Have you heard the buzz yet about the newest diet craze? You might not lose weight on this one, but if you’re a food processor, you may lose some customers.

I’m talking about the 100-mile diet, a concept that is garnering considerable coverage within the mainstream media, and being talked about on an infinite number of websites and blogs.

The original concept for the 100-mile diet began in 2005, when Vancouver residents Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon decided that for one year they would buy only food that was produced within a 100-mile radius of their home. Since then the couple, both journalists, have encouraged other “100-mile dieters,” by offering suggestions and links to suppliers in their communities.

Of course, eating locally is not new. It’s been a way of life for most of the globe for centuries, and in fact, still is depending on where in the world you live. Neither is cross-border trade strictly a “modern” practice (after all, ancient civilizations traded olive oil, wine, spices and other dried foods). But as consumers today become increasingly detached from the source of food production, they have become more concerned with the distance their food must travel to get to their retail destination.

Fruit, vegetables and meat are now often processed by large corporations with many different processing facilities, generally located far from their end users. Food safety concerns surrounding transportation include the use of chemicals such as ethylene to initiate ripening, and genetically altered ingredients to increase yield and reduce quick spoilage. Traceability, contamination and even food tampering also become issues when products are transported over long distances, something consumers have become wary of following recent food safety scares and product recalls.

In many categories, multinational food companies have replaced independent producers with roots in the community. Production facilities have relocated to countries with cheaper labour or lower raw material costs. Grocery retailers too have consolidated to the extent that there are only a handful of chains, albeit with different brands and price points, within a region from which to choose.

In fact, in recent years the “eat local” movement has gained considerable momentum. Farmers’ markets are increasingly popular with a wide range of the public, particularly in large urban centres, as much for the fresh produce as for the feelings they provoke in people – the notion that buying food straight from the farm makes it fresher, safer and somehow more natural. To consumers who prefer to buy local, many of whom have never had any rural connection, being able to purchase from the producer themselves, someone they can ask about their growing practices, feels like a more “authentic” experience. Many of the smaller businesses that benefit from this trend fill niche markets for organic produce, “natural” foods and beverages, or high-end specialty products.

There are of course challenges to this argument. Eating only locally sourced foods often precludes processed goods, it cuts out a wide range of food alternatives, and it significantly alters the range of diet options available. Ironically, it also goes directly against both the demand for foods infused with healthful benefits, many of which are developed through R&D centres located across North America and Europe (consider margarine containing cholesterol-lowering plant sterols, or vitamin-infused beverages), as well the demand for exotic, ethnic and customized foods. Large-scale grocery chains and mass merchandisers such as Wal-Mart make it possible for all consumers, not just those who can afford it, to buy organic produce. And, of course, subsidiaries of larger companies can and do establish wonderful, co-operative ties to local communities.

Regardless of the pros and cons of the 100-mile diet, it should be no surprise that governments are listening to consumer concerns. Many regions, and even cities, are stepping up “buy local” marketing campaigns to boost local economies and encourage the growth of regional product categories. And in the U.S. the federal government is considering introducing an “eco-label” for all produce sold in retail outlets, based on the amount of greenhouse gases involved in growing and transporting that product.

What does this trend mean to the food industry in general? It’s a boon to smaller, regionally based producers, especially those in specialty or niche markets. For larger companies, it could encourage a backlash against buying from producers representing “big food.” Perhaps it’s time to consider what sort of connection your company has to the communities it serves.

Carolyn Cooper

carolyn.cooper@food.rogers.com