

THANKSGIVING DINNER

As we anticipate gathering with family and friends to celebrate our blessings and to enjoy a delicious Thanksgiving dinner, I am reminded of an article my good friend Don Sproul recently shared with me. The author of said article wrote of the impact agriculture is having on our economy and daily standard of living we have come to enjoy. The writer explained that civilization as we know it could not have evolved, nor can we prosper without an adequate supply of food. The article concluded with the declaration that "100% of those surveyed said eating food is important".

News reports all across the nation report that amid the economic downturn, an increasing number of people are struggling to get enough to eat. Statistics from USDA show that 14.6 percent of American households were considered "food insecure" last year, meaning they had trouble putting enough food on the table during the year. That's up from 11.1 percent the previous year, and it's the highest rate since the USDA started doing the survey in 1995. Food Banks, nationwide, are seeing a tremendous increase in need. Agriculture Secretary, Tom Vilsack, said, "This is a wakeup call for us to get very serious about food security and hunger."

The world recently noted the passing of Dr. Norman Borlaug, a visionary wheat and rice researcher, and recipient of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. In presenting him with the Peace Prize, the Nobel committee said, "More than any other single person of this age, he has helped provide bread for a hungry world. We have made this choice in the hope that providing bread will also give the world peace."

Borlaug and his colleagues of the Green Revolution are credited with doubling world food production from 1960 to 1990. Their work has had far-reaching impacts on the lives of millions of people in developing countries. Dr. Borlaug is credited with saving 1 billion lives in Asia alone. About half of the world's population goes to bed every night after consuming grain descended from one of the high-yield varieties developed by Borlaug. The Green Revolution came under attack from environmental and social critics, however, who said that modern agricultural production methods created more difficulties than it solved.

According to the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization, world demand for food is expected to double within the next 40 years. The earth's population is projected to grow from today's 6.7 billion to 9 billion-plus. Worldwide living standards are predicted to increase with global demand for meat and dairy products almost doubling during that period. It has taken civilization 4,000 years to develop a food production system that is barely feeding the present population. Current production models will not keep up with anticipated demand.

For as long as we can remember, those of us in American agriculture have been told that it is up to us to feed a growing world population. We must become more efficient and more productive in order to provide nutrition for people in all corners of the world. After all....there is only so much land. Even as we deal with well-fed critics, U.S. farmers have ramped up food production while leaving a smaller environmental footprint. An editorial in Progressive Farmer magazine shared these facts.

Farmers grow five times as much corn as they did in the 1930's on 20% less land. From 1987 to 2007, corn productivity in the United States increased 40%, soybeans increased nearly 30% and wheat grew 19%. Reduced tillage and other farm-management practices have reduced soil erosion 43% in 20 years. Farmers grow 70% more corn per pound of fertilizer than in the 1970's. In 1940, one U.S. farmer produced food and fiber for 19 people; today one U.S. farmer feeds 155 people.

There's an unsettling irony to reflections on world food supplies present and future. As food producers, we accept the moral and ethical responsibility to help feed the world. But most of us are more worried about the economic survival of our farms over the next four months than we are about the next four decades of world food supplies.

Another irony has to do with the wasteful habits of our "throw-away society". A University of Arizona study spent 10 years measuring the path food travels from farms and orchards to homes to landfills. The study quantified tangible proof that, on average, U.S. households waste 14 percent of their total food purchases. The study determined that an average American family of four tosses out approximately \$600 each year in meat, fruits, vegetables and grain products.

I am personally grateful for a safe, abundant, and affordable supply of food each day. As we celebrate Thanksgiving dinner this week, let us all look around and invite others to join with us in enjoying such a wonderful abundance that we often take for granted. And let us be careful not to thoughtlessly bite the hand that daily feeds us.