

# Local food, local security

Kamyar Enshayan

Forum

There is much talk about homeland security, bioterrorism and how to safeguard our system of food and agriculture from terrorists. But if we look around us, we see that the forces systematically destroying American agriculture are almost entirely domestic: nitrogen pollution of our streams, atrazine in our drinking water, farm policies that kill independent businesses and small towns, genetic manipulation for profits and power, and monopolization of agricultural markets by a few global corporations.

One clear and troubling example of a domestic biological threat to our system of food and agriculture is the way the industrial meat giants raise and process livestock. In 2002, roughly during the same time that snipers killed 12 people around the nation's capital, contaminated lunch meat killed more than 8 people and sickened many more in New England, prompting a record recall of 27 million pounds of meat. I asked my students what differences there were between the two tragedies. The class had just read Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, which documents how packing giants repeatedly evade public health laws, leading to meat contamination and death. The only differences my class saw were that the shootings received massive news coverage but the poisoning victims died quietly in hospitals with little media attention, and while there was an extensive search for the snipers, there were no arrests in the meat industry.

There are other ways of protecting our food and agriculture. My friend Mary Berry Smith, who farms in Kentucky, says 'Our country, through its ruinous desire for cheap food, has nearly destroyed the safest food system we could have: farmers feeding the people closest to them.' Her family sells most of their farm products direct to customers: 'Our customers trust us to provide delicious, healthy, safe food; we trust them to pay us a fair price.'

The people of Black Hawk County, Iowa, annually spend nearly US\$240 million on groceries and another US\$130 million on eating out. Most of these food dollars leave our county and state. Six years ago, I approached the dining services directors of our university, our local hospital and the owner of a locally owned restaurant about buying a greater portion of their food from nearby farms. The aim was to keep a significant part of these dollars in our community and region, as well as to build local relationships. 'Value-subtracting' industrial agriculture and the resulting 'value-missing' markets create insecurities for the very people who grow our food.

Ten institutions we have worked with over 5 years have spent nearly US\$780,000 of their food purchases locally. At Rudy's Tacos, one of our partners in Waterloo, 71% of the restaurant's food budget, US\$143,000, goes for fresh, locally grown ingredients. For most restaurants, that percentage would be in single digits, if any. Bartels Lutheran Home in Waverly, another partner, buys two to three cattle each month, raised locally and processed at a local meat locker. Last year Bartels bought US\$40,000 worth of locally raised beef and vegetables. Three years ago the beef came from an unknown source, and the US\$40,000 left the region. The University of Northern Iowa, where I work, recently bought its first local cow!

This is 'value-retained' agriculture, and we need more of it. If our county set a goal of retaining just 10% of our food dollars, that would amount to US\$37 million *every year*. And that would be real community economic development based on our best assets: our people and our land.

These institutional food buyers have come to understand that their decisions affect crucially the vitality of nearby farms and businesses. They have decided to buy their meats from farmers they know for this reason, and because they can find out what the animals were fed and how they were raised. Through local, inspected lockers they are assured that their ground beef came from *that* cow, and not from a mixture of thousands of other cattle from unknown places. Obviously, local meat lockers can also be susceptible to meat contamination and must follow strict meat safety guidelines. The key is local accountability and traceability to a farm, to a specific feed, etc.

This work has expanded the web of local relationships, which is the essence of local economy and local life. This is the kind of homeland security I think about.

*Kamyar Enshayan works at University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa. Many thanks to the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and NCSARE for supporting the institutional marketing project. The original commentary, entitled 'Food Security Begins and Stays at Home', was presented at the Land Institute Prairie Festival in September 2002 and was printed in 'The Land Report' Number 75, Spring 2003, pages 8–9. For a summary of 5 years of work with institutional food buyers in north-eastern Iowa, please visit <http://www.uni.edu/ceee/food-project>*

## Editorial response by Wallace Wilhelm

Dr. Enshayan expresses good ideas and views that are appropriate during this time of international uneasiness. I respect Dr. Enshayan for having the courage to express his position openly and for making me think deeply enough about the topic to realize I have a somewhat different opinion. Our different points of view may span the range of opinions held by the readers of RAFS. In that regard, Dr. Enshayan may have also established a forum for a valuable discussion among our readers.

I compliment Dr. Enshayan for opening the issue of local production and consumption of agricultural products. He raises several extremely important points: increasing enterprise income by locally adding value to agricultural products; adding to the sense of community by buying from and selling to neighbors; and maintaining a fraction of local control over our food supply (quantity, quality, safety and healthfulness) through local buying and selling. However, I think he has missed two important points in this discussion. First, most people in the US assume our food supply is safe and healthful. This assumption is the result of decades of control by a series of US government regulations that have elevated the standards for food handling and processing to a point where food can be assumed to be safe (US Food and Drug Administration, 2000, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/codex/system.htm>). Food, regardless of source, is neither safe nor hazardous. The standards during production, processing, transport and storage largely impart the characteristics of safety and healthfulness (Woteki et al., 2001, <http://www.nutrition.org/cgi/content/full/131/2/502S>). Food-related illnesses (poisonings) are unusual events and therefore draw media attention. If they were an everyday event, print and broadcast media would not highlight them; they sell newspapers and capture market share by highlighting the unusual and tragic, not restating everyday events. Secondly, some improvements in public health can be attributed, in part, to having a wide array of

foods available to everyone at a relatively low cost. Nutrition-related diseases are as uncommon today in the US as food poisoning. Having an effective food production, processing, storage and marketing industry capable of delivering exotic fruits, vegetables and other produce safely, and at a low cost, has benefited all in our society. The most revealing statement one can make may be the fact that the greatest concern, and the most-repeated story relating to public health and food-related diseases, is overweight and obesity. If we relied solely on locally produced food, our food supply would differ greatly from that to which we are accustomed. We would have an abundance of food during the summer and fall months, if local weather condition were favorable, but we would have to process and store some of this abundance for consumption during the winter and spring when fresh produce is not available. This situation is not greatly different from the food supply scenario that existed in the first half of the 20th century. Our food production industry has evolved since that time, maybe not entirely for the better, but it has changed.

We now have great metropolitan areas with massive populations. People in these cities rely on the existence of an efficient food production and distribution system. I am reasonably sure Dr. Enshayan was not suggesting complete abandonment of our food industry infrastructure. At best that would be an intricate, hazardous process. However, in individual cases, where the opportunities exist, there can be benefit to both buyer and seller to seek, and profit from, local markets.

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## Kate Clancy's response to Forum and Editorial Comments

The commentaries by Enshayan and Wilhelm are a good example of a debate that has been going on for 25 years or so in the US. One of the major questions in this debate is what percentage of the food system can be occupied by local/regional alternatives and what percentage will remain in the dominant, industrial system. Although I disagree strongly that food-related illnesses are unusual (USDA data show an epidemic of such disease) and that most nutrition-related diseases are uncommon (the three leading causes of death in the US are diet-related), I believe it will be many

years before a majority of consumers take the extra time and money to buy local and sustainably produced food. Therefore, we will continue to work on developing the alternative and trying to reform the dominant for some time to come.

*Kate Clancy is director of the Wallace Center for Agricultural and Environmental Policy and serves as senior manager for Winrock International's domestic agricultural programs.*