Food system project battles food insecurity in Northeast

Cornell University

Studies show that up to 10 million people in the Northeast lack access to healthful, affordable food. Cornell researchers are playing a central role in a $5 million project to determine whether greater reliance on regionally produced foods could improve food access and affordability for disadvantaged communities, as well as strengthen economies and benefit farmers and others in the food supply chain.

The "Enhancing Northeastern Food Security with Regional Food Systems" project was funded in April for five years by the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, administered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. The team includes researchers from 12 institutions in the Northeast, including Cornell, and is led by Stephan Goetz of Pennsylvania State University.

Cornell researchers Miguel Gómez, assistant professor of applied economics and management, and Huaizhu Gao, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering, will receive about $700,000 of the grant to develop a supply chain model for how regional systems can compete with other food supply chains and to develop policy simulations associated with regional food systems to understand what interventions can improve the performance of these systems.

"There is strong evidence that regional food systems perform better in terms of sustainability indicators and distribution, relative to local and mainstream systems," said Gómez, who received a 2009 Academic Venture Fund grant from the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future that supported preliminary work on the project.

Regional food systems allow producers to be closer to consumers when compared with national, mainstream supply chains, thereby using a smaller carbon footprint. They also maintain higher volumes of production and greater economic efficiency than local food systems. Additionally, regional supply chains generate multiplier effects where money is recycled within the system among consumers, growers, processors, distributors and retailers, Gómez said.

To model the regional supply chain, Gómez and Gao will consider the ability of Northeastern farmers to produce healthful foods, the demand from consumers, the incentives for growers and processors, economic efficiencies and multiplier effects, carbon footprint impacts, and how people who lack access to healthful food respond to regional food access, among other things.

The project also will include an extension and education component at 10 Northeast sites, with Cornell Cooperative Extension working with communities in downtown Syracuse, Onondaga County, and in rural Madison County to improve access to

healthful foods. Both areas have "food deserts," low-income areas where there are few grocery stores with affordable, healthful food choices. Residents of such communities often lack transportation and nutrition and cooking education, all of which further undermines their access to healthful foods.

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