

too good to be true?

All across the country 'Buy Local' has the backing of government agencies and campaign groups - but does it really make sense?

According to the British Market Research Bureau, consumers don't know what to make of 'food miles'. What is required from the 'food miles' agenda is a far more meaningful debate. What at the simplest level is about reducing miles travelled, is in practice about trade-offs and choices between different food production systems. This needs to consider:

(a) economic policy – is 'buy local' the sensible and sustainable way to stem declining farm incomes and support the rural economy?

(b) social policy – importing food increases consumer choice and can bring about gains for food producers in poorer developing countries that we wish to support; and

(c) environmental costs - like them or loathe them, food distributed by the high-efficiency supermarkets may have less damaging environmental impact than moving produce from a larger number of small-scale growers. Importing tomatoes from Spain may sound crazy, but research shows it costs less energy than growing them in heated greenhouses here; and growing non-organic food in the UK uses more energy than importing organic food from abroad.

More and more, people are being encouraged to buy food that is locally produced. Doing so is seen as the best way of supporting local farmers, the surrounding rural economy and the environment - or even the best way to ensure a tasty meal! And farmers are encouraged to become suppliers to their own localities, thus saving 'food miles'.

Relative Proportions: Population and Agricultural Supply
(% of National Totals)

	LONDON	Metro-Urban Centres	Agricultural England	The Rest of the Country
Population	14.6	22.0	15.0	48.4
Agricultural Land	0.2	3.0	55.7	41.2
Wheat	0.1	2.2	52.5	45.1
All Cereals	0.1	2.5	55.2	42.0
Potatoes	0.1	2.5	66.4	30.0
Horticulture	0.3	1.7	62.7	34.7
Dairy Cows	0.1	2.7	52.2	44.8
Beef Cattle	0.0	4.2	59.3	36.2
Pigs	0.1	2.8	68.5	27.8
Sheep	0.0	2.6	60.8	33.8

Looking at the table above, one can see the limitations of the 'Buy Local' argument. Agricultural England, where more than half the farming takes place (so accounting for more than half of domestic agricultural supplies for all the main crops and livestock), only has 15% of English residents (a population equivalent to that of London).

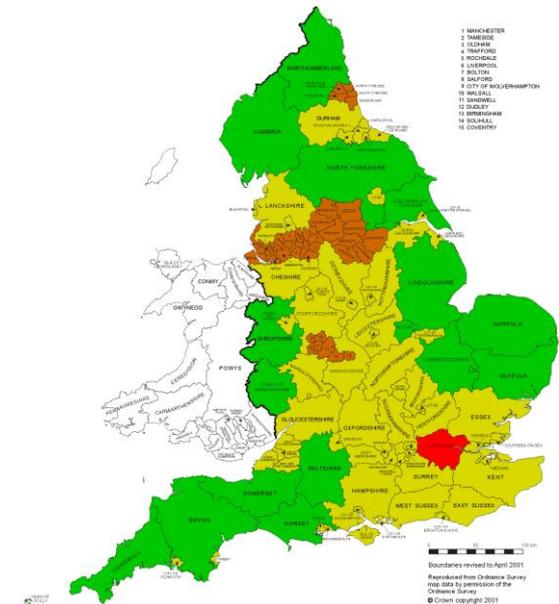
London, with a population equal to the that of Agricultural England, has no farming to speak of.

'Buy local' sounds good, and can be good for a few well-placed farmers, but in many or most areas it can only create small or niche markets, distracting farmers from more promising alternative ventures and from markets with more people and more money – like London.

AGRICULTURAL ENGLAND



The rural areas shown in the map are the most agricultural parts of England; with more than half the farming, and a population equivalent to that of London.



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Rather than being encouraged to buy local, consumers should be encouraged to buy British. This would build on evidence that an overwhelming majority of consumers have confidence in British farmers as good food producers and also think that too much food is imported. Indeed, when it comes to buying meat, our own surveys find that only domestic production is now trusted by most people.

Opinions	Percentage of consumers (%)		
	Agree	Disagree	Net
Too much food is imported	82.5	17.5	65
British farmers are good food producers	85.5	14.5	71
British beef is safe to eat	87.5	12.5	75
Foreign meat is safe to eat	47.0	53.0	-6