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Pride and profits: Growing effort urges consumers to buy products made in Michigan

Jaelyn Trop / The Detroit News

Neil Yaremchuk wants Michigianians to keep their money here in the mitten.

Since December, when the 35-year-old West Bloomfield Township resident launched a Facebook group dedicated to supporting the local economy, he has amassed more than 6,000 members. The outpouring led him this month to start a booster organization, the Made in Michigan Movement LLC.

Yaremchuk began thinking locally when his employer, Conrail, announced impending job cuts before Christmas.

"I started thinking, if more people bought Chrysler Sebrings or Dodge trucks, I wouldn't be in this situation," Yaremchuk said. "It started as a rant, and I knew a lot of people felt the same."

His Web site, madeinmichiganmovement.com, touts a database of Michigan-made products, from Faygo pop to Garden Fresh Gourmet salsa, and links local consumers with producers to keep Michigan's money here at home.

Buying local isn't a new idea, but it's certainly in fashion as the recession continues to shrink the state's economy. In addition to Yaremchuk's group, several organizations and Web sites promoting Michigan and its economy have sprung up recently in response to rising unemployment rates, a sputtering auto industry and general economic malaise. Producing and consuming locally stimulates other areas of the economy and creates thousands of jobs.

The impact on Michigan could be enormous, according to the state Department of Agriculture. If every Michigan family spent \$10 on locally grown fruits and vegetables each week, it would add \$37 million to the state's economy.

"When we see these profits go to Bentonville, Ark., (headquarters of Wal-Mart Stores Inc.) instead of here, it makes a difference," Yaremchuk said.

As the state's second-largest industry, agriculture generated \$63.7 billion and employed

about 1 million Michiganians in 2008, according to the department. Michigan is the country's second most agriculturally diverse state, with more than 200 commodities -- dairy, wine and horticulture chief among them.

State pride is in vogue when it comes to keeping your money close to home, said Jim Hiller, chief executive officer of Hiller's Markets, which operates seven grocery stores in southeast Michigan.

"We're seeing more than just an uptick" in customers inquiring about locally produced items, Hiller said. "We're seeing a meteoric rise."

Hiller is seeking out new Michigan-made products to stock his shelves with, and the stores carry about 2,000 items, denoted by a mitten-shaped tag, at any given time.

"We are responsible for our own economic salvation," he said. "Think globally and act locally."

It's a common sentiment among Michigan's producers. "The more we can support Michigan's economy, the more we all benefit," said Dennis DaPra, executive vice president for Uncle Ray's Potato Chips, based in Detroit.

The company uses local truckers, growers and suppliers to make its chips and cheese puffs, which are distributed in 48 states, and employs 149 people, DaPra said.

Yaremchuk plans to host a product expo in Metro Detroit later this year, to be followed by three others spread throughout the state in 2010. The grass-roots campaign generates money by selling advertising space on its Web site, but Yaremchuk is seeking corporate sponsorships to cover operating costs and partnerships to get the word out.

Though Yaremchuk said he is advocating common sense, not protectionism, skeptics say that too much emphasis on buying local could hurt the economy and shortchange consumers.

"We get much more value out of having an open economy with open borders and free trade," said Scott Watkins, senior consultant with the Anderson Economic Group, a consulting firm in East Lansing.

The "buy local" mantra falters for items or industries that don't have a competitive advantage, he said. It's cheaper to buy jeans in Asia, for example, because of higher wages for workers in the United States.

Hiller said geographic and agricultural limitations mean that Michiganians trying to subsist on local items entirely would have to make many sacrifices, tropical fruit and ocean fish among them.

Watkins agreed that not everything could or should be produced and bought in state.

"It's nice to be able to buy wine made in Michigan or apples grown in Michigan," Watkins said, "but it would be pretty miserable if we could only eat Michigan cheese or wear clothing made out of who knows what."

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