

Community Supported Agriculture in Wisconsin

Supporting Local Farmers and Protecting Drinking Water



Center for Land Use Education

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Community Supported Agriculture Benefits Farms and Farm Members

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a unique social and economic arrangement between local households and farmers who work together to share the responsibility of producing and delivering fresh food. Households support the farm by paying an annual fee that entitles them to a “share” of the season’s harvest. Once harvesting begins, members pick-up their farm share of fresh foods which may include produce, fruits, cheeses, eggs, meats, poultry, flowers, herbs or preserves. Some farms offer every other week, worker shares, or pick-your-own shares to reach a variety of household needs. Pick-up sites are often located at a member’s house or at the farm. Most farms create a newsletter that accompanies each delivery with notes about farm activities, descriptions of what’s in the delivery, cooking tips and recipes. Many farms also create opportunities for their members and families to visit the farm and participate in farm events. The typical CSA season in Wisconsin runs from the end of May through mid-October but many farms offer early spring shares or winter shares.¹

This economic arrangement benefits farmers because they have improved cash flow in the beginning of the year. It also guarantees a market for their products. This arrangement benefits members because they receive fresh product, delivered conveniently to a dropsite nearby. This arrangement benefits the entire community by keeping local farms and jobs viable and securing a healthy, affordable and accessible food supply.²

CSAs have Proliferated Around the World

While relatively new in name, CSA harks back to a time when people knew where their food came from, ate in harmony with their local seasons, and enjoyed a balanced and nutritional diet of basic, natural foods. Community supported agriculture began in the early 1960’s in Germany, Switzerland, and Japan as a response to concerns about food safety and the urbanization of agricultural land.³

In a Nutshell

- ◆ Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) benefits farms and farm members.
- ◆ CSAs have proliferated around the world and the number of CSAs in Wisconsin has grown quickly.
- ◆ Many CSAs protect groundwater.
- ◆ Every “eater” affects groundwater quality through the farming practices they support when they purchase food.
- ◆ The future of CSAs in Wisconsin looks bright.

Community supported agriculture began in the United States on two east coast farms in 1986. Since that time, community supported farms have been organized throughout North America, mainly in the Northeast, the Pacific coast, the Upper-Midwest, and Canada.⁴ North America now has at least 1500 community supported farms.⁵



The Number of CSAs in Wisconsin has Grown Quickly

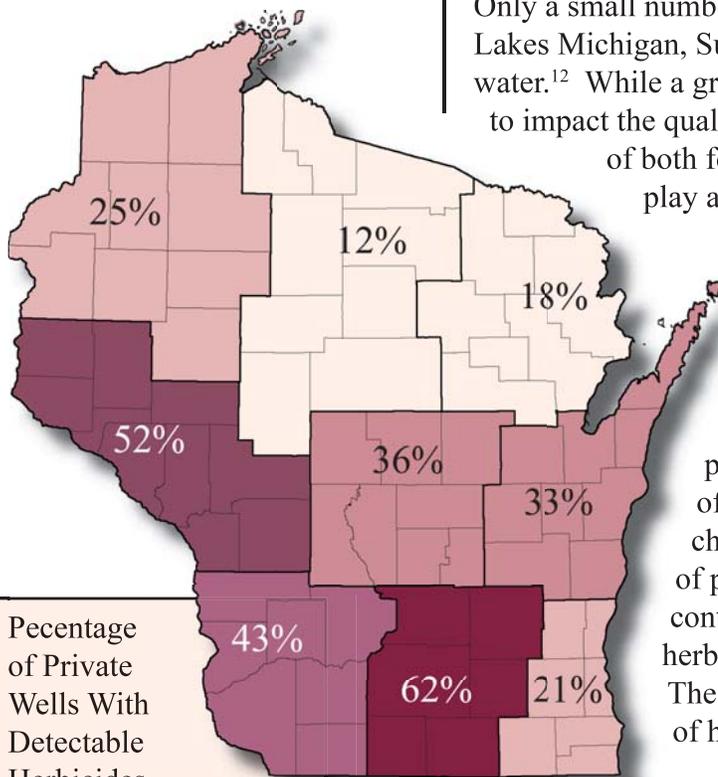
The Midwest has proven to be fertile ground for CSA farms and communities. In Wisconsin, the first CSA projects began near Milwaukee and in western Wisconsin near the Twin Cities in 1988. In 1996, more than 65 Wisconsin community supported farms grew food for an estimated 3,000 households.⁶ In 2007, there are approximately 90 CSAs in Wisconsin.⁷

Wisconsin CSAs are listed in a number of locations including:

- ◆ Local Harvest⁸
- ◆ Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition⁹
- ◆ Urban Ecology Center (Milwaukee)¹⁰
- ◆ Farm Fresh Atlases for each region of Wisconsin¹¹

Many CSAs Protect Groundwater

For about 75% of Wisconsinites, drinking water is groundwater. Only a small number of communities in Wisconsin, located along Lakes Michigan, Superior or Winnebago, are supplied by surface water.¹² While a great many land use practices have the potential to impact the quality of drinking water, agriculture is a large user of both fertilizer and pesticides, and farming practices play a large role in whether these chemicals seep into the groundwater.



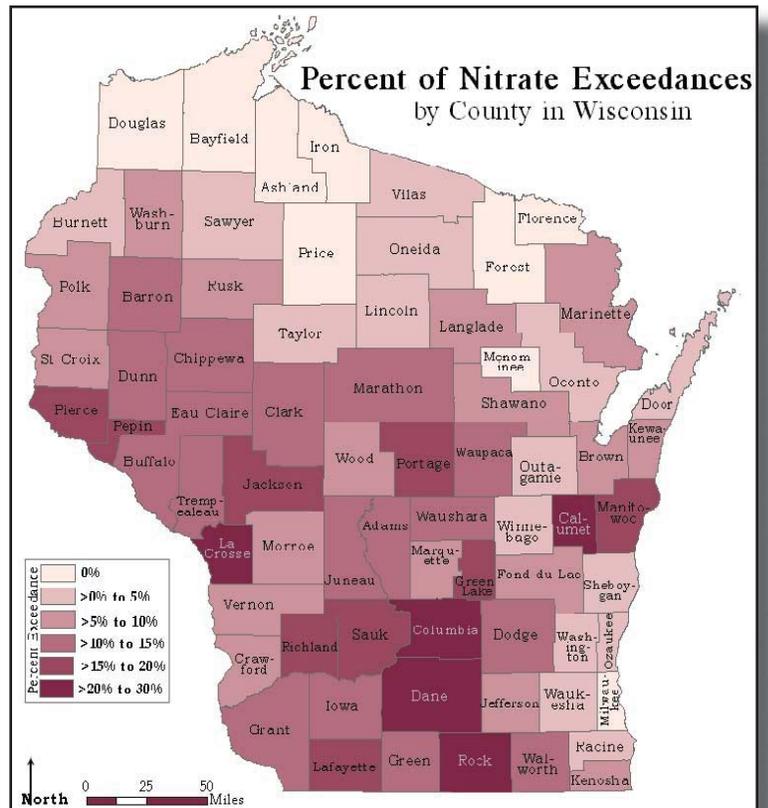
Percentage of Private Wells With Detectable Herbicides or Herbicide Metabolites (2001)

Approximately 13 million pounds of pesticides are applied to major agricultural crops in Wisconsin each year, including over 8.5 million pounds of herbicides, 315,000 pounds of insecticides, one million pounds of fungicides, and 3 million pounds of other chemicals.¹³ As a result, an estimated 37.7% of private drinking water wells in Wisconsin contained a detectable level of an herbicide or herbicide metabolite, according to a recent study.¹⁴ The map at the left shows the geographical pattern of herbicide contaminated wells.

In contrast, a national survey of CSAs in 2001 found that more than 96% of the 314 CSAs responding to the survey followed some form of organic or biodynamic production. Over 40% of the CSAs were certified

organic and so do not use synthetic pesticides.¹⁵ In Wisconsin, at least 50 of the approximately 90 total CSA farms (55%) produce their crops without the use of synthetic pesticides.¹⁶

Nitrate is the most widespread groundwater contaminant in Wisconsin and is increasing in extent and severity. Currently 11.6 % of private wells exceed the health-based drinking water limit with geographical distribution shown in the map at the right.¹⁷ Since 80% of nitrate inputs into Wisconsin's groundwater originate from manure spreading, agricultural fertilizers, and legume cropping systems, it makes sense that nitrate-contaminated wells are more prevalent in agricultural districts.¹⁸ In general, well-managed organic farming practices lower nitrate inputs to ground water,¹⁹ but at times, leaching from organic systems may also exceed the drinking water limit for nitrate.²⁰



Every “eater” affects groundwater quality through the farming practices they support when they purchase food. Buying food from local CSA farms protect farmland, supports sustainable farming practices, and conserves natural resources, including groundwater.

The Future of CSAs in Wisconsin Looks Bright

The number of CSAs in Wisconsin has grown quickly in the last 20 years from none to about 90 CSAs serving over 5000 households.²¹ A number of health insurance companies are providing an additional boost to the number of CSA subscribers by offering a cash rebate for CSA shares to encourage health plan members to eat healthier.²² In addition, the media are promoting local foods, with recent articles in *Time Magazine* and the *New York Times*.²³ Taken together, these trends suggest a bright future for CSAs in Wisconsin.



Endnotes:

- ¹ Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (MACSAC). www.macsac.org/aboutcsa.html
- ² Urban Ecology Center www.urbanecologycenter.org/csa/csa.html#whatis
- ³ MACSAC. www.macsac.org/csa/csa.html#whatis
- ⁴ MACSAC. www.macsac.org/csa/csa.html#whatis
- ⁵ Personal communication with John Hendrickson, 6/24/07.
- ⁶ MACSAC. www.macsac.org/csa/csa.html#whatis
- ⁷ Personal communication from John Hendrickson, 6/15/07, based on query of www.localharvest.org
- ⁸ www.localharvest.org
- ⁹ www.macsac.org
- ¹⁰ www.urbanecologycenter.org
- ¹¹ Southern WI www.reapfoodgroup.org/atlas/farms/csa.htm; Southeast WI www.farmfreshatlas.org/csa.htm; Western WI www.wifarmfresh.org/farms.cfm; Eastern WI www.farmfreshatlasoew.org/files/farm%20fresh%20atlas%20layout-A-Final-May12.pdf; Central WI call 715-343-6214
- ¹² Groundwater and its Role in Comprehensive Planning: Comprehensive Planning and Groundwater Fact Sheet 1. dnr.wi.gov/org/water/dwg/gw/pubs/SmartGrowth1.pdf
- ¹³ Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service. 2006. Wisconsin Pesticide Use. www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Wisconsin/Publications/Miscellaneous/pest_use_06.pdf
- ¹⁴ Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. 2002. Agricultural chemicals in Wisconsin groundwater: final report. ARM-PUB-98.qxd. Madison, WI.
- ¹⁵ Lass, Daniel et al. Community Supported Agriculture Entering the 21st Century: Results from the 2001 National Survey. www.cias.wisc.edu/pdf/CSA_survey_01.pdf
- ¹⁶ These 50 CSAs were listed as certified organic, organic, not using pesticides or not using synthetic pesticides and were compiled from the CSA lists from MACSAC www.macsac.org/consider.html, Urban Ecology Center www.urbanecologycenter.org and the Farm Fresh Atlases listed in endnote 10 on June 18, 2007.
- ¹⁷ Wisconsin Groundwater Coordinating Council Report to the Legislature. 2006. p.74 www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/dwg/gcc/rtl/2006report.pdf
- ¹⁸ Wisconsin Groundwater Coordinating Council Report to the Legislature. 2006. pp.73-74 www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/water/dwg/gcc/rtl/2006report.pdf
- ¹⁹ Pimentel, D., P. Hepperly, J. Hanson, D. Douds, and R. Seidel. 2005. Environment, energy, and economic comparisons of organic and conventional farming systems. *Bioscience* 55(7): 573-582. US Department of Agriculture. 2006. CSREES Research Results: Organic and Integrated Farming Key to Lowering Nitrogen Leaching. www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/news/2006news/nitrogen_organic.html
- ²⁰ McIsaac, G.F., and R. A. Cooke. (no date). Evaluation of Water Quality from Alternative Cropping Systems Using a Multiple-Paired Design. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. asap.aces.uiuc.edu/research/stew_farm/home.html
- ²¹ Personal communication with John Hendrickson, 6/24/07.
- ²² MACSAC www.macsac.org/rebates.html
- ²³ Eating Better Than Organic. Time, March 02,2007 www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1595245,00.html; The Vegetable-Industrial Complex, New York Times, October 15, 2006 www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/magazine/15wwln_lede.html?ex=1182398400&en=b2fad4ce7ad62d25&ei=5070



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