

Agriculture Faces Public Image Challenge



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American agriculture and all associated food processing and marketing industries now face a serious public image problem from well meaning but misinformed critics who do not understand the achievements and benefits of our food system.

Time magazine confirmed this problem (August 31) when they carried the cover headline "The Real Cost of Cheap Food". Inside they carried the title, "America's Food Crisis and How to Fix it". You may wonder why a writer in a national news magazine was not aware that Americans spend a smaller percent of their disposable income for food than any other nation. Those who monitor food safety believe that our food supply is as safe or safer than any other country in the world.

Here are some of the misleading statements that illustrate how little the author understands about modern agriculture:

"Large operations can lower costs, but with meat, getting too big leads to problems with antibiotic use and animal welfare. We need smaller farms but lots of them around the country."

"Organic methods can produce almost as much yield per acre as conventional ones but require far more human labor. In a time of scarce jobs, a return to the farm can help both the land and the economy."

"Conventional meat takes energy, grain and drugs to produce. ...We should cut back on meat in favor of greens and fruits - which are better for us and for the planet."

"The U. S. agricultural industry can now produce unlimited quantities of meat and grains at remarkable cheap prices. But it does so at the high cost to the environment, animals and humans....And perhaps worst of all, our food is increasingly bad for us, even dangerous".

"The way we farm now is destructive of the soil, the environment and us, says Doug Gurian-Sherman, a senior scientist with the food and environment program at the Union of Concerned Scientists."

This cover article, really an editorial not a news story, drew strong condemnation from agricultural leaders. Rick Tolman, CEO of the National Corn Growers condemned the article, for "perpetuating misconceptions about 'family'

and 'corporate' farming."

Illinois Farm Bureau president Phil Nelson said he was "outraged by these types of antics to disparage production agriculture with no documentation or supporting facts."

The article applauds organic producers and marketers while placing obesity concerns at the door of a fast food meat intensive culture fostered by vast monocrop fields in Midwestern states." The author placed no responsibility on the individual to eat a balanced diet to prevent obesity.

Tolman points out that the environmental consequences of large scale production may be no different or in some cases even better than in smaller scale production. The author criticized direct support payments that help stabilize farm income and reduce risk. But he did not recognize the vast federal programs that have promoted soil conservation, clean water, and sound management that increase yields and reduce costs. Suggesting a movement to smaller farms and bringing unemployed from cities to work on farms is not the solution to providing abundant supplies of low cost food for consumers in this country and overseas.

The author appears to be listening to animal rights advocates who oppose concentrated confined livestock and poultry operations without looking at the scientific advancements and efficient production made possible through confinement methods. The article cites one ranch producing grass fed cattle suggesting that all beef should be produced this way. The author was obviously not an animal or a soil scientist who would have a greater knowledge of modern scale beef and crop production technology.

From this article, agricultural and agribusiness leaders should recognize the continuing need to inform and educate the nonfarm public, including school children, about modern agriculture and food production, humane treatment of food animals, the benefits achieved through scientific research, why food animals and poultry are raised in confinement, and the many government programs that maintain stable prices, conserve soil, promote safe water from wells, streams and rivers, and the government programs that make possible abundant supplies of food for low income consumers, school lunches, and the hungry in this country and in developing countries around the world.

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