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July 19, 2016

Scaling Up Local Food Systems



A Food Hub truck in Philadelphia. PC: Civil Eats

Americans may be known for their poor eating choices, but more and more are seeking out food grown and produced closer to home. The number of farmers' markets in America [has exploded](#) in the last 20 years: from 1,755 in 1994 to 8,284 in 2014. Still, the [vast majority of Americans](#) continue to buy food from mainstream grocery and bigbox stores and most grocery stores, restaurants and workplace cafeterias

Events

Upcoming Potluck
and Discussion:

obtain that food through global supply chains. For the local food movement, the logical next step is to increase the scale of production, reaching beyond farmers' markets and entering the broader food economy. What will it take to scale up local food systems?



A group of green-collar workers at the Urban Farming Institute of Boston

Local food doesn't simply mean food grown near where it's sold. It often [includes the principles](#) of sustainable agriculture, climate-adaptive planning, fair labor practices, higher standards of animal welfare, and community involvement and development. While we often think of agriculture as a rural activity, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 800 million people worldwide are growing vegetables or raising animals in cities, which [according to Worldwatch](#) produces 15 to 20 percent of the world's food. For example, in Brooklyn, New York, [Added-Value Farm](#) grows up to 40,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables on 2.75 acres for low-income residents. Urban agriculture also has the unique opportunity to [sequester more carbon](#) in densely populated cities. Yet farmers who prioritize these principles face several obstacles to scaling up their distribution.

Ecotrust conducted a research project to identify barriers to "scaling beyond farm-direct channels into mainstream outlets" in Oregon; they interviewed farmers and ranchers around the state, along with processors, wholesale buyers and other actors in the state food economy. Their report, ["Oregon Food Infrastructure Gap Analysis,"](#) focuses on "Ag of the

Global Warming, Endless Growth, and the Extraordinary Power of the Powers of 2

When: 6 - 9 p.m. on Sunday, July 24, 2016.

Where: Cambridge, MA. See [Meetup page](#) for address.

Al Bartlett was a physics professor at the University of Colorado who spent the last few decades of his life educating on the insidious magic that takes place when anything doubles over time, i.e., $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \dots$ "The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function." When we apply this perspective to climate change, our understanding of the climate deepens, especially with respect to positive feedback loops. Adam Sacks will lead us in a discussion of the implications of the exponential function for addressing climate and related phenomena.

[Introducing our next upcoming conference:](#)

"Restoring Oceans to

middle" (AOTM). This includes farms and ranches that are in between direct-to-consumers small farms and the large commodity markets that supply most of the produce we see in grocery stores. [AOTM operations](#) typically supply their regional food economies but can't scale up as they lack the requisite infrastructure, such as local food processing and cold storage.

	Small	AOTM	Commodity
How big are they?	\$	\$\$	\$\$\$\$\$
Who are their customers?	Eaters	Restaurants Retailers Institutions Distributors	Processors Brokers Distributors
What's their region?	Local	Regional	Global
How diversified are they?	Very	Somewhat	Minimally
Where's the boss?	In the field	On-site	At HQ
Who owns the business?	Family	Family Co-op Partnership	Corporation
Who sets the price?	Producer	Negotiation (farmer/buyer together)	Market
Does the producer have an off-farm job?	Yes	No	No

AOTM is a conceptual framework. Chart by Ecotrust.

Ecotrust's main finding is that the existing food infrastructure (warehouses, processing facilities, delivery services, etc.) and the standard business framework in the food industry both favor large-scale farmers and [pose significant barriers to entry for AOTM producers](#). For example, AOTM producers typically cannot meet volume minimums, and they lack access to affordable processing and distribution facilities. They also lack "soft" assets such as market development strategists who can create the type of branding and marketing that is commonplace in larger operations.

It's time to invest in this scaling up process. Midsize producers are often better able to meet regional demands than large-scale industrial farms, whose focus on national and global commodity markets can lead them to forgo principles of sustainability. AOTM producers can benefit the wider local economy in ways that are important but not always quantifiable, like active community engagement. They also offer more obvious benefits, like providing more local and regional jobs. Midsize producers will only thrive when the proper infrastructure is set in place to accommodate the regional food market.

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Added Value Farm in Brooklyn, NY. PC:
Greennychan.org

ecosystems-along with the associated carbon, water and nutrient cycles-to draw down excess atmospheric greenhouse gases, cool the biosphere, and reverse global warming, for the benefit of all people and all life on earth.

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Still, some midsize producers are managing to transcend these market obstacles. Ecotrust found that successful AOTM producers are taking control of various parts of the supply chain from production, processing, packaging and storage, all the way to sales and distribution. By avoiding a middleman, they can often negotiate prices directly with their buyers and secure a larger percentage of the final product value. Farmers may deliver their products directly to suppliers, or [distribute through a "food hub,"](#) a centralized location where multiple farmers bring products to be sold to many institutions in the region. Growing the market for direct sales to retailers, food services and institutions is the next logical step for scaling up the local food movement.

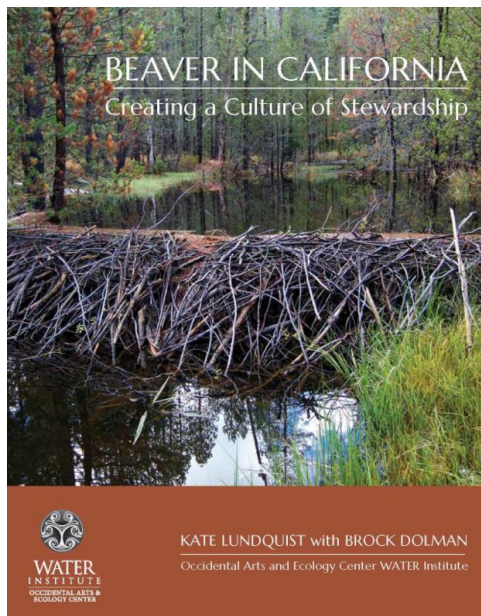
-Jacqueline Sussman

**Carl Safina: What are animals
thinking and feeling?**



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