

# Understanding Olivia . . . And Others Who Make A Living Bashing Farmers

## Is Secretary Earl Butz To Blame For Obesity In America?

SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.



The e-mail seemed simple enough. A junior in high school named "Olivia" had found my name via the Internet and wondered if I would answer a few questions about farm policy. She planned to write a paper about former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz for her history class, and had seen a column that I wrote on Butz a couple of years ago.

While Butz was Secretary of Agriculture, I was growing up and later, had the pleasure of listening to his speeches and interviewing him. Still, I don't consider myself an expert on Butz and when I read her initial list of questions (below), I took a deep breath. These aren't exactly "yes" or "no" questions that could be answered in a simple format.

- What were the most significant agricultural reform policies Butz codified?
- Were all the effects of Butz's actions as Secretary of Agriculture beneficial? Why or Why not?
- What is your take on planting fence row to fence row? Was it a good way to grow more food, or did it promote overproduction of unhealthy high fructose corn syrup?
- Did farmers reap the benefits of Butz's agricultural reform, or did they still struggle to stay out of debt?
- How was the environment impacted by the "get big or get out" philosophy when in terms of farming?

All good questions, but at first I was skeptical. Where was a young woman who lives in Seattle getting her information to even frame these types of questions? Was she trying to set me up for something or really interested in learning? Although Olivia didn't say, you could generally figure out her opinion on certain issues through the tone and nature of the questions she asked.

So I sent her an e-mail asking for her phone number. And for the next hour or so, we had a delightful chat about my life growing up on a farm, U.S. crop and livestock production, food prices and the legacy of Earl Butz and other significant individuals impacting food production.

Like many young, high school students, Olivia gets her information about farming from the Internet and movies like "King Corn" and Food, Inc. She had also read Michael Pollan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," in which the journalist turned pseudo food expert decides we need to reinvent U.S. food production. All of a sudden, I started to connect the dots.

Soon, I figured out why she was interested in Dr. Butz, who was named Secretary of Agriculture in 1971 – long before she was born. He was featured in the documentary "King Corn," as the person who started the rise of "fence-row to fence-row corn production, large commercial farms, and the abundance of corn in American diets. As more and more corn was used for high fructose corn syrup in American diets, and as more and more Americans became obese, she asked: Were Dr. Butz's policies at the heart of the obesity in America?

### Kill the messenger?

Many people will tell you that those sources she was referring to are wildly inaccurate and should not be trusted. But the reality is, there are millions of pieces of information moving around the globe in this 24-7 information world we live in, and we can't be the "truth" police on all of them. These sources are out there, they have enjoyed some measure of popularity and my goal was not to support or oppose those sources, but to try to get Olivia to think more

critically about what she was reading. I tried to think in terms of a 17-year old, an exercise that is not to difficult because my youngest just turned 19. So I started asking questions, including:

- Have you ever been truly hungry, as in without access to food? (The answer was "No.")
- Do you drive a car? (The answer was yes). If you have to fill up your gas tank, do you fill it up with gas that costs \$4.00 a gallon or \$3.00 a gallon. (Of course, she went with the lower cost option.) If your body is low on fuel, and you are hungry, would you purchase the \$4.00/gallon "fuel" or the \$3.00/gallon fuel for your body?
- Do your friends drive cars or walk to school? Would the lack of physical activity among teenagers over the last three decades also have impact on obesity levels? What about population and technology trends, as fewer people worked on farms and in manufacturing doing "hard" labor and more worked in the service sector? (She had not thought about those impacts.)
- What else was going on in the world when Earl Butz was Secretary of Agriculture? Did she understand the Russian grain deals and the focus on opening world markets, the work of Norman Borlaug, the changes in on-farm productivity and the millions who have been fed because of changes that have been made in our food system?

### No simple answers

There were so many other factors influencing the changes in farm policy at the start of the 1970's that she started to realize it was not as simple as perhaps she once thought. I sent her links to USDA's Economic Research Service web site, and several other sources for additional background.

Even one of the co-producers of King Corn noted after he met with Dr. Butz for the first time:

"As our meeting went on, I realized that Dr. Butz's policies of abundance were somehow understandable. When Earl Butz finished college in 1933, it was the middle of the Great Depression; when Ian (the other co-producer) and I graduated, it was the obesity epidemic. I had never known scarcity, and had little respect for its power," wrote Curt Ellis on his web site.

Still that didn't stop Ellis from saying that "it's hard to see any lasting appeal of Butz's program: more cheap corn, cheap soy, and cheap food. We're ready for a new kind of farm policy, one that responds to our generation's realities of obesity and Type II diabetes and leaves Butz's fears of scarcity behind."

Could you expect anything less from someone trying to sell a movie? People who are trying to sell movies, books and political agendas are not likely to be interested in a serious dialogue that establishes common ground.

I expect a more balanced approach from Olivia. As we closed up our conversation, she said that she was not sure whether the conclusions she reached would agree with mine. I told her that I wasn't interested in getting an agreement on any particular point. Farmers and ranchers know they have room for improvement. If they don't, they won't be in business long. More than anyone else, they understand what Secretary Butz was famous for saying, "Adapt or die."

If, as a result of our interaction, Olivia understands a little more about the issues being debated and can be more critical in thinking about farmers and food policy in the future, I will be satisfied. I just wish I could reach another million or so like her. Δ

SARA WYANT: Publisher weekly e-newsletter, Agri Pulse.

**APACHE**   
The #1 mechanical drive sprayer.

Link Directly To: **APACHE**



Link Directly To: **SYNGENTA**