

MICHIGAN LAND USE INSTITUTE

September 10, 2008

Testimony to the Michigan House Agriculture Committee

Re. Farm-to-School and Select Michigan legislation
HB 6365, HB 6366, HB 6377, HR 408, HR 409, HR 413

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MLUI Position

The Michigan Land Use Institute supports the intent of this legislative package to develop regional markets for farm foods through farm-to-school assistance and *Select Michigan* marketing. Particularly important are provisions to provide for food preparation training, kitchen facilities made for scratch cooking, greater purchasing discretion for schools, and proactive facilitation of grower-buyer relationships, including *Select Michigan* and online directories.

Our Experience

In 2004, MLUI launched a regional farm to school initiative in northwest Michigan in partnership with area schools. Results from this work point to significant economic opportunity for Michigan in growing farm to school and related regional markets for farm foods. Results also show farm to school is a powerful part of improving children's dietary health.

Specifically, northwest Michigan results show:

Economic Opportunity

- **SALES:** More than 30 schools in Benzie, Grand Traverse, and Leelanau counties have since 2004 made purchasing local farm products a permanent part of food purchasing and meal preparation. They currently purchase a dozen different farm products, from apples to winter squash and even eggs, meat, and honey.
- **ADDING UP:** Traverse City Area Public Schools, which spends \$1.8 million a year on food, has run up against Michigan's \$19,650 small purchase threshold two years in a row. Smaller districts are also increasing purchases of local farm foods and are concerned about red tape tying their hands when they cross that low spending line.
- **PROFITS:** Farm to school sales account for a large share of increased grower profits reported in a 2007 survey of 212 growers involved in MLUI's regional *Taste the Local Difference* effort [www.LocalDifference.org]. Nearly 60% of respondents attributed profitability increases of up to 40% to *Taste the Local Difference* marketing and networking.
- **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT:** A startup distributor of local foods to schools, restaurants, and grocers in northwest Lower Michigan has in one year quadrupled sales, created nine jobs, filled a vacant warehouse, and stimulated farm investments in greenhouses and other infrastructure. Farm to school sales are a significant, shoulder-season component of sales for this new business and for the emerging regional food market.
- **JOBS FOR MICHIGAN:** Determined efforts to grow regional food markets, such as *Select Michigan* and farm to school, could increase Michigan's total net farm income by up to \$164 million (14 percent) and increase employment in Michigan by up to 1,900 jobs. [Source: "Eat Fresh and Grow Jobs, Michigan" a 2006 study by MLUI and Michigan State University. See: www.LocalDifference.org/downloads/EatFresh.pdf]

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Improving Children's Health

- A top recommendation for improving children's health is more fruits, vegetables, and whole foods. Not just any apple will do, however!
- Children consistently choose local products when available and communicated. This Benzie County example is typical: Students ate five times as many apples after their school switched to juicy, local varieties raised for flavor rather than long-distance shipping.
- Health and wellness results for children have prompted powerful school and community commitment. The 16-district Traverse Bay Intermediate School District, for example, has made furthering farm-to-school in the region a key objective.
- As a nonprofit facilitator of farm to school in the region, MLUI fields repeated calls from other schools and regions requesting assistance.
- We are just beginning: A capacity crowd of 330 at a 10-county regional conference last winter activated a broad cross section of administrators, faculty, cooks, parents, students and community health professionals. Many new farm to school efforts are in the works.

State Legislature's Role

Across the nation, buyers are looking for food produced nearby with a love for land and neighbors. This demand ranges from small school districts working with area farms to global food distributors, such as the SYSCO Corporation, which is now piloting a corporate buy-local strategy in its Grand Rapids and Kansas City regional offices.

Michigan has most everything it needs to succeed: A diverse agricultural base second only to California and large population centers in and around the state.

But Michigan needs stronger state leadership to fully engage in this new market, which requires support for new farm entrepreneurs, market infrastructure, and civic connections, such as farm to school. The market is working. Now the state's role is to remove obstacles to innovation and invest in entrepreneurs.

We applaud the House Agriculture Committee's current efforts to catch Michigan up nearly 20 other states that have already implemented similar farm to school provisions.

We also encourage state leaders to act on more recommendations from the Michigan Food Policy Council. The original Council produced a valuable set of strategies in 2006 for state leaders to pursue, including farm to school and *Select Michigan*. The current Council is beginning work, in partnership with the Legislature and other organizations, to move more strategies forward. [See: www.michigan.gov/mfpc.]

The Michigan Land Use Institute

The Michigan Land Use Institute is a Traverse City-based, statewide non-profit organization working to help Michigan's economy thrive and its residents prosper through close-knit towns and cities, a clean environment, and working rural landscapes. The Institute is the proud home of *Taste Local Difference*, a broad based effort to grow jobs, build health, and protect land with food that is thousands of miles fresher. For more information, visit the Web sites www.mlui.org and www.LocalDifference.org or call 231-941-6584.