

Paper #7 – “The true cost of food – pollution, ozone loss, wildlife, animal welfare; poverty and social injustice...and free speech (!?)”

Lagoons. Fountains. Bayous. Sounds more like a bucolic dream than the agricultural nightmare it is. Running in a pigpen with poo up to your knees escalates this lurid nightmare, as you are unable to get away from the stench, finally succumbing to a slow, suffocating death. Then you wake up. Whew, that was close. But while you are able to rise, stretch, throw open your window, and take a deep breath of fresh air to clear your mind of the disturbing dream, those who live near hog farms are not so lucky. Plagued by health problems, residents who share property lines with these CAFO's pay a high price for the economic stimulus the pork companies promise their towns. Society's huge appetite for animal products fuels a CAFO dependent industry that relies on drugs to keep the livestock disease-free and pesticides to keep the corn feed flowing. Protein-processing mega-farms and the pesticide bathed crops that feed them generate copious amounts of toxic waste that pollute our waterways, kill wildlife, and breed drug-resistant super bugs that should have us all worried. On an earth where there is no “away”, we need to wake up from this nightmare and take action before it becomes everyone's reality.

To market, to market, to buy a fat hog... I'm the first to question the validity of a sensationalized piece in Rolling Stone – a publication that often uses the two-by-four effect to get the attention of its readers. But *Boss Hog* was disturbing in its real-life accounting of the horrors that exist on pig CAFO's. Tietz could not make this “shit” up. Mega-farmers, such as Smithfield, attempt to assuage our growing concerns over their waste management system by claiming they have had a “complete cultural shift on environmental matters.” But simply admitting there is something that requires attention does not translate into action – not like it would matter because, according to Tietz and his sources, there is nothing that can be done to manage the amount of waste generated. Why not consider reducing the number of pigs and allowing them to graze, breed, and give birth outside of crates? Giving pigs the lifestyle suggested by the photo on their packaging could bankrupt Smithfield and it does not sound like Mr. Luter is interested in downgrading his lifestyle anytime soon.

Regulation matched with an increased demand for humanely raised livestock may be the best route for change. It is no surprise that the former has been met with great resistance. CAFO's should at least be required to divulge basic information that could potentially protect the environment and the humans and workers that occupy it. The EPA's inability to step up to the plate and demand disclosure of relevant operations information makes future regulation more difficult. With regulation failing, consumers need to take charge. Anyone paying close attention to supermarket offerings over the past few years would note a bright spot of change; the increase in “grass-fed”, “free-range”, and “humanely processed” meats available. Feeling better about where your food comes from and the life it had while on four feet is very vogue. Carman's article is a perfect example of the power of the people. The public voice can incite change, but is being 30% humane good enough? When Smithfield Foods announced that 70% of its pigs would continue to be subjected to crate confinement, should we applaud? It was a small gesture aimed at calming the masses, but it's when these masses start voting with their wallet and only buy 100% humanely raised pigs that corporations will make significant changes.

But what if you're a working family who cannot afford elite meat? Perhaps the answer to this dilemma can be found in Harvey's article. Everyone can afford to eat less meat, or no meat for that matter. After all, it is not required as part of a healthy diet according to 2010 USDA Dietary Guideline for Americans. But in a culture that has a meat-centric history and deals with healthy food availability, this seemingly simple solution becomes complicated. However, as nutrition educators and policy makers we should try. Unlike the corn, hogs cannot be stored in silos – Smithfield will not crank out pig parts they cannot sell. In reducing demand for the product, we reduce waste, pollution, and super bug creation propelled by use of antibiotics that keep the livestock “healthy”

Muddy Waters, singing the blues... The singer was named for the muddy waters of the Mississippi that he played in as a child in the early 20th century. Now, his moniker has taken on new meaning. A constant deluge of excess nitrogen and phosphorus flow into these waters from the corn-centered agricultural systems used to fuel animal protein farms hundreds of miles upstream. These nutrients threaten not only the communities who live near the water source and its tributaries, but the wildlife that calls water home as well. According to Berger, large algae blooms created by these nutrients suck oxygen out of the water and devastate populations of fish and shellfish, unfortunate collateral damage of the demand-driven meat industry – and those under the waterline aren't the only ones paying the price of Franken-agriculture. Heavy pesticide use for crops has compromised the immune systems of a silent, often unseen partner in agriculture – bees. Without them, animal feed and most of the produce aisle would evaporate overnight.

We need to sing a different tune and I would prefer it be one of a positive note. I will leave the policy making and regulation to those with stronger stomachs. Increasing the public's awareness of the true cost of mega-farm produced food (health and environmental threats) could be the “Wake up!” pinch that comes just in time to save our society from this nightmare playing out in our food system.