

About the Local Food Memo

Each day, people in the Chicago region depend on the local food system to provide for their basic needs. The local food system includes the production, processing, and distribution of food products for human consumption within the seven counties of northeastern Illinois and surrounding regions. It is an important piece of the regional economy and a factor in public health and residents' household economy. A diversified agricultural economy and the availability of healthful food contribute to a resilient region.

This report summarizes data on crop production, food access, and land preservation, highlighting the most significant findings that will inform the development of ON TO 2050. It focuses on local food production, a subset of the larger regional agricultural economy, which primarily comprises crops not intended for human consumption, such as corn. It also addresses trends in the ability of those in the region to access safe, fresh, nutritious and affordable foods.

The first section focuses on findings from the analysis of local food system data. GO TO 2040 established a set of data indicators and associated goals that CMAP has been tracking since the plan's adoption. These indicators, along with other data the snapshot considers, document trends in land use patterns, demographics, and the agricultural economy. As the Chicago region has developed, the number and total acreage of farms has decreased. The long-term trend towards fewer farms and less acreage under cultivation has continued in recent years. Food access has improved in recent years, with the data showing progress toward GO TO 2040's goal of reducing to zero the number of residents lacking easy access to food.

The second section discusses the policy context set forth in GO TO 2040 for local food production and access, which have guided both CMAP's activities since the plan's adoption and the work of partners. CMAP has worked on a range of planning projects to work toward implementation of these policies, while numerous regional partners, including county and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and advocacy groups, have pursued efforts to directly advance the production of local food and increasing food access for the region.

Finally, the memo includes a concluding discussion on the policy and planning implications of its findings on the region's local food system. It presents related findings from the ON TO 2050 Lands in Transition Strategy Paper, as well as opportunities for local actions to advance local food production and access.

Indicators

The indicators established in GO TO 2040 and related data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture show a number of important trends in the local food system. The overall number of farms in the region and the total number of acres under cultivation have declined. Local food, the focus of this report, constitutes a relatively small percentage of overall agriculture in northeastern Illinois both in terms of acreage under cultivation and the value of the region's agricultural products. Nevertheless, the value and percentage of agricultural products sold for human consumption have been increasing.

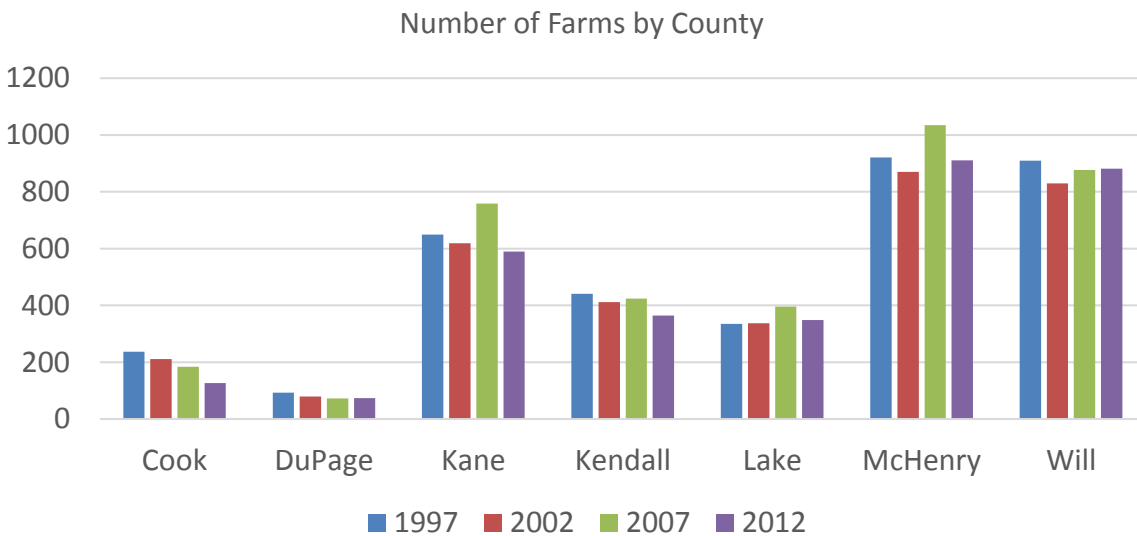
Food Production

Data shows an overall continuation of long-term trends toward fewer farms in the Chicago region and less overall acreage under cultivation. While the region saw a brief increase in the number of farms

between 2002 and 2007, 2012 data showed that the overall number of farms was again decreasing, in keeping with long-term trends.

While the overall regional trend has been toward fewer farms, several counties have maintained fairly stable numbers of farms. Cook County has exhibited a consistent downward trend, while DuPage County saw a small increase in 2012 after a downward trend over the previous three agricultural census periods. These heavily developed counties have the fewest total farms in the region. Lake County has also seen a relatively stable number of farms across these four census periods.

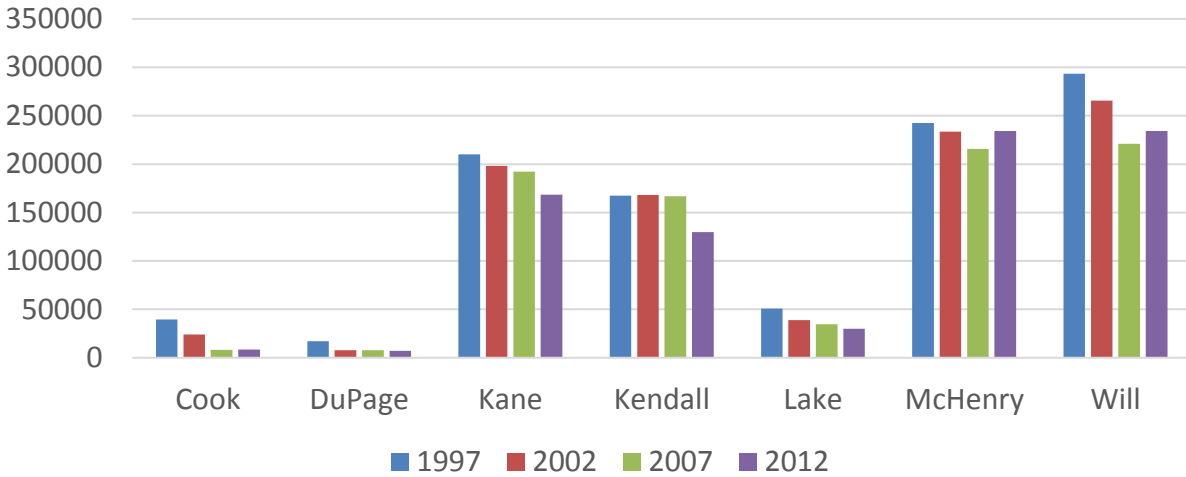
The counties with less development and the greatest number of farms have shown larger changes. Kane and Kendall Counties showed a return to the overall trend of decreased number of farms in the 2012 census following sharp increases in total farms in 2007.. McHenry County and Will County, which have the highest number of farms of the region’s seven counties, have fluctuated in number.



Source: USDA NASS, 1997-2012 Census of Agriculture

Along with the decrease in total number of farms, the region continues to see a decrease in the total number of farmland acres, especially in its less developed counties. The largest recent declines in the number of farmland acres have been in Kane and Kendall Counties, with additional significant decreases in McHenry County and Will County. Cook, DuPage, and Lake Counties, which have long been the most developed counties in the region, each lost a large percentage of their already small overall farmland acres between 1997 and 2012. Some areas, such as Lake County, have steadily lost farmland acreage while maintaining a steady number of total farms. This trend may reflect subdivision of agricultural land that preserves a smaller parcel for continued agricultural use while making the bulk of the land available for development. Overall, each of the seven counties has seen a large amount of agricultural land converted to other purposes, even in those counties that have seen that trend slow more recently.

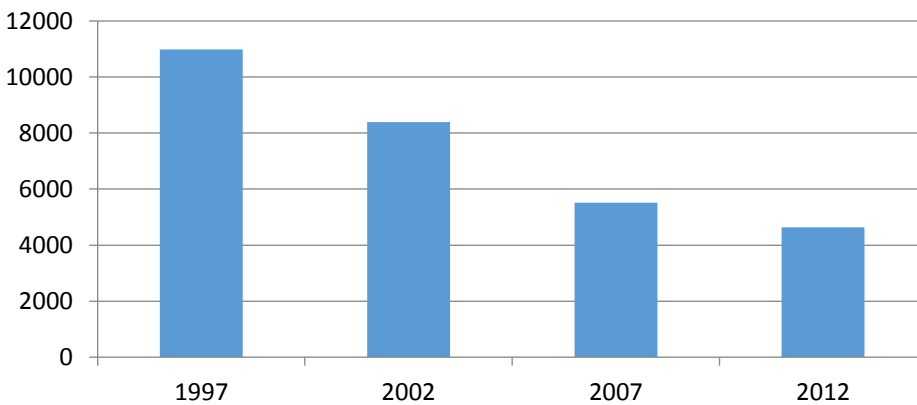
Number of Farmland Acres by County



Source: USDA NASS, 1997-2012 Census of Agriculture

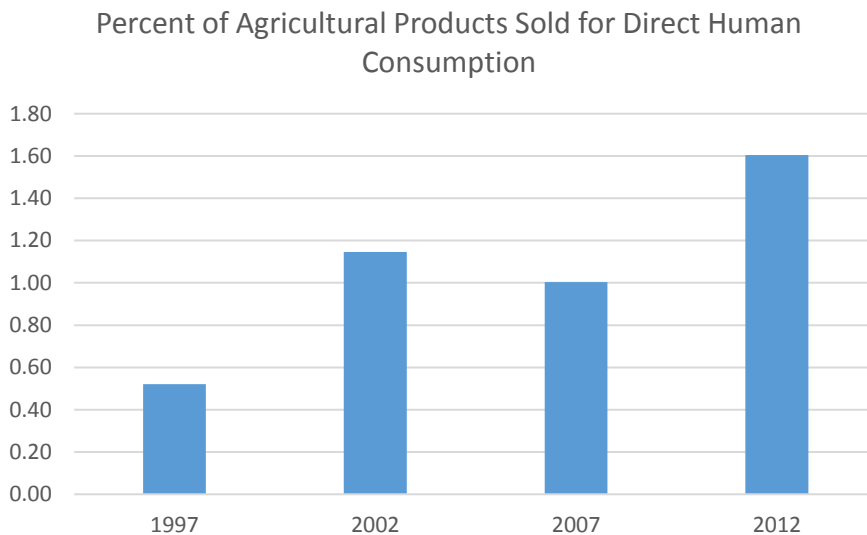
In keeping with the overall decrease in farms and farmland acreage, the portion of regional farmland acres used to produce food for direct human consumption has also decreased. In 1997, approximately 1.1% of the total 1,020,851 farmland acres harvested that year were used to harvest food for direct human consumption. Since then, the total acreage and percentage have declined to nearly 0.6% of the total 812,532 farmland acres harvested in 2012. These acreage trends run counter to the trend in the number of total farms raising crops for direct sale for human consumption, which has risen from 284 in 2007 to 334 in 2012. While more farms are now involved in this type of agriculture, they are dedicating a smaller and smaller amount of land to it. Given CMAP recommendations for farmland protection, land use, and the agricultural economy, the GO TO 2040 goal for this indicator was 5,700 acres by 2020 and 8,200 acres by 2040. Trends in the region continue to move further from CMAP’s policy goals.

Acreage of Regional Farmland Used to Harvest Food for Direct Human Consumption



Source: USDA NASS, 1997-2012 Census of Agriculture

Despite the significant losses in regional farmland acres used to produce food for direct human consumption, the value of agricultural products sold directly to individuals for direct human consumption has steadily increased throughout the region. As of 1997, \$2,443,000 worth of agricultural products were sold for this purpose, accounting for approximately 0.52% of the total value of agricultural products sold that year. In 2012, \$11,345,000 (\$8,259,000 in 1997 dollars) worth of agricultural products were sold for this same purpose, accounting for 1.60% of the total value of agricultural products sold that year. GO TO 2040 sets targets for the value of agricultural products sold for direct human consumption at 1.95% in 2020 and 2.80% in 2040.



Source: USDA NASS, 1997-2012 Census of Agriculture

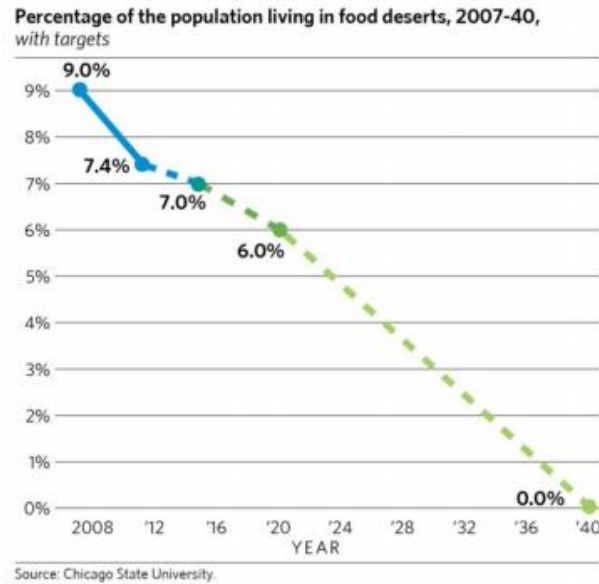
While the overall acreage of farmland used to grow products for human consumption has decreased, the percentage of all farms producing food for human consumption has increased. This increase in percentage reflects both an increase in the number of farms producing food for direct human consumption (from 234 in 1997 to 334 in 2012) and a decrease in the number of total farms in the region (from 3,587 in 1997 to 3,297 in 2012).

Food Access

The Census of Agriculture does not collect data on food access, but academic studies have provided information.¹ In 2010, over 9% of our region’s population lived within a “food desert,” or an area that lacks access to nearby stores with fresh, nutritious food within a reasonable distance and accessible by multiple transportation modes. Most often, food deserts exist in low-income and minority urban and suburban neighborhoods. Reducing food deserts is a goal of GO TO 2040 and subsequent planning activities; access to fresh, healthy food has been linked to decreases in risks associated with obesity and other diet-related chronic diseases.²

¹ CMAP anticipates that Chicago State University’s updated data on food deserts in the region will be released in 2017, and will update this report’s indicators when the data is available.

² Policy Link and The Food Trust, ‘The Grocery Gap, Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters Report,’ 2010. http://www.policylink.org/site/c.lklXLbMNJrE/b.5860321/k.A5BD/The_Grocery_Gap.htm



Source: CMAP, GO TO 2040 Plan Update

In GO TO 2040, CMAP set a goal to reduce the percentage of our region’s population living in food deserts to 7% by 2015. By 2012, two years after the plan’s release, this percentage had fallen from over 9% to 7.4%, indicating that progress towards this goal was being made at that time. This same indicator has a goal of 0% by 2040, at which point every resident in the region will have access to fresh, nutritious, and affordable food within a reasonable distance and accessible by multiple transportation modes. Although increasing food access remains an important goal for our region, it has been and will likely continue to be a locally driven endeavor; therefore, CMAP will continue to depend on its partners to implement strategies related to food access and focus more of its efforts on tracking and increasing local food production instead.

Land Conversion

Patterns of land development, particularly in the collar counties, have significant influence on the local food system. From 2001 to 2015, nearly 140,000 acres of agricultural and natural lands were developed. This additional development represents an 11.7% increase in the developed area of the region and is roughly comparable to the land area of the City of Chicago. While it is likely that only a small percentage of the converted agricultural land was being used to farm crops for human consumption, the loss of agricultural acreage limits the land that could be available to grow local food crops. CMAP’s forthcoming snapshot report on natural resources and Lands in Transition strategy paper will explore these trends at greater length, including the impacts on ecosystem services and added infrastructure costs.

At the same time, efforts have been increasing to support the region’s farming economy. In recent years, the region has increased the number of agricultural conservation easements, particularly in Kane County. Established in 2001, the Kane County Farmland Preservation Program advocates the importance of agricultural land use policies and has acquired over 6,000 acres of farmland conservation easements, predominantly located in southwestern Kane County. Overall, the amount of agricultural lands under protection doubled during this period. While agricultural protection programs contributed to this increase, this figure also reflects agricultural lands protected in order to achieve natural area goals in the future through restoration.

Context and Progress

“Food – like air, water, and shelter – is a basic human need. In addition to sustaining life and influencing health, food and the act of eating are part of our culture and everyday existence. Three times per day, we decide what to eat, often without consideration for how that food was produced or where it comes from. These daily decisions have consequences whether or not we are aware of them, and they directly shape the food industry that feeds us.” – CMAP’s GO TO 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan

Local foods are products available for direct human consumption that are grown, processed, packaged, and distributed within our seven counties and adjacent regions. The local food system for the Chicago region spans a variety of production methods, from backyard and community gardens to commercial farms. A strong, diverse local food system generates benefits to residents’ quality of life, the regional economy, and the natural environment. Local food systems designed for sustainability can provide direct environmental benefits associated with green space, such as stormwater management and water quality improvements.

Regardless of where food is grown and processed, communities and households are more resilient if they have access to fresh, nutritious, and affordable food. Strategies to increase access to fresh food combined with nutritional education can help to mitigate obesity and related health conditions.³ In areas where new grocery stores with fresh food are introduced in areas that previously lacked sufficient food access, research has shown that residents’ consumption of fruits and vegetables will increase.⁴ Robust, affordable access to local food through of easily reachable retail sources can increase the food security of households and communities.⁵

CMAP Activities

CMAP has been involved in local food policy and planning through the GO TO 2040 comprehensive regional plan, tracking the indicators GO TO 2040 sets out, and pursuing subsequent projects through its Local Technical Assistance (LTA) Program. GO TO 2040 includes a section of recommendations to “Promote Sustainable Local Food” as part of the “Livable Communities” theme. Citing the economic and public health benefits of both food production and food access discussed previously, the plan recommends pursuing strategies to facilitate local food production, increase access to healthy food, and raise understanding and awareness of nutrition and food policy.

CMAP has worked with community partners to implement GO TO 2040’s local food goals through a variety of strategies. These products and plans have included a local food model comprehensive plan chapter, an urban agriculture ordinance toolkit, a video about local food, and a local food micro website. Through the LTA program, CMAP has assisted with several projects dealing, at least in part, with local food, including 30 LTA plans connected to food production and 26 LTA plans connected to food access.

³ Let’s Move! Campaign, 2010. See <https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>; Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago’s Children (CLOCC). See <http://www.clocc.net/>.

⁴ Neil Wrigley, Daniel Warm, Barrie Margetts, and Amanda Whelan, “Assessing the Impact of Improved Retail Access on Diet in a ‘Food Desert’: A Preliminary Report,” *Urban Studies*, October 2002, 2074-2075.

⁵ Institute for a Competitive Inner City, “Resilient Food Systems, Resilient Cities: Recommendations for the City of Boston,” May 2015.

Sidebar

In 2011, a group of nonprofit, public, and private partners in Lake County joined forces through CMAP's LTA program on a Lake County Sustainable Food Systems project. This two-year project explored policy changes to better support sustainable agriculture as an economic development tool and updated the master plan for the Liberty Prairie Reserve -- an area of Lake County with a unique mix of sustainable agriculture and land preservation. The project resulted in the Lake County Sustainable Local Food System Report and the Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan. To implement the recommendations, Lake County's Planning, Building and Development Department has led efforts to update county policies to become more supportive of sustainable, local food systems.

Partner Activities

The Chicago metropolitan region is fortunate to be home to a growing number of organizations and government agencies dedicated to the improvement of our region's local food system, most of which have contributed to strengthening our local food production and access in some way since GO TO 2040's release. The following non-exhaustive list provides some examples of the many activities local non-profit, philanthropic, and governmental organizations have undertaken to advance the local food system in northeastern Illinois.

- Nonprofit organizations, including The Chicago Community Trust, Openlands, Fresh Taste, Liberty Prairie Foundation, FamilyFarmed, Advocates for Urban Agriculture, Growing Power, and the Chicago Food Policy Action Council, have all worked on a variety of projects to advance local food systems. These efforts include collaborative policy work such *Breaking Ground: A guide to Growing Land Access for Local Food Farming in Northeast Illinois*, the Chicago Urban Agriculture Map, and work toward the passage of two state level composting bills (HB2335 and HB3319). Many of these organizations have also engaged in direct programming and funding, including operating urban farms and community gardens, the Lake County Community Food Systems Micro-grant Program, and Food:Land:Opportunity, a grant program to localize the Chicago foodshed.
- Government agencies, including the Kane County Farm Bureau, Kane County, the McHenry County Farm Bureau, and the City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, have helped to create or utilize existing government programs for the betterment of our regional food system. These efforts include the Growing for Kane Ordinance, which implemented much of Kane County's local food goals, the Kane County Farmland Protection Program, the City of Chicago's urban agriculture efforts, and the Food and Agriculture RoadMap for Illinois (FARM Illinois).

Sidebar

In 2013, Kane County completed the Growing for Kane Health Impact Assessment, which recommended policies and actions to increase the supply of locally grown healthy foods, benefit County farmers, and support networks that supply healthy food options to the County's residents. Among the activities that the County has pursued since completing the plan are the Growing for Kane Program, which enables the County to pursue a number of programs that support local food projects. The County is also moving forward with the creation of a Kane County Food Hub, a single site that will receive, process, and distribute produce and other food products from County farmers to consumers, restaurants, schools, and businesses. Kane County expects to name a location and operator for the food hub by summer 2017.

Moving Forward

Although the local food system is a small part of the region's overall agricultural economy, it offers ecological, economic, and public health benefits that merit strong policies to protect and promote it. Much of the action to enhance the local food system, especially those elements connected to local food access, depend on local and subregional implementation. Local zoning and business development efforts may attract retailers that sell fresh, healthy, affordable food in areas that have lacked such food access. Local zoning and building codes can also enable small-scale efforts that boost food access, such as farmers' markets, urban agriculture, and community gardening. Counties can support local food production through farmland protection and programs like the Kane County Food Hub that connect producers with supportive industries and consumers who highly value local farm products.

As a core component of regional resiliency, a strong, diversified food system remains an important goal for regional stakeholders. The importance of both local food production and reliable food access for residents of the region is reflected in prominence of local food issues in CMAP's Local Technical Assistance work and in the continuing efforts of regional partners from all sectors to support the local food system. Agriculture is a major but diminishing land use in the CMAP region, and understanding its relationship to the region's economy and food system security is important when making land use decisions. As a regional planning agency, CMAP is limited in its ability to address deficient food access, which often depends on highly local land use decisions and economic forces. However, developing an understanding of the geographic relationship between food access, demographics, transportation, and community vulnerability is important for local planners and will continue to be an important topic of discussion at the regional level.

As the agricultural sector continues to be a strong part of the regional economy, CMAP and its partners should seek to integrate local food production into the broader economic discussions about the region's farms, food processing facilities, and food transportation infrastructure. It is important to understand the region's agricultural system not just as a provider of exports, but as a resource for feeding our communities. Local food systems may also produce positive economic impacts through their ability to make farmland preservation more economically viable, in addition to potentially improving the value of unused and surrounding parcels of land. Local food production can promote economic benefits by

retaining dollars within the regional economy – money that otherwise would be sent out of state. As discussed in the forthcoming Lands in Transition strategy paper, diversifying the outputs of the region’s farms will improve the resilience of the agricultural sector, an important industry sector in the CMAP region. Its strategies emphasize supporting state and county farmland preservation efforts, encouraging sustainable and climate resilient food and agriculture systems, and recognizing farmland and agricultural uses—including local food production and processing—as economically valuable.