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How we feed the future

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On Jan. 4, two views of agriculture policy appeared in leading newspapers. The *Chicago Tribune* featured an article written by former Sen. George McGovern and Marshall Matz, an advocate for child nutrition programs. *The New York Times* had an op-ed by farmer/essayist Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, director of the Land Institute in Salina, Kan.

Both articles identify the policies that need to be in place not for the next four years but for the next 50 years. Jackson and Berry say that a 50-year program is needed to ?address forthrightly the problems of soil loss and degradation, toxic pollution, fossil-fuel dependency and the destruction of rural communities.?

McGovern and Matz quote Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, who ?has concluded that the world will have to produce more food in the next 50 years than it has in the last 10,000.?

Matz and McGovern could be described as ?productionist? and Jackson and Berry as ?holistic.? Side by side, these articles articulate dramatically contradictory policies.

Both sets of writers are surely attempting to speak to Thomas Vilsack, President Barack Obama?s incoming secretary of agriculture.

When I was director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, I served on Vilsack?s farm crisis task force in 1999 and was appointed by him to the Iowa Food Policy Council beginning in 2000.

Iowa is the nation?s leader in corn and soybeans and in pork and eggs. Iowa has been the epitome of productionist practices, all-out assaults in which farmers plant ?from fencerow to fencerow,? using plentiful chemical fertilizers to maximize crop yields, a technique that results in adverse environmental effects. This is also tagged ?industrial? agriculture.

In sustainable agriculture, Iowa has also been a trendsetter. Iowa is the home of many livestock producers following the humane philosophy of Niman Ranch, which uses traditional husbandry methods and raises

animals on natural feeds. Iowa is the locus of inventive pastoral practices in the hundreds of farmers who call themselves the Practical Farmers of Iowa. The state?s farmers include a community-based approach represented for over 10 years by the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture. The Iowa Food Policy Council has been a leader in food democracy efforts, encouraging more production of organic and local foods. It brought together business, civil society and government in creative food-policy governance.

As governor of Iowa, Tom Vilsack spoke with, listened to and was challenged by all of these voices. And he initiated some creative efforts. It would be hard to imagine as diverse a landscape for agriculture policy, a clear dominance by an industrial vision but a growing and increasingly institutionalized sustainable agriculture. In his recent testimony he called for a ?diverse? agriculture.

Maybe Vilsack?s openness has made Matz and McGovern nervous.

I was invited by the Pew Foundation to be a part of the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production in 2006. After two years of study and $1.8 million of expenditure, the clear final position of the Pew Commission called for an ecological vision and for change from the dominant industrial policies. The Pew report, ?Putting Meat on the Table,? was published in April 2008.

At the same time, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development was issued in Johannesburg, South Africa. The assessment was a four-year U.N. project funded by the World Bank. It included natural scientists, economists, farmers, social scientists and indigenous people.

The international assessment report stated that ?the way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse.? The conclusions of both studies were remarkably similar: The world can no longer conduct productionist practices as usual in agriculture policy.

This is a policy year for food and agriculture at the United Nations in the Commission on Sustainable Development. Already the U.S. State Department has been gathering citizens to participate in February and May at the United Nations. The government?s vision is to bring together rural and urban sectors in the United States.

New York City is being showcased through its inventive urban and rural connections where there are community gardens, urban farming, inner-city organic producers, rural farmers feeding their nearby city. Food banks have their own farms to provide access to fresh, organic, local produce.

Even though production is perhaps not as central to the problems around food provisioning as distribution and access, the U.N. Environmental Program recently released a report, ?Organic Agriculture and Food Security in Africa,? indicating that organic, small-scale farming can deliver the increased yields that were thought to be the preserve of industrial farming, without the environmental and social damage caused by industrial agriculture. A similar report by the U.S.-based Rodale Institute comes to the same conclusion in ?The Organic Green Revolution.?

The older approach of McGovern and Matz is giving way to the urgent, growing, holistic vision of Berry and Jackson for a future of sustainable food production. The public is encouraging this new kind of policy. A new sense of unity and community including the biotic realm is in the process of stabilizing. Productionism is on the decline.

Perhaps McGovern and Matz are writing against the trends and to challenge the approach that Obama and Vilsack may take to consolidate the vision of sustainable agriculture.

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