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Securing Alaska's insecure food supply: With some help, Alaska could produce more

by Carol E. Lewis and Fred Schlutt Jr., Community Perspective

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Community Perspective

Thought about food lately? Maybe three times a day (or more)?

Thought about what would happen if our food supply was interrupted?

Benjamin Franklin said "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water." We would paraphrase: "When the food is gone, we will know the worth of food."

Alaska's food supply is not secure.

Food security includes not only availability of locally produced foods but also a mix of imported and exported food products. Most states and regions in the U.S. have a reasonable balance of locally produced, imported and exported foods. Alaska imports nearly all its food and is increasingly dependent on imported food. If this trend continues, Alaska's expanding population will require increased food imports during a time when energy plays an ever-increasing role in their cost.

Producing more food in Alaska is possible with help from university research, the Cooperative Extension Service and university-business partnerships. While Alaska currently does not depend on in-state production, there is no reason why it cannot. Lands are productive for crops and livestock, and the growing season can be extended with modern technologies.

State funding for a special project could make a world of difference in the state's dismal food security outlook. This joint project between UAF School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences, the Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station and UAF Cooperative Extension Service addresses food security by focusing on animal agriculture (reindeer, elk, bison, muskoxen, yaks, cattle, sheep, goats, hogs and poultry) and controlled environment vegetable production (controlling the length of the growing seasons and using local materials to manufacture soil). The proposal, which is before the Alaska Legislature via the University of Alaska budget, includes \$300,000 per year during a five-year period for research, education and outreach.

We will focus on community development of local food production, including food science, food technologies, processing and human nutrition as well as production technologies, food preservation, and processing and storage for year-round consumption. Cultural considerations of food self-reliance, nutrition and appropriate crops and livestock for Alaska's diverse climate and geography will also be addressed.

The close linkage of the extension service, the experiment station and the school

will give us the opportunity to look at ways to help our farmers produce high-quality products to take the place of imported fresh, frozen and canned supplies, will potentially provide business opportunities for processing and distribution and will train students who, when they graduate, will be expert in bringing research and technology to users.

Why should you care? This type of important research and outreach affects the very food that will appear on your plate tonight.

While many people proclaim the virtues of local food via T-shirts or bumper stickers, are they willing to truly support a project that will make Alaska-grown food more abundant and accessible? Food insecurity for Alaskans is a grave concern but can only be addressed if we choose to make it a priority.

Alaska needs locally grown food. Are you willing to help by letting your legislators know you support this important project?

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