

CISA: 20 YEARS OF STRENGTHENING FARMS AND COMMUNITIES

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LAST YEAR River Valley

Market bought almost \$3 million in locally grown items, mainly produced on the Pioneer Valley's fertile bottomland, rolling pastures, and hilly orchards. Those purchases were made possible by the hard work and ingenuity of our region's farmers and the enthusiasm of residents for locally grown food and farm products. Connecting these critical elements—prime farmland, skilled growers, and an engaged community—has been the work of local non-profit Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), now celebrating our 20th anniversary.

In 1993, a group of Valley residents, farmers, and agriculture supporters began meeting, concerned about the threat to local agriculture posed by development pressure and competition from the global marketplace. They chose a name that reflected the fundamental connection between community and agricultural health in our region: Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture.

Support from the Kellogg Foundation helped CISA launch the Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown® campaign in 1999. Market research early in the campaign indicated that Pioneer Valley residents understood that buying from local farms supported neighbors and kept their dollars in the community. Local Hero offered a distinctive logo to help residents find locally grown products, and CISA used ads, events, and bumper stickers to help residents keep this priority top of mind.

The Local Hero program is now the longest-running agricultural “buy local” program in the country. More



than 225 farms, 56 restaurants, and 67 other businesses—supermarkets, corner stores, processors, colleges, and retirement homes—joined the campaign by 2013. The Pioneer Valley boasts 55 CSAs and 49 farmers' markets, including 7 winter markets.

An early Local Hero ad featured a couple of farm kids standing in a field. After the ad ran, we heard from a farmer that her children's classmates had stopped teasing them about living on a farm and instead became curious about farm life. Today in the Pioneer Valley, we have a culture of support for local farms. Our farmers are treated with respect and even occasionally speak of being treated like rock stars!

Throughout our history, CISA has benefitted from the passionate involvement of a broad group of people who care about food and farms. From institutions such as Hampshire College, Mass. Dept. of Agriculture and UMass to other non-profits, the Valley now benefits from diverse organizations and institutions who champion the benefits of healthy food and thriving farms. Their goals and approaches are diverse: improving food access, changing school food, expanding community gardens, helping new food businesses get started, encouraging healthy eating. Or, like River Valley Market, running a successful business that sees sales of locally grown products as fundamental to its mission and success.

Today, CISA:

- Connects people to local farms through radio, TV, newspapers, website, e-newsletter and smartphone app;
- Ensures local farm products are available for all by providing summer farm shares to low-income elders;
- Provides technical assistance for farm businesses through workshops and mentoring;
- Helps farms respond to natural disasters with no-interest loans

through our Emergency Farm Fund; and,

- Inspires people to support local agriculture!

As we look ahead to the next twenty years, our goal is to double the amount of local food in our diets. To do that, we need to increase both the demand and supply for local food. We must expand the number of businesses that connect farm to table by sourcing, processing, selling and delivering local food.

To help CISA meet this goal, a few key supporters have created a \$100,000 Anniversary Fund. Every new dollar raised will be matched by two dollars from the Anniversary Fund! We'll use this \$150,000 in new resources to expand supply by supporting farmers, especially those in their first ten years; to increase demand, especially in Hampden County, and to scale up the local food system to provide more local food to more residents of our region.

For more information on CISA's work, finding local food and farm products, becoming a community member, or donating to the \$100,000 Anniversary Fund, go to buylocalfood.org.