



The Food Chain: Linking Private Plate to Public Process  
An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Perceptions of the Food System

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute

By

Meg Bostrom

Public Knowledge, LLC

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## Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to explore public understanding of the food system and to test hypothetical reframes developed in consultation with the FrameWorks Institute research team and based upon findings from earlier phases of research. We use the term reframe to mean changing “the context of the message exchange” so that different interpretations and probable outcomes become visible to the public (Dearing & Rogers, 1994: 98). In other words, in this process we are seeking the alternatives to the dominant frame that are most likely to stimulate public reconsideration of the issue.

To test the reframes, twelve focus group sessions were conducted with engaged citizens (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue). These are the types of influential citizens who are likely to be the first receivers of any reframe on this issue. Their interpretation of the reframe is likely to determine its success or failure in public discourse.

There are a number of demographic characteristics that could influence a person’s understanding of the food system. Therefore, the groups were divided by various characteristics: gender, educational attainment, race and ethnicity. Other than the selected characteristic, each group represented a mix of all other demographic criteria. For example, while the groups in New Mexico were divided by gender, each group included a mix of participants by age, educational attainment, race and ethnicity, party identification, and so on. The groups were as follows:

- August 1, 2005 – Albuquerque, NM: one group of women, one group of men
- November 15, 2005 – Greenville, SC: one group of non-college-educated residents, one group of college-educated residents
- November 16, 2005 – Battle Creek, MI: one group of women, one group of men
- November 30, 2005 – Los Angeles, CA; one group of African American residents, one group of Latino residents
- December 1, 2005 – Stockton, CA: one group of women, one group of men
- December 12, 2005 – Baltimore, MD: one group of non-college-educated residents, one group of college-educated residents

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location and gender. Informants who participated in the groups that were divided by educational attainment or race and ethnicity are further identified by that characteristic. The focus group guides are included in the Appendix.

## Introduction

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation developed the Food and Society Initiative to “support the creation and expansion of community-based food systems that are locally owned and controlled, environmentally sound and health-promoting.” To build public support for this effort, the Kellogg Foundation asked the FrameWorks Institute to analyze existing public perceptions and develop a communications frame that will engage the public in a dialogue about relevant policy options, such as support for small locally owned farms, support for locally grown organic food, and information leading to wise consumer choices, among other options.

The objective for this phase of research was to test hypothetical reframes to build public support for addressing problems in the nation’s food system. To that end, a series of hypothetical reframes were developed based on earlier phases of research in consultation with the FrameWorks Institute research team, and then tested in a series of focus groups.

The obstacles to reframing public understanding of the food system are significant:

- The food system is largely invisible to the public, with few members of the public able to voice anything more than shallow descriptions of food system operations or issues facing the food system.
- The public believes that modernization is inevitable, but the advancements the public anticipates move the system further from traditional methods of food production that result in vibrant rural communities and healthy foods and environments.
- Quaint, stereotypical images of the small family farmer both attract support from the public and undermine support, as the public assumes that small farms are unable to play a substantive role in the food production system.
- Finally, the public assumes that consumer power controls the system, thereby obscuring the role of government in changing the food system.

Even in the face of these obstacles, it is possible to create substantive understanding and build public will to improve the food system. Research informants were largely unaware of the issues facing the food system, but they became highly engaged in learning more about these issues once exposed to them. This strong interest suggests that the public will be highly attentive to news coverage, making it possible to create a public conversation. Whether that conversation moves forward productively or veers off course will depend upon communicators’ ability to incorporate frame elements that avoid triggering problematic default understandings concerning consumer choice, progress, and so on.

To that end, this phase of research investigated whether it would be most effective to advance a public conversation from the perspective of health, environment, the economy or a combination of all three. This research suggests that, at least initially, there are more opportunities to advance this issue with the public by creating a link between choices in food production and their affects on human health (such as declining nutritional value or

environmental impacts that create food safety issues). People are primarily motivated to improve the food system to protect their families' health and to leave a healthy environment for future generations. Even more important, when people are reminded that the objective of food is nutrition, they hold the industry accountable for negative health consequences.

Critically, an effective health frame needs to differ distinctly from the dominant food-health stories that exist in today's media environment. While most stories in the media currently bring attention to an individual's eating habits or the benefits of specific foods, an effective health frame develops understanding of the food system by creating a chain of links between choices in production and the eventual effects on human health. It should cause a citizen to ask "How and where was this broccoli grown?" rather than "Should I have broccoli for dinner?"

The Economic Frame is less productive, in part because it heightens economic insecurity which then causes people to seek food that is *less* costly. This undermines support for the recommended changes because they are perceived to make food *more* costly. Further, the public is not convinced by a message that suggests small farms are important to economic development. Instead, when the economy needs to be part of the conversation it is more effective to frame the issue as a desire to *give back* to the community or *support* local farmers.

Finally, the most challenging aspect of building public will lies in convincing the public that this problem is manageable and change is possible. The scope of the problem can quickly overwhelm people, so it is essential to communicate specific examples of success so that the public understands that a transformation can happen. If those examples include a role for government and citizen action, people will feel empowered as citizens, not just consumers.

## **Obstacles and Opportunities in Public Perception**

Since the main objective of this phase of research was to understand how different communications approaches influence public perceptions of the nation's food system, most focus group participants were asked to review a series of fictional news articles, each incorporating different framing approaches. (The groups in New Mexico were an exception; the approach in these first groups was less directive and more exploratory.) Several consistent themes about the food system emerged across the focus group discussions that allow us to better understand why certain communications approaches are more effective than others. This section reviews these themes and offers recommendations for future communications. The second section of this report provides a specific review of each of the test articles.

**Though focus group participants have little existing knowledge of the nation's food system, they are nevertheless very interested in learning more about it. This suggests that it should be relatively easy to create a public conversation about the food system.**

Left to their own devices, focus group participants are largely incapable of having a sophisticated conversation about the nation's food system. While men tend to be somewhat more knowledgeable about the food infrastructure and non-college-educated informants tend to be more outspoken on the problems in the existing system, most have little occasion to think about this industry and can therefore only talk about it in the broad generalities that they use to discuss other aspects of the nation's economy.

At the same time, focus group participants are very interested in the topic, and once exposed to news articles about needed changes in the food system, they are enthusiastic and engaged in the topic of conversation. "Until I read this article here, the extent of my trip to the store was going to the store, getting the product that I was supposed to get and coming back home and preparing it, not thinking about where did this come from," stated a man from Michigan. "This is great. This information is awesome and I think it's eye-opening," a non-college-educated man from South Carolina expressed.

### **Perceptions of Locally Grown Food**

**Most focus group participants hold favorable perceptions of locally grown food. They note that locally grown food is fresher than food that travels a great distance, they trust local growers to use safe farming methods, and they appreciate an opportunity to infuse their community's economy with additional money.**

For most, "local farm" is synonymous with "family farm" or "independent farm." They tend to trust family farmers to be good stewards of the land and to make limited use of chemicals such as pesticides, fertilizers, and so on. "It's local; those people know the land. They know how to rotate their land; they have a love for the land and they won't be

giving these steroids and antibiotics like they're [agribusinesses] doing now. So that's got to produce better foods, better meats, fruits and vegetables. America has always had a love for the land," explained a college-educated woman from Maryland.

At the same time, the locally grown message can easily be undermined by default understandings of the food system. As people begin to consider the role of local, independent farmers in the nation's food system, they reveal a number of tensions or perceived trade-offs in placing more reliance on locally grown food:

- Old-fashioned vs. Modern
- Backward vs. Progress
- Small vs. Large
- Taste and Freshness vs. Choice and Convenience

Each of these tensions is briefly discussed below.

**While focus group participants desire the taste and nutrition provided by an “old-fashioned” food system, many feel that increasing modernization in the food system is inevitable.**

One of the most apparent tensions in the food system dialogue is the tension between old-fashioned food production and the future of food production. Many informants say they can remember food from their childhood that tasted distinctly different from the food they experience today. Taste and nutrition have both declined over the years, they say. “Food may be more prevalent today than it ever has been but the food that we are eating doesn't have the nutritional level as the food 25 years ago,” a man from New Mexico remarked. “There was a period of time in this country where you sort of ate whatever was fresh at the time or what you could can. Go back to it,” suggested a man from California.

As they look to the future, they assume that the food experience will continue to decline. “I think you are going to compress everything into a little pill and get your lettuce and your tomato [that way],” a woman from New Mexico complained. “We forgot about freeze dried. Everything will be freeze dried. What's on the space shuttle? Ice cream that is in a little foil packet,” added a woman from New Mexico.

Many feel that progress is inevitable, and that means more technology. “It's a natural progression to increase your technology and you don't want to stay stuck in the past because you've got to keep moving with the future. There is going to be new technology. I mean growing food is probably one of the things from the Bible, but there are advances and granted there are going to be new technologies to improve upon that. You've got to move forward,” a college-educated woman from South Carolina insisted.

**Changing the food system to place more emphasis on local food production sounds like a step backward in time, according to focus group respondents. Many believe that a bigger, more complex, industrialized system represents progress.**

While they generally look fondly upon the past, most respondents believe it is unrealistic and backward to try to recapture the qualities of the food system of 50 or 100 years ago. “You have generally an agrarian society [that changed] to an industrial age society [that changed] to a service industry society, and that is -- I think I view that as a progression...It's like the advent of the automobile effectively destroyed the carriage industry. I'm sorry for the carriage industry, but I don't want to stifle the development of the automobile for nothing more than the nostalgic sake of keeping the carriage operator in business,” explained a college-educated man from South Carolina. “So the idea of what they're talking about here, I think it's a thing of the past. We're going forward, the future,” argued a man from California.

Some equate an advanced system with one that is high-tech and complex.

*I always kind of marveled at how complex our food system is and how [it is] so interconnected. Just traveling around and you see trucks moving, trains moving and most of that is carrying food from places where it grows to places where we eat it. I've always kind of thought about how ephemeral that system is. If you break one part of it, it's so complex that it affects the rest of it too. I'm always amazed at how well it works in this country. You go overseas and everything is locally grown and locally consumed. They don't have the vast transportation systems that we have. It's really amazing to me how that works.*

New Mexico man

In addition, the current system seems cleaner, more sterile, than the old-fashioned food system. A college-educated woman from Maryland explained her belief that antibiotics result in healthier meat that is less likely to carry disease: “But then on the other hand, you could be bringing home all this meat that has these diseases because they're not giving them antibiotics and you're taking the risk of catching the diseases from the meat.” A California Latina noted that processing is healthier for some foods “because they are processed has kept a lot of diseases from erupting. There are some things that people just should not eat raw or plain or without being treated.”

**While the stereotypical image of the small family farmer is attractive to focus group participants, this image also undermines their confidence that the small family farm could serve a significant role in providing for the nation's needs.**

Another consistent tension in the dialogue is the differing public perceptions of small and large farms. Focus group participants assume that small farmers are better stewards of the land and are more concerned with providing safe, nutritious food. “Perhaps nostalgia plays a little part and maybe misplaced trust. I don't know. I just think that they would be more careful than an industrial farm. It's their land; they need to take care of it. They don't want to pollute their own rivers. That's their family they're feeding,” explained a woman from Michigan. Many assume that larger farms are run by profit-centered corporations. “I think the larger ones have one idea in mind and that is profit, because

they'll do whatever it takes...whatever chemical it takes to make this crop grow quicker and bigger instead of the natural process,” stated an African American man from California.

At the same time, several respondents insist that it is simply unrealistic to believe that small farms can provide the amount of food that is needed today. “There is a point of supply and demand. These smaller farms just can't produce enough to support the communities and they don't have the labor to do it,” insisted a college-educated woman from Maryland. “If we eliminate a few hundred million people, a couple billion off this earth, then we can get back to some nice farms and things like that where you don't have to worry about all the people being fed,” a non-college-educated man from Maryland stated sarcastically. “This is all wonderful, but it's pie in the sky. Now how are you going to pasture turkeys? Everybody in New York City [wants] a turkey for Thanksgiving. Where are you going to put them?” a Michigan man asked.

**As people consider the benefits and weaknesses of a system based on locally grown food compared to the current food system, they consistently discuss taste and freshness as though they are trade-offs with choice and convenience.**

Focus group participants appreciate that today's food system allows a wide variety of produce at all times of the year, and believe that a system emphasizing local production would not be able to provide the same amount of choice. “This is just not an environment that is conducive to mango production. Only recently in the last decade has this city been exposed to pomegranates on a regular basis or all the other foods. It's like because of the ability of imports we now have stores like Whole Foods,” stated a college-educated man from South Carolina.

The trade-off for choice, they assert, is a system that results in bland food, and some would prefer taste over variety. “We have maybe fewer choices [with the old system], but boy it tastes a lot different” asserted a man from New Mexico. “There is just no comparison. Fresh produce lives by the season and so far they haven't been able to find any way in the world to escape from that,” noted a Michigan man.

However, many also note that it takes more time, energy, and skill to prepare meals using fresh foods. In a society that has so embraced convenience, many assert that it is unrealistic to expect people to take the time to cook fresh food. “It takes longer to cook fresh vegetables than it does frozen [vegetables]. I'm going to get some string beans and I get fresh. I've got to wash it; I've got to pick [through it]. [But] if I get frozen, I open the bag and I throw them in the pan,” explained a non-college-educated woman from Maryland.

### **Perceptions of Organic Food**

**While a few focus group participants are very knowledgeable about, and very loyal to, organic food, many are confused about the definition of the term “organic.” Most respondents have the general perception that organic foods are believed to be**

**healthier than conventional foods, but they are skeptical. For many, the high cost of organic food is a serious impediment to purchase.**

During the course of the focus group conversations it became very clear that “organic” is frequently misunderstood. When asked to explain it, a woman from New Mexico stated, “I don't know because I've never really paid attention. I don't eat anything organic. I don't know anybody who does. But I know it is supposed to be better for you.” A college-educated woman from Maryland suggested, “Organic is not always healthier because it says they don't have antibiotics. You can be carrying diseases and you take that home with you...then it allows anything to grow.” A California Latino said that with free-range turkeys “you don't know what they're eating. Where the ones that are being massed-produced, at least you know they're being fed a certain type of diet, whatever they feed them.”

While it was not a commonly-expressed opinion, there may also be a perception that those who purchase organic food may be motivated by what they are trying to convey about their identity. “Basically with organic, a lot of it is more of a social type of thing. You're using it more to say ‘I only eat organic vegetables; I only eat organic strawberries and I'm a level 5 vegan and I don't eat anything that casts a shadow’ type of thing,” stated a man from New Mexico.

While survey findings noted in *Digesting Public Opinion*<sup>1</sup> stated that the public holds positive views of organic food, some informants in the focus groups were suspicious of organic food and saw the organic label as a negative association. “‘Organic’ makes me think of things like manure, human waste instead of the fertilizers, you know. So when I buy something that is organic, which isn't very often, I wash it really well because I don't know what it's been planted in,” noted a woman from New Mexico.

Finally, cost is a significant barrier to purchase. “I'm stuck on the money thing. I have a family of six. I have four children. We go to Bi-low's, it's \$200 for a week. If you're asking [me] to buy the Happy Cow milk and organically grown everything, it's going to turn into \$300 and I'll have to have three jobs instead of two jobs,” argued a non-college-educated man from South Carolina.

### **Taking Action to Change the System**

**Once they learn about the health, environmental, and economic consequences of the existing food system, focus group participants become quickly overwhelmed by the range of issues and the scope of the problem.**

During the course of the group discussions, informants read three to four news articles about the food system. As the food system and its problems became more visible to informants, they became increasingly disconcerted. “It seems like such an overwhelming, huge problem that affects so many [things] like air, water, your food, the

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<sup>1</sup> Meg Bostrom, *Digesting Public Opinion: A Meta-Analysis of Attitudes toward Food, Health and Farms*, for the FrameWorks Institute, July 2005.

economy. It just seems a little overwhelming and just putting more local farms doesn't seem like that is really going to solve everything," noted a college-educated woman from Maryland. Even though the articles included recommendations for improving the food system, participants frequently noted that no solutions exist. "I'm depressed because it seems like my efforts are futile and I haven't been brought back to 'here is what you can truly do' to counter that sense of futility," asserted a college-educated man from South Carolina.

The profit motive and greedy corporations are to blame, they say. "I have seen here an element of greed. They feed fat to the turkeys; they feed any garbage to let them gain weight so that has to come through our body, too. The same thing with the pesticides, like they have very bad pesticides that wash away to the ocean, which kills a lot of birds – only to make money. They don't care for the health of the people," warned a California man. "The system out there just does what is fast, easy and makes them a lot of money, but it is not the best thing for us," stated a woman from New Mexico. "Corporations decide, or profits from corporations decide, what food we'll eat and where it comes from," a Michigan woman remarked.

**The ideology of individualism is so strong in American culture that most focus group participants automatically begin to think of individual responses to address the problem.** When overwhelmed, participants are not sure what kind of individual action will help to address the problem. Some assume the only answer is to raise their own food, which is an unrealistic solution for most. "I live on a quarter acre and neighbors on both sides of me. I don't think they'd like chickens in my yard. I really don't. They'd get mad about that," asserted a non-college-educated man from South Carolina.

Many other informants determine that the only solution is for each individual to make smarter decisions. "As an individual it's difficult to try to promote something that could change some of these things. I just try to make better choices for myself in that respect," stated a California Latino. "On your end you've got to deal with what you're shoving in your mouth. You can't just rely on something [else to take care of you]; you've got to realize what you're putting in your mouth. Nobody is forcing you to eat stuff," argued a California Latino.

Others suggest that consumer purchasing power can actually change the system. Those advocating this position state that the marketplace is responsive to consumer needs and if enough consumers buy wisely, the system will change. "People just need to be educated so they can go ahead and make the right decisions for themselves, and if people want healthier food...they'll buy more of it and there will be a larger demand for it, and farmers can produce more of it," a college-educated woman from Maryland explained. Some informants noted that individuals can take control of this problem, because choices already exist in the marketplace. "You've got regular; you've got diet; you've got your options," argued a Latino man from California. "If we demand better food, the price will come down," suggested a non-college-educated woman from South Carolina.

While some informants believe that choices exist and consumer power can change the system, many suggest that the high cost of fresh and organic food limits options and keeps quality food out-of-reach for many. In nearly every group, participants raised concerns about poor and working class families' ability to afford quality food. "There are a lot of people who are in poverty...Every Wednesday they have a farmers market. I've walked through there and just for one tomato, yeah it's organic and I'm sure it is much, much better as far as the vitamin source. But then you're buying a tomato for \$1 versus if you go to the market, you buy 5 tomatoes for \$1," a California Latina remarked. "How can we expect a 22-year-old single mother making \$7 an hour working at McDonald's that has two kids at home, how can we expect her to drive to Centerville and do all this stuff [search for locally grown and organic food]? It's not economically feasible for so many people to do that," argued a Michigan man.

**Support for policy solutions rests on the public's perceptions of an appropriate role for government.** Across the group discussions, people expressed a range of opinions concerning the role of government in addressing this problem. For some, government is simply invisible on this issue and is not even a consideration as an agent or locus for solutions. Other informants actively dismiss government, asserting that there is no role for government action. "Well to me, the main point of this is government regulation. They're saying that people aren't smart enough to take care of themselves. You can go out and you can buy organic fruits, vegetables...But why should the government be involved in that and force the farmer to produce something that maybe does not fit the market that is out there?" argued a California man.

Some suggest the government is an ineffective actor because government has made incorrect farm policy choices. In most of the groups, one or two participants would suggest that government has taken the wrong action on behalf of farms by paying them not to farm. "I also think it's so wrong for the government, if that is what it is, to pay farmers not to farm. With...hungry people in America, why can't they grow food and give this food to them? There is a lot of hunger in America. Our government just seems to look backwards, or don't look at it the right way. America is noted for our wealth, but a lot of people are suffering," remarked a college-educated woman from Maryland.

Finally, some insist that government intervention is necessary to address such an enormous issue. "I think it's just time that we start calling some of these representatives who are in office making all this money to represent us, who are not really representing us. We need to let them know that, 'hey, we need to take back a little bit of this,'" asserted an African American man from California.

### **Changing the Conversation**

**With the right frame, it is possible to motivate people to act on this issue.** By the end of the discussion, several participants were energized to act on this issue. "I think we all woke up tonight. Maybe something like this all over the country, we'll all wake up and realize what we're doing to our land, to ourselves. It's very important," stated a non-college-educated man from Maryland. "I'm upset. I'm the kind of person that writes

letters and I want to do something about it,” asserted a college-educated woman from Maryland. “I am encouraged that there is a company, a group of people, a groundswell, whatever of people that are actually interested in making this a reality. I'm enthusiastic about that,” remarked a man from Michigan.

**This research strongly suggests, however, that a number of considerations need to be taken into account in developing an effective frame that will build support for changing the nation's food production system.**

**1) Demonstrate that it is possible to improve the system.**

**Since people can become quickly overwhelmed and see no way to address the problems in the food system, effective communication needs to strive to make this situation manageable. One way to accomplish that goal is to incorporate specific examples of success in all communications.**

When focus group participants read about approaches that people have used to improve the food system in specific communities, they begin to set aside their skepticism. “It seems like if Philadelphia can make it work, maybe most cities in the country can make it work,” stated a college-educated man from South Carolina.

**2) Incorporate the values of future, protection and stewardship into the conversation.**

**People are motivated to improve the food system to protect their families' health and to guard the environment for future generations.**

One consistent value that emerged throughout all of the group discussions was a desire to protect future generations from shortsighted decisions that are being made today. “That's my main worry, evolution. We pay a price later for it. It's convenient right now because you can bulk up these turkeys and claim to feed the world with them, but it's going to come at a price,” worried a woman from Michigan. “I think most of us have got children, and probably my reason [for wanting action is] because I want to make sure that they are going to have something,” a non-college-educated man from South Carolina remarked.

They wonder what increasing modernization will do to the food system if left unchecked. “I'm worried about our kids, the future. What's the food going to be like and stuff like that?” asked a woman from Michigan. “Everyone in here, I'm pretty sure, has someone like a child or a grandchild and you want the best for them. I don't want to leave the ones [coming] behind me something worse than [what] we have. I want to leave it better than what I had,” asserted an African American man from California.

Some also worry about the environmental cost for future generations if the system does not change. “It's a product of being a good steward. It's recognizing if it is healthy for the environment, it is going to be sustainable over a long period of time, and therefore, it is in

our own personal best interest and also in terms of thinking of generational [interests]. It is also wise,” noted a college-educated man from South Carolina.

**3) Make the link between choices in food production and consequences in nutrition and/or food safety.**

**Health is the primary driver for concern and action when health consequences are tied to those food production choices that affect nutrition and/or safety. When people are reminded that the objective of food is nutrition, they hold the industry accountable for health consequences.**

Throughout the course of the group discussions, informants repeatedly returned to health issues as their primary concern. As is noted in the following analysis of responses to individual articles, informants frequently discussed health concerns, even when responding to articles that emphasized a different issue.

In addition, when participants were asked to select what should be the most important consideration in developing a food system, healthy nutritious food was selected far more frequently than any other response. (See Table) What is even more relevant than the number selecting each category is the reason given for each selection. Obviously, those who selected health as a primary consideration provided health-oriented reasons for their selection. “Healthy food, healthy bodies, healthy lifestyle; I mean it's just less illnesses. It's the beginning of something better,” a Michigan woman explained.

A system that provides healthy, nutritious food	84
A system that does not harm the environment	57
A system that encourages local food production	38
A system that can continue to produce food for several generations	35
A system that is sustainable for the long-term	29
A system that is profitable for small and mid-size/independent farmers	29
A system that provides inexpensive food	24
A system that provides an abundance of food	17
A system that offers a lot of choice and variety of food	14

Interestingly, several of those who chose other top choices also mentioned health concerns as a reason for their selection. A college-educated woman from Maryland stated that she chose the environment as a consideration because she wants “Regulations for those big companies that are using the pesticides and are giving the weird things to the things that we eat.” “The snowball effect of pesticides causing cancer,” a Michigan woman remarked. “If it is harming the environment that goes back to the food being harmed; so therefore, we're not eating good food if it is harming the environment,” stated a college-educated man from South Carolina. Non-college-educated respondents in South Carolina mentioned that they chose local food production as a top consideration because “we talked about it being fresher” and “better nutrition.”

**4) Suggest that more emphasis on locally grown food allows people to give back to the community and support local farmers.**

**When local economies are part of the conversation, people are motivated by reciprocity, or a desire to give back to their community and support local farmers. They are less compelled by a message that suggests that small farms are effective ways to develop the local economy.**

The Economic Frame is ineffective in building support for changing the food system in part because many respondents become distracted by other, more pressing economic concerns. When they begin to feel more economically vulnerable, respondents focus on cost and say they want less-expensive food, which undermines their support for changing the food system in ways that they believe will lead to more expensive food.

At the same time, many participants volunteer that they want to buy from local farmers to support them and give back to the community. A California woman suggested that a benefit of locally grown food is “Supporting your community and putting your money back into your own community.” A responsibility to community is also one reason that participants are attracted to Community Supported Agriculture as a policy.

#### **5) Explain the role for government and citizen action that will result in change.**

**To keep people from feeling overwhelmed and immobilized, and to cause people to feel empowered as citizens rather than just as consumers, it is essential to clearly communicate an appropriate role for government and citizen action.**

This is, perhaps, the most challenging aspect of developing an effective reframe for this issue. As noted earlier, participants have a wide range of assumptions concerning an appropriate role for government, and that influences their support for specific policies.

Community Supported Agriculture and increasing the number of farmers markets are the kinds of approaches that tend to be more immediately popular, perhaps because they sound as though communities are the responsible actors, not federal government. Changing the structure of subsidies is mentioned frequently by respondents on both sides of the issue. Some see this debate as an opportunity to remove all subsidies, while others see it as an opportunity to shift subsidies from corporate farms to family farms.

This research suggests two other possible opportunities for foregrounding a role for government. First, there may be an opportunity to use school nutrition to raise awareness of this issue while defining a role for government. Despite the fact that survey findings reported in *Digesting Public Opinion* (Bostrom, 2005) suggest that most believe school lunches are healthy, many informants in the focus groups stated that they are unhappy with the quality of food in the public schools. “I had seen something on the news the other day, it was something about this chef that was talking about how all these schools have all this processed lunch and that's why kids are getting obese. There is one area where they are focusing on making the food fresh and making it better for you, and he said that's what we should be aiming for, if we really care about what our kids are eating, what we are eating,” a college-educated man from South Carolina explained. Since government is in charge of selecting vendors for the public schools, this is a role that makes sense. “I think [changing

to more local food production in the] contracts, especially in the schools [makes sense]. I think it's absolutely pitiful what they feed children. I hear there is Burger King and Taco Bell and it's like, 'Oh no, you're brown bagging it, sweetheart. I'm making you your lunch,'" asserted a California woman.

Second, cost is clearly one of the main concerns for respondents as they consider any changes to the food production system. They worry about costs for their own family, but they also worry about increasing food costs for those who are living in poverty. The first critique of any recommended change to the system will be the cost of that change. Therefore, in addition to addressing cost concerns, it would be wise for advocates to develop a role for government that results in lower costs for locally grown foods with benefits across classes.

## Responses to the Test Frames

**The prior section provides a strategic analysis of focus group participants' responses throughout the course of the group dialogue, drawing upon reactions to frames presented in news articles. This section reviews participants' specific responses to each of the tested frames.**

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this research is to develop a communications framework that will build public support for changing the food system to place more priority on locally grown food. To that end, focus group participants reacted to a series of "news articles" that were designed to represent different frames to advance the discussion.<sup>2</sup> The mark of success was not which frame focus group participants *liked* best. Rather, the objective was to determine how focus group participants' dialogue and understanding of the issue changed as they considered each frame. By determining the strengths and weaknesses of each frame, it is possible to determine the mix of frame elements that will result in public support for changing the food system.

Over the course of the groups, informants were exposed to five test frames. Most of the frames emphasized a specific issue category, such as health, environment or the economy. One of the test frames incorporated all three issue areas into a broader critique of the system. All of the frames included policy solutions and a specific role for government action. Specifically,

- The Modernization Frame: Modernizing the Food Infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- The Nutrition Frame: Food Without Fear
- The Environment Frame: Eat Local
- The International Economy Frame: The Outsourcing of Food
- The Economy Frame: The Economics of Food

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<sup>2</sup> The articles were developed by the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge and adapted from numerous unverified sources. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

## The Modernization Frame

**“Modernizing the Food Infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”<sup>3</sup> attempts to change the definition of a “modern, efficient” food system by stating that a system reliant on long-distance travel is inefficient and backward. However, informants reject the characterization of the current food system as inefficient because they assume that advanced technology leads to more efficiency. Focus group respondents are compelled by the health consequences discussed in the article, but they are not convinced the recommended solutions will be effective.**

**Discussants reject the idea that the current system is inefficient.** The high-tech nature of current agricultural equipment causes some participants to assume that the system is more efficient than ever. “They used the words ‘backwards and inefficient,’ which is the opposite now. It's overly efficient in the mass production, the using of the big combines now that are actually controlled by the GPS... And because the cost factor for shipping and transportation and storage is so high today, you need a big business to do it,” noted a non-college-educated man from Maryland. “What they're doing is producing the most output for the least cost, so it is technically efficient,” a college-educated man from Maryland stated.

**The health consequences of the existing food system that are mentioned in the article cause informants to become concerned, rather than the inefficiencies in the system.** Many participants center their attention on the nutritional aspects of the article.

### **Tested in MD**

#### **Modernizing the Food Infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

By Chris Howard, Chicago Tribune

August 2005

America's food system is in need of an overhaul, says a growing choir of economists and agronomists concerned with the effects of globalization on a system that was set up in the 1950s. A new report from a group of economists affiliated with the University of Delaware's Towson School of Business and Agriculture finds that the newly globalized practices of many multi-national corporations, spurred by a new trade environment, are having some harmful effects on the American economy, health and environment. “Ironically, as agriculture has become more industrialized and less reliant on family farms, the agricultural infrastructure has become increasingly unwieldy, backwards and inefficient,” stated Robert Wilson, chair of the committee that issued the report.

“Not so long ago, people relied upon meat and produce from farms in their state or region. This was an efficient, sensible system. But corporate farming changed all that in just the past few decades,” Wilson suggests. As federal subsidies began to favor mass production, corporate farms responded by buying up huge tracks of land and specializing in the production of just one type of food, which caused diversity in food production to slowly fade away. That means that broccoli might travel all the way from Mexico or pork all the way from Iowa, even though both could be produced at a local farm in most parts of the country.

On average, only 1 or 2 percent of an American family's food is currently grown or produced locally. This has serious economic, environmental and health consequences that are becoming increasingly apparent. For the first time in our nation's history, we now import more food than we export, which is undermining rural economies in the nation. Transporting food such long distances wastes enormous amounts of energy and pollutes our environment. Finally, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and preservatives are suspected in a number of long-term health problems.

States like New York and South Carolina are working to change the system. In New York, a regional planning board has just finalized a 10 year plan that will encourage small and mid size farms in the state, and set up distribution networks for locally grown food. In Tennessee, state contracts for school lunch programs, state hospitals and other state institutions give priority to locally grown food. Experts estimate that New York's and Tennessee's efforts will cause the proportion of locally grown food in each state to grow from just 1-2 percent to 10-15%.

The new report calls for consolidation of oversight in fewer federal agencies, and a nationwide plan for ensuring that the food infrastructure is sound, secure and sustainable in the coming years. According to the report, these changes can help to improve rural economies as the number of small and mid-size farms increase. Air and water quality will begin to improve as well, due to fewer agricultural chemicals and shorter travel distances from farm to plate. “Most important, our children will be able to expect better health by eating more nutritious, whole foods, fresh from the farm, rather than ripening in a truck during transport. It's time to update and put some reason back into our agricultural infrastructure,” Wilson concludes.

<sup>3</sup> This is a fictional article written by the research team.

“We're getting poisoned from all the pesticides and we go all the way to Timbuktu to get our fruits and vegetables and our meats,” a non-college-educated woman from Maryland remarked. “With the food traveling, it decreases the nutrition in it...after two or three days the nutrition in it is not as good as when you first picked it off the tree. I think this is why America is suffering the way we are today with diabetes, obesity, which is part of that...Long ago we went to the store, we bought our fruits and vegetables and now you go to the store and you've got 50,000 potato chips. You've got 500 cereals to choose from and they're all junk. You wonder why we're suffering so in America with all these diseases that we didn't suffer from years ago,” a college-educated woman from Maryland stated.

**While they yearn for the taste they remember from years ago, many do not believe it is possible to go back to the way things used to be.** “It's trying to say go back to the small town and have your states take more control, more regulations to take control and try to build smaller farms, encourage the farmers to rebuild. It's not going to happen,” stated a non-college-educated man from Maryland. “I think it's kind of idealistic because we're not a rural country. We're not farmers; we don't grow cows any more. We just don't do that type of thing,” a non-college-educated woman remarked. “I think we have gone too far in the other direction. I don't think we'll ever get back to local farming and getting your products in your region from local. I think it's just out-of-hand. It will never go back,” asserted a college-educated woman from Maryland.

**The article's description of the food infrastructure makes the problem seem too overwhelming and difficult to address. In addition, while some want to support small farmers, more local production seems like an inadequate solution for the size of the problem.** If the problem is of the size and scope the article indicates, then more reliance on local farms does not seem to be a big enough solution. “It seems like such an overwhelming, huge problem that affects so many [things] like air, water, your food, the economy. It just seems a little overwhelming and just putting more local farms doesn't seem like that is really going to solve everything,” a college-educated woman from Maryland insisted. Another college-educated woman from Baltimore argued that it is important to support small farmers: “Even though you say this never would happen, I would like to be able to say people want this...my husband and I always try to support the little guy...we try to help local people alongside the road selling their fruits and vegetables. We'll go there versus to the grocery store.”

## The Nutrition Frame

**“Food Without Fear”<sup>4</sup> reports on the nutritional consequences of the United States’ current food system. It attempts to cause the reader to think about the relationship between health and food production, rather than the relationship between health and an individual’s eating habits. It is successful in raising concerns about the food production system and in increasing public desire to address the problem. However, defining an appropriate role for government and making the problem manageable continue to be obstacles.**

**Informants are shocked to learn the ways in which nutrition is being undermined by existing food production practices.** For most, the information contained in this article is completely new. “It’s a rude awakening. It makes me become more health conscious,” stated an African American man from California. A Latina from California expressed her concern at “the fact that we don’t have a lot of the nutrients that we think we’re getting when we’re buying things from the market.” “The biggest thing that jumped out to me, you take two turkeys – one factory-raised and one pasture-raised – and you think you know this one has been pumped up with chemicals. I never even realized how much less fat the pasture-raised one

**Tested in SC, MI, CA, MD**

**Food Without Fear**

By Joel Fenton, New York Times, November 2004

Every diet fad Americans have followed over the last 30 years tends to have one thing in common: they focus on *what* we eat - not on *where* what we eat comes from or *how* it was grown. Good nutrition has been conveniently, and profitably, reduced to an ingredient list. (Remember the grapefruit diet?) That’s a shame - and there’s no better time to explore the ways in which we’ve been led astray than during Thanksgiving week.

Consider the turkey. [In SC/MI: If your image of a turkey’s life is one of green grass and rolling hills, look more closely.] Nearly 300 million turkeys are raised today in windowless buildings illuminated by bright lights 24 hours a day. (This keeps the turkeys awake and eating.) The birds stand wing to wing [In SC/MI: on wood shavings] and eat an overly fortified diet that enables them to reach an ideal dressed weight of 15 pounds in 12 to 14 weeks. Compare that with a turkey that spends most of its life outdoors. [In SC/MI: Such birds - called pastured birds - are able to move around freely.] Instead of having to be injected with antibiotics to stay healthy, they doctor themselves, seeking out certain plants for pharmacological reasons. [In SC/MI: Because they expend so much energy moving around, they also grow more slowly.] Department of Agriculture research comparing the health benefits of conventionally raised chickens to pastured chickens found that pastured chickens have 21% less fat, 30% less saturated fat, 50% more vitamin A and 400% more omega-3 fatty acids than factory-raised birds. They also have 34% less cholesterol.

[In SC/MI: The pasture principle can be applied to vegetables as well. In order to experience the health benefits of the roasted broccoli at the Thanksgiving table, that broccoli needs to have been healthy too.] Sadly, the broccoli on your holiday table was most likely grown in a monoculture - a place where, with the help of large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, nothing but the crop is allowed to grow. The chemicals bulk up vegetables quickly, enabling them to withstand the rigors of long-distance travel so that they can arrive at your supermarket unbruised and brightly colored. But [In SC/MI: think what gets lost.] broccoli raised in an industrial farm monoculture, and shipped over a long distance loses up to 80% of its vitamin C and 95% of its calcium, iron and potassium. Fruits and vegetables grown locally and organically, however, have higher levels of antioxidants.

[In CA/MD: Our farm policy is intimately linked to the destructive ways we’re eating. Think about your local supermarket where you’re surrounded by processed, canned, preserved and frozen foods. It may appear to be a world of variety, but look closer. The cookies, granola bars, crackers, chips, and salad dressings all have one thing in common: they are made from derivations of corn, soy and sugar – crops that are subsidized by the federal government while more nutritious foods are not. About 70 percent of our agricultural land in the Midwest is devoted to producing these crops.]

So as you’re getting ready for Thanksgiving, try to remember that we can’t be healthy unless our farms are healthy [in SC/MI: and that the end of the food chain is connected to the beginning of the food chain.] To the extent possible, buy locally-grown organic produce and support stricter regulations on corporate farming practices such as limiting chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Support incentives to create community based farm production [In CA/MD: rather than subsidize megafarms,] and make sure that the food sold in our kids’ schools is produced with nutrition in mind. Your food will be tastier, fresher and more nutritious. You’ll be able to have your cake (and your bacon and your bread and your potatoes) and eat it too.

<sup>4</sup> This article was based upon “Food Without Fear” by Dan Barber, which appeared in the New York Times on November 23, 2004. It also drew from “Stuck in the Middle” by Dan Barber, which appeared in the New York Times on November 23, 2005. It was edited significantly by the research team to fit the needs of the research process and to more closely represent the frame the team wanted to test.

[has] and the vitamins it has in him, less cholesterol,” remarked a non-college-educated man from South Carolina. The end result, according to an African American woman from California, is that it is “almost as if a fraud, a fraud [is] being committed.”

**Even though the article does not link food production practices to specific health problems, focus group participants automatically make that link and voice their concerns about the negative trends in physical health that may be influenced by food.**

This article helps participants see systemic connections between food production practices and health. “You are what you eat” came up over and over in the discussions, and in many instances respondents were using that cliché to refer to the way choices at the production level

*“Maybe that's why we're sicker. Everyone is sicker. They're not getting the nutrition from the food that they thought they were.”*

Non-college-educated woman,  
South Carolina

influence the quality of food that enters the food system. “It frightens me a bit. I think that's one of the reasons that we have a lot of the healthcare issues in this country that we do and [that] a lot of other parts of the world aren't seeing. . . It kind of goes along with ‘you are what you eat’ kind of thing. If you eat a lot of preservatives and chemicals and so forth, I don't care how healthy you are, at some point that has got to affect your system,” suggested a man from Michigan. “It could fix the turkey but it's killing us,” warned a non-college-educated woman from South Carolina.

After reading this article, participants in nearly every focus group wondered if food production practices are causing the early onset of adolescence in American girls. “The girls these days are developing earlier and they're saying it is because of all the hormones they inject in the milk that they're drinking,” suggested a non-college-educated woman from Maryland. “We look at how fast they develop and this is a direct result of it. Things they eat at 6 and 7, by the time they get to 12 and 13 they're looking like adults,” remarked an African American man from California.

Many also wonder if cancer is related to the chemicals used in modern food production. “The more industrialized that food production is, the more pesticides (sic) are needed to transport it longer distances for it to last longer. We've created that. . . So we might be living longer, but there are more and more types of cancers that we have now than we did even 20 or 30 years ago. I think a lot of it comes directly from how our food is produced,” stated a Latina from California. “I know when I was first diagnosed with breast cancer and the first thing they wanted me to do was write down everything that I had eaten. They said it could have come from chemicals off fruits and vegetables,” warned a non-college-educated woman from South Carolina. “When you hear pesticides are in your food, that can probably be the cause of a lot of the cancers that are going on,” a woman from Michigan surmised.

The one food-health relationship implied by the article is the relationship between food production and obesity. The benefit of the obesity connection is that it is a health issue that is currently top-of-mind. “I'm 56 years old. I know that the turkey I bought this year does not compare to the turkey that my mother made when I was 6. . . Of course we're getting

fatter because we're not eating the same thing, because all of a sudden we're eating something that is not as natural," stated a man from California.

However, communicators need to be cautious in emphasizing the obesity connection because it can easily lead focus group participants to begin to think about an individual's lifestyle choices rather than systemic problems. A college-educated woman from Maryland noted that part of the reason children are overweight is due to "the way we eat and our lack of exercise... Years ago people rode their bicycles, ran up and down the street, were in the alley playing. Everybody I see now is sitting in front of a computer, so we're not getting any exercise and we're getting bigger." "We see all our kids are not playing any more outside. They're with the games and internet and all those things inside, and never exercise, so we're getting overweight children with diabetes," a California man explained.

**The Nutrition Frame, as exemplified by this article, begins to change the reasoning behind why people eat.** After reading this article, focus group participants use nutrition as the rationale for eating rather than taste or hunger. This is an important distinction, because the consequences of a decision based on nutrition are different than the consequences for taste or hunger.

When nutrition is the rationale for eating, people are furious that choices in food production would *sacrifice* nutrition for some other benefit, such as profit. "I want some vitamins. I want all the things I'm supposed to be getting. And now that I find this out -- it loses its vitamin C, come on, out of broccoli, the calcium, potassium. We're not getting anything," argued an African American man from California. "You want iron. You want potassium, that's why you eat broccoli. You might as well eat junk food," noted a woman from Michigan. "The broccoli you're having, for the amount of nutrients you get, you might as well be eating french fries," sneered a college-educated woman from South Carolina. "It just shows that these people are producing the product more for profit than for health of individuals. They're focusing on profit," remarked an African American woman from California.

**There are further opportunities to strengthen the Nutrition Frame by linking it to children's health and future.** For some focus group participants, the Nutrition Frame causes them to think about protecting children now and preparing for the future. These are powerful values that can build support for change. "I'm worried about our kids, the future. What's the food going to be like?" a Michigan woman asked.

School nutrition may provide an opening for this conversation. Most focus group participants believe that school food is of very poor nutritional quality. Importantly, school nutrition affords an opportunity for collective action in an area that is normally seen as an individual responsibility. "I look at our schools... pizza and hot dogs and no vegetables, no fruits. As parents and as a community we ought to look into that to help," suggested a California man.

**One of the most significant challenges that advocates face on this issue is defining an appropriate, effective role for government. In response to the Nutrition Frame,**

**some see a role for government, but more often than not they are not sure what can be done.**

Some approach the problems facing the food system with a sense of inevitability. “If we eliminate a few hundred million people, a couple billion off this earth, then we can get back to some nice farms and things like that where you don't have to worry about all the people being fed,” stated a non-college-educated man from Maryland. “Now how are you going to pasture turkeys? Everybody in New York City [wants] a turkey for Thanksgiving. Where are you going to put them?” a Michigan man asked. People are not willing to change, they warn. “The organic stuff is on the reduced price quite often because it comes looking spotted and mottled and beauty sells in the United States of America,” a Michigan woman remarked. “I try to read labels in the store...but that turns my trip to the store into an hour and a half. That just doesn't fit my lifestyle. This is California,” stated a California man.

Others are skeptical that the government would be an effective actor, because government has not shown any ability to address related problems in the past. “I don't think our government has cared very much about farmers, farms. We've lost so much farm land and so many farmers have lost their farms and the government doesn't seem to care about that,” a Michigan woman complained. “One thing it says is for us to be healthy that our farms should be healthy. I see that as a monumental task. Where does the regulation come from?” a California man asked.

However, many others expect government to take some kind of action to address such an important problem. “They're part of it, the government. They let these businesses do this, really. They should set conditions,” a Michigan woman noted. They gravitate to the article's mention of federal subsidies as one way to begin to address the issues in the food system. “The government could also subsidize and give them some more money and get them on a level playing ground instead of...big businesses getting a big discount right now,” a Michigan man suggested. “I think the bottom line of this, if raspberry farmers were majorly (sic) subsidized, we would find raspberries at 50 cents a pint instead of \$3 a pint and more people would then eat raspberries,” a California man remarked.

New subsidies are not a welcome solution for many focus group participants, however, because they believe that the free market and supply and demand should be the right approaches. “This society stresses self-accountability and self-reliance, but this article pointed out that these corn, soy and sugar crops are subsidized by the government...I'm guessing that the more healthier things are not [subsidized] because they're just not as marketable,” noted a California Latina.

**While most focus group participants quickly accept the nutritional benefits of locally grown produce, some question whether or not it will be affordable, particularly if it is organic.**

Focus group participants worry about the cost consequences of substantial changes to the food production system. “I would think the price of locally grown produce would have to go up substantially,” a college-educated woman from Maryland worried. They are

particularly convinced that organic food would be unaffordable. According to a non-college-educated man from Maryland, this article “apparently wants to get back to the organic food, the small farms that have everything be local...you can't afford it. I said jokingly you go out and you pick that Beefsteak tomato. It costs you \$10 to grow. Would you go to a supermarket and pay \$10 for a handful of tomatoes? No.”

While some are worried about the cost consequences for their own family, it is important to note that many are worried about the costs for poor families. “I thought of the farmers market...just for one tomato, yeah it's organic and I'm sure it is much, much better as far as a vitamin source. But then you're buying a tomato for \$1 versus if you go to the market, you buy 5 tomatoes for \$1...there is a big population like 50 percent are living in poverty. I don't think they could afford to go buy a tomato for \$1 to feed a family of 10,” remarked a Latina from California. The cost concern provides an opening for a possible role for government. “I'm not saying that it's not justified to buy this food, but give these farmers tax breaks. Make this food more affordable for me to buy,” suggested a non-college-educated man from South Carolina.

**The conditions in which animals are raised advance this conversation only when those conditions reinforce the Nutrition Frame by linking animal treatment to effects on human nutrition and health. When animal treatment is only about the morality of animal cruelty, many focus group participants dismiss animal treatment as a serious reason to change food production practices.**

When the issue of animal treatment is tied to a discussion of nutrition, people's concern may be heightened, reinforcing the power of the Nutrition Frame. During the course of their conversation, women in Michigan sought to explain why factory-raised birds are less nutritious than pasture-raised birds:

*The fact that they inject the birds, the stress that the birds are under. When a person is under stress, your body goes through different changes.*

*Yeah, really. It can cause health problems.*

*Right, health problems. I'm quite sure, even though they're animals. . .*

*The same thing.*

*...they go through some kind of change within their bodies and then we're eating that. And they're injecting these things, and they're growing them quicker, so they're not going through a proper process to be ready to be eaten. I don't know what damage it does to our body, but I'm quite sure it has some effect on our health.*

Michigan women

However, when the conversation becomes too focused on animal cruelty, many focus group participants become less supportive. Some people are genuinely moved by the idea that animals are suffering. “I will not eat veal, after they told me how veal is presented. They put them in little cages. They put them in the dark and all that crap. The process is a real turn off. So mentally I won't eat veal, period,” insisted a Latino from California. Most others, however, are saddened by the image of a suffering animal but it does not convince them to change the system. “I've seen how they're grown. There are

50,000 like sitting on a table like this, and the cows are restricted. They can't move from here to here. If you see that, it will break your heart but the thing about it, they've got to produce it to get it out there, because we need it, we need it, we need it because of all these people," argued a college-educated woman from Maryland. Another college-educated woman from Maryland added, "These animals are specifically bred for that reason." A college-educated woman from South Carolina explained that she's more motivated by the nutritional consequences of food production: "It doesn't bother me that these animals are kept up all night either because they wouldn't be alive if they weren't going to be eaten anyway. I don't mean to be cruel, but the nutrition does bother me."

**The monoculture description is not effective in building support for changing food production.** Most focus group participants believe that specialization is a good thing. "I would think it would make them awfully more specialized, probably more expert on what they do. I know there is an apple producer that does just that. He does like 30, 40 different types of apples," a Latino from California explained.

## The Environment Frame

**“Eat Local”<sup>5</sup> emphasizes the environmental consequences of the current food production system. After reading the article, informants begin to understand the environmental impact of the current food system. Participants are quickly drawn to those environmental examples that connect to human health concerns, which further reinforces the power of health as a critical frame element. Most importantly, participants begin to believe that solutions exist, in part due to the specific example of success included in the article. They were particularly enthusiastic about Community Supported Agriculture as a way for communities to take responsibility for addressing these concerns.**

**As noted earlier, focus group participants find it difficult to think of farms as environmentally harmful, but after reading this article, they begin to talk about fuel used for food transportation, pesticides, and soil erosion among other issues.** After reading this article which focuses on the distance that food travels, most informants see fuel as the biggest environmental problem in the current food system. “Obviously, if a farmer needs to travel 50 miles to get from his farm to the restaurant rather than a big rig truck traveling 1500 miles, then obviously that would be better for the environment because of the fuels,” stated a Latina from California.

### **Tested in SC, MI, CA, MD**

#### **Eat Local**

By Rob Tins

Los Angeles Times Magazine -

July 2005

Greg Higgins, owner of the tony downtown Philadelphia restaurant Higgins, walks to the back of his bustling kitchen and opens a walk-in refrigerator crammed with food, nearly all of it originating within 100 miles.

A personal connection between a restaurant chef and the people who grow his beef or broccoli might not sound newsworthy, but it's a major element of a burgeoning shift. It's called "sustainable food"—a chain of supply and demand that theoretically could continue in perpetuity. A shorter food chain cuts down on oil consumption, puts money in the pockets of independent farmers, is more humane to animals, helps protect soil from wearing out and water from running out [in SC/MI: and, best of all, usually delivers food that tastes better.] [In CA/MD: It delivers food that tastes better while protecting the planet for future generations.]

That this kind of relationship is even news is an indication of how remote the food production and distribution system has become over the past 30 years. The produce in the average American dinner is trucked about 1,500 miles to get to the plate, according to a 2001 study by Iowa State University, up an estimated 22% during the past two decades. [In CA/MD: Tomatoes traveled an average of 1600 miles.] Brian Halweil of the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental research organization, estimates that just 1% or 2% of America's food is locally grown. He thinks the locally grown share could easily reach 40% or 50% [In SC/MI: if the American public realized what is at stake.] [In CA/MD: if new policies were enacted.]

Large food producers focus on supplying products as cheaply as possible [In CA/MD: to be made into processed goods], and consumers are waking up to the fact that something's wrong: genetically modified foods, schools of pen-raised and chemically dyed salmon, mercury and PCBs in fish, chickens crammed into cages the size of a sheet of paper, and giant hog farms that pollute watersheds and raise a stink for miles. Acres of topsoil get washed away by large-scale farming and pesticides wind up in human breast milk.

Philadelphia was quick to grasp the idea that changing food choices made sense on every level and would ripple out into the natural, cultural and economic systems. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the sustainable food movement is how quickly a community can create a local food economy. It doesn't take global agreements or Congressional legislation. There were two Philadelphia farmers' markets in the 1980s; now there are more than 20. Community Supported Agriculture, in which people buy shares of produce from a farm family before it is grown, which provides needed start-up money, is booming. Most important, city government has bolstered production of locally grown foods by creating distribution systems with restaurants, grocery stores, and by contracting with independent

<sup>5</sup> This article was based upon “Think Global, Eat Local” by Jim Robbins, which appeared in the Los Angeles Times Magazine on July 31, 2005. It was edited significantly by the research team to fit the needs of the research process and to more closely represent the frame the team wanted to test.

Respondents also mention pesticides and soil erosion as environmental concerns. “A lot of them are using pesticides, insecticides and that messes up your soil. It contaminates it to a certain extent,” explained an African American man from California. “We talked about the soil being washed away from mass production,” a Michigan woman described.

**Importantly, focus group participants quickly connect the environment and human health.** Even when “Eat Local” was the first article respondents read, as in Michigan, participants discussed the relationship between environment and health:

I'm certainly, as a grandmother, concerned that the pesticides end up in human breast milk. (Michigan woman)

This canned stuff you buy has got stuff, preservatives that make the kids hyper. (Michigan woman)

The mercury and the PCBs in the fish, and chicken crammed in cases about the size of paper; large hog farms polluting the watershed – that wasn't too appealing to me. It made me think more about health. (Michigan woman)

The minerals are taken out. A lot of the food has to have the minerals and vitamins put back in because the soil doesn't have the necessities to give that food the correct minerals. (Michigan man)

**After reading this article, the sense of inevitability fades away from the discussion and solutions sound more achievable.** Perhaps due to the specific example of success included in the article, respondents begin to talk more about what can be done. “It seems like if Philadelphia can make it work, maybe most cities in the country can make it work,” stated a college-educated man from South Carolina. Another college-educated South Carolina man noted that this article sounds more reasonable than the others: “It's explaining it in a better way. It offers more verified, statistical information that can be proven, not just his own personal agenda. And I think he just lays it out ‘this is how it is and these are real true facts.’ I just think it's coming from a factual point-of-view versus an agenda point-of-view.”

As the objectives begin to sound more achievable, participants shift their focus to considering how the world might look different with more emphasis on locally grown food. “You know what I think would happen?” a California man asked. “I think we'd have restaurants with much more varied menus because when corn wasn't in season, they would be using some other starch product that they could get locally.”

More importantly, they begin to consider the kinds of actions that would need to happen to change the food system. “I'm wondering in what ways the city government helps create the distribution center system it mentions here in the last paragraph,” a Michigan woman wondered. “Your local government has to be truly involved in trying to set up these small farmers with different companies. I think that would work,” a non-college-educated woman from Maryland remarked. “I think maybe somebody could approach, maybe individuals could approach the city commissioner, whoever the environmental person is, with the local officials and bring it to their attention that this has worked in Philadelphia and is this

something that Battle Creek could do or participate in or the state do within some area of the economy,” a Michigan woman suggested.

Of course some skepticism continues. One focus group participant described how the recommendations in the article do not fit with his stereotype of business owners’ motivations. “I think this puts forth some lofty principles and ideas but it just goes against human nature...to get restaurant owners to go buy corn from this local guy and this, most restaurant owners aren't concerned with that. They're concerned with where they can get it the cheapest, where they can get it the quickest. This is something that is going to be awfully difficult to push, in my opinion,” warned one California man.

**Focus group participants were very enthusiastic about the Community Supported Agriculture concept because it sounds like an approach that encourages community involvement and responsibility.** Focus group participants are attracted to community involvement, and believe it could be an effective solution. “Just working together in a community like that would be really nice,” stated a Latina from California. “I thought that it sounded like a good idea, if the community is involved and supports the local farmers so that everybody will benefit,” stated a college-educated woman from Maryland. “People buying shares of produce from the family farm to help them get started, that's an idea that kind of might work...But then again, how many people are going to do that?” asked a non-college-educated woman from Maryland.

**“Sustainable food” is a confusing term for most focus group participants. For a few, “sustainable food” conveys a meaning that may undermine policy objectives.** This article included a reference to “sustainable food”—a chain of supply and demand that theoretically could continue in perpetuity.” Most focus group participants have significant difficulty accurately explaining the meaning of the term “sustainable food.” A few provide explanations that are generally consistent with the meaning that advocates intend to convey. “Sustainable’ suggests something that is in balance,” a California man explained. “It keeps on putting out nutritious food. We haven't ruined our soil,” remarked a California woman. “Rome fell in a day. I would narrow his definition. Sustainable food is a way to produce food in a manner that doesn't cause the ecosystem that it's producing to collapse upon itself,” noted a Michigan man.

Others provide definitions of "sustainable food" that are completely irrelevant to the subject at hand. A Michigan man struggled to define the term as “something that would tie you over to the next meal. I've heard it said a lot of times when you eat Chinese food it's like as soon as you eat it you are hungry again. So when I think about a sustainable food, I think of something that would hold over a lot longer.”

Finally, while it was not a very common response, a few participants reacted to this term in ways that undermine the goals that advocates seek. One man suggested that “sustainable food” implies that farmers can sustain themselves without government support. “The term itself creates a direct contrast to the image of local farmers being supported by the government. It created this positive idea of local farmers supporting themselves and not having that outside help,” a college-educated man from South Carolina stated. Another

participant suggested that “sustainable” suggests farmland that is constantly producing food. “I think it's possible only in certain, select areas that has (sic) ideal climate, ideal soil conditions where you can keep this going. To me to try to do this in the whole United States, it is kind of like asking for a perpetual motion machine. It's not going to happen; it's impossible,” noted a Michigan man.

**Finally, while the cost concerns were somewhat less pronounced in response to this article, focus group participants continued to express concerns about the affordability of fresh foods.** Several African American respondents in California discuss cost concerns in the context of a social justice frame. “They should just make it so that people, people want to eat healthy but when you only have a little bit of money or you have six and seven kids, you can't afford to buy a bag of organic lettuce for \$7 and you can get the other at the regular supermarket, two for \$3. You want the best meat. They don't even make it so that you can even have that choice,” an African American woman from California remarked. “The dollar menu is very appealing. There is no money. I have three kids. They're hungry,” an African American woman from California described. “Three nuggets, three fries, happy meal, \$2; nobody can go get a turkey burger for \$5. It's not right.”

## **The International Economy Frame**

**“The Outsourcing of Food”<sup>6</sup> links the problems facing the United States agriculture industry to international competition and flaws in free-trade agreements. The intent of this article is to build an economic case for basing more food production in local communities. While informants are uncomfortable with relying upon other countries for food (mostly due to safety concerns), the International Economy Frame does little to build public support for changing the food system because it reminds people of the country’s economic vulnerability in a *number* of industries.**

**Foreign countries have fewer food safety controls, according to focus group participants.** Repeatedly during the course of the focus group conversations, participants stated that other nations do not put the same strict safety controls on food production as the United States. “By us buying all these products from foreign countries we really have lost the control over how these things are grown and what is used on them. Many of the pesticides that we have taken out of our own food chain are showing up in the food chain over there and they are shipping them back with the very same potentially damaging disease-producing things. We are losing our ability to feed ourselves,” a non-college-educated woman from South Carolina warned.

**The reference to Walmart distracts focus group participants from a more substantive conversation about the food system.** Instead, informants discuss the

**Tested in SC, MI**

### **The Outsourcing of Food**

By Joe Mason, Miami Herald  
October 2005

From the apple orchards of western Washington to the tomato fields of Florida to the potato heartland of Idaho, American farmers are battling a new kind of pest -- imports from international rivals who can produce essential foodstuffs cheaper than they can be grown here. After decades of being the world's top food producer, the US is falling behind Brazil which is expected to eclipse the U.S. as the number one food grower.

Call it the outsourcing of food. U.S. markets are being flooded with products that Americans are accustomed to growing themselves. An increasing percentage of the produce you buy at the grocery store comes from fields and orchards thousands of miles away. If you've had any apple juice lately, it's more than likely that the concentrate used to make it was produced in China. Those raspberries you love may have been grown in Chile, the tomatoes in Mexico, and the avocados in Central America.

Many farmers and academics say that a decade of free trade agreements is responsible for the plight facing U.S. agriculture. The new trade deals have reduced barriers to food imports, while technological improvements in refrigeration and irradiation have reduced the physical barriers to shipping food long distances without spoiling. All of which leaves the American food system on shaky ground.

By encouraging more food imports, corporations such as Cargill and ADM -- along with the major supermarket chains like Wal-Mart and food processors like Philip Morris's Nabisco -- keep their costs low and their profit margins high. The major food companies' first priority is cheap food, regardless of where it comes from, not what may be lost in taste, nutritional value, or economic development in the process.

Some are suggesting that it is time for communities to take control of local economies back from national and international companies, starting with food. Agriculture can be the cornerstone of a new approach to economic development according to The Institute for Local Self Reliance which has been working to promote self-sustaining community development using local resources. Shopping at a national chain retailer takes money out of the community according to one study that showed for every \$100 spent at a "big box" store, \$43 stays in the local community. That same \$100 spent at a local retailer will put \$68 back into the local community. Local retailers are more likely to buy from farmers in the same state, keeping

<sup>6</sup> This article drew heavily from “The Outsourcing of Food” by Mark Jason, which was posted on [Alternet](#) on October 6, 2005. It also drew from “Main Street Message: ‘Buy Locally’” by Bob Kalish, printed in the [Brunswick Times Record](#) on October 13, 2005. The article was written by the research team to fit the needs of the research process and to more closely represent the frame the team wanted to test.

disappearance of independent stores. “If we don't start buying from places like Lakeview Hardware, they won't be there any more. All we will have is the company store. Wal-Mart is going to rule the world,” argued a Michigan woman.

**Most important, when the primary frame is the international economy, focus group participants cannot distinguish their concerns about the food industry from their concerns about other industries. Jobs are being outsourced in every industry, they assert.**

Over and over, focus group participants reiterated that the problems facing the food industry are not unique:

*It's just not food that is being outsourced; it's everything. (Michigan woman)*

*You have a computer problem and you fix it in India for three hours. (Michigan woman)*

*My co-worker and I talk about it all the time. It's like pretty soon we're going to have to move to Mexico to get a job. (Michigan woman)*

*Outsourcing is a real hot button for me. I've lost three jobs because of it. (Michigan man)*

*I sat there and saw all of these companies opening up different places from Japan and Germany bringing over and starting factories here in the U.S.(sic) Everybody was talking about how great that was that they are getting this business. They're doing stuff here because we're their Mexico. The average wage over in Japan and Germany, they're like \$30 an hour. We were cheaper than they are. (Michigan man)*  
*I didn't take the article to be necessarily strictly about food...let's just pick one out of a dozen. It could be clothes, technology, computers, electronics, anything and this is what the U.S. is doing by free trade. We are building other countries at our own expense. (College-educated woman, South Carolina)*

*If you're not buying food that is bought here, or you are buying any type of product from another country, somebody that lives in the U.S. is not working...[and] may or may not end up on a social plan that your tax money is going to support. (College-educated woman, South Carolina)*

**The obvious solution, according to focus group participants, is to buy American and convince companies to stop outsourcing.** When asked for a solution, a Michigan woman responded, “Stop exporting jobs. You can't give all the jobs to these other countries and expect the United States to still remain number 1. Don't outsource.” “Companies need to realize that the bottom line isn't the dollar; it's the people. And if the people here aren't making money, they're not going to spend any money either,” a Michigan woman noted. Some struggled with how to translate a “buy American” mindset to food purchases. “It dawned on me, how would I know that it came from China, Brazil, Chile? Is it labeled like clothes?” a college-educated woman from South Carolina asked.

**In fact, the International Economy Frame may undermine consumer actions to change the system because people begin to feel even more economically insecure.** When people are feeling economically insecure, they are less willing to spend more

money on food. Therefore, they want to create a food system that costs less, not more. “Dad's job has been outsourced and you've got a family of five, your choice is you either eat or you don't eat. Organic may not be the option because organic may mean you've got children barely getting food or you spread the money to be able to put more food in their mouth. It's a lose-lose situation. Either you make sure they've got food in their stomach at night or they don't,” asserted a non-college-educated woman from South Carolina.

## The Economy Frame

**After testing the International Economy Frame in four focus groups, the researchers adapted the article to put less emphasis on outsourcing and more emphasis on federal subsidies and local economic development. “The Economics of Food”<sup>7</sup> tries to position local food production as an economic development issue and highlight changes in federal subsidies as an effective solution. Even with these changes, the Economic Frame continues to be weak. Instead of a compelling economic case for local farming, to many it sounds like a call for charity for small farmers. When they think about the economics of food, informants are much more likely to think about food cost and families in poverty. While most become concerned about food independence, Latino respondents are more likely to worry about the fate of poor people in other countries if the US stops buying food internationally.**

**Most informants want to support small, local farmers, but the Economic Frame does little to cue that perspective.** As noted earlier, most focus group participants prefer supporting small farmers. However, when asked to provide an economic rationale, they cannot. When asked to explain why small farms provide more economic benefit than large farms, an African American man from California replied, “Well, tell the person that is starving in Africa that. He doesn't care. He wants to fill his stomach up, so maybe it is good to a certain degree that they can produce it like that. They need to feed us.”

### Tested in CA, MD

#### The Economics of Food

By Mark Smith, Chicago Sun Times  
October 2005

Problematically, an increasing percentage of the produce you buy at the grocery store comes from fields and orchards thousands of miles away. If you've had any apple juice lately, it's more than likely that the concentrate used to make it was produced in China. Those raspberries you love may have been grown in Chile, the chicken in Maryland, and the avocados in Florida. On average, the food on your plate probably traveled more than 1,500 miles.

Many farmers and academics say that a decade of free trade agreements is responsible for the globalization of food. The new trade deals have reduced barriers to food imports, while technological improvements in refrigeration and irradiation have reduced the physical barriers to shipping food long distances without spoiling.

Government farm subsidies are part of the problem as well. Since the end of World War II, the federal government has subsidized certain commodities that were considered core to the prosperity of large US farms: sugar, corn, soybeans, wheat, and cotton were subsidized by government, even when they met a loss in the market system. This has led to the idea that the only way to keep farming was to become a huge industrial farms that are subsidized to produce sugar and corn in bulk, while small and mid-size farms that produce a variety of foods like fruits and vegetables struggle to survive economically with few, if any, subsidies. The end result is an increasing consolidation of farming by global corporations.

Some are suggesting that it is time for communities to take control of local economies, starting with food. Agriculture can be the cornerstone of a new approach to economic development according to The Institute for Local Self Reliance which has been working to promote self-sustaining community development using local resources. According to Bill Palladino, a small-business development specialist in Michigan, “We know that small and mid-size farms are a core economy for our region. The value-added ag economy is based locally, uses local resources, and takes those resources and extends them to the marketplace here. It has a ripple effect throughout the state.”

How do we shift to more local food production? By shifting the money. Our government now subsidizes the commodity production of grain - mostly corn and soybeans. We need to pull local farmers out of the commodity trap and help them make the transition to growing the kinds of whole foods - fruits and vegetables - that would benefit both local economies and local

<sup>7</sup> This article drew from “The Outsourcing of Food” by Mark Jason, which was posted on Altnet on October 6, 2005. The article was written by the research team to fit the needs of the research process and to represent the frame the team wanted to test.

In fact, many believe that large farms would be more beneficial to a local economy. “Places like that [large farms] more people would be hired in the community to work there. It would help the community... More people would be hired and things would be kept locally,” explained a college-educated woman from Maryland.

**Food Independence becomes a significant concern.** Focus group participants worry about becoming dependent on foreign countries for the nation's food. “If all of a sudden we're bringing in food from everywhere else instead of growing it right here, we end up with a president that doesn't like another country, we end up having a conflict with them... I don't like the idea of being totally dependent on everyone else in the world. It's out of our control,” noted a California man.

**Latino respondents are among the most resistant to the information contained in this article.** During the course of their group conversation, California Latinos raised several concerns about taking actions that could damage economies in developing countries. “The arguments against free trade are saying that those people that we're getting these raspberries from, from Chile, are not exactly -- their economy is not blossoming. If anything it is being hurt because the prices are being driven lower and lower. And so in turn their production needs to be driven lower and lower,” cautioned a Latina from California. “Somewhere around [the world] it would hurt somebody,” noted a California Latina.

**In response to this article, informants were particularly concerned that placing more emphasis on locally grown food would limit food choices.** To a certain extent, focus group participants assume that those promoting locally grown food expect that a region would produce all of its own food. A California Latina suggested that even Californians would face restrictions: “I would think we're more equipped to grow just about anything than anywhere else, but we would still be limited.” “It's such a mixed variety of things that we like, that we're used to. It would be hard to change. If we were just going to eat stuff grown in California, we'd be limited to a lot of things,” added a California Latina. “I think we could survive on anything we could produce. We just wouldn't be able to eat the Maine lobster or the whatever from wherever. You would eat less; you wouldn't have the choices you have,” asserted a California Latina.

**While the intent of the article is to make a sound economic case for local agriculture, many respondents interpret the article as a sympathetic cry for help for family farms.** To many, this article sounds like a plea to save the family farm which they interpret as a charitable act, not one that is in their economic self-interest. “The real point is the family farmer is already a myth,” stated a California man. “It's so hard economically for the small guy to start because he's eaten up by the corporation. Mom and pop stores are gone because of the big mergers. It's inevitable,” suggested a California Latina. “Pastures are condos,” added another California Latina.

**Cheap food prices are an economic benefit, not more family farms in their region.** Therefore, some argue that removing subsidies is the solution, not more subsidies. “I think the subsidies should go away in an orderly manner so there is not mass chaos, but at the end of the day you should be able to compete on your own. If the small farmer can or

can't make it, in my mind that's what has to happen,” stated a California man. “We outsource a lot of things. Look at your Dell computer. You're talking to somebody in India. I think it's just the opposite. It's cheaper the way we're doing it now,” noted a California Latino.

Even if the economics made some sense, family farms are fading away in part because children do not want to stay on the farm, according to respondents. “We sit behind computers and use our brains and think all the time. We're not going to go do manual labor,” noted a college-educated woman from Maryland. “The young people are going to college getting an education. A lot are getting out of the agra-business and doing something else. So therefore, you see all these houses going up, all the farm land is disappearing, and in some kind of way we need to put a moratorium on that and maybe we can keep some of that,” stated a California man.

**Respondents find the health arguments more compelling than the economic arguments presented in this article.** The Economic Frame fares the worst when it is the first article presented to focus group participants. Without the benefit of the information presented in the Nutrition and Environment frames, those who are trying to defend the article are forced to rely on a “family farms teach kids good values” argument:

*Okay, maybe it would take a major change to get back to small farms and to family farms. Okay, but let's look at what was happening at that time, and is that something that is so offensive to people? You brought up families working on the farm. You learn responsibility; you learn how to take care of other people. You learn how to take care of other living things. Those are some values that lots of kids aren't getting, lots of people aren't getting. There are far more advantages here besides just the economic advantages. And I'm certainly not saying we should do this tomorrow. I'm saying we need to look at this when we're evaluating this. Just because we think something is progress doesn't really mean it's better for us.*

(California man)

In contrast, respondents in Maryland who were exposed to the Nutrition Frame prior to the Economic Frame, are more likely to incorporate health arguments to argue for change. “The bottom line is it's time to get these vegetables and foods back on the farm. It's healthier. All these chemicals and junk they're putting in these vegetables and these meats and stuff, it's going to kill us. It's not healthy,” stated a non-college-educated man from Maryland. “I'm curious in other countries how healthy they are compared to how much local food they really eat... I was more sick when I got home than I was the whole time I was in Costa Rica. I don't know if that is because it was local or what I was eating. It was a lot of rice, fresh fish, fresh chicken, vegetables which I don't eat at home and my body just freaked out when I got back. So I'd be curious to find out what the difference in that is,” a college-educated woman from Maryland wondered.

## Conclusions

While few demonstrate any significant understanding of the nation's food system, most informants are engaged and interested in further learning which suggests to this researcher that a public dialogue is possible on this topic. Developing an effective frame that will build support for changing the nation's food production system will require the following elements:

- 1) a demonstration that it is possible to improve the system,
- 2) a chain of connections between choices in food production and consequences in nutrition and/or food safety,
- 3) motivational values such as future, protection, stewardship, and reciprocity or giving back to the community, and
- 4) a role for government and citizen action that will result in change.

In other words, communicators need to see this as an effort to educate the public: explain how the food system works, how choices in production have consequences for human health, and how policy can be effective in improving the system. This educational process differs from a campaign process which identifies an enemy, attaches negative motivations to the enemy, and tries to develop enough support on one "side" of an issue to defeat the "other side."

## About the Author

Meg Bostrom, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a frequent FrameWorks collaborator and a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her experiences as communicator, opinion analyst, advertising executive, and political consultant. Meg started her career as a political pollster, consulting for nonprofit groups, political candidates, foundations, and national associations. She then served as Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning at the advertising agency Trahan, Burden and Charles, where she was responsible for determining communications strategy for corporate and non-profit clients. Meg founded Public Knowledge to serve as a bridge between public opinion research and communications strategy. Public Knowledge uses public opinion data to develop communications strategy that will advance public understanding of, and support for, public policies to address social issues, including the environment, children, foreign policy, healthcare, and the working poor. A Chicago native, she received her bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois, and holds a master's degree from the University of Connecticut.

**Appendix:**

**New Mexico Guide  
Guide Template for all other States**

## Focus Group Guide New Mexico

### I) Introduction (10 minutes)

- A) Standard intro – audio taping, talk one at a time, not vested, etc.
- B) Let's go around and introduce ourselves: say your name, a bit about yourself, what you like to do for fun.

### II) Food Images and Associations (30 minutes)

We have a very interesting topic tonight, a topic we all know something about – food.

- A) (**Collaging exercise** – Using a few dozen pictures from magazine, explore the images that come to mind.) I have here several pictures that I cut out from magazines. I want you to think for a moment about “food” and see what images come into your mind. Pick a picture here that symbolizes what you think or feel when you think of food. I want what food means to you, not a picture of food. Let me give you an example on a different subject. (Give example.)
  - 1) Before we discuss that picture, let's do one more. Now I'd like you to pick an image that comes to mind when you think of the food system.
  - 2) Discuss food images.
  - 3) Discuss food system images.
  
- B) Describe the food system to me. Take something specific, let's say a carrot, and walk me through the system that brings a carrot to me.
  - 1) In that system that we just described, what kinds of things can happen along the way that will influence the success or failure of the system?
  - 2) What kinds of choices or decisions can influence success or failure? By government, by industry, by local municipalities?
  - 3) How is today's food system different than it was 100 years ago?
    - (a) Fifty years ago?
    - (b) When you look forward 100 years, will the food system be different? In what ways?
  
- C) Now, imagine that you are standing in front of a bin of several batches of strawberries. There are signs over each section to describe the strawberries. Up on the easel I've written what each sign says. Take a minute and write down for me what you think about as you look at each sign. What are your immediate, top-of-mind thoughts when you look at each sign?
  - Strawberries
  - Locally-grown Strawberries
  - Organic Strawberries
  - Strawberries from Chile
  - Strawberries with extra Vitamin C added
  - 1) Discuss associations with each sign.
  - 2) Why did that come to mind?
  - 3) Does that make you more or less likely to purchase those strawberries? How come?

**III) Level Two Category Associations (40 minutes)**

Let's talk some more about the food system.

- A) Have you seen or heard anything in the news recently about issues facing the food system? What have you seen?
- B) Think for a moment about the relationship between food and health. How does the food system affect our health?
- 1) How does it affect nutrition? Listen for:
    - (a) Factory farming creates less nutritious meats, poor quality animal nutrition, unhealthy animal environment, etc.
    - (b) Processing harms nutritional value/processing adds nutrients
  - 2) How does it affect susceptibility to illness?
    - (a) Food additives that harm health, trans fats, antibiotics, hormones, etc.
    - (b) Pasteurization and other processes reduces likelihood of disease
    - (c) Who is responsible for making sure the food you eat is healthy?
- C) Think about the relationship between food and our economy. How does the food system affect our economy?
- 1) How does it influence the price of food?
    - (a) Government subsidies
    - (b) Corporate farming results in cheaper food, international competition
    - (c) Small farms squeezed out by monopolistic corporations
  - 2) What about farms? Does it make a difference to our economy if food is produced by small family farms or large corporate farms?
  - 3) Who is responsible for making sure that small farms are economically viable and can compete against agri-business?
- D) Think about the relationship between food and the environment. How does the way we produce food influence the environment?
- 1) How do farms help or hurt the environment? (small vs. corporate)
    - (a) Pesticides, herbicides, growth hormones, antibiotics, pollution, genetically altered foods, transportation pollution, etc.
  - 2) Does it make a difference if farms focus on just one type of food or have more diversity in food? For example, just raising chickens, or just growing soybeans, compared to raising and growing several different kinds of food.
  - 3) Who is responsible for making sure the food we eat is safe, and environmentally friendly?

- E) Does it make a difference if most food is grown locally – in your state or region – or not?
- 1) Does it affect nutrition?
  - 2) Does it affect the local economy and community?
  - 3) Does it affect the price of food?
  - 4) Does it affect the environment?
  - 5) What does “locally” mean to you?
  - 6) I was reading the other day that our food is increasingly being transported over very long distances. So the chicken you buy might be raised in Maryland. Or the grapes you buy might be grown in South America.
    - (a) What’s your reaction to that?
    - (b) What is the downside of basing a system on foods transported long distances rather than producing most food locally?
- F) There are a variety of considerations that have to be taken into account in the development of any food system. As we look at ways to improve our food system, think about which of these considerations should have the most priority, second most, etc. Rank order them from first to last in term of their importance.
- HAND OUT
- A system that provides inexpensive food
  - A system that does not harm the environment
  - A system that provides an abundance of food
  - A system that is profitable
  - A system that provides healthy, nutritious food
  - A system that is sustainable for the long-term
  - A system that encourages local food production
  - A system that offers a lot of choice and variety of food
  - A system that can continue to produce food for several generations
- 1) Count how many chose each as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>.
  - 2) Discuss each.
    - (a) Why is that important?
    - (b) Does our current system achieve that objective?
    - (c) What should change for the system to improve in that area?
- G) Let’s do something a bit different. We’re going to break up into groups of two. I’ll assign. We’ll all listen as each pair discusses some aspect of the food system. One of you will explain to the other why the food system needs to put more priority on a particular objective. The other will ask questions, add comments, or disagree – just like you would if you were having this conversation with a friend and neighbor.
- 1) Pair 1 – healthy, nutritious food
  - 2) Pair 2 – local food production
  - 3) Pair 3 – environmentally conscious food production
  - 4) Pair 4 – continue to produce for several generations

**IV) News and Policies (15 minutes)**

- A) Let me toss out some ideas that have been suggested to address some of the issues facing the food system. For each, ask:
- 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) What problem does that solve?
  - 3) What are the downsides of that policy?
- Provide labeling and other information to allow consumers to make choices based on where and how food was produced
  - Expand distribution channels for locally-grown and organic food
  - Shift agriculture subsidies away from industrial farms to small, family farms
  - Change school menus by eliminating sodas and sugary snacks
  - Change school menus by adding salad bars emphasizing locally-grown, organic food
  - Shift government loan support from corporate fast food and unhealthy food systems, to independently-owned restaurants serving local, organic food (may be an opportunity to probe for "slow food").
- B) When you look across these policies, which do you think is most important? Why?

**V) Wrap Up (5 minutes)**

Honestly, how important is this issue to you really? Why?

What do you think needs to be done?

Of all the things we talked about tonight, what do you most remember? What stands out?

## Focus Group Guide Perceptions of Food

### VI) Introduction (15 minutes)

- A) Standard intro – audio taping, talk one at a time, not vested, etc.
- B) Let's go around and introduce ourselves: say your name, a bit about yourself, what you like to do for fun.

### VII) Level Two Category Associations (60 minutes)

We have a really interesting topic for tonight. We are going to review three different articles that each have something different to say about the nation's food production and distribution system.

#### ROTATE ARTICLES ACROSS GROUPS

- A) Read "Farming for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

  - 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) What's the main point of the article?
  - 3) How does it make you feel?
  - 4) What should be done about this problem?
  - 5) Anything confusing about this article?
  - 6) Who is responsible for making sure that the food infrastructure is sound?

  
- B) Read "The Economics of Food" article.

  - 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) What's the main point of the article?
  - 3) How does it make you feel?
  - 4) What should be done about this problem?
  - 5) Anything confusing about this article?
  - 6) This article talks about the relationship between food and our economy. How does the food system affect our economy?
    - (a) How does the economy influence the price of food?
      - (a) Government subsidies
      - (b) Corporate farming results in cheaper food, international competition
      - (c) Small farms squeezed out by monopolistic corporations
    - (b) What about farms? Does it make a difference to our economy if food is produced by small family farms or large corporate farms, if it is local vs. shipped?
    - (c) Who is responsible for making sure that local farms are economically viable and can compete against agri-business?

  
- C) Read "Eat Local" article.

  - 1) What's your reaction?
  - 2) What's the main point of the article?
  - 3) How does it make you feel?
  - 4) What should be done about this problem?
  - 5) Anything confusing about this article?

- 6) This article talks about the relationship between food and the environment. How does the way we produce food influence the environment?
- (a) How do farms help or hurt the environment? (local, organic, etc.)
    - (a) Pesticides, herbicides, growth hormones, antibiotics, pollution, genetically altered foods, transportation pollution, etc.
    - (b) Who is responsible for making sure the food we eat is safe, and environmentally friendly?
- D) Read “Food Without Fear” article.
- 1) What’s your reaction?
  - 2) What’s the main point of the article?
  - 3) How does it make you feel?
  - 4) What should be done about this problem?
  - 5) Anything confusing about this article?
  - 6) This article talks about the relationship between food production and health. How does the food production system affect our health?
    - (a) How does it affect nutrition? Listen for:
      - (a) Factory farming creates less nutritious meats, poor quality animal nutrition, unhealthy animal environment, etc.
      - (b) Production harms nutritional value
    - (b) Does it make a difference if farms focus on just one type of food or have more diversity in food? For example, just raising chickens, or just growing soybeans, compared to raising and growing several different kinds of food.
    - (c) How does it affect susceptibility to illness?
      - (a) Food additives that harm health, trans fats, antibiotics, hormones, etc.
      - (b) Obesity
      - (c) CDC has said it is a national problem – health care system is carrying the price tag for the cheap, fast, fatty foods that are now common in the American diet.
      - (d) Pasteurization and other processes reduces likelihood of disease
      - (e) Who is responsible for making sure the food you eat is healthy?
- E) These articles talk about the benefits of local food production. Does it make a difference if most food is grown locally – in your state or region – or not?
- 1) Does it affect nutrition?
  - 2) Does it affect the local economy and community?
  - 3) Does it affect energy use?
  - 4) Does it affect the price of food?
  - 5) Does it affect the environment?
  - 6) What does “locally” mean to you?
  - 7) What is the downside of basing a system on foods transported long distances rather than producing most food locally?

### VIII) Developing a Food System (30 minutes)

- A) There are a variety of considerations that have to be taken into account in the development of any food system. As we look at ways to improve our food system, think about which of these considerations should have the most priority, second most, etc. Rank order them from first to last in term of their importance.

#### HAND OUT

- A system that provides inexpensive food
  - A system that does not harm the environment
  - A system that provides an abundance of food
  - A system that is profitable for small and mid-size farmers
  - A system that provides healthy, nutritious food
  - A system that is sustainable for the long-term
  - A system that encourages local food production
  - A system that offers a lot of choice and variety of food
  - A system that can continue to produce food for several generations
- 1) Count how many chose each as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>.
  - 2) Discuss each.
    - (a) Why is that important?
    - (b) Does our current system achieve that objective?
    - (c) What should change for the system to improve in that area?
- B) Now let's develop our own food production system. Coming out of the Great Depression and the second World War, the national government designed a food system that was geared to grow certain commodities that were considered core to the prosperity of large US farms: sugar, corn, wheat, and cotton were subsidized by government, even when they met a loss in the market system. And incentives were put in place that encouraged more dependence on chemicals and machines to produce large volumes of food. That system, most economists and agricultural experts agrees, is now outdated. It no longer meets the needs of the US public, the food system nor does it produce useful products and stable markets. Let's say we have just been appointed by the governor of the state to make recommendations on ways that the state can change food production to meet different criteria. We are going to use a variety of tools at our disposal to shape the food system in particular ways. I have here a list of just some tools that we can use, like government incentives or loans, investments in technology, state contracts and so on. We can make up more.
- 1) Now, let's develop a new kind of food system—one that emphasizes locally grown, nutritious, environmentally sound practices
    - (a) Which of these policies would help us do that?
    - (b) Any other ways we would recommend for state action to get to a food system based on locally grown, nutritious, environmentally sound practices?

- Sample Policies (write on easel)
- Help farmers change to producing products for local markets
  - Labeling and other information to consumers
  - Incentives to distributors
  - Advertising restrictions
  - Advertising incentives
  - Better conditions and pay migrant and other farm farmers
  - Environmental regulations
  - Technology that will increase production or reduce spoilage
  - Trade relationships with other countries
  - Contracts for school menus, hospitals, and other government-sponsored institutions
  - Technology for genetically modified foods
  - Government loan support

**IX) Wrap Up (5 minutes)**

Honestly, how important is this issue to you really? Why?

What do you think needs to be done?

Of all the things we talked about tonight, what do you most remember? What stands out?