

## A Decision Tool for Values-Based Food Purchasing

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**Food purchases are investments that influence the characteristics of our food system.** Price, convenience, and perception of an appropriate level of quality are drivers of food purchasing decisions. Other values related to economic, environmental and/or social sustainability are harder to support through food purchasing decisions due to lack of information and transparency in the food system.

**In recent decades, local food has become a proxy for food-related values** other than price and convenience. These include culinary attributes such as freshness and flavor, but also many values associated with the goals of a sustainable food system, such as environmental stewardship, rural economic development, and humane treatment of farm animals and farm workers.



**Local food has been defined in two ways: by geographic location or distance from food sources, and by marketing method.** The location or distance from a food source may not be what people value *per se*, but geography is convenient to measure so it has been widely adopted as a metric for defining local (and regional) food. The metric may be the boundary of a State (e.g., Vermont), a specific region (e.g., Appalachian-grown), or a number of miles from point of production. When Congress passed the 2008 Farm Bill it defined local or regional food to mean a final product that is transported less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it is produced. When the Food Safety Modernization Act was passed by Congress in 2011 Congress used a smaller area of proximity to allow exemptions for local food producers: those located 275 miles or less from their customers, or within the same State.

Local food is also defined as that sold through local marketing channels, either direct to-consumer at roadside stands, farmers' markets, pick-your-own, and community supported agriculture, etc., or direct to intermediate markets in the local supply chain, such as grocery stores, restaurants, food hubs, and schools, universities, hospitals, and other institutions. The U.S. Census of Agriculture, and the USDA's Economic Research Service generally use sales of local foods, as defined by market channels, to describe and measure local food systems.



**Neither geography nor market channels are direct assessments of the values associated with specific foods**, though they are useful. For example, using geography to promote purchase of food produced in a local area is likely to have a local economic multiplier effect. And promoting purchase of food through direct-to-consumer and direct-to-reseller markets are likely to strengthen "relationship marketing" which can result in greater transparency about how food is produced.

A broader, more specific, and more flexible approach is needed to help food purchasers, especially smaller retailers, organizations, and institutions, make buying decisions that align with their values. The 2020 Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan recognized this need. In the [School Food Procurement](#) brief one of the five recommendations is to “Further develop a transparent values-based system so buyers can buy according to their values, not just price. This includes values such as supporting the local economy, farming practices that support healthy soils and planet, fair labor practices, etc.”

Many municipalities and institutions across the nation have adopted the [Good Food Purchasing Standards](#) which is a detailed set of attributes with a scoring system aimed at supporting five key values: local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and [human] nutrition. Adopting (and verifying compliance with) the standards is a robust process. Other municipalities have adopted local food purchasing policies that use a simpler “values matrix” for decision making. Some of these are described in a policy brief by Growing Food Connections titled [Local, Healthy Food Procurement Policies](#). For example, the policy from Linn County, Iowa, establishes most- to least-preferred sources for locally, sustainably, and seasonally produced food. Geography, production method, type of enterprise, and seasonality of the food are the main categories.

The Values-Based Food Purchasing Rubric presented here attempts to create a relatively simple and flexible assessment tool that can be easily used by businesses, organizations, and communities to inform their purchasing decisions for all types of food, including foods that cannot be produced locally (such as tropical products). It is not a set of standards or guidelines to follow, but rather a way to quantify comparisons between different food source options. The categories of values listed by column can be added to, deleted, or modified. The metrics or means of verifying whether a source earns points in each category can also be modified (to be either more or less rigorous/complicated). The points for each category could be weighted, to align with a purchaser’s priority values. Finally, each organization can determine the total minimum score they will require of vendors to be an eligible food supplier.

The rubric includes 14 categories for which points are earned in the score. Each category is aimed at supporting specific types of business entities or food production and distribution practices.

- *Ownership Type*. Non-corporate ownership and benefit or B-corporate ownership.
- *Economic Scale*. Relatively small entities that often are disadvantaged in the larger marketplace.
- *Local Proximity*. Close to point of production – strongest relationships and benefits.
- *Regional Proximity*. Within a few hours’ drive so economic multiplier effects are still likely.
- *Ingredients Source*: majority from on-farm production provide most value-added to farmer.
- *Ingredients Source*: local or regional sources contribute to economic multiplier effect.
- *Organic Production*: a known, easily verified credential for stewardship.
- *Other Stewardship Credential*: for grass-fed, fair trade, or many other desirable practices.
- *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*: supporting BIPOC ownership and management of food businesses.
- *Land Conservation*: investing in farms that have protected their land from development.
- *Renewable Energy Use*: supporting businesses that take steps to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.
- *Packaging Waste Avoidance*: specifically limiting the amount of plastic used to wrap food.
- *Culinary Quality*: a subjective assessment by the buyer seeking to support superior food products
- *Affordability*: a subjective assessment by the buyer seeking to support food access.

View the editable spreadsheet rubric [here](#).

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