

Could Walmart make us healthier?

By Jonathan Bender in [Organic](#)

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Long criticized for its employee health care practices and in-store fast food offerings, could Walmart be the America's answer to improving people's diets? That's the suggestion from a [recent NPR story](#), which posits that Walmart's distribution network and purchasing power could be the key to changing the way Americans eat.

Before we even consider whether there is demand for locally grown fruits and vegetables, the problem is essentially one of supply. According to NPR, 75 percent of food production is currently handled by four percent of farms because of the industrialization of agriculture and subsidies for farmers.

That means that even if the Department of Agriculture looks to support farmer's markets, the possibility of meeting a widescale demand for local produce isn't feasible. But Sallie James, an agricultural trade policy analyst with the Cato Institute, argues that Walmart could help fill the gap:

"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."

At the end of the day it would be difficult for Walmart to suddenly stand for something different than a fat guy angry that his chicken nuggets aren't ready (as show in [this video](#) on The Daily Fork). But Walmart is trying. This summer it instituted an [electronic indexing system](#) designed to measure the environmental impact of the products it sells.

Gary Hishberg, the president of Stonyfield Farms (85 percent owned by Groupe Danone), [argues in Food Inc.](#) that mega-retailers will respond to consumer demand, saying that a million-dollar order from Walmart for his organic yogurt and milk products is effectively changing the market.

But what if the demand isn't there yet? Is it up to Walmart to help create the market for local produce? Walmart has shown that it's willing to change the way it does business, but it's hard to believe the company would take on such a public issue without first hearing that's what the public wanted.