The CENTER for AGROECOLOGY & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ | RESEARCH BRIEF #1, WINTER 2003

The CENTER for AGROECOLOGY & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

CENTER • RESEARCH • BRIEFS

Research Brief #1

Community Supported Agriculture on the Central Coast: The CSA Member Experience

In recent years, both growers and consumers have become increasingly interested in direct marketing as an alternative to conventional marketing outlets. Further, as more consumers develop an appreciation for fresh food produced close to home, they're turning to farmers markets and other direct markets that offer not only locally grown food, but a connection with those who grow it.

In the search for alternatives to the current food system, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) offers an increasingly popular option. In the CSA arrangement, consumers get much of their weekly produce by picking up a box of organic, fresh-picked fruits and vegetables grown on a farm in their community. A farmer commits to growing food for a group of people (often called "members" or "shareholders"), and the people support the farmer by paying for their shares of produce ahead of time, often at the beginning of the season. CSA members thus ideally share both the risks and the bounty of farming.

Although community supported agriculture farms have only been operating in the U.S. since the mid 1980s, there are now between 800 and 1,000 CSAs in the United States. As CSAs have proliferated in this country and elsewhere, CSA and sustainable agriculture advocates have professed a number of hopes and dreams for this approach to farming and marketing. Many see CSA as a vehicle for increasing small farm viability and for encouraging the use of ecologically sound farming practices. CSAs have also been promoted as a way to connect people to their food and each other by building personal relationships between farmers and consumers, as well as by educating people about the food system and its issues.

In 2001, the social issues staff of the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (the Center) at UC Santa Cruz initiated a study of California central coast CSAs, covering Monterey, San Benito, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz Counties. This research aims to: 1) describe how the CSA model has been implemented on the central coast, 2) determine the extent to which CSAs on California's central coast are manifesting the hopes that people hold for them, and 3) identify constraints and opportunities to reaching these ideals. The project was designed to contribute to the small number of studies focusing on CSAs in California, and to provide information to people interested in understanding, supporting, or furthering CSAs.

This research brief focuses on one aspect of the CSA study: the profiles and experiences of CSA members. Member attitudes, experiences and perceptions are summarized, and then used to explore the extent to which CSAs are meeting the ideals that many hold for them (to make farming viable and ecological, as well as to encourage connection to and learning about the food system) and to identify some opportunities and challenges that they face in meeting these goals.[1]

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research team—post-graduate researcher Jan Perez, social issues specialist Patricia Allen, and post-doctoral researcher James Murrell—used three strategies for collecting information about CSAs: interviews, written questionnaires, and focus groups. Center social issues staff conducted 1 1/2- to 3-hour interviews with growers from 12 of the 14 CSAs identified on the central coast. These growers also completed a questionnaire covering information such as farm size, growing practices, and demographic data.

CSA members provided information through a written questionnaire and by participating in focus groups. A 4-page survey was distributed to members of 8 farms through the mail or in the CSA box. Of the 638 surveys delivered to members, we received 274 responses for a response rate of 43%.[2]

On a form delivered with the questionnaire, members were asked to indicate if they would be interested in participating in a focus group on CSA. Ultimately, 17 members from 5 different farms were able to participate in one of three focus group sessions that took place in several central coast locations.

WHO JOINS CSAS?

In 2001, we estimated that around 4,900 people (approximately 0.2% of this regions population) regularly received food from one of the 14 CSAs in the five-county central coast region. Our survey results suggest that these members are very similar to other CSA shareholders nationwide: they tend to be European-American (90%), highly educated (81% have 16 or more years of education, equivalent to a college degree), and middle-to-upper income (66% have a household income of $60,000 or more). Members represent a relatively narrow proportion of the central coast population, where only 51% of the people are European-American and the median income for most central coast counties is below $45,000. Thus, it appears that central coast CSAs are currently serving a specific demographic profile.

Our research also reveals that many members who joined CSAs in 2001 were new to this activity. Forty-one percent were first-time members. Slightly more than 20% have been members for 4 years or more, implying that not many people have stayed members of CSAs for the long term.

WHY DID PEOPLE JOIN?

The survey asked members to write in their most important reasons for joining the CSA. As shown in table 1, the most frequently reported "important reasons" members expressed were to purchase organic[3] (62%), fresh (34%) produce. The members also wanted to buy local produce or support "local" (40%).

When focus group members were asked why they wanted to "support local," several themes were mentioned. Some people felt that local farms benefit the community in some way, such as by adding jobs, green space, and diversity. Other reasons mentioned include that local farms allow for connection—to the farmers, other people, the land, or farming itself. Finally, others think that supporting local is more ecological, in that less resources are used shipping the food to distant outlets, and having a farm nearby allows people to make sure their farmer is actually using ecological farming methods.

Social issues research on CSAs is part of the Center's Central Coast Research Project, an effort funded by the US Department of Agriculture. The project explores ways to improve the sustainability of the food and agricultural system on the California central coast. Also included in the Central Coast study is research on water quality and ways of decreasing nonpoint source pollution from the region's farms.

Table 1. Most frequently listed *most important* reasons for wanting to become a CSA member.*

Response Categories	N	%
organic produce	170	62%
support or buy local	110	40%
fresh produce	94	34%
support organic (farms/farmers/agriculture)	44	16%
quality produce	39	14%
convenience	39	14%
support small or family farms/farmers	28	10%
health	26	10%
variety	26	10%
good price/value	23	8%
support sustainable agriculture	20	7%
eat seasonally	20	7%
know how/where food was grown	19	7%
other	28	10%

*Only categories with more than 5% of members endorsing them were listed. 255 people (out of 274) who responded to this question. 19 surveys (7%) had no response. All answers were coded, and there was an average of 3.08 reasons listed for each respondent.

Considering that several of the primary reasons given for becoming a CSA member could also be met by going to the farmers market, focus group members were asked what they receive by participating in a CSA rather than by shopping at a farmers market. Although not everyone participated in a CSA to the exclusion of farmers markets, there were still themes regarding their preference. Convenience was frequently mentioned by focus group members—that CSA is less work than going to the farmers market. Some preferred CSA because it allowed them direct contact to a farm, which, as one member said, is " . . . much different than going to a farmers market and just seeing the produce on the table—you see . . .the whole process." Others mentioned that it helped support eating habits that they wanted to have. These responses show some of the unique aspects of CSA, and offer insights for promoting this new aspect of the food system.

HOW DISTANT ARE PEOPLE FROM THEIR FOOD SOURCE?

One goal of CSAs is to shorten the distance between consumers and the source of their produce as a way to save energy on transportation (some estimates for the average distance fresh produce travels range from approximately 1,100 miles to 1,700 miles[4]).

Our results confirm that central coast members are close to their farms and their pick-up sites. Respondents live an average of 19 miles from the farm, and close to half (45%) live less than 3 miles from their pick-up site. This finding suggests that CSAs may be meeting their goals of providing a more ecological alternative to the current food system, by helping to cut down on the resources used for food transportation.

ARE MEMBERS CONNECTING WITH FARMERS?

One hope of some CSA advocates is that members will connect with farmers and the farm from which they get their food. The survey results show that 60% of the respondents have been to the farm at least once in the past year, implying that some form of connection is taking place. However, only 34% had been to the farm on a regular basis (this number includes those who pick up their share at the farm, and members who have visited 6 or more times on their own). Additionally, only 5% of the respondents reported doing any work for the CSA in the past year. Thus, while there is clearly a connection between some farmers and some members, central coast CSAs do not appear to achieve the ideal of close working connections between farmers and members.

HOW DOES CSA MEMBERSHIP AFFECT HABITS AND ATTITUDES?

One goal of this study was to see how people's habits around shopping and cooking changed as a result of joining a CSA. We assumed that CSA membership would create another task for people; in addition to picking up their weekly share, they would still have to go to the store for food that the CSA did not supply (generally, everything but produce) as well as process the food. Interestingly, we found that half (52%) of the respondents' households reported that they spent *less* time obtaining food after becoming members than they did before joining. Based on our conversations with CSA members, it is possible that they actually spend more time, but that it 'feels' like less. On the other hand, most people (59%) reported that they spent more time preparing food than they did before, since CSA produce is usually minimally processed. Participating in a CSA appears to decrease the amount of time spent on some food-related household tasks while increasing the time spent on others.

Changes in eating habits was another area we explored. Survey results show that 81% (221 individuals) said that they had some type of eating habit change; 79% of the 221 noted that they eat more vegetables or eat a greater variety of vegetables. This finding is encouraging since eating more fruits and vegetables, including a wider variety, has been suggested as a sound way to address and prevent health problems. The next most frequently cited eating habit changes are behaviors related to better health. Shareholders noted that they are eating healthier (18%), eating at home more and out less (11%), and eating better quality food (10%). Focus group participants partially explained this phenomena. The CSA structure helped to support these types of eating habits: for example, some people felt compelled to eat the produce that they had already paid for, and others just couldn't stand throwing vegetables away.

We also wanted to identify what people learned from their experiences with the CSA farm, and how their lives changed. We asked members if there have been any other changes (besides changes in eating habits) in their own or their household's life since participating in CSAs. The most frequent responses were that people cook differently (27% of the 133 responses). This includes people who say they now plan their meals around the vegetables, cook more creatively, enjoy cooking more, and use different recipes/try new things. As one woman said, "I usually plan a week's menu in advance of going shopping. With CSA I planned the menu around the CSA produce, e.g., ate more stuffed chard and cabbage, fruit desserts, etc."

Some members also noted that they now have a connection with the farm or the farmers (16% of the 133), that they are more aware of agricultural or environmental issues (12%), and that they are more active regarding agricultural issues (11%). These effects—learning more about the food system, and doing something to improve it—are changes that some CSA advocates hope will take place as a result of CSA membership. Although the numbers are low, CSA participation does appear to lead to an increased awareness of food system and environmental issues.

WERE CSA MEMBERS SATISFIED WITH THEIR EXPERIENCE?

What did central coast CSA members think about their experience? Most appeared generally satisfied. Satisfaction among members is very high regarding the quality of the CSA products (71% were "very satisfied"). This is a common finding among other CSAs across the nation. Satisfaction with quantity of produce had the second highest rates: 41% found the quantity to be "just right." Similar to members in other locations across the U.S., CSA members were least satisfied with the product mix (only 24% said they were "very satisfied").

CSA member reaction is important, particularly as it relates to member retention. Encouragingly, 78% said they would return to the CSA next season. However, this finding may be optimistic, since the average return rate farmers reported was around 65%. Some farmers stated that they have to do a fair amount of work every year to replace the members who did not re-join.

WHO STAYS AND WHO LEAVES?

Since a stable marketing channel is important for farmers' economic viability, it is important to know why people leave. When we asked people why they did not plan to rejoin the CSA, issues around choice was the primary reason given. The survey found that two-thirds (out of 57 households) of those who did not intend to renew their CSA membership or who were unsure about returning, mentioned something that related to choice or the lack of it. This includes the 44% who gave reasons for leaving that related to product mix. Their comments included, "I really prefer to select my own mix of vegetables" and "[I/we] did not like some of items which we consistently got—kale/ chard/ beets."

Other responses related to choice include the 37% who said they had problems with quantity (got too much food, threw away too much, have a hard time finding people to split the share with, etc.). After choice, people cited reasons unrelated to their CSA experience (e.g., loss of income in the household, moving away from the area, or planning to have their own garden). Other reasons are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Reasons why CSA members might not, or will not, renew their membership.*

Response Categories	N	%
product mix issues (more variety, want to select own)	25	44%
problems with quantity (threw out too much, etc.)	21	37%
household issues (moving, don't cook, etc.)	15	26%
cost/value issues	8	14%
pick-up issues	8	14%
problems with quality	5	9%
problems processing and storing	2	4%
prefer farmers market	3	5%
other	6	11%

*There were 55 people who responded to this question (out of the 57 who stated they would or might leave). All responses per survey were coded, and there was an average of 1.75 reasons listed for each respondent.

In addition to exploring why members may leave, we also looked at factors that are related to returning to the CSA. Respondents appeared more likely to re-join when they were satisfied with the quality, quantity, and product mix of the produce; when picking up the box was convenient; and when people felt the share price was fair. Also, members were more likely to return the next year if the payment schedule did not pose a financial hardship, and they were not throwing away or composting more produce than before they joined the CSA.

One interesting finding is that those who said they or their household experienced a change (in eating habits or in some other area of their lives) as a result of participating in a CSA were also more likely to rejoin. For example, 82% of households that experienced a change in eating habits would sign on again, whereas 65% of those without such a change were not likely to rejoin. It appears that learning to incorporate or adapt to the new way of eating and cooking helps increase the likelihood of staying with the CSA, as well as encouraging desirable/valuable lifestyle changes.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

The CSA member survey and focus group findings reveal both positive results and future challenges for those running CSAs or growers who are considering starting a CSA. On the positive side, CSA farms have succeeded in producing high quality produce, have helped people develop healthier eating habits, appear to have addressed some ecological issues (fuel consumption and chemical usage), and have connected some people back to their food source.

Conversely, the data point to several challenges, particularly regarding long-term CSA viability. Addressing the issue of choice appears to be a persistent dilemma. Most people leave the CSA due to lack of choice, yet the idea of "receiving what is available when it is available" is an integral part of the CSA concept. Therefore, turnover is likely to always be an issue, and thus finding new members will continually be required. Some people look at the small number of members currently participating in CSA and see a huge untapped market. However, there are also several indicators that point to obstacles to CSA growth. The limited demographics of people participating, the availability of organic food from other sources (farmers' markets and natural food stores, which are especially prevalent on the central coast), a culture based on convenience and choice, and having to spend more time preparing food and eating what is seasonally available could limit the number of potential members available for both current and future CSAs.

Ultimately, it appears that while CSA is not a quick answer to problems in the food system, it definitely offers a needed alternative. Providing fresh, local, and organically grown produce; a connection to where food is grown; and education about agricultural and environmental issues are important and necessary services for those seeking options in today's food system.

– Jan Perez, Patricia Allen, Martha Brown

[1] Additional aspects of the CSA study, including farmer interviews, will be discussed in future Research Briefs.

[2] It is not known if the survey results are representative of all CSA members in the central coast region. It is possible that people who responded to the survey are more supportive of CSA.

[3] 100% of the 12 farms interviewed claimed to be organic (67% certified). As would be expected, 100% did not use any type of synthetic pesticide or herbicide.

[4] Pirog, R., T. Van Pelt, K. Enshayan, and E. Cook. 2001. Food, fuel, and freeways: An Iowa perspective on how far food travels, fuel usage, and greenhouse gas emissions. Ames, Iowa: Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubinfo/papersspeeches/food_mil.pdf. Accessed on 2002/11/15.

The Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS) is a research, education, and public service program dedicated to increasing ecological sustainability and social justice in the food and agriculture system. Located at the University of California, Santa Cruz, CASFS collaborates with growers, researchers, policy makers, non-governmental organizations, and others on research projects to promote sustainable farming and food systems. This Center Research Brief is part of a series reporting on CASFS research efforts. For more information on the research covered in this Brief, or on the Center's activities, contact us at CASFS, 1156 High St., University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, 831.459-3240, www.ucsc.edu/casfs.