

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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Looking Back, Looking Forward

2009 is certain to go down as an eventful year. The worst financial market crisis since the Great Depression, ongoing concern over how to address climate change, and the debate on whether US President Obama was a deserving recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. While these are all notable, I think 2009 may be remembered more as the year when food and agriculture returned to the fore and became a topic of political, public, and private debate. Food and Ag is back!

Looking back over the year, a few key themes stand out. **First**, is the increasing interest in **local, high quality, and often traditional food**. Going under the label of "locavore" in the US or "geographical indications" in the EU or just plain "normal" most everywhere else this is a return to a pattern of eating that would be more familiar to our grandparents than those in my generation.

Particularly notable has been a shift by the USDA. This is both in the form of money – see the grants on the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food website and platform www.usda.gov/wps/portal/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER as well as more

visionary policy statements by leading officials such as that by Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan in her memo on the importance of support for local and regional food systems (<http://civileats.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/local-food-memo.doc.pdf>) in the U.S. For reactions to these and more see these two articles - civileats.com/2009/10/15/a-new-direction-on-research-at-the-usda-some-experts-weigh-in-on-what-we-need-to-know-now/ and <http://civileats.com/2009/11/20/8-steps-obama-could-take-to-save-food/>

A **second** key trend is the ongoing focus on **food safety**, particularly in the US given a number of high profile incidents described in NY Times and Washington Post articles about people who became paralyzed by eating food contaminated with E Coli bacteria. Marion Nestle has been chronicling a lot of this discussion on her blog with this post about the above mentioned newspaper stories (www.foodpolitics.com/2009/10/the-high-human-cost-of-unsafe-food/), this post summarising an interview she gave (www.foodpolitics.com/2009/09/interview-with-foodsafetynews-com/) and this related post about the downsides of continued use of antibiotics in farm animals in the US <http://www.foodpolitics.com/2009/08/antibiotics-in-farm-animals-the-fight-is-on/>. Related posts summarised the latest labelling controversy over health claims

www.foodpolitics.com/2009/10/fda-to-clean-up-the-front-of-package-mess/ and the dilemmas related to meat consumption www.foodpolitics.com/2009/11/meat-arguments-health-climate-taxes/ cover related topics.

For perspectives on one US senators view on the EU ban on the use of antibiotics see <http://civileats.com/2009/10/09/scientists-respond-to-sen-grassley%E2%80%99s-criticism-of-time-magazine-piece-%E2%80%98getting-real-about-the-high-price-of-cheap-food%E2%80%99/> This issue also is part of wider ongoing food trade disputes between the US and EU as noted by <http://ictsd.net/i/news/bridgesweekly/56748/>. As may be obvious from the above, food safety continues to be a primary motivating factor for changes in the US food system.

The **third** trend to highlight is **climate change**. Primary agriculture itself contributes on the order of 14% of greenhouse gas emissions and when one includes land use changes from expanding agriculture production the figure can rise as high as 30%. Thus, it seems unlikely that we can truly address climate change without factoring in agriculture particularly if you consider FAO estimates that food production will need to expand by up to 50% by 2050.

Agriculture was excluded from the Kyoto Protocol and the initial EU Emissions Trading Scheme so it is new territory for now. New Zealand is at the forefront of the thinking as evidenced by the *Wall Street Journal* article by the NZ Trade Minister earlier this year - online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703298004574455911537211256.html?mod=oglenews_wsj The UK Chief Scientist has also spoken out on this issue as well www.reuters.com/article/environmentNews/idUSTRE5A147O20091102

The flip side of this is the impact that climate change will have on agriculture. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) published an impressive study on the issue in September 2009 concluding that climate change will reduce calorie availability by 2050 to below 2000 levels. In the study -

www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/p_r21.pdf - IFPRI called for USD 7 billion in new investment per year to help figure out how to offset the impacts of climate change. On a somewhat narrower topic, one of the last editions of the US food magazine *Gourmet* (which stopped circulation during 2009) contained an article on the potential impact of climate change on wine production in France - www.gourmet.com/foodpolitics/2009/08/wine-war-global-warming At the same time UK wine makers are reporting record harvests.

Another strand to this discussion is the impact of various other policies intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on agriculture production. ICTSD published a paper in 2009 (<http://ictsd.net/i/publications/55241/>) that examined the interaction between trade policy, agriculture, and climate change policy. There are number of uncertainties here and it is an area that has been under-researched. See here for an example of what may be possible (carbon credits for sustainable cocoa) - http://ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/article.news.php?component_id=7091&component_version_id=10795&language_id=12

On the broader topic of agriculture trade policy, ICTSD is due to publish a book on issues related to the future of agriculture subsidies and international trade. A paper with a good summary was published by ICTSD here - <http://ictsd.net/i/publications/56284/> For some details on one particular subsidy program – sugar subsidies in the US – see some commentary on Marion Nestle’s blog here - www.foodpolitics.com/2009/09/how-will-the-sugar-policy-crisis-shake-out/

The above demonstrates there is no end of interesting issues in the world of food and agriculture right now. But how can one make sense of it all? See below for some help

News

If you read just two documents all year I suggest 1) the short *Search for a Fresh Recipe* article from the FT’s special section on food and agriculture published on World Food Day 2009 - <http://media.ft.com/cms/27d41acab9a3-11de-a747-00144feab49a.pdf>

and 2) this longer paper from UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/security/assessment.htm

The DEFRA document innovates by specifying objective indicators and metrics that can measure future developments to judge improvements. Thus, we can look back at where we have been and look forward to where we may go. Kudos to UK DEFRA.

Resources

There are a number of new websites to support those interested in finding local, high quality food in both the US and Europe. The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) in the US has an online searchable local food guide (<http://guide.buylocalca.org/>). Also in the US, the website Local Harvest has an online database listing farms, community supported agriculture groups (CSAs) and other places where you can buy sustainable food (<http://www.localharvest.org/>) In the EU one of the best developments in 2009 was the release of the Qualigeo database by Qualivita Foundation. This website (www.qualigeo.it) provides a searchable database containing an almost overwhelming amount of detail about quality foods, most of them recognized geographical indications. Finally, globally Slow Food is now identifying farmers markets following their basic principles (www.earthmarkets.net/)

Following on with geographic indications theme, the FAO released a detailed guide, *Linking people, places and products*, on promoting sustainable geographic indications and other quality products linked to geographic origin. This book was prepared in conjunction with the Siner-GI network of researchers and provides some great case studies showing creative ways in which geographic origin can be used to further a number of related goals such as rural

development, environmental protection, and cultural preservation. The book is available on the impressive FAO Quality & Origin website - www.foodquality-origin.org/eng/index.html

To finish off the GI-related theme, the EU released in mid 2009 the detailed assessment made of its current quality agriculture policy. This provides insight into how the PDO and PGI schemes really work in practice and will feed into reform proposals that are expected from the EU Commission in 2010. See here - ec.europa.eu/agriculture/eval/reports/pdopgi/

Organic and bio production is often highlighted as one of the keys to address negative climate and environmental externalities of agriculture production. There was a lot of interest in whether organic sales would hold up in the face of the financial crisis in 2009. For some perspective see the Green Planet website <http://en.greenplanet.net/point-of-view/opinions/944-is-organic-out-of-the-dark-an-interview-to-gerald-herrmann.html> and <http://en.greenplanet.net/food/trade/956-uk-organic-market-can-grow-by-p1-billion-experts-say.html>

For an excellent overall assessment of the impact of agricultural production on the environment there is still probably no better single source than the FAO's 2006 report - *Livestocks Long Shadow*. The report is here www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm and a pretty good summary, including reactions to it, can be found on Wikipedia here http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livestocks_Long_Shadow A close second is the UNEP 2009 report *The Environmental Food Crisis* - www.grida.no/publications/rr/food-crisis/

Upcoming Events

1 Jan 2010: A new year will no doubt bring many new developments in quality food and ag. I wish you a sustainably prosperous 2010

