

New Food Day Draws Applause, Skepticism

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WASHINGTON, D.C.



Since its founding in 1945, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has celebrated global Food Day on October 16. But now, “foodie” groups and “localvores” are joining forces for a new national Food Day on Oct. 24.

“One of the best things you can do for your health is to cook and enjoy family meals made with fresh, colorful seasonal ingredients,” said chef and author Ellie Krieger, host of Healthy Appetite on the Food Network and a member of the Food Day advisory board. “Food Day is a chance to celebrate the power good food has to nourish us and bring us together.”

Indeed, if Food Day was designed to simply celebrate cooking and eating, it might be difficult to find many critics. But this one is generating more than its fair share of controversy.

Organized by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), Food Day touts honorary

Farms will include Food Day messages on 11 million bags of carrots.

Yet, some farmers and ranchers are worried that Food Day is more about dividing than uniting the food community. As examples, they cite the published principles as criticisms of the role of “big agribusiness” and yet-undefined “factory farms,” a school curriculum guide that promises to help Middle School students “eat real,” and a webinar hosted by Food Day organizers that producers say unfairly blames modern agriculture production practices for a variety of health problems. Others are offended because some local and regional Food Day events will promote “Meatless Mondays.”

CSPI Founder and Executive Director Michael F. Jacobson says that if you look at the Food Day goals, “Clearly, the Farm Bureau is not going to be first to sign up. And it’s been tough finding Republican members of Congress to serve on our advisory committee because they are not in favor of spending money to prevent chronic diseases and limiting subsidies to big farms to support small farms. It’s unfortunate, but that’s how things are these days.”

Food Day Advisory Board

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co-chairs Sen. Tom Harkin, D-IA, and Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-CT, and an advisory board that looks like a “who’s who” of the local food movement. The list of high-profile celebrities, activists and officials who have signed on includes author Michael Pollan, urban farming proponent Will Allen, Humane Society of the U.S. President Wayne Pacelle, Seattle Mayor Michael McGinn, former Surgeon General David Satcher, author Dr. Dean Ornish, chefs Nora Pouillon and Alice Waters, and others. In addition, there are a couple of names that “aggies” might recognize, including Sen. Jon Tester, Rep. Dave Loebsack, Daryll E. Ray, Jim Hightower and Carol Tucker-Foreman. (For the complete list, see sidebar.)

Although several of the advisory members don’t agree on certain aspects of food production, such as whether or not to use genetically-modified seeds, or promote a vegetarian diet, they are focused on six principles where they were able to find common ground. These include:

- Reduce diet-related disease by promoting safe, healthy foods
- Support sustainable farms and limit subsidies to big agribusiness
- Expand access to food and alleviate hunger
- Protect the environment and animals by reforming factory farms
- Promote health by curbing junk-food marketing to kids
- Support fair conditions for food and farm workers

Modeled on Earth Day, organizers hope Food Day will inspire Americans to hold thousands of events in schools, college campuses, churches, and even in private homes aimed at the need to “fix” America’s food system. A few big food companies and farm organizations are on the list of supporting partners, including Dole Food Co., Bolthouse Farms (one of the nation’s largest carrot producers), American Farmland Trust and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. However, each is celebrating Food Day in its own way, ranging from education to marketing. For example, Dole will put Food Day stickers on 100 million bananas and Bolthouse

But he insists that his organization is not trying to promote a specific way of eating.

“Being a vegan or vegetarian is almost like a religion and it’s divisive. The same thing with GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms). So, Food Day is not getting into those issues,” said Jacobson. “We are trying to foster collaboration. That would just be fostering battles.”

That hasn’t stopped some agricultural groups from criticizing the effort and what they view as anti-agriculture messages. Earlier this year, some members of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation questioned why Sen. Harkin would even associate himself with Food Day. Harkin fired right back, questioning why ag groups wouldn’t want to be part of an effort that promotes food.

“All Americans will benefit from greater understanding and appreciation of food, agriculture and nutrition – spanning the food chain from farm families to family tables. Participants in Food Day activities and events will be helping to promote better nutrition and health, lessen hunger and increase access to food, conserve and protect our land and water, and enhance the lives of consumers, farm families, and rural communities,” Harkin told *Agri-Pulse*.

Some farm organizations told *Agri-Pulse* that they don’t oppose Food Day, but they plan to stay away and observe. A few others suggested that, if they just stay away, Food Day might die as it did in the 1970’s – just three years after its initial launch.

“There was tremendous support and publicity,” Jacobson recalls of the 1970’s effort. “But we didn’t have the money and energy to keep it going.” CSPI does not accept money from government or industry groups, but does accept contributions from foundations and individuals. The organization also raises money from the sale of materials on their web site.

This time, Jacobson is confident that Food Day’s future will be different.

“Clearly we struck a responsive chord,” Jacobson said. “I think it will be big this year and build over the years.” Δ

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