

THANKSGIVING DINNER

Most of us ate too much this week. Our society has been fed so well, for so many years, that we don't seem to worry about agricultural sustainability anymore. We just expect the food will be there, and that it will be cheap, safe and affordable.

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 an expanding percentage of American households are considered "food insecure", meaning they have trouble putting enough food on the table. 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".

Agricultural sustainability is seldom an agenda item when legislative bodies meet. We assume our food will always be there with no planning, sacrifice or effort on our part. The average US consumer spends less than ten percent of their disposable income on food, yet the variety, quality, and convenience of that food is unsurpassed. Food is a real bargain, but few people give it much thought. We have come to simply expect it.

The late Dr. Norman Borlaug was 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. Today, there are still many critics of our productive agricultural practices.

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 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.

The increased cost of land, labor, machinery and other inputs has caused agriculturists to seek efficiencies. The result is larger facilities. Smaller operations are limited by restrictions on labor and management. Poultry, pork and dairy industries are examples of that trend.

Most farmers manage more acres too. A recent USDA report describes improvements in farm equipment. Since 1970, farm operators have increased their planting rate from 40 to 420 acres per day

and their harvesting rate from 4,000 to 30,000 bushels per day. Over time, the least efficient producers are forced out, encouraging further consolidation of farming resources and concentration of production.

Total agricultural output has increased by nearly 50% over the past three decades, even as resources like land, labor, fertilizer and pesticides have declined. Those changes have resulted in environmental benefits, shrinking the environmental footprint for the average unit of agricultural output.

I am personally grateful for a safe, abundant, and affordable supply of food each day. I hope our society will never be forced to go hungry, and I hope the populace will allow agriculturalists to do what they do best.