

Can Walmart Sell Nutrition Better Than The U.S.?

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture's push to promote farmers markets and local food production doesn't fly with everyone in the business of tracking the farming business. Sallie James does that for a living — she's an agricultural trade policy analyst with the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. — and she

tells NPR's Guy Raz that it's not economically feasible for the vast majority of Americans to buy and eat local foods.

It will be difficult not only to get many people within reasonable distance of a local market, but also to create enough production to feed America's 300-million-plus population, she says.

Seventy-five percent of that production is currently handled by less than 4 percent of farmers in America. James says one of the reasons that has happened is due to the subsidy system, which is partly based on paying growers per unit of production and encourages commercial, large-scale farming.

"It may well be that if we did away with production subsidies that we may see a different breakout of production patterns in America," she says. "But certainly that suggests that, for efficiency reasons, agriculture depends on economies of scale." Farmers markets, for all the attention they're getting from the Agriculture Department, can't handle that level of demand, she says.

"You throw enough money at something, of course it's going to thrive," James says. "It's not front-page news that the Agriculture Department invests a lot of money in promoting farmers markets — we see more farmers markets.

"What I'm suggesting is, it's not the best use of money. There is absolutely very little wrong with encouraging people to eat healthily. But what the problem is here, is poor people having access to fresh fruits and vegetables."

How do you do that? Walmart, James says.

"You allow Walmart to come into urban areas and provide cheaper fresh produce to people," she says. "The reality is they have a very good distribution network. They can get fresh produce into rural and exurban areas very well."

But Walmart sometimes faces strong opposition to settling in urban areas — often from the same people who advocate for farmers markets, James points out. "I'm sure they'd love to provide produce to poor people, but often activists prevent that from happening."

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Sarah Mastrian (scribblescribe) wrote:

Right. Because now we should allow Walmart to run farmer's markets and local grocery stores out of business like they have done to other retail stores in rural and suburban areas. No thank you!

Monday, October 05, 2009 9:28:34 AM

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Stuart Knoles (Calen) wrote:

Farmer's markets seem more of a step in the right direction than a solution. Current agri-industry has come to be in discord, disintegration with life itself, thus not supporting to the life