

DIET FOR A DEAD PLANET, Big Business and the Coming Food Crisis,
By Christopher Cook. Review and commentary by David G. Schwartz, M.D.
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You've probably seen the bumper stickers, "No Farms, No Food?" How can that be? Well...we are not too far from that in terms of real farms, where the farmers who do the business of farming, actually live on the farm, are integrated into the local community, are intimately connected to the soil, produce high quality fresh food, and get decent prices for what they sell. My previous article on Farmacology highlights how "health comes from the farm, not the pharmacy," providing nourishing sustenance when the farm is a real one. Big agribusiness and the petrochemical industry, with collusion with governments, have turned food away from nutrition and into a commodity and sometimes a weapon. If we want healthful nutrition, we must preserve real farming.

Christopher Cook, an award-winning journalist, has studied and investigated this dire food situation and has received outstanding acclaim by numerous newspapers, journals, and authors for this expose, including from Frances Moore Lappe, author of Diet For a Small Planet.

Before the onset of industrial civilization and commerce, the hunter-gatherer societies knew scarcity at times of drought and other adverse weather conditions, but they had none of the widespread famine and mass starvation of the modern world. Current corporate control of food supply including seeds, agriculture, harvest, storage, distribution, food processing, and retail result in famine, chronic malnutrition, food deserts, an epidemic of sugar addiction, obesity, diabetes, and a host of inflammatory chronic illnesses, as well as the loss of topsoil, depletion of the fertility and vitality of soils, mass pollution of air, water, and food, greenhouse gases, serfdom of farmers, farm worker and meat packer abuse, community disintegration, and ecological degradation.

Christopher Cook draws a parallel with Rachel Carsons' "Silent Spring," now the "Silent Autumn." He points to eroding topsoil and water supplies, poisoning the ground and waterways with pesticides and toxic manure run-off from animal factory farms. The meat is permeated with pesticides and growth hormones, with thousands of people dying each year from food-borne infection and hundreds of thousands hospitalized. Most soy and corn products have GMO's and/or glyphosate. Processed food and sugar produces obesity and diabetes. Meat packing plants cripple thousands of workers, mostly cheap, expendable, vulnerable, non-union, immigrant labor. Cornell University's expert Dr. David Pimentel found that U.S. Agriculture, dependent on petrochemical based fertilizers and pesticides for large monocultures, uses 400 gallons of fossil fuels each year to feed each American. The average supermarket food item has traveled nearly 1,500 miles.

Most of the food items in the shopping cart, especially packaged, and the meat and dairy products, are produced and controlled by a handful of corporations that determine their cost and their producers. Due largely to this corporate takeover, the U.S. loses one farm every ½ hour. "When farms shut down, the social and economic fabric of rural communities and small towns is shattered. And whole generations of highly skilled

producers of food are lost.” “Each time the Justice Department approves another merger or takeover, both farmers and consumers lose more control over what we eat, how it is grown, and how much it costs.”

The lame excuse for GMO and large monoculture agriculture is that it can feed so many more people. Sounds altruistic? “But research shows demonstrably that hunger and malnutrition are caused not by any global food shortage, but instead by severe economic inequalities and lack of distribution and access.” He cites numerous authors, including Frances Moore Lappe, Joseph Collins, Peter Rosset, David Kinley, Susan George, and publications such as, World hunger 12 Myths, Aid as an Obstacle, How the Other Half Dies, and The Real Reasons for World Hunger.

It is beyond me that the Gates Foundation is duped into thinking that the problem is lack of production and that it puts large sums of money into promoting large monocultures, the same model that has corrupted our food system.

The chapter on “One Big Supermarket” shows how “Get big or get out,” diminishes quality and choice in food. Retail grocers demand slotting fees from producers to get their products on the shelves, an informal arrangement outside of any legal contract and unpredictable, and constituting “proprietary information,” able to stonewall government inquiries. Small, family-run businesses are muscled out by the large corporations that can afford the fees. Corporate retailers can dictate terms to producers, who then dictate to the growers. Retailers have the market power to keep prices high when prices to wholesalers and to farmers keep dropping.

Supermarket concentration has come at the expense of the poor, avoiding poor neighborhoods as risky investments, producing a dietary segregation affecting inner city African American communities. Many of the poor neighborhoods have to get expensive and poor quality food at convenience stores.

Regarding food-borne illness, and especially during the mad cow disease monitoring, the state of inspection and testing is dismally inadequate. Felicia Nestor, food safety program director for the Government Accountability Project, noted, “It’s really significant that they’re focusing all their attention on the very smallest plants. It’s almost like the USDA wants to protect the big plants from a finding because the implications would be too scary. If they find a case at a small plant, the USDA can say it’s an isolated problem.”

I am reminded that Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm, who grows pastured organic animals in the most natural, healthful, humane ways. He says the meat inspectors require of him to follow the same regulations required for the large producers, like having a bathroom nearby, which is absurd, considering he butchers only a few birds in humane and clean way in his back yard, in contrast to the large processors, who butcher large volumes of meat rapidly and don’t allow the employees time to go to the bathroom, some having to wear diapers. See Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation.

The USDA allows many of the large processors to do voluntary testing and inspections, with occasional oversight by government inspectors. The volume is too great to have adequate inspections.

The author quotes Diane Carmen, a columnist at the Denver Post, describing the irony of blind trust in corporate food in the age of national security paranoia: “If 19 million pounds of meat distributed to ½ of this country had been contaminated with a deadly strain of E. Coli bacteria by terrorists, we’d go nuts. But when it’s done by a Fortune 500 corporation, we continue to buy it and feed it to our kids.”

The Food Industry’s promoting sugar addiction in children that results in over-consumption (greater profitability), obesity, and a host of chronic illnesses, has also been covered in my previous articles on “Fed Up” and Fat Chance, and Christopher Cook devotes a chapter on the promotion of over-consumption.

The author devotes several chapters to detailing the history of the U.S. Government’s meddling in agribusiness, subsidizing large growers to produce cheap grain. This put smaller growers out of action. Then with boom came bust over and over again, with price volatility, losing more farmers each time it went bust. When prices are low, the farmer has to produce more (get bigger) because of a smaller profit margin. That causes prices to go even lower. What are the farmers to do? They can’t just follow the law of supply and demand by growing crops only when the price is high. When prices are too low for too long and they are not making a profit, not paying on their debts, there is nothing to do but get out, often in bankruptcy. Then only the larger farms with economy of scale can survive. Thus, the phrase “Get big or get out” applies. Then these large monocultures are the ones that require more pesticides on crops, and more antibiotics for animals. The purpose of promoting large cheap agricultural products originally was to open up export markets. This, in turn, put millions of farmers out of business worldwide, being flooded with subsidized imports. This created a dependency of foreign markets on these exports. We must remember that when any person or country suffers malnutrition or starvation, it affects us all.

One example of insane policies of the government in trying to manipulate prices is exemplified during the Great Depression. In 1933 when the prices of hogs plummeted, an attempt was made to increase the price by reducing supply. “While food lines lengthened and families wrote in hungry requests for their first meat in years, nearly 30% of the hogs were liquefied and churned into inedible products such as soap and fertilizer. Pig carcasses were burned, buried, sometimes into rivers and streams. The Chicago Tribune reported irately of the ‘incredibly revolting stench’ of mountains of ground-up pigs piled in the hot sun...’ which were martyred by the government so that the rest of the swine might become more valuable.”

Regarding the corporate takeover of agriculture, the vertical integration of the poultry business involved the corporation’s owning the farms, the feed, the chickens, the meat packing, so that there is no price negotiation between the farmers and the buyers. The author quotes John Crabtree, “As farms have grown bigger and bigger and more and

more concentrated, the corporate farms don't buy their feed or their inputs, like veterinary services, locally. This has a devastating impact on rural communities that depend on that economic activity." Then the local community has to keep the cost of increased road maintenance and other external costs like increased utility rates, while the corporation get the local tax breaks (subsidies). The chemical companies like Monsanto dictate to farmers who can grow genetically modified seeds, and do not allow farmers to save the next generation of seeds.

The author devotes a chapter to chemical pollution. Pesticides, 1/3 of which are highly toxic to humans, can drift several hundred miles. They are toxic to farm workers who are constantly being exposed to them, many of them immigrants. A study of 146,000 Hispanic farm workers showed that, compared to the general Hispanic population, the farm workers had 59% more leukemia, 70% more stomach cancer, and 78% more uterine cancer.

Immigrants are used in meat packing plants, an industry with high rates of injury, making it the most hazardous work in the country. The labor force is transient and non-union, many undocumented, with no recourse to legal representation, and vulnerable to abuse. If many are injured, injuries can go unreported, and the workers are disposable and can easily be replaced with others desperate for employment. Tyson Foods recruited workers in Mexico and actually help smuggle them in. It was indicted by the U.S. Dept. of Justice for this on 36 counts. No one was ever convicted, and the company paid no fine. The Food Revolution Network notes that Tyson Food poultry workers have a higher rate of amputation than the mining industry, injuries 5 times higher than average industry rates, and is fined repeatedly for refusing to pay overtime.

The author discusses effluents from large animal feeding operations toxic to waterways, soils, and air. Many of the large hog producing counties have high African American populations and high poverty rates. People who investigate the practices of hog producers have been threatened and intimidated with defamation lawsuits.

Attorneys for a North Carolina hog farm threatened to sue Elsie Herring, a black woman in her 90's, who had complained to state water quality officials. The attorney's letter said they would sue her for compensation and punitive damages and impose a restraining order. If she continued to file "false and groundless" complaints, and if she violated the restraining order, "we will ask the court to put you in prison for contempt." This is an example of how, when many industries get too large and powerful, they can manipulate laws and courts to eliminate restrictions on their practices that cause harm to residents of the community and to consumers of their products.

One Kansas farmer with ideas for reforming factory farming said on his website, "Maybe no home should be allowed closer to the waste containment lagoon of the big corporate hog factories than that of the corporate CEO. In fact, let's take it a step further. Perhaps every farmer should be required to actually live on the land that he owns and profits from, intimate with its blessings, its needs, and limitations, so that he might daily be reminded that he is to care for it, and invest his heart and soul in it, not just mine it."

Dr. Joseph Mercola notes in his newsletter that Smithfield Farms is now owned by a Chinese company. Environment North Carolina's Research and Policy Center's 2016 report shows that Smithfield, largest pork producer in the world, ranks #1 in toxic pollution released into water supplies, more than Exxon Mobile or U.S. Steel, owns 2,700 CAFO's (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) in 12 states. The company can produce meat in this country and send it to "China, and leave this area with the pollution.

The author discusses subsidies. Most farm subsidies go to the wealthiest farmers and for a few crops, grains, oils, and seeds that are largely exported, not for fruits, vegetables, and meat. The grains are exported to expand foreign markets, to drive local growers out of business, and to create a dependence on the exports, one of the consequences of "free trade" agreements, and an example of using food as a weapon. Investment Watch notes that the control and management of global food supplies has been the corporate and political priority for decades, with the U.S. – based conglomerates leading the charge. They quote Henry Kissinger – "Control oil and you control nations. Control food and you control people." Investment Watch Blog 2012 said, "U.S. Strategy deliberately destroyed family farming in the U.S. and abroad..."

I would like to comment that the whole economy gravitates toward bigness - big banks, big media, big pharma, big military industry, big food, big agribusiness, big energy companies, etc., thinking that size brings efficiency by economy of scale, and that efficiency is most important. This is a materialistic ideology that ignores the consequences of loss of quality of life, democratic principles, equality of opportunity, and justice. In contrast, European governments subsidize small family farms because of the preservation of the quality of life for the country as whole.

Christopher Cook sums up the problem on page 51, "But huge agribusiness conglomerates furnish their relatively cheap food at a high cost: pushing smaller farmers off the land and into the unemployment lines, polluting the environment and rendering much land and water unusable (See the documentary "Symphony of the Soil"), recruiting, exploiting, and discarding low-paid immigrant workers; ultimately, selling food that is almost always mildly toxic, (due to pesticides), relatively nutrient-poor, tasteless, and frequently contaminated, and which, for all its cheapness, remains over priced, thanks to the middlemen who process, package, and market the bulk of what we eat today."

I would like to present excerpts from Christopher Cook's article in the 2016 "Food First Backgrounder" newsletter. Food First is an NGO that proclaims it to be a basic human right to feed oneself. I quote, "Remember the great 2016 presidential campaign debate about food and agriculture, the backbone of human nourishment and survival? Remember when the candidates were forced to articulate their stances on soil regeneration, farm subsidy inequities, labor abuse in the food industry, and how to rein in pesticides and GMOs while expanding organic diversified farming? Remember when the media pressed candidates to explain how they would make food and farming equitable, truly sustainable, and deeply healthful for generations to come? You didn't forget. It never happened." He quotes Armando Nieto, executive director of the California Food &

Justice Coalition, “Politicians don’t want to open that can of worms. We have a robust food movement that could and would hold politicians accountable.” The 2 major parties and the media were mum on the topic, although Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein did speak vigorously about these issues.

In the article he further notes that there is a disturbing dissonance between the lack of public debate and the food and agribusiness presence in politics. Since 2008, they produced \$356 million in bipartisan campaign contributions, and in 2015 alone, \$133 million on lobbying federal lawmakers and officials. Robert Lustig, author of Fat Chance, (See my article.) notes that 338 members of Congress take money from the “food” industry.

Christopher Cook says that we need a whole new way of thinking about food, that encompasses health, affordability, accessibility, ecological sustainability, and economics, that enables small and large farmers to keep farming.

My purpose in writing this is to raise public awareness of what is happening to our nutrition so that we take actions to bring about a better food system. Already people are having an impact on the markets. Consumer demand has given rise to organic, fresh, local food production and markets. CSA’s (Consumer Supported Agriculture) allows customers to pay in advance for the season and to get vegetables every week, and sometimes to go to the farm and pick their allotments by themselves. Schools and colleges are growing gardens and donating produce. Urban vacant lots are being taken over with gardens. Training programs are teaching young aspiring farmers how to farm sustainably. Strategic boycotts of certain large firms can be effective. To affect the larger picture, public policy must change subsidies, protect worker safety, restrict pesticide and antibiotic use, make mandatory labeling of GMO’s, and do better, transparent research on GMO’s and glyphosate’s effect on human health.

Food security, quality, and access should be something that could get bipartisan support. After all, the subsidies to wealthy corporations get bipartisan support, and campaign contributions and lobbying are bipartisan! United grassroots actions many times have been able to get bipartisan support. In Ralph Nader’s words, “When the left and the right walk into the room together, the senators turn pale.”

Education is a vital part of the massive changes needed in our food system. School gardens can give students practical living skills and hands on learning of chemistry, biology, physics, math, geometry, agronomy, microbiology, finance, economics, and entrepreneurial skills. They can engage them in seeing the practical value of their education rather than just boringly going through the academic curriculum and testing, in theoretical abstract learning. It encourages collaborative learning and problem solving, things the Millennials and Generation Z are good at, and which are so important for the new economy. Farming teaches skills that transfer to many other occupations. Gardening and connecting with the natural environment has many health benefits, one of which is grounding, direct contact with the earth. See Earthing, Dr. Steven Sinatra and Clint Ober.

It is my observation that children growing up on a farm learn practical daily life skills and principles about “how things work,” such as what goes up must come down, there’s no free lunch, strength and wisdom come through meeting challenges, solving problems, enduring hardship, etc. They are less likely to take an ibuprofen or a naproxen every time something hurts or to get depressed or turn to addictive substances every time disappointment hits. Driving families off the farms deprives children of many valuable experiences that teach healthful living. You don’t just farm vegetables and animals. You farm people. I am immensely grateful for my experience growing up on a small farm. It is admirable that some European countries actually subsidize small farms because it is a valued part of quality of life and the fabric of the country.

We must act now in defense of food. Every time we buy locally and organic, raise food ourselves, donate to training programs for new farmers, such as The Farm School, and to other NGO’s that promote food sovereignty, quality, and availability, and preserve soils and seeds, when we sign petitions and letters to legislators and government agencies, form people’s lobbies, and do street activism and boycotts, we can make a change. “If the people lead, the leaders will follow.”