

Lawmakers want more for 'locavores' in military stores

By Karen Jowers, Army Times

Lawmakers want more local food products sold in base stores.

In the House version of the 2014 defense authorization bill, lawmakers direct defense officials to develop goals by Sept. 30, 2018, to maximize the purchase of local food products, sustainable products and recyclable products by commissaries and exchanges.

They also direct the Defense Department to develop guidelines within two years after the law is passed for identifying fresh meat, poultry, seafood, produce and other products raised or produced through sustainable methods that are not harmful to the environment.

The guidelines should also ensure those products are not made too expensive for customers, lawmakers noted. The "local food" movement has picked up steam in the public arena in the past four or five years, said Steve Vogel, an agricultural economist for the Agriculture Department's Economic Research Service.

Many people prefer to purchase foods that don't travel great distances and like to help smaller farms. The word "locavore" has even entered the lexicon, defined by Merriam-Webster as "one who eats 'grown locally' whenever possible." Some large retailers, including Wal-Mart, are making an effort to buy more local produce.

For years, Defense Commissary Agency policy has been to buy local produce and other products when possible. For example, produce contracts state that "contractors are expected to provide locally grown produce to the maximum extent possible, especially items such as watermelon, cantaloupe, peaches, nectarines, tomatoes, etc. Prices should be competitive with the local supermarkets or farmers markets."

Contractors also are expected to provide signs that detail where the produce was grown and its journey from field to plate, said DeCA spokesman Kevin Robinson.

In addition, commissaries provide "farmers market events" from mid-June through mid-July, inviting local farmers to talk to customers about their products. This year, because of customer demand, they expanded the event from one weekend to one month.

Fresh beef and pork is provided by suppliers that have been selected through a process that makes provisions for small business suppliers. DeCA's current seafood suppliers provide an average of 15 percent of its seafood from within a 150-mile radius of the stores, Robinson said. The jury is still out on whether local foods are healthier, however. A number of studies are looking at what impact the growth of local food markets is having on health, environmental quality, economic development and other issues.

“Whether or not food that is grown locally is healthier depends on a lot of things,” said Alice Ammerman, professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina’s School of Public Health and director of the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.

The center is conducting a study of whether the local food system encourages more healthful choices, Ammerman said, adding that while many people want to believe organic or locally grown food is inherently more nutritious, “more importantly, food that is fresh and locally grown has a flavor benefit.”

That, she said, will “drive a behavior change”: If local fruits and vegetables are fresher and tastier, you’ll eat more of them.

Some people worry that prices will be higher for local food. Ammerman said the center did a small study of eight North Carolina counties and found that farmer’s market prices were lower than grocery stores.

“Local” doesn’t necessarily mean organic, although some local farmers grow their products with the limited use of chemicals, energybased fertilizers and pesticides.

There is no generally accepted definition of “local,” even when it comes to geographic distance. One law states that to be considered locally or regionally produced, the product can be transported up to 400 miles from its origin or within the state where it was produced.