Here in Interior Alaska, you know that when you buy a fresh tomato, peach or bunch of grapes during the middle of winter, it could only have come in on a truck or a plane. It will be late June before I can head to the farmer’s market for some just-picked peas, collards and lettuce. Such is life in this climate.

But have you ever paid any attention to those little labels you have to peel off your fruits and vegetables from the grocery store? You might be surprised to find that a lot of what we buy in our local store isn't grown anywhere in the United States, no matter what time of year. That little label is key to finding out where our food originates.

Until recently, most produce in major grocery stores was unlabeled. The U.S. Department of Agriculture issued new country of origin labeling (COOL) regulations that went into effect on Sept. 30, 2008. Suppliers and retailers are now required to provide COOL for a wide range of products, including fresh and frozen beef, pork, lamb and chicken, as well as fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables.

I made a quick trip to the grocery store to read a few labels. These little round labels on my produce gave me some ideas of where my produce comes from. Not everything is labeled, but here are some of the ones that were. I’ve listed the distances (food miles) from each of these locations to Fairbanks: bananas, Ecuador (5,617 miles); pineapple, Costa Rica (4842 miles); grapes and plums, Chile (7,908 miles); melons, Guatemala (4,370 miles); tomatoes and peppers, British Columbia, Canada (1,350 miles); pears, Argentina (7,845 miles); apples, Washington (1,513 miles); and onions, Texas (3,139 miles).

That is a long way for your food to travel. The added expense of shipping increases item costs. I was surprised by the large number of items from Canada (closer than Chile) and the just the number of countries that were listed on labels.
Some food items, such as bananas, have always been imported and have wide consumer acceptance. The most obvious sources for out-of-season produce are Mexico, and Central and South America. But many more countries grow the produce that we buy.

Here's a list of commonly air-freighted fruits and veggies and their country of origin: grapes, Chili; oranges, Australia; asparagus, Peru; raspberries, Chile; nectarines, Chile; tomatoes, Netherlands; peaches, Chile; and papayas, Brazil.

Trucking, shipping and flying in food takes a toll on the environment and on public health. The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) did a study analyzing the transportation-related impacts of importing agricultural products into California's three largest ports — Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland.

The NRDC study showed that in 2005, approximately 3 million tons of fruits, vegetables, cereals, nuts and wine were imported from overseas into California by ship, airplane and truck. That seems ridiculous since so much of what we eat here in Alaska is raised in California.

The California Air Resources Board estimates that 2,400 premature deaths, 2,800 hospital admissions for asthma, and approximately 16,870 missed school days were attributable to direct and indirect exposure to diesel pollution from freight transport activities within the state.

It stands to reason that produce that's traveled thousands of miles is not going to taste as fresh or have as many nutrients as something that's just been picked this morning. And yet, when we shop at the grocery store today, we don't think twice when we see strawberries in deep winter or perfect tomatoes from Holland. We expect to be able to eat produce that is out of season and raised far away.

There are many good reasons for eating local — freshness, purity, taste, community support and preserving open space — but none of these benefits compares to the much-touted claim that eating local reduces fossil fuel consumption.

It's time we start paying attention to those little labels on our fruits and veggies to see how far our food traveled. Ask your favorite grocery stores and restaurants to carry more local foods in season. We can support our local farmers by purchasing produce at a farmer’s market or becoming a shareholder in a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Better still, let's put our hands in some dirt and grow our own food.

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