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The Future of Food and Farming, Part I

by Gordon Clark

If you want to know about the future of our food supply, the first and most important fact to understand is that we do ***NOT*** need to grow more food - not even if human population continues to expand as predicted.

Why is this?

The reason is we already grow nearly twice the number of food calories we need to feed the current human population. The widespread and escalating hunger in this country and the world has nothing to do with how much food we grow, but rather which types of food we grow (and where), what those crops are used for, and how the food is controlled and distributed.

Of course, when you hear those Monsanto ads recently playing on DC news radio - the ones with the soft "advocacy porn" piano soundtrack in the background, designed to emotionally persuade you that a huge multinational corporation really, deeply cares about you - they are all about the need to grow ever greater amounts of food. But why would that be, if we already produce more than enough to feed ourselves?

The reason here is that corporations like Monsanto (along with Cargill, ADM and others) are getting rich off this drive to grow ever more food - through their control of seed stocks, their control of biotechnology, their control of food processing, and their control of the politicians who decide which crops get federal subsidies. It's not for nothing that a double cheeseburger costs less than a head of broccoli.

Think about it: at the same time we are seeing growing food shortages around the world, and up to 49 million Americans are now experiencing food insecurity (according to the latest USDA report), the companies in charge of our food supply are getting rich. Is this any different than health insurance companies getting rich while denying us coverage, or Wall St. banks getting rich while the economy they pillaged is crumbling around us?

Multinational food companies have turned food into a commodity that is susceptible to the same market control, manipulation and speculation as oil. Food in the industrial agriculture system is

not produced to feed those who are hungry, it's produced to feed the profit margins of large corporations. And if they can make more money feeding grain crops to cows (instead of humans) or turning them into inefficient biofuels, then that's exactly what they'll do (and, in fact, are doing), regardless of how many go hungry.

No, the answer to the growing crisis of hunger does not lie in giving more money, power and control to the corporations that are creating or exacerbating the problem to begin with..

Here's a second major fact to remember: the industrial agriculture that has given us these great crop increases over the past 40 odd years, and which is characterized by the massive use of petroleum and chemical inputs, is systematically killing both us and the planet. How is industrial agriculture doing this?

It is destroying the soil - The intensive, continual use of chemical fertilizers scorches the soil and destroys the microbial life necessary for long term productivity. Combined with incessant tilling and the resulting erosion, industrial agriculture destroys topsoil 10-15 times faster than it can naturally regenerate.

It is destroying the water - The runoff of all that chemical fertilizer is a primary cause of dead zones in oceans and waterways around the world. The annual dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, which receives runoff from the Midwestern U.S. corn belt, is now the size of Massachusetts.

It is destroying the air - With its heavy use of oil for production, processing and transportation, industrial agriculture is one of the largest contributors to global warming. Combined with meat production (see below), our global food system produces more greenhouse gases than our global transportation system.

It is destroying farmers - The expansion of capital-intensive industrial agriculture has driven millions of farmers off their land these past few decades. Did you know there are now more prisoners than farmers in the United States?

It is destroying our health - As noted before, industrial agriculture grows food to maximize profits, not to alleviate hunger, and the same lesson applies to our health. Agribusiness has learned that it can maximize its profits by producing (and getting us hooked on) a high sugar, high carbohydrate diet. What do they care if this food supply is causing a national obesity epidemic, or if one of every three American children born after 2000 will contract diabetes as a result?

It is spreading disease - The same agribusiness model that prioritizes profits over feeding nutritious food to people often dictates that food gets shipped out even when it's known to be tainted, whether it's peanuts with salmonella (last year) or a flavor enhancer with the same pathogen (last month). And why exactly do vegetables like spinach now sometimes carry intestinal diseases like e-coli? Moreover, the nationwide supply chain that accompanies industrial agriculture all but guarantees that when food borne pathogens are present, they will be spread quickly and efficiently across the country.

And we haven't even touched the subject of "factory farmed" meat. Companies like Tyson's and Smithfield take the same surplus corn that other companies turn into high fructose syrup and feed it to animals in feedlots or massive pens. This serves to make the animals unnaturally fat in the quickest time possible - which makes bigger profits for the companies, but also passes the less beneficial consequences of fatty meat, such as heart disease, on to those who eat it.

Since most animals did not evolve to be force-fed corn (particularly herbivores like cows), the animals get sick. E-coli is a feedlot disease, produced intestinally by cows that should be eating grass but aren't. To deal with all these sick animals, the corporations pump them full of antibiotics. Incredibly enough, 70% of all the antibiotics used in the U.S. are given to livestock, a process which can't help but produce new and ever more drug resistant viruses.

Does this sound like a food system that's working?

Indeed, when you combine all these factors, and above all the heavy reliance on a finite (and disappearing) supply of cheap oil, it's easy to see that industrial agriculture is an unsustainable system. "Unsustainable." As food author Michael Pollan notes in [The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), we hear that word so often now that we fail to think about what it actually means: an unsustainable system is one that must, sooner or later, collapse. It cannot last.

Maybe it's just fear that keeps us from thinking about it. Our current industrial food system must, by its own inherently flawed design, collapse.

Regrettably, that doesn't stop some from telling us that we need to be "reasonable" and work with the big food corporations to find solutions. The same pattern is happening with energy policy. After the initial rush of people pointing out the coming catastrophe of global warming and the need for radical changes, we get pushback from establishment voices asking us to stop being so uncivil and to look for "common ground" with the oil companies and other big energy producers.

Such reasonableness, which greatly benefits the corporations currently running the show, will not address global warming nor resolve world hunger. We do not need civil discussion with the proponents of industrial agriculture any more than we need more soil depletion, more farmland and farmers lost, more dead zones in our oceans and more greenhouse gas emissions.

We need to say, as gently and/or stridently as necessary given the circumstances, that industrial agriculture is an unsustainable system that is destroying the planet while failing to feed millions of its inhabitants, and that we need to change our system of food production as rapidly as possible if we are to avert the advancing global food crisis.

Fortunately, another way is possible. For the alternative to industrial agriculture, look for "The Future of Food and Farming, Part II" in the May issue of the Voice.

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