

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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System Change by Stirring the Food and Agriculture Public Policy Pot

Any large scale system change in food and agriculture is going to require actions on a number of fronts – consumers, producers, but perhaps most importantly governments. The question is how to create the conditions for changes in public policy given all the various interests involved.

One can see different activity in the US, UK and the EU more broadly which reflect their different starting points and challenges they face. In the US first lady Michelle Obama has been quietly pursuing a multi-pronged strategy aimed at first sight on children's obesity. However, the ambitions are probably much larger including overall health, food quality, and agriculture generally. Key elements in her work have been her Let's Move campaign, the White House garden, and most recently direct talks with food corporations.

An update on the latest White House Childhood Obesity Summit and its relevance for food and agriculture by someone who attended the April event can be found here <http://civileats.com/2010/04/16/what-i->

[learned-at-michelle-obama%E2%80%99s-historic-obesity-summit/](http://www.foodpolitics.com/2010/04/mrs-obamas-anti-obesity-campaign/) Marion Nestle has also commented on the activities of Michelle Obama and how it fits into a broader strategy on food, agriculture and health www.foodpolitics.com/2010/04/mrs-obamas-anti-obesity-campaign/

This is all probably part of the elaborate dance that will lead up to the debates around the next Farm Bill in the US. This bill, which sets out food and agriculture policy (and perhaps most importantly subsidy payments) in 5 year increments next comes up for renewal in 2012. This will be a key moment for those seeking to make changes in food and agriculture policy. For some of the different visions that are being formed for this bill see the commentary here <http://civileats.com/2010/04/23/a-new-vision-for-the-farm-bill/>

One key debate will be farm subsidies and their current focus on only a few crops such as corn and soy. A new study suggests that fruit and vegetable production in traditional upper Midwest corn and soy growing regions might actually lead to more local job production - www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing/files/midwest.html Another debate will focus on linkages between subsidies and other programs such as the school lunch program. For commentary on some recent activity here see www.rocfund.org/blogs/michael-r.-dimock-s-blog/

The example from the UK is slightly different. Rather than using the bully pulpit to encourage change on a number of fronts the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has done the detailed, painstaking work to come up with what it believes is a strategy for a sustainable and secure food system by 2030. This is truly a prodigious piece of work as it attempts to analyse in some detail all aspects of the food and agriculture system in the UK (and in doing so makes many comments on the global system) and then to define objectives that describe a

sustainable and secure system. Most unique is the effort to identify metrics and indicators that can be used to track progress www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/strategy/index.htm

The UK government is also trying to use direct engagement at times. For example, the foresight program is working on report for November 2010 on food security under its global food and farming futures theme – www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/FoodandFarmingFutures/FoodandFarmingProjectHome.asp. Additionally, Defra is trying to find ways to work with a range of stakeholders to promote sound environmental treatment of land through the Campaign for the Farmed Environment. www.cfeonline.org.uk/

The EU has also begun a public discussion about the next round of Common Agriculture Policy reform. The Commission will prepare an official “Communication on the CAP” by year end with first proposals expected in 2011. The impact will not occur until 2014 when the current EU budget expires but no doubt the earlier the discussion begins probably the better the change of a sensible outcome. http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-post-2013/debate/index_en.htm This rather direct outreach is a bit unique but does follow some similar efforts in the EU such as the recent discussions around the quality agriculture policy reforms.

On the international development front Bill Gates and US Secretary of Treasury Tim Geithner have teamed up to launch an investment fund focusing on agriculture development in emerging markets. http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20100422/wl_nm/us_usa_agriculture_1 This is an attempt to follow through on pledges made at the G8 summit in Aquila, Italy in 2008. For some additional thoughts on the link between agriculture in emerging markets and the west see the following interview <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/meet-the-nourishing-the-planet-advisory-board-david-spielman/>

Additionally, for a sceptical view on much of the well intentioned but often over-zealous

effort to make agriculture more sustainable see this story in foreign policy - www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/26/attention_whole_foods_shoppers and for a rebuttal see www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/29/dont_panic_go_organic

Finally, on the international front the Codex Alimentarius Commission continues to operate somewhat under the radar on food standards definition. I often think the work of this group is not well known enough as it certainly has a significant impact on the nature of the food and agriculture system. For an update on the work on labelling of genetically modified foods see www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/04/us-versus-world-over-gm-food-labels/ and for some advocacy on the issue see here <http://civileats.com/2010/04/20/80-groups-urge-fda-usda-to-change-u-s-position-on-food-labeling/>

The common thread here is the diversity. It will take numerous actions to raise the collective conscious to the point where policy change is actually possible. Policy changes are rarely win-win. There is always a vested interest that will lose something. Thus, we must get to the point where even those who lose in the short term realise that they will win something more and bigger in the long term. The ultimate win is a food and agriculture system that produces healthy food in an environmentally and socially responsible manner that also is fun and fulfilling. This is a tall order but one that we have to seek as we make the public policy soup of the future.

News

Corporate Social Responsibility is often in the news these days. The initial discussion always starts with the question of whether there is even such a concept – do corporations have social responsibilities? If so, then what are they and who defines them? And if a corporation does take some action that lies outside its traditional profit motivation how does the corporation talk about this?

For some discussion triggered by an article in the American Journal of Public Health see

www.foodpolitics.com/2010/04/can-pepsico-help-alleviate-world-hunger and for a broader discussion of the topic see www.foodpolitics.com/2010/04/corporate-social-responsibility-real-or-oxymoron/

In the US the name of Walmart can never be very far from a discussion of this topic. For a discussion of their work to support local farmers growing heirloom varieties see www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/04/farmers-praise-wal-marts-heritage-agriculture-program Another retailer that some believe is making progress in the US is Trader Joe's with its seafood purchasing program as reported – www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/04/tutoring-trader-joe%e2%80%99s-on-seafood-sustainability/ Of course for every positive example there are negative ones. For example, Perdue Farms is often criticized for its pollution of the Chesapeake Bay watershed www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/04/perdue-farms-environmental-stewards-or-environmental-stew And an example from Switzerland is the recent campaign against imported strawberries from Spain – www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/internal_affairs/Cheap_strawberry_imports_targeted_by_campaign.html?cid=8683394

In Europe a number of private sector companies have joined with the EU Commission and other public sector bodies to explore sustainability issues in the European Food SCP Roundtable – www.food-scp.eu/

Resources

With all the news about financial reform and Goldman Sachs see this material from a hearing last year on commodity prices http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_ID=26f85374-c43a-4e2a-ac16-b64a40ca263a

The National Research Council in the US has released a study on the impact of genetically engineering crops on farm sustainability in the US. It appears to be well balanced and a good source for those looking for factual analysis <http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=12804>

Speaking of GE crops the Monsanto case has reached the Supreme Court generating news <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/04/supreme-court-hears-gm-alfalfa-case/>

Cuba is often cited as a model of a small scale sustainable urban agriculture system by many. For a more in depth look and some realistic balance on why the system works there see <http://civileats.com/2010/04/21/the-exceptional-nature-of-cuban-urban-agriculture/>

For those looking for another type of urban gardening activity see this information on bee keeping on rooftops in New York City <http://civileats.com/2010/04/09/rooftop-gardens-and-community-plots-welcome-city-bees/>

Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution television show in the US where he attempted to change the food and eating habits in one school has created a stir in the US. For a summary – www.foodpolitics.com/2010/04/eating-liberally-a-vote-for-jamie-oliver/ Meanwhile, for the latest trend in school farming see www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/blog_post/the_first_vertical_school_garden/

Raw milk also stirs passions in the US. For a legal analysis of the issues see this article www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/04/raw-milk-an-issue-of-safety-or-freedom/ and see this advocacy group www.ftcldf.org

Finally, for a novel way to try to measure the increase in food portion sizes over the years see this analysis of the growth of food size in depictions of the Last Supper. www.theatlantic.com/food/archive/2010/03/jesus-christ-supersize-the-growing-last-supper/37982/

Upcoming Events

www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm

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