

On the Frontlines

Fast Food and the Family Farm

It's time to reform how we grow food and what we have for dinner

By Bruce Boyd

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Almost 30 years ago, my family bought a small farm along the Mississippi River in northwestern Illinois near the historic town of Galena. The farm has a couple of pastures where the neighbors' black-and-white Holsteins graze, a hayfield that provides winter feed for the horses, a vegetable garden, fruit trees, and several beehives. It quickly became a cherished place to escape from the busy lives my siblings and I led three hours away in Chicago, as a young lawyer (me), doctor, and theater producer.

Our neighbors had scraped out a living in this rough, rocky landscape for generations as dairy farmers. But today, most of them either are out of farming altogether or pursue it only as a hobby. They are among the well-documented casualties of our switch to large-scale agriculture—and there are other consequences of that change.

In Illinois and elsewhere, we now produce vast amounts of corn and soybeans that become animal feed or ingredients in processed foods. As a result, the food we eat no longer

comes from across the street or state, but from the other side of the country or world. It has typically traveled 1,500 miles or more before it appears on our dinner tables. Indeed, one-fifth of the country's petroleum production goes to producing and transporting our food.

Family farms were once diverse, growing hay, oats, corn, fruits, and vegetables, and featuring a woodlot and numerous fencerows. Many plants and animals found refuge in this landscape, but since they no longer can, local populations of migratory songbirds and other species are declining.

Today's farms also threaten aquatic systems, because they use enormous amounts of fertilizer to increase corn and soybean yields, and the leached chemicals find their way into our rivers and streams. And because the livestock production system relies on confined animal feeding operations, we have unprecedented concentrations of waste and the health challenge of disposing of it.

Not eating locally threatens our health in another way: Rather than eating whole foods straight from the

ground or game from the woods, we eat mostly heavily processed foods, which have a much higher fat and calorie content because of added oils and sugars. (Our yearly per capita consumption of sugars, mostly high-fructose corn syrup and refined sugar, has gone from 128 to 158 pounds since 1985, and our average calorie intake has increased 10 percent since 1977.) Doctors categorize three out of every five Americans as overweight, and children face a one-in-three chance of developing diabetes (African-American children's chances are two in five).

I am not so nostalgic about our agricultural past as to think we should turn back the clock 50 years; but for the good of our bodies and our planet, we must find an alternative to today's food production and distribution system. I am not the only one who thinks so. Last year my firm, Arabella Philanthropic Investment Advisors, consulted experts around the world and identified 10 high-impact giving opportunities; rebuilding a local food system was one of them. Even the Nature Conservancy, the country's largest conservation organization and champion of "the last great places," has concluded it must pay attention to the alteration of our agricultural landscape. The conservancy believes preserving the health of rich plant and animal communities is far more difficult when those communities become islands in a sea of industrial-scale agricultural operations.

Communities across the country



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are rebuilding local food systems—most often by creating farmers’ markets, of which there are some 5,000 nationwide. This is a good beginning, but we must effect widespread systemic change, and we can do so by taking the following four steps.

Food Choices

The surgeon general has called obesity an epidemic that costs our health care system close to \$100 billion a year, but we must go much further in educating Americans about the consequences of poor food choices. The effort deserves the same attention we gave to educating Americans about smoking’s ill effects. In that case, we launched widespread public awareness campaigns, issued government warnings, and taxed cigarettes.

It may not make sense to tax junk food, but government and others can encourage better choices. The “Buy Fresh Buy Local” campaign, coordinated by national nonprofit FoodRoutes, marks a good beginning, as do regional efforts such as the annual FamilyFarmed.org Expo in Chicago, which brings together local food producers, buyers, and consumers.

Green-Collar Jobs

We have a well-developed system for growing and shipping large volumes of corn and soybeans—grain elevators, warehouses, and railroads—and we must create an equally functional system for local food, which would include warehousing and shipping facilities for local produce and the capacity for processing organic meat. Those systems are being built in Northern California and a few other places, but that’s it. Worse yet, within the current crop subsidy system, farmers encounter disincentives if

they want to switch from commodity production (corn and soybeans) to fruits or vegetables.

But here’s an incentive: Rebuilding a local food system presents an enormous economic opportunity. The buzz is already strong on organic, as restaurateurs and consumers increasingly demand fresh, healthy food. A study by Sustain, a Chicago-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting the redevelopment of local food systems, estimates that the current demand for organic food in Chicago is more than \$500 million, but that almost all of it is shipped from out of state.

The economic benefit of rebuilding a local food system would go to those who need it most: small farmers not well suited to producing corn at an industrial scale, fast-disappearing farmers on the urban fringe who work close to local markets, and people whose troubled urban neighborhoods may become warehousing and distribution districts. A 2007 study by Michael H. Shuman estimated that shifting 20 percent of metro Detroit’s food spending to food and beverages that are locally grown and processed would increase the region’s annual economic output by nearly \$3.5 billion, create more than 35,000 “green-collar” jobs, and lead to a nearly \$155 million gain in business taxes.

Large-Scale Green Farming

To feed a nation as crowded as ours, some large-scale farming is probably inevitable. Nevertheless, different principles can guide that production. Companies such as Cascadian Farm, Horizon Organic, and Organic Valley, for instance, are producing meat, milk, and vegetables in great volume while using organic feed (without antibiotics), organic fertilizer, and natural pesticides.

Because large organic farms suffer from some of the same problems as large-scale traditional farms—animals are confined in large numbers and products are often shipped long distances—smaller-scale local food systems should be developed to the fullest extent possible.

Green Legislation

We must use government to jumpstart the redevelopment of local food systems. In Illinois, for instance, food advocates were disturbed by the fact that less than 1,000 acres of central Illinois farmland is dedicated to fruit and vegetable production—and that’s out of 5.4 million acres of fertile farmland in 16 counties. These advocates played a leading role in the development and passage in 2007 of the Illinois Food, Farms, and Jobs Act, which provides a framework for developing infrastructure for processing, storing, and distributing locally grown foods; preserving farmland, especially on the urban fringe; retraining farmers to meet the growing demand for organic food; and establishing farmers’ markets in Chicago neighborhoods, so as to bring healthier food choices to these communities.

I’m cheered by this win, as well as by the many nonprofits (see the FoodRoutes.org network) working to educate consumers or reform the food production and distribution system. I also find it encouraging that the 2007 *New Oxford American Dictionary* word of the year was *locavore*—a person who eats locally grown food. That says a lot about national awareness of the issue. Perhaps in another 20 years, as I travel the back roads near our farm, I will see a vibrant and diverse agricultural landscape—a revitalization of the neighborhood and landscape I so love. □