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Research Brief #5

What Do People Want to Know About Their Food? Measuring Central Coast Consumers' Interest in Food Systems Issues

When it comes to buying groceries, "voting with your dollar" is beginning to make a difference—consumers are increasingly able to change the way food is produced, processed, transported, or sold through their purchasing decisions. The continued growth of the organic food industry is just one example of the way that consumer choices are driving food production and marketing strategies.

Despite consumers' potential to influence the food system, very few studies have attempted to find out what people want to know about how their food is produced, processed, brought to market, and sold, or what criteria would influence their purchasing decisions. Most consumer research related to food and agriculture is conducted by organizations with specific interests, such as the promotion of a particular crop or type of production. Researchers typically decide what people ought to know about a topic or product, and then proceed to measure their knowledge (or lack of knowledge) to identify where education and marketing efforts should be targeted. Such an approach may risk missing what the public actually *wants* to know about their food—information that could help growers, processors, and retailers better meet consumer needs.

As part of a study on the California Central Coast's food systems, social science researchers from the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California, Santa Cruz asked consumers what aspects of food production, processing, transportation, and retailing they were most interested in knowing more about.

Our research involved two phases—a series of 5 focus groups, and a random sample mail survey of 1,000 households. A focus group is a structured roundtable discussion with a small group of people (usually 6 to 10) designed to elicit in-depth information. Focus group participants were recruited in person from two large supermarket chains, a discount grocery store, a farmers' market, and a natural foods store. These sites were chosen in order to ensure a diverse group of participants that reflected the population in this region. Food system topics identified by focus group members formed the basis of the written survey. Both components of the study were conducted in the Central Coast region, which includes San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey Counties.[1]

FOOD SYSTEM INTERESTS

Only 15.8% of survey respondents felt they already knew enough about their food, and 59.8% felt they did not know enough (table 1). A majority of respondents, 59%, agreed that it is difficult to find this information. These results point to a need for growers, processors, and retailers to provide consumers with more details about their products.

Table 1. Food system information needs

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral/ Not Sure
I already know enough about how my food is grown, processed, transported, and/or sold	15.8%	59.8%	24.4%
It is difficult to find out information about how my food is grown, processed, transported and/or sold	59.0%	12.6%	28.4%

Eight food system-related topics were identified as themes that interested the focus groups; these topics were then presented in the written survey (table 2). Not surprisingly, the scores indicated that survey respondents were most interested in safety and nutrition; nearly all respondents ranked these topics near the top of a scale from 1 to 10. A number of surveys have consistently shown these to be important concerns, even for those with few other food-related interests.[2,3] One focus group participant highlighted this fact when stating, "Who knows what the heck is in half the stuff we buy, I mean I don't … Frankly, I don't care as long as it doesn't get me sick."

This was a minority view, however, as most focus group participants also had a number of concerns beyond their personal health. The survey results supported this broader concern. Treatment of animals involved in food production, environmental impacts, and working

Table 2. Level of interest in food system-related topic. Score of 10 equals great amount of interest, 1 equals none at all.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Safety	9.4	1.4
Nutrition	8.9	1.7
Treatment of animals	7.4	2.7
Environmental impacts	7.3	2.4
Working conditions	7.2	2.6
Wages	6.7	2.7
Influence of large corporations	6.6	2.9
How far food travels	5.8	3.1

conditions all received an average score of greater than 7 (table 2).

In the focus groups, the treatment of animals elicited the most emotion. Several participants had toured slaughterhouses and said this experience had a lasting effect on them. Others had changed their consumption habits after learning of the way some animals are treated, such as veal calves. For some people the interest in animal welfare may also overlap with personal health concerns. For example, a focus group participant discussing the inhumane aspects of confinement animal production asked, "then are you eating growth hormone and … or whatever you're putting in them, and what does that do? I mean, in the long run you know, what's that doing to you?"

On the issue of environmental impacts, focus group participants most frequently expressed concerns related to pesticides and genetic engineering. Some participants were also concerned about irradiation and the impacts of food packaging or food waste. Several participants noted that environmental impacts were much more important to them when compared to other concerns about the food system.

On the topic of working conditions and wages, focus group participants were interested in the treatment of farm workers, such as the backbreaking labor performed for very low pay, and the exploitation of migrant workers. Workers involved in other aspects of the food system, such as processing or retail, were not discussed as frequently. When asked specifically to list criteria they would like to see improved for workers involved in the food system, focus group participants mentioned higher wages, protection from pesticide exposure, health care, education, adequate food, limited working hours, and adequate housing.

The influence of large corporations had an average score of 6.6. This theme emerged in all of the focus groups, though it was much more strongly held by some individuals. One participant said, "The huge conglomerates that are controlling agriculture really, really bother me," and others named specific multinational food processors and chemical companies whose motives they distrusted. Some participants blamed these corporations for the low prices that farmers receive for their products and the loss of family farms.

How far food travels was the lowest-ranked topic on the survey, with a score of 5.8. Focus group participants had various reasons for their interest in this topic, involving economic, food safety, or environmental concerns. Most focus group participants wanted to know the country of origin of their food. "I guess I'd like to know [where fruits and vegetables are from] because I'd like to know are we producing our food or are we actually reaching out into other countries?" said one participant. Some participants wanted to support the U.S. economy, while others went further and expressed interest in supporting their local economies. Another stated reason for wanting this information was concern about the safety of imported food, such as the presence of pesticides banned in the U.S. or contamination with microbial diseases. Finally, some participants wanted to know how much fossil fuel was consumed in transporting their food.

Of 60 survey respondents who identified additional topics in a write-in section, 22% had reservations about genetically engineered food, and 15% wanted more information on pesticides. Other interests identified by more than one respondent were freshness, where food was grown, and the fate of food waste.

PREFERRED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

We also wanted to know the formats that people would choose to obtain more information about their food, and asked members of the focus groups which ones they preferred. The categories in table 3 represent the themes that emerged. These information source options were then presented to survey respondents, along with instructions to choose up to 4.

Table 3. Preferred sources of information

Product labels	81.3%
Brochure or retail display	76.4%
Newspapers/magazines/books	51.4%
Web pages/the Internet	46.1%
TV/videotape/DVD	26.3%
Tours of farms and/or processing plants	18.7%
Radio	13.4%
Talking to seller	11.8%

Product labels were the most popular choice for obtaining more information about food, selected by 81.3% of survey respondents. A brochure or retail display was a close second at 76.4%. These results suggest that consumers want information about food when they are actually making their purchasing decisions. Print media and web-based information were selected by approximately half of respondents. A number of focus group participants expressed an interest in labels, but also wanted more detailed information via a website.

RANKING PRODUCTION STANDARDS

A recent trend in food marketing is an increase in the number of "eco-labels"—seals or logos that signify that the product meets certain standards. These standards may include environmental protection or other criteria, such as social responsibility. Organic, which in 2002 became a national standard accredited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is currently the most prominent eco-label. Organic food sales have increased by at least 20% a year for the last 15 years, a trend that is expected to continue.

Focus group participants wanted information on an eco-label to be in "plain English" and easily understood. They also emphasized that any label had to "mean what it says." They were very skeptical of claims made about their food, particularly those that were not well defined, such as "natural." A third party certification system is one way to ensure consumer confidence in claims, although focus group participants were not very familiar with the process. Education about how third party certification works may be necessary to overcome current levels of consumer distrust in food marketers.

We asked survey respondents to evaluate five potential standards that could be represented by third party certified eco-labels. These standards were based on the themes that emerged from the focus groups. We did not include criteria related to safety or nutrition because making claims in these areas can be very contentious given the current state of scientific knowledge. We also excluded environmental criteria, because most of the issues raised by focus group participants related to this topic, such as pesticides and genetic engineering, were already prohibited under the USDA Organic label. The resulting standards were–

Humane: meat, dairy products, or eggs from animals that haven't been treated cruelly

Living wage: provides above-poverty wages to workers involved in producing the food

Locally grown: grown within 50 miles of point of purchase

Small-scale: supports small farms or businesses

U.S. grown: grown in the United States

Because most focus group participants were concerned about both workers' wages and working conditions, for simplicity we chose just one of these topics. We selected a living wage because it was discussed more frequently in the focus groups. For the distance food travels, on the other hand, some members of the focus groups wanted to support local food production, while others were more interested in purchasing food that was not imported from other countries, and we distinguished these criteria.

We asked respondents to imagine a product that was identical except for two of the standards, and to choose the one that they preferred (i.e., locally grown OR humane). All possible combinations were presented in a series of pairs. The result was a ranking of all five standards for each respondent (table 4). We learned from pre-testing the survey that these decisions were very difficult for most people. Many respondents said they would prefer food that represented all of these standards.

Table 4. Ranking of standards criteria

Humane	30.5%
Locally grown	22.0%
Living wage	16.5%
U.S. grown	5.9%
Small-scale	5.2%

"Humane" was most often the top-ranked choice; it was chosen in every comparison by over 30% of respondents. Although not yet widespread, there are three humane labels in the U.S.: 1) the Animal Welfare Institute's Humane Husbandry criteria for pigs, rabbits, and ducks, are used by over 300 operations; 2) "Free Farmed" is administered by the American Humane Association for 5 operations; 3) "Certified Humane," which is partially funded by The Humane Society of the United States, currently certifies 15 operations.

Although interest in how far food travels was not as highly rated as other topics (see table 1), locally grown was the second most preferred of the five potential eco-labels. This may be due to the fact that people prefer local products for other attributes, such as taste and freshness. The non-profit organization FoodRoutes has partnered with organizations across the United States to implement "Buy Local" initiatives, some of which include local eco-labels. In California, the local partner Community Alliance with Family Farmers has a "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign. Participating farmers and retailers display a label that denotes the food was grown in either the Central Coast or Sacramento Valley of California.

Living wage was the first choice of 16.5% of respondents. Currently, consumers interested in a living wage label can seek out the "Black Eagle" label. This label identifies produce from farms that have contracts with the United Farm Workers Union, which indicates "decent wages, benefits and working conditions."[4] However, only 27 food-producing operations in the United States carry this label.

An additional survey question asked respondents about their willingness to pay a price premium for strawberries that would guarantee a living wage and safe working conditions for farmworkers. After being told the regular price was $1.50 a pint, they were asked if they would pay 5 cents to $1.50 more for these standards, depending upon the version of the survey. The median price that people were willing to pay was $1.06, or a 71% increase over the regular price. Eighty-four percent of respondents were willing to pay a 3% increase of 5 cents. These figures indicate that there is consumer support for a domestic version of "fair trade" certified foods (see sidebar, next page), particularly if the price premium is small. Based on a typical piece rate for strawberry pickers of 10.5 to 12.5 cents per pint, increasing the price of a pint of strawberries by 5 cents could fund a 40% or greater increase in piece rate pay.

Labels indicating U.S. grown and small-scale received much less support than the other options; they were the first choice of fewer than 6% of respondents. This does not mean that respondents see these criteria as unimportant, only that they ranked them lower than the other criteria when forced to choose. U.S. grown, in particular, fared poorly in comparison with another geographic criteria, locally grown. However, a recent survey reported 86% of consumers

The Fair Trade Eco-Label

Another eco-label enjoying rapid growth is "Fair Trade." Fair trade is a term that applies only to select, **imported** products that are certified in the U.S. by a non-profit organization, Transfair USA. The standards ensure that grower cooperatives receive a minimum price, or that workers are paid a fair wage. Although the market share is much smaller than organic (which itself comprises less than 2% of total food sales), sales of fair trade products such as coffee and tea increased by more than 40% in the U.S. from 2001 to 2002,[6] and have recently expanded to include fruits, such as bananas.

Participants in the focus groups were all familiar with the organic label, but most were unfamiliar with fair trade labels. Almost everyone, even those who could define fair trade and reported purchasing fair trade products, easily confused the term with "free trade." Free trade generally refers to treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminates certain tariffs for imported goods but does not provide a minimum price or wage.

favored country-of-origin labeling for fresh produce.[5] Interestingly, the focus group participants had more trust in operations that were local, even if they were very large, which may partially explain why support for small-scale criteria ranked last.

PURCHASING BEHAVIORS

As part of the survey we asked respondents whether they purchased organic and locally produced food. Three out of four survey respondents reported buying organic food; nearly one in three said they purchased organic products at least once a week. Sources of organic foods have expanded rapidly in recent years, and now include retail outlets such as supermarkets and warehouse clubs.

Local food sources have also been increasing, as evidenced by the exponential growth in farmers' markets. Approximately half of respondents obtained food from gardens or retail outlets dedicated to local food, such as farmers' markets, community supported agriculture subscriptions, roadside stands, or U-pick operations. However, less than 15% reported using these sources at least weekly. Local food sources are much less convenient for consumers to access than 24-hour supermarkets, which may explain why purchasing locally is a less frequently reported behavior when compared with organic purchasing.

Table 5. Purchasing patterns for obtaining organic and local* food

Purchase organic	74.5%
Infrequently	44.4%
At least once a week	30.1%
Obtain food from local source	48.0%
Infrequently	33.5%
At least once a week	14.5%

*Local was defined as gardens, farmers' markets, CSA subscriptions, roadside stands, or U-pick operations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS, MARKETERS, AND CONSUMERS

Our survey results indicate that growers, processors, and retailers could do a better job of providing their customers with information on the way that food is produced, processed, transported, and sold. They should recognize safety and nutrition as consumers' top concerns, but they should also devote attention to ethical issues, particularly the humane treatment of animals, environmental impacts, and social justice issues. Because respondents identified labels as their preferred source of information, eco-labels may be an appropriate way to address these matters.

A majority of respondents indicated a willingness to pay more for strawberries that embodied a living wage and safe working conditions, even at price premiums up to 71% higher. The rapid growth of organic food sales, as well as sales of fair trade products from other countries, suggests that promoting the ethical values (such as a living wage) represented in food will continue to be a promising marketing strategy.

Consumers who are interested in ethical aspects of the food system should recognize that their purchasing decisions can influence the way their food is grown, processed, and distributed. They should also recognize that this strategy of change works best for choices that are currently available, such as organic, and is far less effective for creating new alternatives, such as a domestic fair labor practices label. Consumers will have to express their concerns to growers, processors, retailers, and policy makers if the current food system is not meeting their needs; to be taken seriously this may require amplifying their voices by working with advocacy organizations, rather than relying solely on individual efforts.

– Phil Howard

[1]Further details of this study's methodology are available by request to phoward@ucsc.edu, or online at www.ucsc.edu/casfs.

[2]McBride, J. 1997. Food safety is major concern of shoppers. Washington DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. September 17. www.ars.usda.gov/is/pr/1997/970917.htm

[3]Steptoe, A., T. Pollard, and J. Wardle. 1995. Development of a measure of the motives underlying the selection of food: the food choice questionnaire. *Appetite* 25:267-84.

[4]United Farm Workers, 2004. UFW Union Label of the Month. Keene, CA. www.ufw.org/ulmth.htm

[5]The Packer. 2002. Fresh Trends: 2002 profile of the fresh produce consumer. Lenexa, KS: Vance Publishing.

[6]Fair Trade Federation. 2003. Report on fair trade trends in U.S., Canada and the Pacific Rim. Washington, DC. www.fairtradefederation.com/2003_trends_report.pdf

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This Center Research Brief is part of a series reporting on Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems' research efforts. For more information, contact CASFS, 1156 High St., University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, 831.459-3240, www.ucsc.edu/casfs.