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Buy Michigan effort gains steam

Economists say campaigns can boost local areas

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In an age of globalization, buying local may seem like an impossible dream.

But determined consumers in Michigan are finding it a bit easier these days to spend their money on local products. More stores are highlighting Michigan-made goods on their shelves.

And more farmers markets are letting consumers buy directly from local growers. "I try to buy as much local food as I can to put money in the local economy," Kristine Kidorf, 42, of Detroit said last week at a newly opened farmers market near Wayne State University.

Economists say buy-local campaigns can give a real, if hard to quantify, boost to the local economy.

"Any time you can recirculate dollars within an economy you help to increase what we like to call the multiplier effect and economic impacts," said Scott Watkins, a senior consultant with the East Lansing-based Anderson Economic Group.

Beginning Monday, a Buy Michigan Now festival in downtown Northville highlights many of those products and encourages consumers to spend their dollars to boost local businesses.

Lisa Diggs, a business consultant who organized the festival and operates the Web site www.buymichigannow.com, said she got the idea while traveling around the country.

"The economies in other states were just better than in my home state," she said. "I wanted to do something about that. It seemed that the easiest thing to do was to get people to keep more of their money here."

Diggs' Web site includes a database to find names of producers of many kinds of Michigan-made products.

Lots of people are thinking the same way. At Hiller's, a chain of seven supermarkets in metro Detroit, a "Made in Michigan" shelf tag highlights locally produced goods.

"We just wanted to do something to restore our economy and restore the image of our beautiful state," said Justin Hiller, vice president of the chain.

Michigan's economic problems have given a renewed push to the Buy Michigan sentiment. Lots of people try to buy local not only to help regional producers but to detach themselves from an economic system gone wrong.

At a new weekly farmers market near Wayne State University's campus, Jennifer Fitzpatrick of Detroit said she tries to buy only Michigan-grown produce.

"You don't have to weed through the people that are the middleman," Fitzpatrick said after purchasing fresh peppers and tomatoes at the market. "You can buy straight from the farmers. It's just fresher and it helps Michigan farmers and the economy."

While buy-local efforts are popular and can boost the economy, there is a danger, economists say, if the campaigns edge over into protectionist trade barriers against outside goods.

"If it's just promoting the quality of local products and a sense of local community, I'm all for it," said Charles Ballard, a professor of economics at Michigan State University. "But I don't want to put up a huge tariff on things from out of state. You can get into really foolish policies."

He also noted that in an age of globalization, so many products are touched by workers in various locales that teasing out what's a Michigan product is difficult.

Take clothing.

"The cotton was grown in Egypt and the cotton fabric was made in some other country and it was stitched into a shirt in a third country. In an awful lot of cases, you don't know," Ballard said.

Clearly, though, an emphasis on local sourcing of products can have an impact. Grand Rapids-based retailer Meijer announced last week that it is expanding its sourcing of local produce as part of its "Home Grown" initiative.

Meijer handles more than 75 different locally grown fruits and vegetables from area farmers. The "Home Grown" program pumps more than \$50 million into local economies, the company said. Local produce accounts for nearly 30% of all the fruits and vegetables the chain sells during the peak growing season.

Cincinnati-based Kroger has also made efforts to promote local foods and products at its stores. Kroger locations throughout Michigan sell local products including Faygo pop, Better Maid potato chips and Kowalski meats.

Additional Facts

Buying Michigan?

If you want to buy more local products, one resource is the Web site www.buymichigannow.com. The site includes a searchable database of the site's Michigan Blue Pages listing Michigan producers in various categories.

Also, Hiller's supermarkets in metro Detroit post "Made in Michigan" shelf tags by items produced in the state.

There is also a growing number of farmers markets in cities and towns around the state that offer locally grown fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products for sale.
