

Local Organic Initiative (LOI) Strategic Plan

I. Mission

The Local Organic Initiative (LOI) will support the growth of a regional food system in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana with a goal to supply a significant portion of the organic food consumed in the Chicago area and throughout the region. The LOI will help a network of regional organic farms grow and prosper by developing a strong regional distribution system, supporting farmer training and development programs, securing philanthropic and government support, and creating a multi-media marketing program. This program will be a significant tool for local economic development, spurring job creation in urban and rural areas. By developing a regional food system, the LOI will minimize transportation and environmental costs, encourage sustainable public policy, provide food to underserved communities, build local economies, produce safe and healthy food, and support family farms.

II. The Need for the Local Organic Initiative

The Chicago-area market for regionally grown organic food is one of the best in America. The region's 10 million plus residents patronize fifteen Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, and Wild Oats supermarkets in the region, dozens of health food stores, over fifty farmers' markets, and numerous supportive restaurants. All of these purveyors have expanded rapidly in recent years and most have expressed preference for locally grown organic food. In addition, there is a growing demand for organic food from mainstream supermarkets like Dominick's and Jewel, who would likely purchase local products in the right circumstances.

In addition, the opportunity to link locally produced food with organizations that support the needy is tremendous. According to Diane Doherty of the Illinois Hunger Coalition, 8.2% of Illinois households suffer from food insecurity and over 3% are hungry. A large supply of fresh organic produce and other food products could make a significant contribution to improving this situation. Another opportunity will be to support the development of community food centers to distribute fresh food in moderate income, inner city areas such as Chicago's Austin neighborhood where residents are clamoring for access to healthier food.

The challenge is to develop more organic farms, more organic farmers, greater farm capacity, better post harvest handling, and a more sophisticated distribution infrastructure to meet this demand. The consensus among organic leaders in the area is that less than 1% of the Illinois market for organic food is being met with locally grown products. These same leaders feel that a well funded and well executed strategic plan can ultimately grow the supply of locally grown and processed organic food to supply 10-20% of the organic food consumed in the region.

A strong network of organic farms ringing Chicago will provide a greenbelt of open space by encouraging farmers to stay on the land, rather than selling to developers. This will help to preserve the rural character of outlying areas and help farmers practicing conventional methods to learn more about the economic and environmental benefits of organic farming. A strong regional food system will provide the opportunity for significant local economic development by encouraging the growth of companies and jobs in both rural and urban communities. This would occur in areas such as food processing, farming, distribution, greenhouse development, education, and others.

As the market in the Chicago area grows, other areas in Illinois, southern Wisconsin, Michigan and northern Indiana can then be targeted for both increased production and distribution of locally grown and processed organic foods. This regional food system will provide strong environmental, economic and social benefits and serve as a model for other programs across the country.

III. Structure

The Local Organic Initiative has been created by Sustain, which provides leadership and administrative functions for the project. The LOI Advisory Board consists of a diverse array of local and national organic and community food security leaders. Their input has been used to develop this plan.

This plan reflects the thinking of these leaders concerning the opportunities and challenges in creating a regional food system. It spells out numerous areas in which the LOI and dozens of partnering organizations can begin to

make an impact. Over the next year, Sustain will seek support to begin work on some of these programs, both for the LOI itself as well as for strategic partners.

IV. Key Areas

A. DISTRIBUTION

There is a consensus among regional organic leaders that the lack of distribution infrastructure is one of the biggest problems to achieving the goals of the Local Organic Initiative. To remedy this we set forth the following goals and action steps.

1. Goals:

a) Link rural farmers and urban farmers with urban and regional consumers

b) Create a distribution/marketing system that enables farmers to obtain an equitable price for their products. This system will include:

- 1) Marketing
- 2) Trucking
- 3) Warehousing

c) Build the distribution infrastructure to supply locally grown organic produce, meat, and dairy products to markets such as:

- 1) Farmers' markets
- 2) Community supported agriculture subscribers
- 3) Food cooperatives/buying clubs/community food centers
- 4) Restaurants
- 5) Natural food stores, such as Whole Foods, Wild Oats, Trader Joe's, etc
- 6) Year round Green City Market
- 7) Independent supermarkets
- 8) National chains such as Dominick's, Jewel, etc
- 9) Ethnic communities

d) Partner with organizations such as the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, and the Illinois Hunger Coalition to provide fresh organic food to under-served communities such as:

- 1) Soup kitchens
- 2) Homeless shelters
- 3) Food pantries

e) Expand the market for organic foods into institutions such as:

- 1) Hospitals
- 2) Schools
- 3) Prisons/Jails
- 4) Childcare
- 5) Nursing homes/extended care
- 6) Hotels/bed & breakfasts
- 7) Faith-based congregations
- 8) Scouts, 4-H, Boys and Girls clubs
- 9) Homeless shelters/food centers
- 10) Universities
- 11) Museums/botanic gardens/zoos

f) Set up systems and training to help farmers better manage other issues important to distribution such as:

- 1) Supply Chain Management

2) Post Harvest Handling

g) Set up systems to support the development of urban farms/greenhouses partnering with organizations such as:

- 1) University of Illinois Extension
- 2) Growing Power
- 3) Growing Home
- 4) Resource Center

2. Strategy / Action Steps:

a) Conduct a feasibility study to explore the needs of a regional organic distribution system

1) Survey existing systems nationally

- i) America Fresh
- ii) Red Tomato
- iii) Goodness Greenness
- iv) Homegrown Wisconsin

2) Map existing regional system including such components as:

- i) Current volume and mix of organic production
- ii) Potential volume and mix of organic production
- iii) Distribution needs
- iv) Farms
- v) Produce
- vi) Trucks
- vii) Communication system
- viii) Supply chain management
- ix) Post-harvest handling
- x) Drop-off sites
- xi) Markets/consumers
- xii) Staff
- xiii) Quality control
- xiv) Capital

3) Identify obstacles/opportunities in the marketplace

4) Identify and pursue next steps to overcome those obstacles and capitalize on the best of those opportunities

5) Create revenue forecasts for each area listed in IV.A.1.c) and IV.A.1.d) by surveying potential buyers

6) Evaluate opportunities to work with existing trucking, warehousing, and handling facilities

7) Determine distribution system needs

- i) One, three, and five years
- ii) Determine a budget to meet needs in above time frames
- iii) Project possible needs in 10 to 20 years

8) Assess financing options for various plans

- i) City, state, federal support
- ii) Foundation/major donors

9) Evaluate ownership structures

- i) Need for 501 c-3 status

- ii) Co-operative structure
- iii) Develop a clear decision-making structure

B. MARKETING

The LOI will develop an advertising and public relations program to encourage the identified target markets to purchase/grow/consume locally grown and processed organic food. The identified target markets will include: farmers, a diverse consumer base, institutions and policy makers.

1. Goals:

- a) Educate individual consumers about the benefits of a regional food system and locally grown and processed certified organic food
- b) Encourage organic farming as an attractive farming method and career choice for new and existing farmers
- c) Develop materials to educate policy makers about the economic and environmental benefits of regionally produced organic food
- d) Educate the public that regionally produced, fair trade organic food offers economic, environmental, and social benefits to the region
- e) Educate children and teachers about the benefits of organic food and encourage school gardens
- f) Educate institutional buyers about the benefits of locally grown organic food targeting those listed in IV.A.1.e)

2. Strategy / Action Steps:

- a) Create an Integrated Marketing Campaign strategy to achieve the above goals
- b) Identify the target markets with different messages and strategies for each market
- c) Create a synergy through all components of the marketing program so that every component has a consistent look and is sending the same message. Elements will include:
 - 1) Multi-media advertising campaign
 - 2) Public Relations
 - 3) Public events
 - 4) Website
 - 5) Brochure
 - 6) Posters
 - 7) Slide shows
 - 8) Cable access video
 - 9) Direct community outreach
- d) Explore creation of a "regional fair trade organic label"
 - 1) Secure talent of people who have done certification and standard development
 - 2) Research existing labeling initiatives and eco-labels
 - 3) Perform a feasibility study to evaluate the costs/benefits of a regional fair trade organic label
- e) Encourage farmer-led marketing efforts by assisting farmers with direct marketing needs
 - 1) CSAs
 - 2) farmers markets
 - 3) direct sales

f) Educate children/families/educators about organic farming/gardening

- 1) School gardens
- 2) Creating a practicum for teachers which builds bridges between different curriculums; lesson plans for teachers
- 3) Create a curriculum that raises awareness of benefits of regional food systems and the importance of developing future organic farmers
- 4) Educate people about the benefits of composting, and backyard gardening

g) Partner with groups arranging farm tours to educate target markets about the benefits of regionally grown organic food

h) Develop programs to sell regionally produced and processed food to institutions

C. FARMER DEVELOPMENT

The LOI will support existing organizations to develop strategies and resources to train new and existing organic farmers, encourage more organic production, attract new organic farmers, and educate conventional farmers about the opportunities available by transitioning to organic.

1. Goals:

- a) Understand the needs and capacity of regional farmers
- b) Increase the total number of organic acres in the region
- c) Increase the total number of organic farmers in the region
- d) Work with existing farmer development institutions to support new and existing organic farmers with the following needs:

- 1) Land
- 2) Capital
- 3) Training
- 4) Market development
- 5) Consumer education
- 6) Labor development

2. Strategy / Action Steps:

- a) Develop relationships and provide support for existing and new farmer training programs, including:
 - 1) CRAFT - Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training, a coalition of 35 northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin small organic and biodynamic farmers who mentor and train farmer interns
 - 2) Michael Fields Agricultural Institute - provides educational, training, and research resources to support and build organic, biodynamic, and sustainable agriculture
 - 3) Heifer Project International Midwest Office - offers training and support for limited resource urban and rural farmers
 - 4) MOSES - Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Services convenes a number of training opportunities including the Organic University (a mobile set of training modules offered across the region) and the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference, a regional conference attracting more than 1,200 participants
 - 5) The Land Connection Foundation (TLC) saves farmland at risk of loss to development, makes the land available to new organic farmers, provides financial, technical, and mentoring support to new organic farmers, and provides technical and marketing support to existing organic farmers
 - 6) University of Illinois offers a new training program in organics. Make stronger connections with university

extension to offer training and provide extension with appropriate materials on organic agriculture

7) Organic certifiers verify that farmers meet US organic standards and sometime offer technical support

8) ATTRA - this U.S. government resource (Appropriate Technology Transfer to Rural Areas) offers a list of farms, intern opportunities, research, information and other resources for small organic farms

9) University of Illinois Extension program workshops

10) DECCA - Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, offers business training for farmers

b) Perform research to determine availability of land that may be converted to organic agriculture in order to increase the total organic acreage in the region

1) Identify vacant lots and rooftops that may be used for Urban Farms

2) Identify retiring/retired farmers and link them with new farmers who may rent or buy their land

3) Identify universities and churches who own land and may want to transition it to organic agriculture and/or create organic demonstration farms that show the environmental benefits and financial feasibility of organic farming

4) Identify absentee landlords (often city-dwellers) who would like to rent their land to an organic farmer and/or help their tenant farmers transition to organic methods

5) Create networks/partnerships with, e.g. Farmer organizations, Land Trust organizations, Dept. of Planning, etc. to identify land coming up for sale and match it with buyers (individuals or nonprofits). Educate potential buyers/donors about land being a socially responsible investment

c) Perform research (interviews/questionnaires) to understand the needs of organic farmers and would-be organic farmers in Illinois and Wisconsin. Use the results of the research to find, train, and foster more organic farmers

d) Develop programs to support farmer's need for capital

1) Develop programs that provide direct financial support, through grants and/or through the creation of a low-risk incubator program for new organic farmers

2) Link farmers to community credit unions and/or credit repair organizations

3) Explore ways to support farmers to transition from conventional to organic

e) Help farmers tap into existing support structures (above) and help build new structures to meet farmers' needs

1) Create accreditation for farmer training programs allowing participants to obtain university credits for the existing training programs above

2) Create effective outreach programs to disseminate information

i) A mentoring program in which experienced farmers advise new farmers

ii) A farmer association that provides training, networking, market information, education about new equipment, and opportunities to share equipment. Models in other states include:

(a) Missouri Organic Farmers Association

(b) Hoosier Organic Marketing and Education (HOME)

(c) Minnesota's Land Stewardship Alliance, Farm Beginnings Programs

3) Develop tools to teach farmers various skills

i) Conferences/Training

- ii) Multimedia Tools
- iii) Brochures
- iv) Web site
- v) Information CDs
- vi) Videos
- vii) 800 phone number
- viii) Linkage to existing programs

f) Develop programs to meet farmers' business needs

- 1) Develop entrepreneurial skill-building programs to educate farmers about the various aspects of creating and running a small business
 - 2) Support programs that help farmers develop their markets, particularly direct markets such as CSAs and farmers' markets
 - 3) Research the need for a regional distribution. Create proper infrastructures to support different levels of producers
 - 4) Explore the development of farmer cooperatives to meet distribution needs
 - 5) Support training programs that provide farmers multi-year internships and/or advanced education
 - 6) Use multi-media as a tool for education. e.g. focus on a successful organic farm. Models may include Vermont Valley CSA, Organic Pastures Meat CSA and others
 - 7) Develop programs to meet farmers' need for community
 - 8) Create opportunities for farmers to learn about new equipment and set up systems for group purchasing discounts
- g) Support urban agricultural centers in the cities that can provide training/resources to urban farmers. Models include:
- 1) Growing Home
 - 2) The Resource Center
- f) Strengthen or create new farmer link programs at the state level that focus on organic farming opportunities; this creates a way for retiring farmers to pass on their farms to the next generation
- h) Create programs to recruit and train immigrants and other inner city residents to work on farms

D. DEVELOPMENT

The LOI will develop strategies to seek philanthropic and government support to help the regional movement finance its growth.

1. Goals:

- a) Encourage federal, state, and local governments to invest in projects that promote local organic agriculture
- b) Develop programs with foundations and other donors to support organizations that promote a regional organic food system

2. Strategy / Action Steps

Create a detailed development plan, which integrates with the needs described in IV.A., B., and C.

E. LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

1. Goals:

- a) Identify key stakeholders in the regional food system (farms, food buyers, food consumers, natural food groceries, mainstream groceries, restaurants, brokers/processors, distributors, etc)
- b) Map out economic relationships between these key stakeholders (food imports into and exports out of the region, food processing and marketing within the region, flow of capital generated from the sale of food products, etc)
- c) Develop opportunities to create living wage jobs with significant training and advancement possibilities

2. Strategy / Action Steps:

- a) Identify and pursue "next steps" to develop relationships with those farms, food buyers, food consumers, natural food groceries, mainstream groceries, restaurants, brokers, food manufacturers/processors, and distributors where synergies with the LOI are likely to produce job creation

F. FOOD SECURITY

1. Goal:

- a) Work with participants of the Illinois Food Security Summit to provide regionally produced organic food to underserved communities

2. Strategy/Action Step:

- a) Develop relationships to distribute fresh processed foods to food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters
 - 1) Greater Chicago Food Depository
 - 2) Illinois Hunger Coalition
 - 3) Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

V. Initial Milestones (for next 12 months)

A. Hire LOI director

B. Finalize first phase strategic plan

C. Further develop LOI operational and management structure

D. Develop process to link funding with various aspects of the plan. Develop programs to match the needs of funders with the goals of LOI

E. Engage in feasibility studies to evaluate needs of a regional distribution system and regional, fair trade, organic label

VI. Monitoring and Evaluation Process

The Local Organic Initiative will be primarily evaluated for the effectiveness of the implementation of the strategic plan as well as for its ability to facilitate larger community participation.

A. Strategic Plan

Sustain has continually solicited feedback from the community on elements and components of the LOI's strategic plan and will continue to do so once it has evolved into an action strategy. We have a substantial e-mail list of community members and participants who regularly receive correspondence from us (including the 200 members

of the Illinois Food Security Summit list serve).

Once the plan and the regional organic distribution feasibility study are completed, stakeholders will be consulted for feedback and evaluation, prior to moving on to the next steps of implementation.

B. Larger Community Participation

Sustain continually engages the larger community in the process. We plan to use e-mail surveys and an in person survey at the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference) to gauge reaction to our efforts. Those involved in the process of evaluation will include LOI advisory board members, hired consultants on the project, Sustain staff, and the Local Organic Initiative Task force of Sustain's Board of Directors. Evaluation results will be used to refine the process, better engage the community, and create a successful regional organic food system.