

Food: California flash point



TRENDS BRIEFING: California Secretary of Agriculture A.G. Kawamura speaks to the State Board of Food and Agriculture at its annual agri-food trends briefing as State Board President Al Montna and others listen.

By MIKE DURANT

FOR the foreseeable future, food will be a flash point for change on many social platforms, Kerry Tucker told the State Board of Food and Agriculture at its annual agri-food trends briefing.

Tucker and a panel of experts briefed the board on seven trends from the 2008 Food Foresight report that Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc. collaborates on with the California Institute for Food and Agricultural Research at the University of California, Davis. (See story below.)

"In a world that seems out of control, food is one thing over which a consumer can exert personal control," Tucker said. "It's a trend driven by

Key Points

- Food will be a flash point for change on many social platforms.
- Pressure is building to remove unhealthy ingredients from food products.
- The public's growing interest in the farm bill is an example of food's new platform.

opinion leaders, like celebrity chefs and best-selling authors, but also nongovernmental organizations and individual citizens at the grassroots level."

He gave these examples:

■ Parents are organizing grassroots initiatives to pressure school boards, principals and school food-service directors to add more fresh produce and to remove high-sugar options. More than one-half of U.S. states have enacted tougher guidelines for what can be sold or given away during school hours.

■ Nongovernmental organizations are campaigning to push food manufacturers and restaurant chains to remove a growing list of "villain" ingredients, such as trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup, from products and menus.

■ Animal activists are pressuring farmers, processing plants and restaurant chains to change animal treatment practices. In California, the Humane Society is initiating a ballot initiative aimed at poultry, swine and veal producers and processors.

■ Congress is threatening industry with new regulations to protect children from junk-food advertising unless there's more success from voluntary self-policing efforts.

■ Philanthropic foundations such as Kellogg, Packard, Pew Charitable Trusts and others are collectively spending hundreds of millions of dollars supporting new sustainable food systems.

■ Kaiser-Permanente is offering fresh, local foods and hosting farmers markets in its health-care facilities.

■ Political leaders like former President Bill Clinton and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger have launched their own initiatives to combat obesity.

New policy players

Michael Pollan, a UC Berkeley journalism professor and author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto," weighed in with others on farm bill discussions serving as a platform for challenging the industrialized food system and what he calls its negative effect on public health and the environment.

"In the past, that alliance [of agriculture and food companies] could have passed a farm bill like this one without breaking a sweat. But the politics of

food have changed and probably for good," Pollan wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed article. "If the eaters and all the 'other people on the outside' make themselves heard, we just might end up with something that looks less like a farm bill and more like the food bill a poorly fed America so badly needs."

During board discussion, State Board President Al Montna told the group that this round of farm bill discussion involved a number of new players demanding more "relevance" for food, health and consumers. "The next farm bill will have involvement by even more new players expressing what's important to them. We can't ignore this. We need to be on top of it and engaged," said Montna, a rice farmer who also grows organic walnuts.

Growing with care

"Public interest in last year's farm bill discussion is but one example of food becoming the platform for bringing attention to shifting consumer expectations for how business is conducted, and it's to our advantage to pay attention and adjust," Tucker told the board.

The Food Foresight trends briefing is one of a number of hearings the State Board of Food and Agriculture is holding to chronicle issues affecting agriculture in California. Under Montna's leadership, the board is in the developmental stages of a new vision for the future of California agriculture and a set of policy priorities to strengthen California ag's position in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. The board is building on the coalition of agricultural, environmental and health/nutrition interests that rallied around the 2007 Farm Bill. Called the "Growing With Care Initiative," the board will focus this year on policy priorities, perhaps even a California food bill that a diversified stakeholder alliance is likely to agree to and push forward collectively.

Participants included Jeff Dlott, CEO, SureHarvest, and Cheryl Mitchell, president of Creative Research Management.

Durant is a Sacramento writer.

Food Foresight's predicted trends

1. The American Dream feels like it's slipping out of reach for a growing number of consumers.
2. Food emerges as a social platform across multiple fronts.
3. Sustainability sows seeds of profit and social acceptance.
4. Food and health converge on commercial relevance.
5. Consumers drive evolutionary change.
6. Traditional science becomes less important in the rapid democratization of information.
7. The food pipeline is in major realignment to cut costs from producer to consumer.

Food Foresight, a trends intelligence collaboration of Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc. and the California Institute for Food and Agricultural Research at UC Davis, is used as a database for strategic and futures scenario planning, and issue and crisis management. See www.foodforesight.com.

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