Have you ever been unable to find something you really needed? Your car keys, your shoes, that wrench, it doesn’t matter what the item, not being able to find it can be frustrating and bring your progress to a halt. That’s how it is for many producers and professionals in the small scale vegetable production arena in North Dakota. Currently there are very few if any real ‘numbers’ out there to find. While NDSU has done some great backyard vegetable variety trials, there is no data to tell a producer how many pounds of those carrots or tomatoes can be grown in a fifty foot row right here in good ol’ ND. There is no table or matrix to help a new producer decide how much they need to grow to serve a CSA of 20 members. There is no research to prove that high tunnels are extending the growing season, or by how much.

Worse yet for the North Dakota professionals in the field such as agricultural lenders, economic developers, and grant writers, there is no research or data to show that our local foods improve the economic viability of small communities or that growing and selling direct to consumers is profitable.

Many times we rely on studies and research from other states such as Minnesota and Iowa. While helpful, these numbers are not accurate for our climate or communities and only provide a crutch for us to get by. What we really need is REAL numbers, from REAL producers and communities, right here in North Dakota. What we really need is to find some DATA!

That’s exactly what the ECH has been working very hard to do in the last several months. With the help of Dakota College at Bottineau’s grant writer, Stephanie Blumhagen, we have written several grant proposals that if funded would provide us with some money to travel to producers, work with them, assist them in gathering this kind of information and then allow us to send it out to the world so everyone can find it. We cannot, at this time, announce that we have landed any one of these grants – but I can say we are very hopeful and are pretty close to announcing good news. Watch for more information in the coming months. Now, where did I put those car keys?
Another bright spot in the spring came from our North Dakota Legislature. Representative Joshua Boschee from District 44 introduced a House Concurrent Resolution (HCR3037) this session to commission an interim committee “to study the current laws and rules relating to the sale of homemade food and homegrown produce and the policies and practices of local public health units and the State Department of Health regarding these sales and whether steps can be taken to make these policies more uniform throughout the state”. The resolution passed through the House and the Senate and is now awaiting the selection of a committee.

We are very excited about this interim committee as food safety and farm food safety plans is something we have been working on since the ECH’s inception. The current system of health and safety regulation for produce in North Dakota is confusing for producers and professionals alike and not consistently administered from one health regulatory agency to the next. Did you know that North Dakota has 28 separate and different health agencies that regulate the sale of produce grown and sold in North Dakota and that many of them have rules that pertain only to their district? It’s a tough row to hoe if you are a rural producer and want to or need to travel to sell your produce – you conceivably could be working under five or six different sets of rules. You can bet that we will be watching this committee, assisting when we can, and providing real world evidence for them to consider. Thanks to the Human Services committees in both the Senate and the House for hearing testimony on this resolution and for Representative Joshua Boschee and the other sponsors for bringing it forward.

A couple last bright spots in the spring before I leave off and get to work on other things. The first was a meeting of producers called together by a passionate and enthusiastic couple in Anamoose. Julia and Mirek Petrovic are working very hard to begin a food hub in Anamoose. They have secured a building, made plans and are now looking for producers willing to participate in the food hub to sell their goods to a broader market. The meeting was well attended and the Petrovics laid out their plans to grow the hub quite nicely. I believe they are really on the right track and I will be excited to see their dreams come to life as the future unfolds.

The second bright spot was a quick trip I took with the Leadership in Local Foods folks to Glendive Montana to visit the Farm to Table Food Cooperative and Marketing Club. What a great visit. It was wonderful to see the successes of another group so close and to hear how they have conquered the bumps in the road – so we can avoid them! The group that went was a lively and diverse group that added to the learning and enjoyment. Thanks NDSU and the Leadership in Local Foods folks for inviting us on your road trip!
The term “local” tends to relate to a geographical area. Defining the geographical area continues to be a topic of discussion. Producers and local processors selling directly to consumers at farmers’ markets, CSA (community supported agriculture) and schools seems to be a good fit for the definition of “Local”. Most consumers in the Dakotas would agree that food grown in the state or within 100 miles of the state borders is considered locally grown.

Consumers are finding importance in being able to know where their food is grown and the methods used to grow and process food. Foods grown locally give consumers a closer link to the producer and it seems that there is more customer satisfaction in knowing the producer first hand.

USDA’s Farm to School Grant program continues to grow and the 2014 Farm Bill gives even stronger support to this program. USDA grants are available to local school districts to assist the implementation of a farm to school program improving access to local foods.

Producers are finding a number of different ways to market on a local basis. Here are three of the more common markets in the Dakotas and factors that affect the producer’s decisions on how to market.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) finds the producer providing a variety of items usually delivered on a weekly basis. The consumer subscribes to the CSA paying an annual fee at the beginning of the growing season. However, there may be variations to the fee schedule depending on the CSA’s policy. The producer sets the price based a history of expenses or based on other local CSAs and is able to use the customer’s payment to cover expenses incurred during the growing season. Items included in the weekly delivery are produce, eggs, baked goods and processed foods with a variety of 25 or more items during the season. A producer will have activities on the farm during the growing season to acquaint the consumer with the practices used on the farm.

Another popular market is Farmers Markets. This marketing strategy is a direct producer to consumer relationship. The consumer has a choice of producers and products to pick from and will often have a favorite producer when attending the farmers market. There can be quite a variety of items at farmers market. Presentation and salesmanship is an important factor for producers and it is more time consuming than other market activities. Income is weekly at the farmers market, however, there may be unexpected loss due to low consumer turnout or high quantities of similar items made available by other producers at the same farmers market. There is usually a fee for setting up at a farmers market.

In the last 5 years the term “local foods” has become popular when we think of food for our community. There is a steady increase of federal and state initiatives to promote growth of production, distribution, and consumption of locally grown foods.

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Farm to School is probably one of the more exciting markets with high growth potential. It provides students with locally grown foods that are fresh. There are a few challenges for the producer as most produce is grown during the summer months when students are away from school. The school lunch programs have gone away from raw or unprocessed foods in the past few decades. Lunchroom labor has been reduced due to the use of processed foods. The producer may need to assist in processing their products and that may raise the cost of production. Appearance of food at the school lunch program is also an important factor. Students are comfortable eating foods that are consistent in appearance so adding variation such as different colors or varieties, for example, in salads need to be blended. Scheduling and volume of deliveries is also important for the school lunch program. Developing a marketing strategy that will increase profits and customer satisfaction is an important part of producer’s financial plan. Often a combination of market types will improve profitability.

From Frank’s Desk ... The Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (NPSAS) Farm Breeding Club has begun several new breeding projects with garden fruits. Members and other interested souls across the northern plains region will be planting and evaluating the offspring from two tomato crosses in 2015. With very different parents one expects fairly uniform hybrid progeny in the F1 generation, but then incredible diversity in the F2 generation. We will be hunting through this diversity to see if any of the offspring provide us an early, determinate, orange fruited tomato from one of these crosses and an early, determinate, paste fruited tomato from the second cross. Since tomatoes are self-pollinating all we have to do is to save seeds from the plant or plants that actually come close to these breeding objectives and in a few years we should have new varieties. Participants are being asked to judge among the plants they are growing and see if they find one for the FBC objectives to share seed back with the club. This will be used for ongoing breeding work in future years. However, with the great diversity they are also encouraged to save seeds for themselves from any plants they like and to eat the harvest otherwise. Other projects being evaluated are zucchini plants from a multiple parent population, and potato onions grown like garlic.

For more information about the NPSAS Farm Breeding Club please visit the FBC page on the NPSAS website (http://npsas.org/about-us/farm-breeding-club.html) and our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Farm-Breeding-Club/165221056860513). If anyone else would like to participate in our tomato or zucchini breeding work this summer, please contact Frank Kutka at fkutka@npsas.org or 701-225-7853. We will accept other serious participants so long as we have enough seeds.
Bill just got back from Easter vacation, and is busy starting his gazillion starts in the greenhouse to be transplanted (hopefully very soon) outside in our high tunnels and 3 open garden spaces. This un-Spring like weather is getting tiresome as we are anxious to get digging in some dirt.

Our 2015 CSA season menu includes a variety of well know vegetables, and fresh cut flowers. Bill is planting some beans, peas, tomatoes, eggplants, carrots, beets, radishes, chard, spinach, salad greens, cabbage, onions, watermelon, broccoli, corn, potatoes, cucumbers, romaine lettuce, peppers, squash, and pumpkins. Let’s all think happy warm thoughts so we can happily start planting!

Here are some important facts from Bill’s desk to your tasty health buds!

**What is CSA?**

**Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a locally based food distribution system that creates a direct link between farmers and consumers.**

**Individuals pre-purchase a "share" of the farm’s harvest in the spring when expenses are highest for the farmer.**

**In exchange, CSA members receive a weekly box of freshly picked organic produce as it becomes available throughout the growing season.**

**This mutually beneficial partnership helps ensure a more secure market for small farms struggling to compete with larger, less sustainable farms, as well as ensures members consistent access to healthier, safer, and tastier food.**

**Why CSA?**

**Taste:** We carefully select our produce varieties for excellent taste and quality.

**Freshness:** Produce is harvested on or before the day you receive it.

**Health for Body and Soil:** Our produce is grown without pesticides in fertile soil resulting in highly nutritious food and healthy soil.

**Support Local Agriculture:** Today's agri-"culture" is in crisis. Through a CSA, your dollars go directly towards strengthening and sustaining a small farm – a vital community resource!

**Support Responsible Agriculture:** Get to know the farm and farmers. See where and how your food is grown.

**Good for Gardeners:** Let us provide your weekly basics, & devote your garden space to your favorites.

Source: [www.ploughsharefarm.com](http://www.ploughsharefarm.com)