

A Quality Agriculture Newsletter

A Call to Farms



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Food is Everything, Everything is Food

A newsletter titled *A Call to Farms* clearly has a view on the importance of food. There are also plenty of statistics that can be cited to prove the centrality of food to some of the broader themes of our times. For example

- 70-75% of freshwater is used for agricultural purposes
- 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions are from agriculture
- 35% of the earth's land surface is used for agriculture
- 30% of food is wasted post harvest
- 1 billion people are undernourished and 1 billion are obese
- 60% of income in developing countries is spent on food

However, my cynical side comes out when I hear every issue start to be linked to food.

Michael Pollan is one of the most cogent and thoughtful social commentators on food and agriculture issues in U.S. currently. I almost always find myself enlightened by what he has to write. His most recent piece in the New York Review of Books did not disappoint. (www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/food-movement-rising/) Among the themes cited by Pollan include animal rights,

use of technology, human health, economic and political sovereignty, government subsidies, product safety, urban agriculture, rural development, worker rights, labeling and marketing, child development, and social activism. I cannot really think of any other issues that could have been packed into the list. Thus, by the time I was finished it did leave me feeling a bit like discussion of food and agriculture is now in a bubble of its own.

Further reading did not really help. Food and agriculture was cited as the key to rebuilding rural economies lost through urbanisation (<http://civileats.com/2010/05/13/rebuilding-rural-america-and-the-economics-of-organic-farming/>). Included within this discussion was a thread about the value of small farming (www.foodpolitics.com/2010/05/what-is-a-small-farm/), the dangers of increased concentration in certain industry segments, (<http://civileats.com/2010/05/19/food-inc-s-carole-morison-to-speak-at-doj-poultry-concentration-workshop/>) and the loss of the needed infrastructure to support local food (www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/05/usda-study-shows-gaps-in-local-meat-infrastructure/) and what to do about it (www.foodpolitics.com/2010/05/the-slaughterhouse-problem-is-a-resolution-in-sight/)

Then there were the articles about the harmful impacts of government farm subsidies (<http://civileats.com/2010/05/12/rachael-rays-radical-evolution/>) and the problems with overzealous safety regulations (www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/05/usda-quells-small-meat-haccp-fears/). Food safety regulation is also cited as being too lax and this is part of the overall discussion about updating food safety regulation in the US (www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/05/house-hearing-focuses-on-fda-oversight/). This discussion extends to labelling and health claims regulation as well as cited here (www.foodpolitics.com/2010/05/iom-wants-just-as-rigorous-science-for-food-claims-as-

[for-drugs/](#) and here www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/05/open-up-fda-unveils-draft-proposals-on-transparency/ leading to dedicated websites on the issue www.producesafetyproject.org/. Of course labelling regulation is not an issue unique to the US as it is also an issue in the EU where debate on the proposed traffic light system for designating the healthiness of packaged foods seems to have ended for the moment www.foodnavigator.com/On-your-radar/Nutrition-labelling/MEPs-plump-for-GDAs-over-traffic-lights Dietary guidelines are also up for debate in the US again www.foodpolitics.com/2010/06/dietary-guidelines-advisory-committee-files-report/

The overall health impact of foods is a big issue in the US right now and one that is a focus of First Lady Michelle Obama who recently extracted some serious sounding pledges from major food corporations (e.g. 1 trillion calories to be trimmed by 2012 and 1.5 trillion by 2015). These seem similar to the carbon emissions reduction targets set by various countries under the Kyoto Protocol and likewise have drawn their share of critics (<http://civileats.com/2010/05/19/big-food-pledge-placates-white-house-who-needs-policy-when-youve-got-promises/> and here www.foodpolitics.com/2010/05/white-house-says-1-5-trillion-calories-to-be-cut-from-food-supply/)

On the international development front the use of agriculture as a tool for sustainable development is more and more at the front of the discussion. Some interesting innovations are being catalogued in preparation for the WorldWatch Institutes State of the World: 2011 publication. Some previews can be found here www.worldwatch.org/node/6219 and on the Nourishing the Planet running blog <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/nourishing-the-planet-featured-on-green-traveler-guide/>

The environment always pops up as well. For example, bee colony collapse disorder (CCD) is again in the news with reports that up to half of the managed honeybee colonies in the US did not survive last winter and that bees are on the way to extinction unless we convert

all agriculture to organic production <http://civileats.com/2010/05/26/beeline-to-extinction/>. Some information on the UK is here <http://en.greenplanet.net/lifestyle/eco-sustainability/1643-british-beekeepers-break-up-cash-deals-with-chemical-companies.html>

This is not just a terrestrial issue as the unsustainability of current fish farming practices is discussed more and more with individuals putting forward proposals for how to create better integrated farming systems <http://civileats.com/2010/05/27/how-green-is-blue-lessons-on-aquaculture-from-the-cooking-for-solutions-conference/> or to change fish consumption habits as noted here <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2010/06/it-takes-a-sardine-to-raise-a-village/>

This laundry list is not meant to belittle any of the issues or the writers. The range of topics is startling and it is difficult to examine them all in detail. In fact that is the concern. There is so much commentary and so many voices there is a risk that much of it is shallow and does not dig deep enough under the surface to get to the real complexity of the issues.

Perhaps all those writing on food, including myself, need to try just a bit harder to get into the details and stick with one topic long enough to really understand it in depth. Perhaps we need more voices like the one behind the Big Picture Agriculture website who dig into the details of issues like wheat here <http://bigpictureagriculture.blogspot.com/2010/05/on-wheat-production-and-stocks.html> or the range of writers at the Good Eater blog www.goodeater.org/.

This is now my 15th newsletter. In light of the above, it is a good time to take a pause and reflect. I will hopefully be back in some form but do thank everyone for the encouragement and hope you enjoyed the journey with me.

News

The debates between those who fervently believe in organic/bio production and those who believe that genetic modification/engineering (GM/GE) is needed to ensure a stable and sufficient food supply continue.

The Rodale Institute recently published an article citing 10 reasons why GM/GE and organic/bio production are incompatible - www.rodaleinstitute.org/20100412_nfoped_Te_n-good-reasons-why-genetic-engineering-is-not-compatible-with-organic-agriculture

This of course led to a commentary with 10 reasons why plant breeding is therefore incompatible with organic agriculture www.biofortified.org/?p=3097&preview=true

This was then picked up and put into the context of the seemingly irresolvable discussion of what production methods and technologies are needed to feed a global population of 9 billion by Pamela Ronald on her blog and in an article co-authored with James McWilliams in the New York Times http://scienceblogs.com/tomorrowstable/2010/05/a_harvest_for_92_billion.php and http://scienceblogs.com/tomorrowstable/2010/05/should_we_tinker_with_plant_ge.php

A lot of this discussion was stirred up by the publication by the National Research Council on the benefits of using genetically modified crops and what techniques are needed to ensure those benefits continue www.national-academies.org/morenews/20100413.html

Promotion of biotechnology and genetically modified crops in international trade by the US also continues to be controversial with the US refusing to agree at Codex to allow countries to adopt differing approaches on GM/GE www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/05/cu-calls-on-obama-to-support-gm-labeling-agreement/. I doubt this ends soon as evidenced here <http://civileats.com/2010/05/19/biotechnology/>

Resources

The Environmental Working Group annual database of who receives what farm subsidies in the US <http://farm.ewg.org/index.php>. It always makes for interesting reading and no end of commentary from pundits and critics - www.foodpolitics.com/2010/05/lobbying-and-farm-subsidies/. The fact that USD 245 billion was spent on farm subsidies between 1995-

2009 means there is a lot at stake. The US of course is not the only country that heavily subsidises its agriculture sector. An overview on the EU (EUR 55 billion in annual payments) <http://ictsd.org/i/news/bridgesweekly/75747/>

Slow Food has created an ambitious new website to cover all issues related to fish www.slowfood.com/slowfish/ On the topic of fish and the sea, the US has released yet another strategy for the Chesapeake Bay region near Washington, D.C. This is a running issue with a long and sad history but there is new hope for ecosystem payments www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page_id=7555§ion=news_articles&eod=1#close and www.ecosystemmarketplace.com/pages/dynamic/article.page.php?page_id=7561§ion=news_articles&eod=1#close with wide impacts www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/science/earth/09amish.html

No doubt this is a target for the cynical but Cargill has announced the first fully UTZ certified cocoa. The goal is to scale this up to expand the availability of sustainable chocolate www.cargillcocoachocolate.com/Our%20Responsibilities/first_sustainable.shtml Such labels were the core theme of the Sustainable Foods Summit www.foodnavigator.com/Financial-Industry/Use-sustainability-to-boost-organics-says-analyst

Various resources - the annual update of the OECD-FAO agriculture outlook for 2010-19 www.agri-outlook.org/, ag stats from USDA www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AgOutlook/AOTables/, update of FAO/IIASA world soil dbase www.iiasa.ac.at/Research/LUC/External-World-soil-database/HTML/index.html?sb=1, and a UNEP report citing agriculture as an activity with one of the worst impacts www.unep.fr/scp/publications/details.asp?id=DTI/1262/PA

Upcoming Events

www.conferencealerts.com/agri.htm

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