

Report: Area makes much less organic than it eats

Chicago Sun-Times

By Sandra Guy

Wednesday, October 19, 2002

Now that the Chicago technology community is suffering along with the rest of the high-tech industry, business leaders are turning to a new growth opportunity: organic farming.

A report to be released today reveals that farmers in the six-county Chicago metropolitan region supply no more than 3 percent of the \$63 million to \$80 million of organic fruits and vegetables sold annually throughout the region by retailers, farmers' markets and agricultural associations, and bought annually by restaurants.

Most of the produce, which is grown using no pesticides and no genetically modified ingredients, among other criteria, is shipped from farms in Florida, California, Mexico and the Netherlands, according to research by the Prairie Partners Group, a Lake Forest-based consulting firm that focuses on small to mid-sized businesses.

"I approached this research strictly from an entrepreneurial standpoint," said Erik G. Birkerts, president of the Prairie Partners group. "I tried to remove philosophy and politics, and approach it from a dollar-and-cents standpoint. Can people make money from this?"

The conclusion: "There is such a disparity between the amount of organic produce being consumed in the Chicago region and the amount supplied locally, it is screaming entrepreneurial opportunity," Birkerts said.

Chicago's leading organic boosters are chefs, business people, families concerned about their children's health and descendants of printing magnate R.R. Donnelley.

George A. Ranney, Jr., and his wife, Victoria "Vicky" Post Ranney, are CEO and president, respectively, of Prairie Holdings Corp., which developed the environmentally progressive Prairie Crossing community in Grayslake and which commissioned the organic farming study. The Prairie Crossing community was started in 1987 when George Ranney's uncle, Gaylord Donnelley, then-retired R.R. Donnelley & Sons chairman, and several of his neighbors bought the original 667 acres.

Ranney also is chief executive of Metropolis 2020, a private-sector long-range planning group.

Indeed, the local organic movement has support from a "Who's Who" of Chicago's chefs, including Charlie Trotter, Rick Bayless and Gale Gand, as well as the Chicago Community Trust. The trust teamed with Les Brown, policy director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, to create a program to develop organic gardens and greenhouses to grow food for homeless shelters and to sell to restaurants and other buyers.

Grass-roots efforts have emerged, too.

LaDonna Redmond and her husband, Tracey Redmond, revived the Black Farmers' Market in the Austin neighborhood. The market, which sells food on Saturdays during the growing season, features a cooperative of 12 African-American farmers who use organic methods to produce vegetables, fruit, poultry and beef.

Redmond's interest in organics started when her son, Wade, now 4, was born with severe food allergies. "I had to think seriously about how to feed him the best quality of food I could afford," she said.

The growth in popularity of organic food is also evidenced by the emergence of Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and Wild Oats, which have collectively opened a total of 20 stores in the Chicago region in the last eight years.

However, locally grown food comprises only \$200,000 of the \$60 million in annual grocery retail sales of organic fruits and vegetables in the Chicago metropolitan region, according to the report.

Formidable obstacles remain to making organic farming a significant presence locally, as a second report being released today shows.

The report, "The Land of Organic Opportunity," claims that economic, environmental and social services benefits can be gained by supporting regional organic production and distribution, despite the obstacles.

The report was written by Jim Slama, president of Sustain, a Chicago-based environmental advocacy organization. The report is part of Sustain's Local Organic Initiative, which aims to build a regional organic food system serving the Chicago area.

"For years, the agricultural sector in the Midwest has suffered due to low commodity prices," Slama said. "Building a diverse organic farming sector serving the Chicago market could provide farmers a big boost."

GROWING ORGANIC

These are among steps that a report by the Prairie Partners Group recommends that government agencies, civic leaders, philanthropists, academics and other community members take to make organic farming more viable:

- ⊙ Support farmer training and development programs with a goal to rapidly increase organic farm capacity.
- ⊙ Invest in a distribution system for organics, including trucks, warehouses, marketing, technology and supply-chain management programs.
- ⊙ Expand the number of organic farmers' markets, particularly in urban areas.
- ⊙ Develop programs that link entrepreneurs with people in the organics movement in an effort to jumpstart new companies that could create specialty organic foods.