

## VULNERABILITY OF OUR FOOD SUPPLY

**J. Daniel Lousier**

Over the last century, North America's food system has become increasingly industrialized and centralized. It is an economy of scale which has served us well, at least in strictly economic terms. In 1930, the average North American family spent approximately 24% of its income on food. That number has declined in every subsequent decade – by 2007, it had fallen to 10%. Of course, there are hidden costs in the form of health problems wrought by processed foods, and an agricultural industry which has become heavily reliant on subsidies paid out of our taxes. But, the fact remains – until very recently, our food has never been cheaper but it also has never been more harmful to our health, and growing food has never been more detrimental to our environment.

Over the past three years, for example, the rise in energy and fertilizer prices has led to double- or in some cases, triple-digit food inflation. In early 2008, the price of rice doubled globally in a single month; milk prices have increased nearly 100% in two years; the same for wheat and corn prices. And with the average piece of North American food traveling nearly 2,400 kilometers from farm to table, it is likely to become worse as finite fossil-fuel reserves continue to shrink. On average, every calorie which lands on our plates soaks up eleven calories of fossil-fuel energy as the crop is sown, grown, harvested, processed, and shipped to us. When the price of those eleven fossil-fuel calories doubles, then triples, and finally rises exponentially, the cost of that single calorie of nourishment will become prohibitive.

There are other problems with our centralized food system. Most critically, it is vulnerable to:

- energy-supply disruptions,
- widespread outbreaks of insects and diseases on farms,
- problematic outbreaks of food-borne illnesses,
- unexpected weather problems which interfere with food production , and
- unforeseen emergencies (e.g., storms, slides, floods) which disrupt food delivery (the constant flow of trains and trailers).

Our nation's food supply has never been more vulnerable. And we, as consumers of food, share that vulnerability, having slowly and continually ceded control over the very thing which is most critical to our survival. We have become utterly dependent on a corporate supply chain which is entirely beyond our control, in no small part because it typically starts a half-continent or a full continent or two away.

There is no single action, agri-business, or government agency which can make this fragile infrastructure secure and guarantee us a steady supply of high quality food. We need to debate the root cause of this critical disconnection so that we may begin to find solutions to our food security challenge. As a starting point we have to recognize that we have arrived at this crisis from several different directions:

- Is it the modern paradigm of agriculture, as a corporate entity, with its deep pockets and unquenchable appetite for profit? Yes.
- Is it the intricate web of government regulations and subsidies which have supported the food-as-a-commodity model? Yes.

- Is it the never-ending erosion of our landbase and skills set, to the point at which the vast majority of us no longer possesses the means and the knowledge to produce even a head of lettuce? Yes.
- Is it our willingness to allow these things to slip through our fingers in favour of the ease of supermarket shopping? Yes.

The cheap-food-boom has seduced us all. The reality is, farming is hard work, typically has been characterized by low financial returns. By foregoing this burden, by handing the reins of responsibility for the food system to the corporations, we have relieved ourselves of a source of backache, headache, sunburn, and financial strain. We made a deal with agri-businesses: we guaranteed a piece of our income would be dedicated to purchasing their food and food products; we also expressed our full faith in their ability to keep us sustained. In return, we realized the opportunity to pursue lifestyles which do not revolve around soil and toil, and which allow us a measure of leisure time unprecedented in human history.

As long as the corporations can keep their end of the bargain, it is a great deal for us, presuming that one overlooks the depleted nature of the foodstuffs they are providing. But it is becoming increasingly obvious that they will not be able to hold up their end of the bargain forever, or, if recent events are any indication, even for much longer. This leaves us facing a rather daunting situation: we need to rethink our entire food-supply chain for reasons of economic security, health security, and even social security. We need to re-invent how we grow and distribute food; we need to re-scale and decentralize; we need to think and act locally, in our communities.

It is hard to grasp the enormity of this task on a provincial or national scale. It is no less challenging or important than wresting our economy and way of life from our addiction to petroleum and the automobile. And yet, there has been no meaningful public discourse, let alone consensus in Canada, on the food security issue. Indeed, there has been little in the way of serious debate among anyone beyond community-based groups focused on local food production and the growing (but still very much in the minority) community of 'locavores' who frequent farmers' markets. To be sure, they are a critical component of our agricultural renewal – their commitment and motivation are encouraging and inspirational. But between them and a healthy provincial or national food system lie thousands and thousands of hectares of crops sown in depleted soils, coaxed to life with chemical fertilizers, protected by pesticides, and waiting to be harvested, amalgamated into shelf-stable concoctions, packaged, and trucked to a nation of people who have already forgotten that this was not the way things were once done. And, the saddest and perhaps biggest challenge we have is that we cannot imagine that things cannot stay the same.