

## A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

**A Call to Farms**

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**The Age of Government**

Continuing a bit with last month's theme of false dichotomies, this month will highlight some of what may be expected in the near future on food and agriculture regulation. Governments have become more active across the entire economy and this is no doubt the case in food and agriculture as well. However, what is often portrayed as a choice between free market and regulation often seems misguided. It is not really a question of whether to regulate or not but rather what goals we are trying to achieve and what are the right tools to help achieve them.

One area where we seem to be still trying to define the goal and then find the right role for regulation is in agriculture and climate change. Climate Change will have a large effect on ecosystems and thus agriculture (see [www.usda.gov/img/content/EffectsofClimateChangeonUSEcosystem.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/img/content/EffectsofClimateChangeonUSEcosystem.pdf)). While there was broad acknowledgment at Copenhagen that agriculture needs to be addressed in any climate regime the how was not clear.

Shortly before the Copenhagen conference began, USDA Secretary Vilsack outlined his thoughts on the subject – see here

[www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/s.7\\_0\\_A/7\\_0\\_1OB?contentidonly=true&contentid=2009/12/0610.xml](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/s.7_0_A/7_0_1OB?contentidonly=true&contentid=2009/12/0610.xml).

For an alternative view see this commentary posted on the Civil Eats blog shortly after <http://civileats.com/2009/12/15/getting-at-the-roots-of-climate-change-agriculture/>

Related to this is the effort to create markets which would facilitate payments for ecosystems services (PES) that might be recognized under a climate change regulatory regime. Thus, these could be used to direct agriculture production to certain methods. A good introduction to this topic, with a focus on West Africa, is found in this background report on Katoomba Group's Ecosystem Marketplace. [www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/resources.library.page.php?page\\_id=7092&section=our\\_publications&eod=1](http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/resources.library.page.php?page_id=7092&section=our_publications&eod=1)

Another topic where the regulatory approach is up for debate relates to nutrition. Often this is a debate about the best way to try to tackle the obesity problem. Some have argued for taxes on junk foods and it appears that Romania is the first country to try this ([www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=BE3B2B1802c922C6C3QhJ35FEFEF](http://www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=BE3B2B1802c922C6C3QhJ35FEFEF))

Others advocate regulatory targets backed up by fines or other penalties. New York City has been in the forefront here first tackling trans fats, calories, soda, and now salt ([www.foodpolitics.com/2010/01/new-york-citys-new-health-initiative-salt/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2010/01/new-york-citys-new-health-initiative-salt/)) General food labeling is another possibility with much discussion focusing recently on topics such as traffic light systems to demarcate good and bad foods or new rules on portion sizes ([www.foodpolitics.com/2009/12/food-labeling-yet-another-update/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2009/12/food-labeling-yet-another-update/))

A third area where the role of regulation is often a subject of discussion is the effort to develop more local food production. In the US,

Whole Foods Markets is trying to get USDA approval for mobile slaughterhouses that would provide some of the infrastructure necessary to expand local food production. For some discussion of this effort and the concerns that it merely replaces market power of big processors with big retailers see here [www.grist.org/article/2009-11-20-Whole-Foods-chicken-farms/](http://www.grist.org/article/2009-11-20-Whole-Foods-chicken-farms/)

The US based Wallace Center sponsored a report in 2009 on local food businesses. This case study based report contains a wealth of information on the facilitating conditions and regulations that contributed to the success of certain local food businesses. Most interesting is that this report is not just US focused but actually spans the globe with its case studies [www.communityfoodenterprise.org/](http://www.communityfoodenterprise.org/) The report advocates incorporating strategies to support such business into the work of NGOs, national development plans and the work of the multilateral organizations such as the UN and World Bank.

To tie together these last two areas, researchers at MIT released a report in 2009 arguing that increasing local food production is key to helping address the obesity problem in the US. The main thesis is that the decrease in local food production (only 1-2% of food consumed in the US is produced locally according to the report) has led to a situation where energy dense, high calorie products are cheap and readily available while more nutritious foods are expensive or difficult to acquire or both. The research can be found at [web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/foodshed.html](http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/foodshed.html)

What ties these all together for me is the effort to find the right role for regulation of markets. For all markets require regulation – it is merely a decision about what kind and how. Regulation provides the rules within which the market players operate and as such what is really required is a discussion about the value choices of society. We must determine what we consider important and then it should be a decision about the most efficient, effective, and fair way to get there. Regulation is only a tool to help.

## News

The end of 2009 and beginning of 2010 brought the usual spate of retrospectives and forward looking summaries of the food and agriculture world. Three stood out for me.

First, the Food Safety News website published a list of top ten food safety news stories of 2009 [www.foodsafetynews.com/2009/12/top-ten-food-safety-news-stories-of-2009/](http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2009/12/top-ten-food-safety-news-stories-of-2009/). While these have a predominantly US focus it is interesting to see in number 9 that a Chinese court accepted a lawsuit for compensation for the 2008 melamine milk scandal. While China is a long way from the US in terms of being a litigious society this may be a development worth watching given the highly integrated global food system.

Second, the above mentioned Ecosystems Marketplace published a list of developments related to PES in 2009 and some areas to watch for developments in 2010 [www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page\\_id=7403&section=news\\_articles&eod=1](http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page_id=7403&section=news_articles&eod=1). One development that I had missed early in 2009 was the formation of an Office of Ecosystem Services and Markets as the US Department of Agriculture. Who says that governments cannot innovate?

Finally, Marion Nestle published her list of watch areas in food and nutrition during 2010. [www.foodpolitics.com/2010/01/whats-up-with-food-and-nutrition-in-2010/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2010/01/whats-up-with-food-and-nutrition-in-2010/) This may be the year that a new food safety bill gets through Congress and it will definitely be the year that US government releases a new set of dietary guidelines that always is a source of debate for industry and consumer advocates.

## Resources

No till agriculture is often cited as an advance that can not only be environmentally friendly (e.g. less fuel needed to power tillers and less disturbing of carbon and nitrogen trapped in soils) and good for development (see - <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/innovation-of-the-week-zero-tillage/>). However there are also those who criticize it as a key part of the industrial agriculture

system that relies on GM crops (see [www.iatp.org/climate/index.php?q=document/agriculture-and-climate-change-real-problems-false-](http://www.iatp.org/climate/index.php?q=document/agriculture-and-climate-change-real-problems-false-) ). Who is right probably depends on the value choices made.

The website GoodEater.org is developing into a great resource for interesting takes on food and agriculture. Recently there were posts containing charts and other pictures that help visualize the US organic food industry ([www.goodeater.org/2009/12/28/top-5-organic-industry-visualizations/](http://www.goodeater.org/2009/12/28/top-5-organic-industry-visualizations/)) and the status of fair trade South African Rooibos Tea [www.goodeater.org/2009/12/21/the-last-real-rooibos-tea/](http://www.goodeater.org/2009/12/21/the-last-real-rooibos-tea/)

The Rooibos Tea story mentions the role of finance for agriculture and food businesses. An FAO sponsored research study provided an excellent overview of agriculture investment funds in developing countries with a particular focus on Eastern Europe. This almost serves as a cookbook for how to set up such funds. [www.eastagri.org/news/index.asp?id=220](http://www.eastagri.org/news/index.asp?id=220)

Concerns over land grabs are never quite out of the news. A new website with a wealth of detail on the topic at <http://farmlandgrab.org/>

The concern over land grabs is intricately connected to the concern over food security. Unfortunately, a UN special rapporteur on the right to food predicted a new food crisis in 2010 or 2011 and called for increased investment in the agriculture sector. See here [www.euractiv.com/en/cap/un-envoy-world-set-new-food-crisis-2010/article-187694](http://www.euractiv.com/en/cap/un-envoy-world-set-new-food-crisis-2010/article-187694)

Water is also a topic of controversy. The well known author Jared Diamond came under criticism recently for advocating the role of corporations such as Coca-Cola in protecting

world water supplies. See some commentary here [www.foodpolitics.com/2009/12/saving-the-earth-coca-cola/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2009/12/saving-the-earth-coca-cola/) More skepticism on the role of corporations in the water sector at <http://blog.foodandwaterwatch.org/blog/archive/2009/12/07/feeling-dirty-after-corporate-bluewash/>

When talking about large corporations and their role in the agriculture sector it is hard to get away without mentioned Monsanto. A recent report from the Farmer to Farmer Campaign on Genetic Engineering heavily critiqued Monsanto's role in seed markets <http://farmertofarmercampaign.com/> As noted last year, the US Department of Justice is reviewing the market for potential antitrust concerns. Monsanto also made news when the Center for Food Safety sued the USDA for claiming that it illegally approved Roundup Ready alfalfa by failing to produce an environmental impact statement. This statement was available for comment until 14 February and more detail is available here [www.aphis.usda.gov/biotechnology/alfalfa\\_documents.shtml](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/biotechnology/alfalfa_documents.shtml) More on Monsanto and seeds generally on Pamela Ronald's blog here [http://scienceblogs.com/tomorrowstable/2009/12/the\\_gene\\_trade\\_goes\\_global\\_1.php](http://scienceblogs.com/tomorrowstable/2009/12/the_gene_trade_goes_global_1.php)

Finally, Tristram Stuart, the author of the excellent book on food waste recently fed 5000 people lunch in Trafalgar Square from food that otherwise would have been discarded – one way to make a point ! <http://civileats.com/2009/12/22/food-is-for-eating-waste-reviewed/>).

### Upcoming Events

[www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm](http://www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm)

<http://www.foodreference.com/html/march-food-wine-events.html>

### Looking forward to Spring in Switzerland

