

Sustainable Belmont: The hidden costs of cheap food

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Belmont, Mass. – Low cost is a big consideration for most Americans in buying food. In fact, we spend, on average, less than 10 percent of our income on food, less than the citizens of any other industrial nation. But cheap food has some hefty hidden costs that we're just beginning to understand — to our health and the health of the environment.

American food production accounts for 15 to 20 percent of the fossil fuels used in the U.S. in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, factory processing, and transportation. Experts estimate we use more than three times as much energy to obtain our food as to fuel our homes — nearly as much as we use to fuel our cars.

Since the 1970s, massive government subsidies for commodity crops have resulted in huge surpluses of cheap corn, now America's largest crop and the major ingredient in livestock feed. Cheap corn has made it possible to produce meat and poultry on an industrial scale, with resulting low prices at the supermarket. But cheap, abundant meat has come with troubling consequences. Crowded and unsanitary conditions of factory feedlots require animals to be continuously treated with antibiotics, which speeds the development of resistant bacteria and makes human illnesses more difficult to treat. Factory feedlots also generate millions of tons of manure that can contaminate other foods and pollute ground water and rivers.

Subsidized corn has also fueled the growth of the processed food industry. Processed foods, including junk food and soft drinks, have been linked to soaring rates of obesity and diabetes. It is estimated that 64 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that one in three American children born in the year 2000 will develop food-related diabetes in their lifetime. If this proves true, the current generation of children may be the first in American history to die at a younger age than their parents.

Fortunately, you can make a difference in stemming the tide of our industrialized food system. Here's how:

- Pay more, eat better: Sustainable foods can sometimes cost more than their conventional counterparts, but there are far fewer hidden costs to humans, animals, and ecosystems. As Michael Pollan notes in his book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," "The American food system has for a century devoted its energies and policies to increasing quantity and reducing price, not to improving quality. There's no escaping the fact that better food—measured by taste or nutritional quality (which often correspond) — costs more, because it has been grown or raised less intensively and with more care. Not everyone can afford to eat well in America, which is shameful, but most of us can."
- Buy local: Get out of the supermarket whenever possible. Patronize locally owned stores that

rely less on global distribution and often stock local foods. Buy directly from farmstands, U-pick operations, and farmers' markets.

- Eat food, avoid food products: As Michael Pollan says, "Don't eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food."

- Grow food everywhere: If you can, plant a garden. Convert some lawn into an ornamental kitchen garden, grow vegetables in containers, or sign up for a community garden at Rock Meadow.

- Buy a CSA share: In a CSA, or community supported agriculture project, you buy a summer share from a farm in early spring and then receive a weekly share of the produce all season long. Your share provides much-needed cash to the farm, and you get top-quality farm-fresh produce.

- Transform school lunch: Support an educational mission to connect school lunch to local farms; implement changes to the food being served; provide experiential learning in school gardens, kitchen classrooms, and school lunch rooms; and develop an integrated curriculum that links food to culture, health, and the environment.

To learn more about how you can help create a healthier, more sustainable food system in Belmont, see Resources list, or contact Sustainable Belmont at sustainablebelmont@gmail.com.

Resources:

Farmers' markets

Belmont Farmers' Market: www.belmontfarmersmarket.org.

Local Harvest: www.localharvest.org

Rock Meadow Victory Gardens

Contact Mary Trudeau, Belmont Conservation Commission Agent
617-993-2667; mtrudeau@belmont.ma.us

CSAs serving Belmont

Belmont CSA: www.localharvest.org

Waltham Fields Community Farm www.communityfarms.org/csa

Brookfield Farm in Amherst www.brookfieldfarm.org

Red Fire Farm in Granby www.redfirefarm.homestead.com

Local working farm

Sergi Farms www.sergifarm.com

School lunch reform

The Center for Ecoliteracy: www.ecoliteracy.org

Books

“Animal, Vegetable, Miracle,” by Barbara Kingsolver

“The Omnivore’s Dilemma,” by Michael Pollan

“Food Fight: the Citizen’s Guide to a Food and Farm Bill,” by Dan Imhoff