

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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Finding Firm Foundations on Shifting Societal Sands

A continual theme in these newsletters has been the tension between large corporations and those who advocate sustainable, bio, local, and traditional food and agriculture. The dialogue is often intense and prone more to sloganeering than facts or reasoned analysis.

However, one does sense a potential shift in the dynamics of the debate and certainly government actions are starting to have a role. Some have cited the recent decision by the US Departments of Justice and Agriculture to hold town halls and hearings on throughout 2010 on agricultural competition as a potential watershed. The first hearing took place 12 March in Iowa (details including transcripts www.justice.gov/atr/public/workshops/ag2010/index.htm).

Of the oft cited statistics of concern in this review are the fact that Monsanto controls the genetics of over 90% of the soybeans and 80% of the corn grown in the US; just four companies (Tyson, Cargill, Swift, and National Beef Packing Co) control over 80% of the beef packing industry and over 60% of pork (Smithfield, Tysons, Swift, and Cargill); and

only 7% of food spending goes to farmers while over 70% goes to distributors. Farmers are less than 1% of the population due to concentration in farm size and are rapidly aging with an average age of 57 in the US and other developed countries not much different. Of course on the other side companies such as Monsanto will argue that they have increased yields, reduced prices, and are reaping the rewards of their investments (in the case of Monsanto over 1.5 billion in R&D for GM Roundup Ready soy and corn seeds) which are to the overall benefit of the economy.

It is too early to draw conclusions as this was just the first of the hearings. Some believe this is the first of steps that will result in something like the historic antitrust lawsuits against AT&T and IBM (interestingly enough these actions started just about the time that the economic, business, and technology dynamics were changing such that AT&T and IBM were losing their market dominance in the areas they were accused of dominating) and more recently Microsoft and Google. US Attorney General Eric Holder did call the hearing "a milestone" event after all.

Others are not sure yet but it is clear that things are moving on several fronts. For example there are lawsuits by farmers against chemical companies for potential negative health effects from using pesticides (<http://civileats.com/2010/02/24/farmers-fight-back-for-their-health-taking-on-chemical-companies-and-transitioning-to-sustainable-farming/>) There are new documentaries every day exploring dynamics around industrial agriculture (see here for the latest British documentary *Pig Business* - <http://civileats.com/2010/02/26/pig-business-or-business-pigs/>)

There are new academic studies looking at topics like the design of trade policies and their impact on corporations (in this case a Tufts University study about pig producer Smithfield -

www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/Pubs/rp/PB10-01HoggingGainsJan10.html). Others are examining the role of the financial industry in related activities such as water (see here www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/03/private-investment-funds-set-their-sights-on-u-s-water-systems/). Some are looking more closely at certification programs to determine whether they really meet the sustainability credentials they claim (fishmeal in this case www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/02/fishmeal-certification-program-takes-the-green-washed-cake/) Others are concerned about new legislative requirements on topics like traceability that may negatively impact on small scale sustainable farming (see www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/02/should-small-sustainable-farms-fear-s510/)

There is also a whole thread of discussion around labelling and public health. Marion Nestle has been writing about the impact of food labelling on eating patterns and obesity and is quite sceptical of the role of corporates (see www.foodpolitics.com/2010/03/what-are-food-companies-doing-about-childhood-obesity-2/ and this more critical post www.foodpolitics.com/2010/03/does-fighting-obesity-also-mean-fighting-corporations-so-it-seems/) Others have been looking in more detail at the role of fructose (think corn syrup) in health with some alarming conclusions for those companies (think highly processed and packaged foods) relying on this ingredient (www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/02/the-american-diet-a-sweet-way-to-die/) And then there are the recent European Food Safety Agency decisions about health claims for vitamins (allowed) and antioxidants and probiotics (not allowed) which clearly impact certain corporate marketing strategies - www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/nda100225.htm

I am not going to try to unpack each of these issues or critiques. Doing so probably would require a doctoral thesis rather than a short newsletter article. If you will pardon the pun, the debate is healthy and I think we need more of it. Food and agriculture has been a topic that has been ignored in the public discourse for too long.

It is time to move away from the food as entertainment genre to a more serious discussion about how we want to structure our food and agriculture system. Food should certainly continue to be fun but it also needs some serious reflection and consideration.

This needs to be a factual discussion where ever possible. An example is an edition of the Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=g917718511 from last year. I am generally a believer in the concept that what gets measured is what gets managed. Thus, I hope that the discussions do not turn into an exercise in finger pointing and assigning blame for the past as many of the actions of corporate actors are rational responses to the current structure of the economic system we have and how we measure performance. I find myself more and more attracted to the idea of alternative ways to measure value such as that put forward by economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi and their commission last year www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm

I see the need for value choices. We need to decide what kind of society we want to live in first. It is also something that requires extensive debate among government, civil society, and industry. As painful as the health care debate has been in the US and the climate change debate internationally, the topics of food and agriculture deserve such a discussion too. The sands are shifting and we need to recognize that. But we also need enough certainty so that the foundations of what we have will hold steady and we can rebuild on them where needed. Revolution is romantic but guided evolution is more realistic. This was debated in an Economist forum on the usefulness of GDP as a value economic www.economist.com/debate/debates/overview/171

News

Biotech and Bio agriculture trends are always good for stirring the pot. The release of the latest ISAAA report on biotech use (up 7% globally in 2009 to 134 million hectares) www.isaaa.org/resources/publications/briefs/4

[1/executivesummary/default.asp](#) was soon matched by the FiBL and IFOAM report www.ifoam.org/press/press/2008/statsbook2010.php showing growth in bio production (up 8% globally in 2008 to 35 million hectares). The USDA Economic Research Service recently updated its organic statistics to cover 1992 to 2008 (www.ers.usda.gov/Data/Organic/) and provided a good overview in an article here www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/June10/Features/AmericasOrganicFarmers.htm

Regulators on both sides of the Atlantic have also made news recently in this area. The USDA has modified its organic rules so meat can only be labeled organic if the animals have actually been fed on pasture for a grazing season of at least 120 days and get 30% of their feed from that pasture. This contrasts with the prior rule which stated animals only needed "access" to pasture, a critical difference. See the rule on the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service website <http://www.ams.usda.gov>. For some of the politics around GM regulation in the US see www.foodpolitics.com/2010/06/the-latest-on-gm-foods/

In Europe, the EU Commission approved a GM potato variety (Amflora) for commercial starch <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/222&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> which created some debate on EU policy direction and may even allow countries start to go their own way which would be a major policy shift. <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/06/eu-member-states-may-decide-on-gmos/>

So interestingly it appears the two areas may be converging a bit on policy. The implications of this were subject to a brief editorial here <http://en.greenplanet.net/point-of-view/editorials/1486-gmos-europe-is-divided-.html> but no doubt will be subject to much more debate as evidenced by a recent article by Slow Food Founder Carlo Petrini www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=C2744B880772e27368jGM38B348B and the recent book from Maria Rodale in the US <http://civileats.com/2010/04/06/why-we-all->

[need-to-demand-organic-and-worship-the-worm/](#).

Other aspects will factor in here with a recent project by the FAO suggesting organic farming and fair trade could help African development www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/40551/icode and others reporting on the performance, or lack thereof, of biotech crops www.ucsus.org/food_and_agriculture/science_and_impacts/science/failure-to-yield.html Finally for those trying to bridge the gap see a recent short paper from Pamela Ronald www.sciencemag.org/cgi/reprint/327/5967/833.pdf

Resources

After all that seriousness it is time for fun. 2010 is the US year of the Heirloom apple www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/slow_food/blog_post/let_2010_be_the_year_of_the_heirloom_apple/

Pizza Napolitana has gained recognised TSG status in the EU ensuring that those places displaying the name with the approved logo will follow the traditional recipe www.slowfood.com/sloweb/eng/dettaglio.lasso?cod=C2744B88054ce2AA31rkU2ABB3F7

A London grocery store is trying to reduce packaging waste by selling unpacked products <http://beunpackaged.com/> and UK sustainable restaurants have a society www.thesra.org

Worldwatch Institute has done some research on the environmental impact of beer during its life cycle www.worldwatch.org/node/6383

And finally perhaps I am biased by the last name of the author but I did find this article about the history of grasses insightful <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/02/evolution-by-the-grassroots/?hp>

Upcoming Events

www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm

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