

FARM FRESH

Pilot program brings students' food fresh from the farm

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Posted: 9/18/06

Kentucky Kernel

Unlike much of the food farmed in America today, the vegetables at Elmwood Stock Farm will have a relatively short trip to the stomachs of the public - just down the road to UK dining halls.

It's part of a three-month trial period of a new pilot program aimed at investigating the potential of having local food options available at UK. A joint committee featuring members of the Dining Services staff and the College of Agriculture devised the program.

"There was a common interest to get locally produced food in the UK dining system," said Herb Strobel, a committee member and associate professor of anaerobic microbiology with the College of Agriculture.

The program, which began in August, has provided all campus restaurants with fresh, locally grown produce since the beginning of the semester.

"Certainly one advantage is it's providing food that is fresher and more nutritious," Strobel said adding that food travels an average of 1,500 miles from the farm to the consumer. "There's an obvious freshness issue there."

The three-month program was kept small for the trial and will test the feasibility of providing local produce to all 20 campus dining locations on a larger scale. The committee will evaluate the program at the end of the trial time.

The program affects more than UK.

"It can directly contribute to the local economy," said Strobel. "Purchasing and consuming locally is simply more sustainable from an economic standpoint, and environmentally speaking."

The program is in accordance with House Bill 669, which was passed by state legislature during the Grand Assembly's 2006 session. The bill requires that state agencies, including UK, buy agricultural products grown in Kentucky. This requirement is dependent upon the availability, quality and pricing of the produce.

A program such as this has potential to have a large impact on the state farming business.

"For the farmers to have a market even before they sow their fields, that can change the entire landscape of fruit or vegetable farming," said Mark Williams, an assistant professor of horticulture and joint-committee founder.

Williams believes that the support of local food economies is a hallmark of sustainable agriculture.

"It's that idea that the university is trying to build with this new program," said Williams. "With the buying power that it has, it can create an excellent marketing option for local growers, and influence other institutions to develop similar programs in-state."

UK Dining Services has initially linked with Elmwood Stock Farm in Georgetown and Reed Valley Orchard in Harrison County for the program's trial period. The farms are delivering fresh cantaloupe, cucumbers and many other fruits and vegetables to the university.

The program has the potential to impact a larger number of local and regional farmers.

"If an institution the size of UK can do this and make it work, it sure does make it hard for other institutions to say it's not doable," said John Bell, co-owner of Elmwood Stock Farm. "It's the want to. The pay off for convenience and ease is not the freshest and healthiest product."

Strobel said this sort of program is cost efficient because it has less distance to transport, provides healthier food and it's more environmentally friendly because of the shorter travel distance.

Similar programs are utilized in schools like Yale and Lindsay Wilson College.

At the end of the trial period, the committee and Dining Services will evaluate its performance.

"The issue is not so much that dining is scared to do this," said Strobel. "They have to change their mindset and have to change their system."

A few changes must be made if the program is accepted for a long-term duration. At present, Dining Services is equipped to take deliveries from large trucks and will have to adapt to accepting small deliveries from local farmers.

"If this thing takes off, it can be a model that can be used by other state agencies and schools," said Williams.

"If we develop local economies, it can increase our food security and put money back in the hands of the people of this state. We (UK) want to be an integral part of the local community, and that means giving back to the community."

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Ben Abell, a 2006 graduate of the UK College of Agriculture, plants carrots in a Haygrove Tunnel, which is a season extender that helps the farm to grow late fall crops.



Tomatoes that are brought to UK from Elmwood Stock farm are put into boxes and checked for rotten areas before being shipped.



Ann Stone loads a truck with tomatoes on Friday. The truck was to deliver the load to UK as part of a new program in which UK is purchasing food locally.

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