

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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We Want to Change – But How?

Recently in my own work I was reminded of the quote from Lampedusa's *The Leopard* – "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (translated from the original – "Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è bisogna che tutto cambi.")

Now I am not sure that we really want all things to stay as they are in the food and agriculture world but we do want to produce sufficient, healthy, interesting food in a manner that does not inhibit our ability to feed future generations. In this way we do want things to stay a bit the same (or at least how they used to be, or at least we imagine they used to be, a generation ago). But obviously to get there in the face of scarce resources and changing values we do have to do things differently.

The question then is - how do we get from here to there? Should change be driven from the top down, percolate from the bottom up or arrive in surprising transformative ways? The answer is probably all of the above and that is certainly what is happening in the food and ag industry.

On the food safety front, the EU Food Safety Agency and Center for Disease Prevention Control release their most recent study of food borne illnesses in the EU (45000 illnesses and 32 deaths in 2008 generally down from 2007 levels). The report (available at www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/zoonoses100128.htm) provides data that can be used to focus government and industry efforts to improve food safety. Thus it might be of use to China as it established a new food safety commission after another melamine recall (www.businessweek.com/news/2010-02-10/china-names-vice-premier-food-safety-commission-head-update1-.html). This commission is part of a new set of laws on food safety in China. The US food safety reform laws continue to be discussed in Congress. However, some recently expressed concern about the potential for increasing corporate influence over those bills due to the recent Supreme Court ruling removing limits on corporate campaign contributions (see www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/01/pollan-supreme-court-ruling-not-good-for-food-safety/).

So government is the change agent and industry is the problem, right? Well maybe not so fast. The retail chain Target in the US recently received kudos from Greenpeace among others for phasing out farmed salmon from more than 1700 stores in the US <http://pressroom.target.com/pr/news/consumables/label/target-eliminates-farmed-salmon.aspx>. This should help encourage sustainable seafood consumption - <http://blog.foodandwaterwatch.org/blog/archive/2010/01/27/target-hits-the-mark-with-a-phase-out-on-farmed-salmon/> and is being followed by other corporations as well www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=BE3B87D002f4e0A12AWJKr584108

However, those are only small examples and not relevant when many parts of the agriculture industry continue with factoring farming practices that are evil, right? See, for

example, this account of recent exposes in the US media on ABC-TV <http://civileats.com/2010/02/11/an-isolated-act-of-abuse-or-a-standard-industry-practice-that%e2%80%99s-also-abusive/> So thank goodness we have government to reign in industry particularly when it may be engaged in monopolistic practices in the market for such basic inputs such as seeds. See some commentary here on the new US Dept. of Justice investigation into Monsanto - <http://civileats.com/2010/01/21/it%e2%80%99s-about-time-u-s-justice-department-opens-antitrust-investigation-into-monsanto/>)

But government also gets it wrong by banning traditional products such as raw milk. So we need revolutionaries such as this Canadian www.terramadre.org/pagine/leggi.lasso?id=C2744B8803142259F6KoJUC79C8D&n=en&tp=3 And of course Michael Pollan is here, there, and everywhere (including now Oprah - <http://civileats.com/2010/01/29/we-need-a-food-revolution-oprah-with-michael-pollan-video/>) to remind us to eat like our grandparents.

So the blogospherists, locavores, bio crowd are our protectors and should drive the change right? But, according to some, they may not be advocating a practical way to actually feed the world in a sustainable way (see this review of James McWilliams new book *Just Food* on Pamela Ronald's website - http://scienceblogs.com/tomorrowstable/2010/01/just_food.php) And they are part of an elitist trend of good food for the rich <http://en.greenplanet.net/events/conferences/1372-soil-associations-annual-conference-to-discuss-organic-elitism-.html>)

So we need the politicians to use the bully pulpit to get us to behave better as Michelle Obama recently tried to do on the topic of childhood obesity with her *Let's Move* initiative www.foodpolitics.com/2010/02/michelle-obamas-campaign-against-childhood-obesity/ According to some who did not believe it was appropriate for her to personalize the issue, this is the wrong way to go about it <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Health/michelle-obamas-obesity-comments-bringing-malia-sasha-wrong/story?id=9751138>

So where exactly does that leave us now? Honestly I do not know where this all ends up. It is good to see so much energy and activity being put into debate around food and agriculture. It is too much to think it can be channeled in any one direction and that the free market of ideas will steer us toward a sensible result. In the meantime, I will escape from the real world for a bit and try my hand in the virtual world of Farmville where maybe I can avoid these debates (www.farmville.com/).

News

Labeling continues to be a hot food topic, particularly as a way to increase transparency and potentially encourage certain consumer choices. The EU recently settled on its new bio/organic logo for use starting in July 2010 http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/logo/index_en.htm based on a citizen vote (see last page of newsletter for winning design).

France is making news with its Grenelle 2 law that will potentially introduce mandatory environmental labeling on consumer goods. The USDA prepared a briefing note in Dec 2009 focusing on the international trade implications of this potential new law <http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/Proposed%20Carbon%20Footprint%20Labeling%20Could%20Step%20on%20Trade%20Paris%20France%2012-22-2009.pdf> Others have looked at it from a consumer acceptance point of view <http://en.greenplanet.net/point-of-view/opinions/1404-environmental-labeling-will-be-useless-unless-well-prepared.html>

Meanwhile in Switzerland, discussion is underway about how best to introduce a "healthy choice" label onto the food market. The Swiss Society for Nutrition produced a report providing a good overview of potential options from a range of countries and how they have been implemented on the marketplace. See http://www.sge-ssn.ch/fileadmin/pdf/500-fuer_experten/70-Labeling/Label_Inventory.pdf for the report.

Finally for an overview of consumer trends see this market research study from -

www.contextmarketing.com/sources/foodissue_sreport.pdf

Resources

IFPRI released a detailed report outlining a number of successful strategies for reducing hunger and malnutrition in the developing world. This provides a rich source of case studies for those interesting in development

<http://www.ifpri.org/publication/millions-fed>

Another good case study based publication relevant for development is a study by the World Bank on techniques to help emerging market farmers manage production risk

www.globalagrisk.com/pubs/2005_ESW_Managing_Ag_Risk.pdf

In the agriculture development world, the Gates Foundation hired a new head for its agriculture development program. The choice drew some criticism, given his corporate background.

<http://blog.foodandwaterwatch.org/blog/archive/2010/01/20/gates-foundation-great-frustration/>

Catch shares are often cited as a means to ensure sustainable fisheries management. The Katoomba Group Ecosystem Marketplace published a series of articles examining the effects of such schemes in promoting efficient management of fish stocks

http://www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page_id=7422§ion=news_articles&eod=1

Continuing with responsible environmental management, Time magazine recently had an article on the benefits of grass-fed livestock systems for human and climate health -

www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1200759,00.html This article picks up a number of themes from a Worldwatch report

www.worldwatch.org/node/6126

Speaking of the return to "real food" as mentioned in the Time article, this website

offers a continually updated view on laws related to raw milk around the world

www.realmilk.com/happening-other.html

Just to complicate the discussion about who drives change a bit more are some updates on the activities of the US Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan

<http://civileats.com/2010/01/27/merrigan-addresses-ecofarm/> And for more information

about New York state's soda tax see here

www.nyam.org/initiatives/sp-sbb.shtml

New York does seem to be the locus of many debates with NY City Mayor Bloomberg also on an anti-salt crusade. Marion Nestle provides some helpful research on the topic here

www.foodpolitics.com/2010/02/the-research-on-salt/

Traceability is often a requirement for any labelling and food safety scheme. While one might naturally think a single global scheme is needed see here for a different perspective based on the credit card payment experience

www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/02/traceability-is-one-standard-the-cure/

If your head is spinning and you feel a need to slow down a bit after all the information this month you can visit the first official SlowFood Slow City in the US - Sonoma, California

www.cittaslowsonomavalley.org/index.html

And while you might think something called a McItaly Burger is an April Fools joke it is not -

www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2010/jan/28/mcdonalds-launch-mcitaly-burger

Upcoming Events

www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm

<http://www.foodreference.com/html/april-food-wine-festivals.html>

The recently adopted EU bio/organic logo:

