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Bill-backers call for local growing, more organics

A push to aid Illinois' smallest farms unites broad range of environmental, dietary allies

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Last harvest, Jeff Miller packed organic vegetables into his pickup truck and drove to a farmers market in Palatine. Up at dawn. Behind a stall. Every Saturday, like clockwork. By the end of the season, the Grayslake farmer had pocketed \$3,500.

Not bad for a novice working a 2-acre incubator farm. But Miller's proceeds fell far short of the potential that Illinois farmers see if they could fully tap into the state's organic produce market, with annual sales of \$500 million. Instead, they produce about 5 percent of the organic food consumed in the state, they say, and 95 percent comes from other states.

"Ideally, I'd like to move to a 5-acre farm," Miller said. "To do that we need more farmers markets, more marketing, more shipping and storage."

After years toiling on tiny farms, organic growers such as Miller might finally get the help they need. For the first time in Illinois, a diverse set of allies, including green activists, small farmers, urban food-policy planners and, most recently, the Illinois Farm Bureau, has joined forces to change the way Illinois residents put food on the table.

On Wednesday they gathered in Springfield to push for legislation they say will help local farmers grow food, both organic and non-organic, for local consumption. They see it as a first step toward a cleaner environment, healthier food and happier farmers. With organic sellers such as Whole Foods flourishing and more people considering how far an apple has traveled to get to the grocery shelf, they see their collective voice gaining momentum.

"People are finally paying attention to how they get their food," said Evanston

Food Policy Council co-founder Debbie Hillman, who supports the legislation. "It's coming together from a health point of view, an environmental point of view. Mostly it's economic. If you grow local, you support a local economy."

Most Illinois farmers grow corn and soybeans because of complex federal farm legislation that encourages monocropping, proponents of the legislation say. The bill, which has passed the House and is expected to pass the Senate, would change that by encouraging local food production -- the kind of help Miller says he needs to increase production and sales.

The bill doesn't have much teeth: It proposes creating a task force to develop strategy without mentioning money. And it has had some opposition, mainly from Downstate representatives worried that it would encourage organic farming and exclude conventional methods.

But proponents say the bill is a necessary first step toward an eco-friendly policy that would support Illinois' economy while stocking groceries with the freshest food available. The initiative is at the forefront of a lively national debate among farmers and food policymakers.

"We are not trying to destroy the current farming system in Illinois but to expand what they call an 'add-on opportunity,'"
" said Jim Braun of the Illinois Farmer-Consumer Coalition. "Instead of exporting \$500 million out of state, we can keep those dollars in state."

Illinois brings in about 90 percent of its food -- organic and non-organic -- from out of state, according to Sustain, a Chicago institute that promotes family and organic farming. Jim Slama, Sustain's founder, says that's because government subsidies have long favored farmers who grow corn and soybeans, most of which is used to feed animals or produce ethanol.

Both Slama and Braun, like other proponents of the local food bill, believe more food could be grown in-state by small farmers if they had support to make the transition to new crops. Instead, family farmers often think they have to get bigger to survive, they said.

"They're waiting for their neighbor to go bankrupt or die so they can knock on the door and get land," Braun said.

Meanwhile, buying local has become trendy, and organic foods are the fastest-growing sector of the food industry, with 20 percent annual growth, Slama said. Proponents of the local food bill hope to capitalize on those trends. The challenge, Slama said, is to create a system in which local and organic can thrive.

"We all want to know where our food comes from and that it's fresh," Slama said. "By growing our food closer to home, we support our local economy."

When it comes to organic, the problem isn't a lack of demand. Mike Sands, manager of Prairie Crossing Farm, where Miller operates one of four incubator

farms, rattled off dozens of farmers markets around the Chicago area but estimated that only about 40 organic farmers are trying to fill that niche. They need help to meet demand.

"There aren't enough resources to train farmers to go organic, if that's the way they want to go," Sands said.

Sands said more resources would mean more people could go organic.

In Grayslake, Miller said his biggest impediments include access to affordable land and transportation. He's packing the pickup, but he could pack more and keep it fresher in a covered, refrigerated truck, he said. And he would also benefit from a few more acres and greenhouses to extend the growing season, but those represent huge expenses.

With government encouragement, he just might be able to expand in those directions, he said. For now, he has his sights set on finding available stalls in farmers markets closer to home that operate on different days of the week so he can create steady work.

"No one's going to get rich," Sands said, "but you can make a decent living."

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