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Local Market Opportunities For Treasure Valley Farmers: Results of an Institutional Buyers' Survey and Enterprise Budgets

What was the study about?

This report identifies opportunities and obstacles for small- and medium-sized agricultural producers to sell products to institutional buyers in southern Idaho's Treasure Valley. The report describes findings from a survey of institutional food buyers and enterprise budgets for selected crops identified by the survey as most promising. These included apples, leaf lettuce, peppers, strawberries, and tomatoes.

How was the buyers' survey designed?

Thirteen Treasure Valley institutional food buyers were interviewed from late January to early March 2012. Our sample included three types of buyers: school districts; food service contractors; and other autonomous food buyers (defined as institutions whose employees manage food purchasing for the institution, e.g. restaurants). Interview questions focused on current purchases of local food products, advantages and disadvantages of buying from local producers, and interest in future purchases of local products. Because respondents were selected based on our prior knowledge of their interest in local foods, the sample does not represent all institutional buyers in the Treasure Valley.

What did we learn?

Interest in Purchasing Local Foods. There is a great deal of interest in all 12 of the local food products we covered in our interviews, especially tomatoes, beef, and apples. Sizable purchases of some products are already occurring.

Barriers to Purchasing Local Foods. Availability and seasonality are both significant barriers for institutional food buyers who want to purchase more local foods. Most respondents indicated that they would purchase more local food if farmers extended their growing season.

Food Safety and Liability. Most survey respondents require their vendors to carry a food safety certification. Food safety is especially important for institutions that serve vulnerable populations, such as children and the elderly or infirm. About half of respondents require their vendors to carry liability insurance, but those who do not said this will become a requirement in the future.

Enterprise Budgets. Three of the five enterprise budgets (leaf lettuce, tomatoes, and peppers) showed a net profit for farmers and all five crops have the potential to be profitable if additional changes to production practices or access to new markets develops.

What are the next steps?

Opportunities exist in the Treasure Valley for agricultural producers to sell their products to institutional buyers. Although our sample was not large enough to yield detailed estimates of institutional demand for local products, results suggest that opportunities exist for small-scale producers to make a profit by selling locally. Public and private non-profit organizations such as University of Idaho Extension, Idaho State Department of Agriculture, and the Treasure Valley Food Coalition can play a pivotal role in growing these markets through programming, research, and outreach activities.

¹ Contact the author or visit www.uidaho.edu/communitypartnerships for the complete research report on which this brief is based.