

The Kansas City Food Circle

UPDATE

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How Free Trade Ideology Degrades Our Food Supply

Every month or so, we hear about another outbreak of disease caused by bad food. If it's not E coli in beef or salmonella and campylobacter in chicken, then it's contaminated raspberries from Guatemala. People watch, aghast, as thousands of hapless farm animals are crowded into tiny pens and cages never to see the light of day their entire lives. How did our food supply get into such a condition that millions of people are walking out of supermarkets and dealing directly with farmers, if not because of food safety, then because of freshness and taste? While hardly intentional, the problem is not an accident either ... it derives from the mindless pursuit of free trade and exports.

It all started some 40 years ago when the USDA/Big Agribusiness Complex and Washington politicians decided that, in post war international trade competition, the U.S had a distinct "comparative advantage" in agriculture. They figured we could tote up more export revenue and "add value" to raw crops like corn, sorghum, and soybeans by running them through animals to make meat that sells at a higher price. They also figured we could export more if we lowered the price of these commodities. Thus the USDA, on the orders of successive Administrations, blindly pursued a "cheap food" policy complete with export and production subsidies. Meanwhile Big Ag crowed about feeding the world and raked in the cash.

Conventional economists like to say that we now have the most efficient agricultural system in the world that produces, well, cheap food, that fewer and fewer people in this country want to eat. The value added to Con Agra's and Cargill's revenues is, of course, subtracted from the hides of consumers and rural residents. While consumers struggle with questionable food choices, rural people are watching their quality of life decline from the influx of factory farms. Their third and fourth generation farms are going broke (or they are forced into contract farming as modern day sharecroppers), their water supply is polluted and depleted, and their county commissioners are groveling at the feet of Big Ag. We now have a vast "dead zone" at the mouth of the Mississippi River and toxic microbes in east coast estuaries.

The tentacles of the free trade ideologues reach further into our lives than most people realize. Big Ag wanted to

eliminate Europe's ban on U.S. meat produced with growth hormones and to forestall certain threats to the use of toxic pesticides. So, our government instigated the World Trade Organization's secret dispute resolution panels whose decisions are now mandatory. Sure enough, the WTO has overturned Europe's hormone ban and overturned our ban on the import of shrimp caught while killing endangered sea turtles. Congress was also intimidated into removing our ban on the import of tuna caught with nets that also catch dolphins. Under the brave new-world-order of food fascism, people can no longer make collective, moral judgments about how our food is produced or harvested.

The USDA's cheap food policy is also behind the lax enforcement of the Humane Slaughter Act and ignores the cruelties involved in the intensive confinement of hogs and chickens. The new book, *Slaughterhouse*, reveals how packing house lines were greatly speeded up during the '80's, and inspectors were forbidden to stop the line when they found violations. It might add a cent per pound to the price of meat!

This month, the General Accounting Office reported that our system of inspecting imported food is a failure and recommended that such food meet American health and safety standards. Federal officials acknowledged the problem but feared such a solution would disrupt trade.



Federal food scientists believe that free trade rules trump food safety concerns. Before we get too uppity, though, we should realize that the USDA already has regulatory power over imported meat and poultry, and imported meat may be safer than our own.

So why would the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) try to undermine organic food labeling by allowing such foods to be genetically engineered or grown with sewage sludge, and meat to be produced in factory farms and irradiated? Easy! The Organic food movement is a bright beacon and an implied criticism of USDA's absurd, cheap food policy. Consumers are deserting the industrial food system in droves. An unprecedented 200,000 people sent in official comments to USDA protesting the draft rules.

People have a basic right to clean, wholesome food to eat, clean air to breathe and clean water to drink. We have the right to collectively act to obtain these rights. How we treat the plants and animals we eat is perhaps the greatest measure of our worth and dignity as a sentient species ... because we have the power to be cruel, but choose not to be. In essence we must demand a "values-added" agriculture, where all societal values are considered.

We are making progress, but Big Ag will not give up easily on an industrial system from which they have profited so greatly. They prevailed upon the legislatures of 13 states to pass food disparagement or "veggie libel" laws.

It backfired when they picked on Oprah Winfrey. However, they will continue to rely on the USDA and the shadowy gnomes that inhabit the World Trade Organization in Switzerland to enforce their cheap food policy. Fighting this battle will be the most important thing we ever do.

Emergence of Drug Resistant Salmonella Documented

Scientists have confirmed that a type of Salmonella bacteria, resistant to five antibiotics, is becoming increasingly prevalent in the United States. According to the New England Journal of Medicine (May 7, 1998) each year in the U. S., there are an estimated 800,000 to 4 million salmonella infections in people and about 500 are fatal. About 40,000 of these are sent to the Centers for Disease Control for study. Using this data along with information from local health departments, scientists have determined that the prevalence of drug resist salmonella has increased from 0.6% in 1979-1980 to 34% in 1996. In an accompanying editorial, Dr Stuart Levy, MD of Tufts University School of Medicine noted that in Europe the organism has acquired resistance to seven drugs that are used to combat it. He pointed to the use of some 50 million pounds per year of antibiotics in farm animals mostly to promote growth. Multi-drug resistance was traced to farms 14 years ago, but little has been done to combat this problem.

The existence of salmonella in chicken factories and coming out of packing houses is well documented. Less well known is it's presence in hog factories. In a recent study in Epidemiology and Infections (1997) scientists found salmonella at 83% of hog farms tested in North

Carolina. They did not test for antibiotic resistance. The highest incidence of infection among animals was found in the newest hog factory technology, called "all in/all out" where animals are confined according to their life stage, breeding, nursery & finish (14 of 29 farms analyzed). Certain integrated systems (farrow to finish) with attached dirt lots also fared poorly (3 of 29), but the one hog farm using a free range, pasture feeding system was found to be free of salmonella. More pasture systems need to be tested, but this result is striking. Unfortunately many farmers using pasture feeding have been driven out of business by large, total confinement systems.

Slaughterhouse exposes cruelty, USDA Incompetence

Culminating a ten-year undercover investigation by Humane Farming Association (HFA) Chief Investigator Gail Eisnitz, this book is the shocking story of greed, neglect and the meat industry's wholesale disregard of the federal Humane Slaughter Act, passed in 1958 to protect slaughter-bound animals from cruelty. Reagan era deregulation allowed meat companies to radically speed up the processing line such that workers were often unable to properly stun the animals. As a result some animals were butchered fully conscious while USDA inspectors were pressured to look the other way. Eisnitz also attributes the increase in food-borne illnesses to poor management and inspection in packing houses. It's sad to read about the treatment of farm animals in this book, but it will continue unless the public is willing to face up to what's not being done by their government to prevent it. In all in the name of securing the lowest possible costs for export. The book may be obtained from the HFA P. O. Box 3577, San Rafael, Ca. 94912, Phone 415-771-CALF. Price is \$25.95 plus \$4.50 shipping or \$18.00 to members plus \$3.50 shipping.

Corruption in Science, Continuing Saga

In the last issue of the Update we reported how the financial relationship of scientists with pharmaceutical companies colored their reports. The Journal of the American Medical Association (May-20, 1998) reports that 37% of 106 reviews concluded that passive smoking is not harmful to health. Lo and behold, 74% of these glowing reports were written by authors with tobacco industry affiliations. A statistical analysis of the 106 reports showed that the only factor associated with concluding that passive smoking is not harmful was whether an author was affiliated with the tobacco industry. This further demonstrates that not only has big money polluted our political system, but our scientific establishment as well. Greed rules America!

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