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Grow Local/Eat Local: For Your Health and Your Community

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Grow Local/Eat Local: For Your Health and Your Community

A study of a food market in Chicago found that the average distance that food traveled before it reached its destination was over 1500 miles.¹ With every mile that a food item travels, it contributes more and more to fuel consumption, pollution, road traffic, and increased costs to you. While the business of food is complicated, there are simple measures you can take to ensure the long-term sustainability of food production and consumption while supporting local farmers and eating healthier. This article explores the industry of food production, how its policies damage the environment and human health, and why supporting local food initiatives is a great way to improve your health and community.

Most people take for granted the “big box” grocery stores and fast food restaurants along almost every road in the US without giving much thought to how their food was produced or where it came from. While food is something that is essential for survival, it is something bought and consumed without question as Americans go about their busy routines. What people fail to realize is that there is a massive industry devoted to getting that food from producer to consumer, and while efficiency is a key component of this process, sustainable use, consumer health, and environmental protection are secondary concerns. However, there are ways to ensure access to top-quality foods without breaking the bank and degrading the environment. Community-supported agriculture, “grow local/eat local” movements,

¹ Rich Pirog, Timothy Van Pelt, Kamyar Enshayan, and Ellen Cook, *Food, Fuel, and Freeways: an Iowa Perspective on How Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, available at <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs/staff/ppp/> (June 2001).

and government policies aimed at supporting these food movements would greatly enhance the quality, nutrition, and sustainable use of food production while simultaneously reducing the need to use harmful pollutants such as fertilizers and pesticides.

Agribusiness in Modern America

Food production is a complicated process. To get food from the field to the dinner table, it must be grown, processed, shipped, wholesaled, and marketed. Only after all of these steps will it find its way into your shopping cart. The term for this process is agribusiness, which encompasses every step of food production, from the planting of seeds, production of farm machinery and pesticides, and distribution to wholesale, marketing, and retail sales.²

Today agribusiness operates on a global scale. The US economy is largely built around food, accounting for 13% of the country's gross national product and 17% of the workforce as of 2007.³ In 2006, the US exported \$68.7 billion and imported \$64 billion worth agricultural products.⁴

Public perception about farming conjures up pictures of Dorothy and Toto living on single-family farms, of farmers raising pigs and chickens while growing corn or wheat. While family farms still exist, large companies dominate the US food market

² The Agribusiness Council, *The Agribusiness Council*, <http://www.agribusinesscouncil.org/> (accessed Oct. 20, 2010).

³ Am. Pub. Health Assn., *Policy Statement Database, Toward a Healthy, Sustainable Food System*, <http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1361> (last updated Nov. 6, 2007).

⁴ *Id.*

today.⁵ Of roughly two million farms in the country, 46,000 of them produce half of all the agricultural products.⁶ These farms are mostly run by large businesses, which by way of financial clout, are in a better position to dictate food prices, product availability, and public policy. Like most companies, food producers are trying to make a profit. This goal of making a profit doesn't always agree with the best interests of the American public. For example, while the USDA dietary guidelines advocate greater consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains,⁷ government and public policy toward agriculture favors the production of sugar, fat, and meat.⁸

Agribusiness and the Government

The federal government currently provides billions of dollars in subsidies to domestic grain producers.⁹ Corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice are important cash crops that are federally subsidized to help control the price on the international market.¹⁰ Corn is the most important crop grown on the United States in terms of

⁵ US Env'tl. Protec. Agency, *Ag 101 Demographics*, <http://www.epa.gov/agriculture/ag101/demographics.html> (last updated Sept. 10, 2009).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ US Dept. of Agric., *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005, Background and Purpose of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/html/chapter1.htm> (last updated July 9, 2008).

⁸ *Supra* n. 3.

⁹ Env'tl. Working Group, *Farm Subsidy Database*, <http://farm.ewg.org/region.php?fips=00000> (last accessed Nov. 3, 2010). Corn subsidies for the past fifteen years totaled over \$75 billion, rice subsidies totaled nearly \$13 billion, and wheat subsidies totaled nearly \$32 billion. *Id.*

¹⁰ US Dept. of Agric., *Briefing Rooms*, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/> (last updated Sept. 23, 2010).

international and domestic demand, as it is highly valued as livestock feed and in ethanol production.¹¹ However, corn is also used to make starch and sweeteners, and wheat is typically processed into white flour.¹² These products have been implicated in contributing to the overabundance of unhealthy food products in the United States.¹³ Meat from corn-fed cattle is also higher in fat than meat from grass-fed cattle.¹⁴ Rice, another highly subsidized crop, is difficult to produce without harming the environment. Because rice requires large amounts of water to grow, the costs of irrigating rice fields in terms of fuel consumption, fertilizer and pesticide runoff, and water contamination is extremely high.¹⁵ The end result of these subsidies is to keep the costs of processed foods low while contributing to the environmental degradation of the rural United States.

Unsustainable Production Practices

In order to compete on the open market, farmers increase their crop yields by saturating their fields with fertilizers and pesticides.¹⁶ Many farms are exempt from government regulations that would restrict these potentially harmful practices.¹⁷ This practice not only contaminates the food itself, it also contaminates the

¹¹ *Id.* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Corn/>.

¹² *Id.* at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Wheat/consumption.htm>.

¹³ *Supra* n. 12.

¹⁴ *Supra* n. 3.

¹⁵ US Dept. of Agric., *Briefing Rooms*, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rice/background.htm>.

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groundwater, threatening the nearby water supply, fisheries, and aquatic ecosystems.¹⁸

Factory farming, a common agribusiness method of raising large numbers livestock in confinement, also poses hazards to human health and the environment. The practice, while allowing for greater efficiency, requires antibiotics and pesticides to control disease outbreaks. These chemicals, along with concentrated animal waste, can find their way into the groundwater in much the same way that runoff from fields does. The practice has also been linked to outbreaks of swine flu and bird flu.¹⁹

Health Effects of the Agribusiness Model

Americans are more inclined to consume processed food because of its convenience, inexpensiveness compared to healthier alternatives, and satiating qualities.²⁰ The bottom line is that Americans prefer instant gratification: most would rather have time on their hands and extra money in their pockets than cook their own meals. This attitude favoring unhealthy food choices has created an obesity epidemic: the majority of Americans are either overweight or obese, and yet consume inadequate amounts of key nutrients.²¹ Children and adults who eat fast food are at higher risk

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¹⁹ Compassion in World Farming, *Animal Health & Disease*, <http://www.ciwf.org.uk/resources/publications/animal%5Fhealth%5Fdisease/> (last accessed Nov. 3, 2010).

²⁰ Interview by CBS HealthWatch with Eric Schlosser, Author of *Fast Food Nation* (Jan. 18, 2001).

²¹ US Dept. of Agric., *Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*, p. A-1,

for being overweight or obese.²² Overconsumption of fats, saturated fats, and sugar, which are all commonly found in fast food and other processed, has been associated with Type-2 diabetes, condition that inhibits the body's ability to control blood sugar levels.²³ The USDA cites overconsumption of fats, sugars, sodium, and processed grain under-consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and milk products as problems afflicting the American public.²⁴ In much the same way that people pay for purchases on credit and make minimum payments month after month, people are shifting the consequences of their eating habits to a later date, resulting in a much higher cost to their health and life-spans.

While the apparent glorification of overeating on shows such as *Man v. Food* and public preferences for unhealthy food are partly to blame, the fact of the matter is that agribusiness perpetuates the problem by making unhealthy food more affordable and readily obtainable than healthier alternatives. In addition to individual choices that lead many to eat unhealthy food, the USDA cites economic and agricultural limitations as major cause of food-related health problems.²⁵ Put simply, people are more inclined to eat unhealthy food because the healthier options are either more expensive or difficult to obtain. Among its many recommendations, the USDA wants greater financial incentives for healthy food, better availability of

<http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/DGAs2010-DGACReport.htm> (last updated July 13, 2010).

²² *Id.* at E1-1.

²³ *Id.* at E1-5.

²⁴ *Id.* at E1-6.

²⁵ *Id.* at A-9.

fresh produce at grocery stores and farmer's markets, and an increase of sustainable production of fruits and vegetables.²⁶

Toward a More Sustainable Future

To address the social and environmental problems created by the policies of the farming industry, several community organizations around the country have encouraged the use of "grow local/eat local" food campaigns to promote locally grown alternatives to food typically found in a grocery store. The benefits of supporting local agriculture are many. More money stays in the community and goes to the people who actually grow the food, instead of to marketers and distributors. Food that is grown locally and eaten locally does not incur the same transportation costs, and likewise does not contribute as much to fuel consumption and pollution. Because the food doesn't need to travel across the country to get to you, it can be picked when it is ripe and ready to be eaten.

Perhaps the most familiar aspect of the grow local/eat local movement is the farmers' market. Catering to public interest in fresh and organic foods, farmers' markets allow access to locally grown food and foster consumer loyalty between farmers and customers.²⁷ Over six thousand farmers' markets operate in the US today, up from just over seventeen hundred in 1994.²⁸ With twelve farmers'

²⁶ *Id.* at A-4.

²⁷ US Dept. of Agric., *Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing: Farmers Markets*, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/FarmersMarkets> (last updated Oct. 27, 2010).

²⁸ *Id.* at

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&navID=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets>

markets in Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties alone, they offer a wide variety of seasonal fruits, vegetables, and other produce straight from the farm.²⁹

A slightly more advanced model for the grow local/eat local movement is known as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The basic idea is that a farmer will sell advance shares of a year's crops in exchange for regular deliveries of the crops during the growing season.³⁰ Instead of forcing the farmer to bear the risk of a crop failure, shareholders absorb some of the risk in exchange for reaping the rewards of a good harvest.³¹ While the idea was introduced in the 1980's, it has become a popular one, with over thirty-six hundred CSA's currently operating in the US.³² However, only three CSA's currently operate in the Tampa Bay Area: two in Manatee County and one in Hernando County.

What the Government is Doing for Sustainable Agriculture

On the federal level, the Farmers Market Promotion Program grants up to \$100,000 to entities such as CSA's, non-profit organizations, and local governments to

&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth
&acct=frmrdirnkt.

²⁹ Florida Dept. of Agric., *Florida Community Farmers' Markets*, http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/farmers_markets.htm (last accessed Nov. 1, 2010).

³⁰ *Supra*. N. 27 at

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateL&navID=LearnAboutCSAsLinkWholesaleAndFarmersMarkets&rightNav1=LearnAboutCSAsLinkWholesaleAndFarmersMarkets&topNav=&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMCommunitySupportedAgriculture&resultType=&acct=wdmgeninfo>.

³¹ *Supra* n. 29 at http://www.florida-agriculture.com/consumers/community_supported_agriculture.htm.

³² *Supra* n. 30.

promote direct producer-to-consumer programs such as farmers' markets.³³

However, with a budget of only \$25 million for the next three years, few organizations will be able to take advantage of this grant.³⁴

On the state level, several bills have been proposed in the legislature to benefit local food programs.³⁵ Many address educating schoolchildren about the benefits of locally grown fruits and vegetables, and some would require schools to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms.³⁶ However, none of these bills have been passed into law.³⁷

Other states have been more productive. For example, California has passed laws promoting and regulating farm stands and farmers' markets, school gardens whereby children get hands-on experience with growing fruits and vegetables, and increasing purchases of fruits and vegetables in low-income communities.³⁸

Iowa offers loans to persons who sell fruits and vegetables inside the community where they are grown.³⁹ These loans may be used to finance farmers' markets and nutrition programs.⁴⁰

³³ *Supra* n. 27 at

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateN&navID=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=FMPP&description=Farmers%20Market%20Promotion%20Program&acct=fmpp>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ Natl. Conf. of St. Legis., *Healthy Community Design and Access to Healthy Food Legislation*, <http://www.ncsl.org/?tabid=13227>

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

The state of Oregon has passed laws similar to those in California, including farm-to-school programs and monetary appropriations to provide low-income families with local fruits and vegetables.⁴¹ Oregon also offers monetary and other incentives for all of its agencies to use food grown inside the state.⁴² Governor Ted Kulongoski proposed the creation of The Oregon Food Policy Council, an agency devoted to improving connections between food producers, consumers, and policy makers.⁴³ However, this proposal was never adopted into law.⁴⁴

In Florida, the Bureau of State Farmers' Markets operates thirteen farmers' markets through the state, including markets in Plant City and Wauchula.⁴⁵ These markets sell \$225 million worth of fruits and vegetables every year.⁴⁶ The Florida Department of Agriculture also provides information about private farmers' markets, crop availability, and educational opportunities for children and adults.⁴⁷

At the local level, the City of Portland has created The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, the purpose of which is to address issues of food access, land use planning, local food purchasing plans, and other related policy initiatives.⁴⁸ The Bureau provides the public with information about healthy eating, organizes

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ Fla. Dept. of Agric., *Bureau of State Farmers' Markets*, <http://www.florida-agriculture.com/markets.htm> (last accessed Nov. 3, 2010).

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.* at <http://www.florida-agriculture.com/education.htm>.

⁴⁸ City of Portland Bureau of Plan. And Sustainability, *Sustainable Food Policy and Programs*, <http://www.portlandonline.com/bps/index.cfm?c=41480> (last accessed Nov. 8, 2010).

community activities related local and sustainable agriculture, and also organizes farmers' markets within the city.⁴⁹ Partly because of the Bureau's efforts, Portland is home to twenty farmers' markets, most of which accept payment via government-assistance programs.⁵⁰

What You Can Do

Farmers' markets and CSA's are all well and good, but they won't stop the health and environmental problems of the nation unless more people get involved. Instead of going to the grocery store for your groceries, consider patronizing a farmers' market. The food there is generally healthier, fresher, and less expensive than what you would find at the store. For the more adventurous, look into becoming a shareholder in a CSA. The farmer will typically deliver fresh produce to you every week, and may even prepare certain foods for you. At the very least, be aware of the food you eat: where it came from, what's in it, and where the money you pay for it is going. Another important step to take is to lobby your government representatives to support grow local/eat local food programs. Only with public support will these programs make a difference.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*