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The State of [Local] Food..... It's Not Just What You Eat

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My Fellow Green Drink enthusiasts, the state of the local food system is strong. And it is getting stronger every year, every day.

But the brackets around the word "local" in the title of this talk suggest that we are to look at the larger food system as well.

And the state of that system is not strong.

When we take the larger view, we find daunting challenges – but also, fresh opportunities.

So let's take a look from both perspectives.

A decade ago, few Americans were buying their food direct from the farmer. Now there are almost 5,000 farmers markets across the country, in every state, in cities and towns of all sizes. Now there are more than 2,000 CSAs providing American families with fresh food every week in season.

And the impact is showing up in the farmers' pockets. In NY's Hudson Valley, for example, the value of direct sales to consumers increased by about 30% between 2002 and 2007 – and that increase has only accelerated since.

A decade ago, the average age of farmers was in the mid-fifties and increasing every year, as bright young college graduates hurried off to Wall Street to explore the brave new world of securitized mortgages.

Now more and more young people are truly helping to strengthen Main Street by producing food – whether in the countryside or in cities – and creating peer mentoring networks like CRAFT and the Young Farmers Union.

A decade ago, green rooftops were a novelty. Now they are flourishing, literally, as part of the astonishingly creative urban agriculture movement.

Talk about change! Positive change! And these are just a few examples! It is going on all around us, all across the country.

Now for a dose of reality. Local foods are a very small part of the overall food system. The dominant food system is highly industrialized and globalized. Rather than a thousand flowers blooming, we see a high degree of corporate concentration and integration.

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Who is the largest grocery retailer in the US? You know, right? WalMart. WalMart, which in January announced with great fanfare its Global Sourcing Strategy for food. Will you find “organic” products in WalMart? Increasingly yes. Will they be from family-scale farms in the US? Most likely not.

Well, we have almost come to accept WalMart as unique in its market dominance.

Other sectors of our food system are crowded with competitors, aren't they? Let's take a look.

Let's start with meat – In 2007, four companies processed more than 85% of the beef cattle in the US; 66% of the hogs and 58% of the broilers.

Hmm – let's try seeds – more than half of the seed corn in the US is sold by two companies.

Ok – milk – 40% of the nation's milk supply is controlled by one company.

Doesn't sound so good, but does it matter? Turns out it does.

Economists have something they call the “four-firm concentration ratio.” Whenever the top four firms in an industry control more than 40% of the market, that sector is considered “highly concentrated”.

At this level, experts believe competition is severely threatened and market abuses are likely to occur. As we have seen, major sectors of the food and agriculture economy are well above – even double – this level.

So perhaps we should not be surprised that since 1980, as concentration has increased, the price of groceries to the consumer has steadily risen. And the share of your grocery store dollar received by the farmer has dropped by about a third.

So concentration does have economic impacts – for consumers and farmers. It carries other risks as well.

After 9/11 the Department of Defense retained the Rand Corporation to study how secure the American food supply is. The title of its report – “The Soft Underbelly of American Agriculture” – suggests its conclusion – our national security is vulnerable to the disruption of our food supply – whether accidental or intentional. And virtually every vulnerability identified in this report is caused or exacerbated by corporate concentration and integration.

The need for resiliency in the food system that is suggested by this report underscores the importance of maintaining a robust network of diversified, independent farms: They are less reliant on petroleum and petrochemicals. This will become critical as competition for oil grows.

They preserve the genetic diversity of livestock and plants that will be needed as we adjust to climate change.

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They maintain the cultural knowledge of how to farm in particular places that is essential to a sustainable future.

But for now, as one researcher put it, “[n]ever before have the safety and sustainability of our food supply depended on the decisions of so few companies.”

For now, this dominant system is very powerful – seemingly invincible.

But there are beginning to be cracks.

Earlier this year the USDA and the US Department of Justice began the first series of joint workshops ever to explore competition examine possible anti-trust violations in the food and agriculture sectors. Secretary Vilsac and Attorney General Holder signaled the importance of these hearings by personally co-chairing the first workshop held in Iowa. There’s a Crack

Earlier this month, the President’s Cancer Panel released a report in which it noted that 300 contaminants have been detected in umbilical cord blood of newborn babies, and warned that: “to a disturbing extent, babies are born ‘pre-polluted.’” One of the Cancer Panel’s key recommendations is to give preference to food grown without pesticides, chemical fertilizers and growth hormones. This from a panel, mind you, appointed by George W. Bush. Hard to consider them “fringe.”

There’s a crack.

About the same time, the NY Times reported that the widespread use of weedkillers like Roundup has led to the evolution of “superweeds” which are resistant to those weedkillers. Weeds like a form of Pigweed that can grow three inches a day and get to be seven feet long, choking crops as it grows. A weed so sturdy that it can damage harvesting equipment. There are already at least 10 of these superweeds, infesting millions of acres of crops. According to the president of the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts, these superweeds are “the single largest threat to production agriculture that we have ever seen.” That’s a Crack.

Then Military Leaders for Kids, a nonprofit group of 130 retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders issued a report titled “Too Fat to Fight”, noting that a fourth of young adults are too heavy to meet the standards for entering the military. The highly processed food that is the hallmark of the industrialized food system – and that that has become central to school lunches - shares the blame for this problem. Another Crack

Even the Vatican is concerned about the food system. The new head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Peter Turkson, has urged caution and further study of the possible negative effects of genetically engineered organisms.

Each of these reports, each of these problems, is a crack – a fissure in the highly concentrated and integrated food system. A crack in its seeming invulnerability. A crack in its seeming inevitability.

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Here a crack, there a crack, every day a new crack.

And each of them the sign of a crisis – and an opportunity. Our opportunity to expand the scope and strength of the local food movement.

Now let us consider the Purslane. We used to call this plant a weed – a nuisance. Now we know that it contains more Omega-3 fatty acids than any other leafy vegetable.

It is a tough little fellow. According to Wikipedia – “Its deep roots also bring up moisture and nutrients that [companion] plants can use, and some, including corn, will actually “follow” purslane roots down through harder soil than they can penetrate on their own.”

Oh, and did I mention that purslane loves to take root in cracks? Even in NYC sidewalks.

Now – back to the subtitle: The State of Local food – it’s not just what you eat.....I would add, it is also what you do. And I submit to you that our challenge is to be like this purslane.

Find the cracks in the system. Sink your roots down through the hard soil to make it easier for others to come along with you. Be a superweed of a positive kind.

Now we need to do so much – so quickly – that whatever you can do is the right thing.

Are you a producer? Thank you! And please try to help the rest of us better understand what you do and how we can support you.

Are you a local official? Get to know the farmers in your town and find out how you can encourage them to stay in production.

A land conservationist? Focus your efforts on farmland and how you can encourage owners to keep it in production.

A green developer? Incorporate food in your projects. (Take note of the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins, which achieved LEEDS gold, by getting points for its CSA and local foods in its café.)

A consumer? Use your food dollars wisely. And don’t worry about being perfect – just do as much as you can this month, this year - and more the next and the one after that. Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Do what you can.

And don’t forget that you are a citizen, too. Let your elected officials know what you want. Urge your Congressman to support the reauthorization of Child Nutrition Act with increased funding. Encourage Secretary Vilsac to continue working toward creating a level playing field for all farmers – even if does make the Iowa Corn Producers Association unhappy.

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And weigh in on proposed rules needed to manage problems in industrial ag that would make it even more difficult for smaller processors to survive. Let them hear from you!

A few years ago I was at a meeting with senior officials from some major food corporations. I asked one of them why they were so hostile to those of us supporting the local foods movement, since – while that part of the market was growing, it is still very small. He paused, looked down his nose at me and said:

“Because you are encouraging people to want what we cannot give them.”

He meant: Fresh food. Healthy food.

Exactly so. And if we keep on doing just that - Encouraging people to want fresh, healthy food - the state of the local food system - and the food system overall - will continue getting ever stronger.

Let's go do it!