally grown food.

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