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America's good food fight

by Rich Heffern

Eco Catholic

It's agribusiness vs. the sustainable food movement. And reform advocates say it's possible to make delicious, nutritious, safe food available to all people of all income levels.

By Nicolette Hahn Niman

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Our holiday table got quite tense. We are a mixed family ? Jewish, Christian, Republican, Democrat ?? but the tension wasn't from differences over religion or politics. It was about food.

At one end of the table sat my husband's nephew, who runs a food bank. He's an earnest man who spends his days seeking nourishment for the hungry, and favors almost anything that increases food's availability or lowers its price. My husband and I occupied the other end. We operate a pasture-based ranch, and spend much of our time advocating for farming grounded in ecology and stewardship. The food we raise is less readily available and more expensive than most of what's found at typical grocery stores.

Other family members sat between us. They enjoy eating well but, especially in these tough economic times, want their meals as cheap as possible.

Our family dynamic mirrors an emerging national debate about how America's food should be produced. The controversy is often framed by agribusiness and food companies, heavily invested in maintaining the status quo, claiming that a globalized, industrialized system is the only way to produce enough food to feed the world's growing population, and to do so affordably. Reform advocates working to transform the system to one that's more locally based and isn't dependent on chemicals, mechanization and cheap fossil fuels are pitted against the world's poor, working class and hungry.

In other words, the sustainable food movement is characterized as uncaring and elitist.

A recent Newsweek piece titled "What Food Says About Class in America" described "a national phenomenon" of people seeking non-industrial foods because they believe that eating organically and locally helps farmers and farm animals while contributing to the health and well-being of their families and the planet. The author confessed a discomfort with such intense focus on high-quality food while "less than five miles away, some children don't have enough to eat; others exist almost exclusively on junk food."

Of course, similar concerns could be voiced regarding cars, housing or healthcare. But more to the point, our experience as ranchers and reform advocates belies the notion that today's good food movement is either callous or elitist. Making delicious, nutritious, safe food available to all people inspires much of the passion of those laboring to reshape America's food system. We've met them in every region of the country. They are young people setting up diversified farms; chefs dedicated to local sourcing; ordinary citizens establishing farmers markets; mothers and fathers remaking public school lunch programs, and on and on. They come from all walks of life, all incomes and every ethnicity.

It's ironic that spokespersons of multinational corporations paint this broad-ranging, truly grass-roots movement as exclusive. Yet the criticism resonates to an extent because sustainably produced foods are often more expensive.

Commodity foods ? from large-scale, industrialized agricultural production ? seem cheap by comparison because they're produced without bearing their true costs, which are passed on in the form of pollution, virulent infectious diseases and animal suffering.

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"If the full cost of externalized environmental and health costs were taken into account, those same products would be far more expensive," the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production concluded in a 2008 report issued with the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

Agribusiness also benefits from billions of dollars of annual federal farm subsidies, along with other tax breaks and incentives from state and local governments, while a negligible portion of these public moneys aid non-industrial farming. And decades of anemic enforcement of environmental laws have allowed agribusiness to escape shouldering responsibility for its pollution.

Together, these public subsidies largely explain why food can be much cheaper at Wal-Mart than at your local farm stand. But what about the criticism that sustainable farming can't feed the world?

This is simply a myth. People are not going hungry because of a shortage of food. Currently, the world generates nearly 4,000 calories a day (about double what's nutritionally required) for every man, woman and child on the globe.

"Hunger is a political and social problem," writes food security expert Martin McLaughlin in his book, "World Food Security." "It is a problem of access to food supplies, of distribution, and entitlement."

Moreover, here and abroad, the corporatization of agriculture has taken wealth from the hands of many and placed it in the hands of a few, often by driving farmers off their land.

American farm policy aggravates the problem by encouraging overproduction of U.S. commodity crops, which are mass produced and subsidized, and then dumped on developing nations, thereby impoverishing their farmers. Former U.N. Development Program head Mark Malloch Brown has said that wealthy nations' farm subsidies, estimated in the tens of billions annually, hold down "the prosperity of very poor people in Africa and elsewhere."

The good news is that sustainable farming can feed the world. Productivity comparisons of organic crops versus conventional crops have been hotly contested for decades. But recent years have seen mounting studies showing that organic crop yields are catching up and even surpassing chemical-based agriculture.

Nonetheless, there is no denying that foods from sustainable farms carry a higher price tag for the U.S. consumer. Most of us can actually afford it. Americans spend about 9% of their incomes on food, according to the Agriculture Department, one of the smallest percentages in the world.

The real challenge now is making good food available to people at every income level. Currently, the financially strapped single mother has a hard time buying local and organic. This is precisely where hunger advocates and good food advocates can and should unite to make wholesome food more accessible.

Individually, farmers and consumers can do little to fix this systemic problem. Collectively, however, we can demand important changes. For starters, our government should immediately stop enabling industrial food producers to shift their environmental and health costs to the public. This means full federal and state enforcement of environmental laws and regulations governing agriculture; federal legislation banning the use of sub-therapeutic antibiotics at agricultural operations; and a redirection of federal farm subsidies away from overproduction of commodity crops and toward environmentally beneficial farming of healthy foods.

Longer-term policy changes should include reinventing government food, farm, education and nutrition programs to make healthy eating easy and affordable. A few examples: States and localities should facilitate the acceptance of food stamps at farmers' markets; school districts should create lunch programs that offer healthier meals and purchase from local farms; federal and state agriculture departments should help beginning farmers set up sustainable farming operations and reestablish programs that teach citizens skills for cooking, canning and growing some of their own food.

For many people, sharing a festive meal with family and friends is at the center of holiday celebrations. The awkward moments around our own table reminded me of the importance of pushing for public policies that will help bring good, wholesome food to every American.

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