

We must fix the farm-to-fork disconnect



For Starters
By JOSH FLINT

RECENTLY had the honor of judging essays for Farm Credit Services as part of its "We Understand" Agriculture Scholarship program.

After reading just over 100 essays, I can tell you two things about rural Illinois high school seniors: Approximately 75% of them want to be a veterinarian of some sort; and they are all keenly aware of the disconnect that exists between the farmer and the consumer.

The students' comments reminded me of a story I heard at a flour milling conference a couple of years ago. The speaker was from the Food and Drug Administration. He once received a phone call from a consumer who was feeling sick after eating a hot breakfast cereal. According to the consumer, when she opened the package, the product smelled rancid; however, she subsequently cooked and ate it. Once she became sick, she decided the FDA should have protected her.

Ignoring the governmental regulation vs. consumer common sense conun-

drum, it's quite clear this consumer did not understand how a product within its expiration date could possibly be spoiled. The FDA representative explained the cereal originated as wheat in a farmer's field. Along its journey to the grocery store, it could have spoiled in a variety of different ways.

Many of today's consumers are in desperate need of a basic food supply lesson such as this.

Is it the consumer's fault?

When I was growing up in mid-Missouri, the closest I came to farming was riding a dirt bike on my uncle's hobby farm, which included about 20 head of cattle and some tomatoes. Needless to say, the concepts of crop production and grain processing were fairly foreign.

I do remember taking health and nutrition courses in middle school. I learned about the food pyramid, the importance of exercise, how to prevent illness through good hand-washing, and, of course, sexual education. For three days out of the week, we learned from a textbook. The other two were spent practicing some of these concepts. Looking back, I'm not really sure if square dancing went with the lessons on exercise or the introductory courtship portion of sex ed.

Throughout the entire class, we never once learned where our food

comes from. Yeah, we talked about calories, carbohydrates, protein, recommended daily values and vitamins; but we never learned where the stuff in the package comes from. I think this is the time to educate consumers about their food. It's especially important in urban or non-farming areas of the country.

I was quite old before I realized corn is not produced primarily for human consumption. I thought the only time I was relying on the Corn Belt was when I literally had corn on the cob at a summer barbecue. Just think, how many consumers walk through the grocery store and think the farmer's work ends at the produce section? They think taco shells come from Gruma, crackers are from Nabisco and chicken is from Tyson.

Ag in the Classroom

It's been a long time since anyone in my family farmed, aside from my uncle who owned the hobby livestock herd. I recently inquired about our agricultural roots and was told I had a great-grandfather who was a hobby farmer.

Many people are in the same situation. Over the years, more and more Americans began to move off the farm. Today, most are probably at least three generations removed from the agricultural world.

Share your view

Prairie Farmer welcomes opinions and comments on issues that relate to your farm business. Send an e-mail to Executive Editor Frank Holdmeyer at fholdmeyer@farmprogress.com, or write to us at *Prairie Farmer Letters*, 1301 E. Mound Road, Decatur, IL 62526. Include your name, address and phone number for verification purposes. Please limit comments to 300 words or less.

In 1981, the U.S. Department of Agriculture realized this and established Ag in the Classroom. The program provides a lot of excellent information and resources, but it's up to each state to take advantage of them. Some states seem to use the resources a little better than others. Plus, with the current emphasis on standardized testing, I highly doubt the public school system will suddenly become more interested in teaching something that students aren't tested on.

As the food vs. fuel debate continues to receive the mainstream media's attention, now is the time to better educate our youth on the importance of U.S. agriculture. If we don't, we'll only be creating more uninformed voters who don't see value in agriculture.

Letters

Ethanol is not to blame

As a farmer and a lifelong native of Bureau County, I am excited about the expanding ethanol production in our area. The rapid growth in the ethanol industry tells you all you need to know about its performance and viability.

✓ It burns cleaner, thus fighting air pollution; ask the American Lung Association.

✓ It's made here at home providing jobs; just ask the 230,000 people already employed as a result of ethanol plant construction, operation and related supporting services.

✓ It puts more dollars into our local communities; just ask local business owners about the increased dollars spent at their stores and government officials about the accompanying consumer services provided by the \$8 billion to \$12 billion in annual tax revenues generated by ethanol production.

Consumers who have seen gasoline prices climb more than 40% in the last four months want relief and alternatives. We owe it to them and ourselves to explore all of our engine technology and renewable-fuel options if we want a fully functional and strong United States that is less reliant on foreign fuel sources. Right now, ethanol is leading the assault to solve this problem, and, contrary to opponents of this petroleum alternative, ethanol is a terrific fuel with a proven 67% net energy gain as is documented in a 2003 paper co-authored by the U.S. Department of Energy and USDA.

Ethanol is not some upstart. Since its introduction in the late 1970s, production has grown significantly every year and at a rate that is not realized by most Fortune 500 companies. This kind of growth and investment did not happen by accident. It happened because we, in the U.S., needed to fill

supply gaps left by Middle Eastern nations cutting production to raise prices; because we needed to fight air pollution in urban areas, to replace poisons in our gasoline like lead and methyl tertiary butyl ether; and we needed to stop shipping billions of dollars to countries that want to destroy our culture and our way of life.

And, do not believe everything you hear about corn's role in food prices. The No. 1 factor driving food price increases is, you guessed it, transportation. Fuel prices are sucking our economy into a black hole. When you add that to recent rice and wheat crop failures overseas, speculative investors shifting to ag commodities in a weak economy, and growing populations with increased buying power in China and India, you quickly see corn and ethanol barely make a ripple in the pond of a much bigger issue. Ag commodities are not a major factor in the prices of the food you buy in the grocery store.

In the words of Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House, "To create a 21st-century energy system, we must embrace and execute a bold strategy. We've taken the first step with support for renewable fuels like corn ethanol. While record prices at the pump have lent urgency, inducements for real change ought to take the form of providing large rewards for those creative citizens who succeed in speeding up the journey toward energy self-reliance."

Ethanol from corn makes more sense today than ever before. I look forward to both the Patriot Renewable Fuels plant near Annawan and Marquis Energy plant near Hennepin becoming operational so that we can enjoy more of these benefits closer to home.

Jim Rapp
Princeton

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