

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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What Role For Large Industry?

Anyone with an interest in quality agriculture who also works for a large multinational company must confront the question at some stage – i.e. what is the role for large scale industrial companies? More specifically, is it possible to reconcile a belief that more quality agriculture (often specialised, small scale, and local) is necessary with an economic system that is built around concepts of scale efficiency and corporate forms that disconnect producer from consumer, investor from manager, and employee from stakeholder?

This question is especially relevant given the pace with which large corporations are trying to adapt and develop products and services that have a quality or sustainable orientation. Just some recent examples –

- Chiquita banana and German retailer REWE are working together to help preserve wetland habitats (<http://en.greenplanet.net/lifestyle/eco-sustainability/762-chiquita-and-rewe-the-latest-ethical-action.html>)
- Whole Foods Markets has initiated *The Non-GMO Project* to help producers verify and label non-GMO products (www.wholefoodsmarket.com/nongmo-project/)

- Pisces Responsible Fish Restaurants is an effort by leading UK restaurants to link chefs and sustainable fisherman (www.pisces-rfr.org/UK/Home.html)
- And finally Walmart will begin a large scale labeling program that requires suppliers to calculate and disclose environmental production costs and lifecycle impacts which will result in a specific Walmart label (<http://walmartstores.com/FactsNews/NewsRoom/9279.aspx>)

Corporate greenwash? Public relations spin? Certainly reasonable people can disagree (see here for a comment on agribusiness impacts www.sloweb.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaqio.lasso?cod=3E6E345B116f119C45ikP3032CFA) However, what cannot be denied is the multiplier effect that occurs when an entity such as Walmart decides to act and impose a standard or label throughout its supply chain. This will force a wide range of companies to adapt their own processes and practices.

I laud those who advocate and struggle to preserve and restore small scale, local, and specialized production. This is crucial to ensure diversity in the marketplace and probably has an incalculable risk mitigation value by ensuring there are alternatives in case technological advances have adverse unforeseen consequences. We do need those who aggressively push for change given the inherent biases in modern economic systems.

However, I think it is difficult, perhaps even naïve, to think that we will not also have large scale enterprises. There are efficiencies to be gained and certainly the story of human history is one of technological progress and increase in scale. There are no doubt limits and the concept of “too big to fail” (which at times seems to imply “too big to manage”) is problematic. Corporations are just tools at the end of day. They respond to various stakeholders and can be used for a variety of purposes. Thus, I also applaud the efforts of the Whole Foods Markets and Walmarts. What they do clearly matters and the more they act in a certain way (which ultimately reflects their customers’ desires and values) the more the system will change.

News

Debates are heating up regarding a number of quality food related topics. The web filled with controversy when a British Food Standards Agency report compared the nutritional value of conventionally grown and organic foods (www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2009/jul/organic). The study, conducted by the very reputable London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, was a meta-analysis of 162 prior studies and concluded

there is no good evidence that increased dietary intake, of the nutrients identified in this review to be present in larger amounts in organically than in conventionally produced crops and livestock, would be of benefit to individuals consuming a normal varied diet, and it is therefore unlikely that these differences in nutrient content are relevant to human health.

The Food Standards Agency was quick to point out that this did not mean that there was no value to consuming organic foods. Indeed, as Marion Nestle pointed out on her food blog the main point of favoring organic is the benefit on animal welfare and the environment. www.foodpolitics.com/2009/07/todays-huge-flap-about-organics/

Somewhat similarly, the British (as with climate change often leading the way with fact-based analysis) Department for

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published a research report calling into question the singular focus on “food miles” as a means to distinguish good from bad foods. As an example, the study notes that while the production systems of Brazilian and British poultry are similar, it actually takes 25% less energy to produce poultry in Brazil due to the fact that the soya feed has lower transport burdens on the environment as do their naturally ventilated poultry houses.

The report, completed in 2008 but released in summer 2009 is a good example of how the reduction of complex concepts to single slogans or ideas is dangerous. This is something that is unfortunately very common when it comes to food – as, for example, the diet fads. One potential conclusion to take from the report is to focus more on seasonality so that staple foods are imported from the lowest cost and lowest environmental impact producers and produce is consumed locally and seasonally thereby reducing transport and refrigeration impacts. (<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&ProjectID=15001&FromSearch=Y&Publi>)

In the spirit of examining the inherent complexity of seemingly simple solutions to multifaceted problems, the Economist (www.economist.com/businessfinance/display_story.cfm?story_id=14120903) provided an interesting analysis of the potential value of junk food taxes to get people to change their diets. While some may claim the Economist has a particular ideological slant, the article nevertheless makes interesting reading. A number of resources on the topic are available here (www.economist.com/fattaxes)

Finally, on the topic of behavioural change, the author Michael Pollan wrote a lengthy piece in the NY Times on diet and health. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/magazine/02cooking-t.html>) Using the movie “Julie & Julia” as a launching point, the article provides an insightful view of the evolution of television cooking shows (now more in the nature of sports contests than educational shows) and what constitutes the act of “cooking” today. The article finishes with the

conclusion that the most effective way to get people to improve their diets and to eat less is to get them to make their own food. Bring back Home Economics classes!

Resources

The USDA attempts to document what people in the US actually eat; always a difficult task given the way people “forget” about that extra piece of chocolate cake and magically add an extra carrot or two to their daily intake. The latest *What We Eat in America* study, based on data from 2005-6, is available here www.ars.usda.gov/Services/docs.htm?docid=15044

The blog, *Obama Foodorama*, follows all food (<http://obamafoodorama.blogspot.com>) news related to Obama. It focuses not only on policy issues but also has a helpful interactive map called the *Chowbama* tracking where the first family likes to eat in and around D.C. <http://obamafoodorama.blogspot.com/2009/07/cartographies-of-chowbama-obamas-ate.html>

Earlier this year supposedly disturbing news for those excited about the Obama White House organic produce garden started to make the rounds. The claims were that the soil in the White House garden had elevated levels of lead that might leech into the produce from the garden. This was a case of exaggeration and misinformation and was refuted clearly on the Obama food blog. See <http://obamafoodorama.blogspot.com/2009/06/white-house-kitchen-garden-as-media.html>

Returning to the soil, the US National Science Foundation has recently been putting more emphasis into understanding the value of soil biodiversity. For interesting information on the variety of small organisms and microbes that ensure a health environment for plants www.nsf.gov/discoveries/disc_summ.jsp?cntn_id=115253&org=NSF&from=news



Biochar is sometimes lauded as a “magic bullet” for soil fertility. I caution again about the single simple solutions to help enrich soil and reduce carbon emissions from agriculture. Some good background information here http://ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/article.news.php?component_id=6915&component_version_id=10510&language_id=12

In Europe, the NY Times published a rather hardhitting article outlining who actually receives agriculture subsidies in the EU http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/business/global/17farms.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=europe%20farm%20aid&st=cse Among the prominent names, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Albert of Monaco. This is a topic that always makes for good headlines. A website for tracking US subsidy payments is <http://farm.ewg.org/farm/regionsummary.php?fips=00000>

Finally, on the sweeter side of life, Swiss chocolate supplier Barry Callebaut announced (very appropriately in midsummer) that they have developed a way to naturally produce chocolate with a higher than normal melting point. Named “Vulcano” the chocolate may mean that you can have your chocolate in high summer without fear perhaps next year www.swissinfo.ch/eng/front/Melt_resistant_chocolate_to_beat_the_stains.html?siteSect=105&sid=10966083&cKey=124773705000&ty=st

Upcoming Events

16-18 Nov: The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will sponsor a World Summit on Food Security. This builds on three events held in October, including the World Food Day held on October 16 (www.fao.org/getinvolved/worldfoodday/en/) More information on Summit can be found at www.fao.org/wsfs/world-summit/en/