

# ORGANIC AND LOCAL

## SUPPORT FOR DEEP ORGANICS

*By Janine Gibson*

In 18 years as an organic inspector, all of the organic farmers and processors I've inspected have invested great effort to ensure their organic products meet Canadian certification standards. The producers strive to reflect the basic principles of organic agriculture as described in the foundation principles of our standard.

More and more across Canada, eaters are working together to access and share local food and thus better support local organic growers. Often the farmers who have developed their own local distribution have not had the resources or support to become certified organic. Too often Canadian certification agencies are geared to better serve export markets than local markets.

As Kristine Hammel pointed out so well in her article, "In Search of Deep Organic Distribution," in the Fall 2010 issue of *TCOG*, the current food distribution system in North America is a "dinosaur," an inefficient system in need of evolution. If our food distribution systems rely on "renewable resources in locally organized agricultural systems" as the 7th principle of the Canadian Organic Standard states, greater balance could be created, increasing access to local organic products.



*Many Canadian farmers, including Ron Hamilton of Sunworks Farm in Alberta, have developed their own local distribution system.*



*Staff of Fresh Option Organic Delivery (FOOD).*

One excellent example of local distribution recently received the Government of Manitoba's 2010 Outstanding Achievement in Sustainability Award—Fresh Option Organic Delivery (FOOD), which is owned and operated by Marnie Feeleus. Once a week, Fresh Option delivers food from 20–30 Manitoba-based food producers to almost 300 households. The service also distributes the produce of local growers to eight daycares and 10–20 wholesale clients, including the University of Winnipeg's Student Cafeteria Services, organic food stores, local restaurants, caterers, bakeries and community food security initiatives.

As a Red Seal Chef, Marnie recognized early in her career that to access the food quality she sought, she needed a successful local food system comprised of, in the words of Joel Salatin, "production, processing, marketing, accounting, distribution and patrons." She identified a need in Manitoba, set about connecting these dots with her team building skills, and developed Fresh Option Organic Delivery.

Marnie and her team respect the organic principles in their procurement, planning, purchasing, handling and distribution. Fresh Option staff purchase local certified organic products if available, then meet demand by purchasing as locally as possible when a certified product is not available. Each week, they

make difficult decisions comparing several aspects of environmental sustainability.

Though Fresh Option does not do any processing per se (though repackaging is considered processing in our standard), it does do a lot of handling. The team manages to “maintain the organic integrity and vital qualities of the products” (principle 6), through commitment to freshness and integrity and by buying as locally as possible. Marnie has done much through Fresh Option to support a sustainable, locally organized agricultural system by marketing Manitoba farm products to Winnipeg patrons who value the work of farmers.

In 2010, Marnie initiated the “Local Sustainable Produce Value Chain.” The objective was to collaborate to increase efficiencies and profits at each link of the chain, while improving the end product and adding value only when it would benefit the consumer (which, in turn, benefits the whole chain). Initially, she had wanted to include only certified organic producers, but the local pool of like-minded certified growers was limited. So they expanded the circle to “sustainable” by including farms with whom they had a working relationship and a “trust understanding” of what growing methods they use that exclude them from being certified organic, or what factors have discouraged them from obtaining certification.

The value chain pilot lasted one full growing season (nine months) from planning through post-harvest storage and distribution. As project manager, Marnie brought together four farms (one dropped out), Fresh Option as the distribu-

### Principles of organic production

“Organic production is based on principles that support healthy practices. These principles aim to increase the quality and the durability of the environment through specific management and production methods. They also focus on ensuring the humane treatment of animals.

“The general principles of organic production include the following:

1. Protect the environment, minimize soil degradation and erosion, decrease pollution, optimize biological productivity and promote a sound state of health.
2. Maintain long term soil fertility by optimizing conditions for biological activity within the soil.
3. Maintain biological diversity within the system.
4. Recycle materials and resources to the greatest extent possible within the enterprise.
5. Provide attentive care that promotes the health and meets the behavioural needs of livestock.
6. Prepare organic products, emphasizing careful processing and handling methods in order to maintain the organic integrity and vital qualities of the products at all stages of production.
7. Rely on renewable resources in locally organized agricultural systems.”

—CAN/CGSB-32.310-2006, updated 2008

tor, and three purchasing partners representing institutional food service and the retail sector. The pilot project was considered largely a success, and helped the group identify hurdles, remove barriers and strengthen relationships. Production and sales increased for all across the chain. As the pilot drew to a close in December 2010, the group was optimistic that the groundwork they had laid will help them grow together to meet the increasing demand for local, sustainable and organic food in Manitoba.

Marnie says, “Our gold standard is local and organic. When we are unable to proactively fill our needs from both those categories, we look at many factors to decide whether to choose local ‘sustainable’ or imported certified organic.” These factors include:

- quality (i.e. freshness, taste and appearance),

- history of ease in doing business,
- proven reliable delivery,
- distance travelled,
- production methods,
- whether they know the producer,
- ethical and animal rights considerations in some cases,
- presumed likeliness the farm can anticipate availability, then deliver and continue to provide high quality produce with availability, consistency of product, packaging and/or pack size, and
- price.

Matching supply and demand is an art and science, and Fresh Option specializes in the field. Identifying the products required, the quantities and how to price are critical in reducing the risk when it comes to marketing. This is best done ahead of planting and requires a leap of faith, or a great deal



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of trust in your buyers. Marnie feels more growers could capitalize on organic greenhouses to extend the season for regional produce, but that requires investment and long-term strategies. Another barrier is that the stated intent does not always materialize—a high percentage of consumers, even wholesale purchasers, say, “Yes, I buy local when possible,” when they mean, “Yes, but only if it is cheaper.”

Infrastructure costs are a challenge. Marnie feels they need to become more efficient to be competitive against the existing food supply chain system, a David and Goliath challenge. The team makes business decisions that many wouldn't, ones that aren't driven solely by profit. As a result, it “feels like we're competing in a somewhat unlevel playing field,” states Marnie. Unfortunately, while they're trying to bend over backward for both suppliers and customers, there seems to be a lack

of knowledge or understanding in Manitoba of the distributor system. That may not be as common in other regions where businesses have been using distributors, have seen the benefits and accept this as a normal and mutually beneficial way to move product in any volume.

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Fresh Option has always promoted direct marketing as an ideal way to buy, for those that can and do. But as soon as a third party becomes involved (which is how

the majority of food is bought), Marnie feels some kind of accountability should be in place to provide transparency to all involved.

In Manitoba, many farmers who sell directly to local consumers have dropped their certification.

One special treat this year came in a message from one of the residential route delivery drivers. She said every week, house after house, the families, especially little children, express joy and appreciation when they open the box of food to find the “gift” inside. Their appreciation made her realize Fresh Option is doing something very important. For Marnie, such messages make it all worthwhile. Not to mention how beautifully this distribution model exemplifies the 6th and 7th principles of the Organic Standard, and strives to create the support for quality and local sustainable systems.

For more information, see [www.freshoption.ca](http://www.freshoption.ca) and refer to the Canadian Organic Standard, CAN/Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) 32.310–2006.

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*Photo credits: Sheila Hamilton (Sunworks Farm), FOOD, Emma of KEG.*