

Washington Food Fight Pits Big Producers Against Local Farms

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McClatchy News Service

WASHINGTON — There's a food fight under way between Capitol Hill and the Agriculture Department, and it's about small potatoes.

Organic small potatoes. Big ones, too, as well as peas, beans, beef, poultry and melons. Just about anything, in fact, that's farm-raised and edible.

Three Republican senators have complained that a USDA effort to educate the public about where food comes from slights "conventional farmers who produce the vast majority of our nation's food supply."

Sens. Pat Roberts of Kansas, John McCain of Arizona and Saxby Chambliss of Georgia complained in a recent letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that his agency spent \$65 million last year on a program "aimed at small, hobbyist and organic producers whose customers generally consist of affluent patrons at urban farmers markets."

Or, to put it bluntly: Take your arugula and shove it.

The USDA calls the program "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food." It has no money of its own, but the agency has spent other federal agricultural dollars to further its goals, including farm bill funds to aid locally grown food products.

These include grants to support farmers markets in Kansas and California, crop productivity and management efforts in Missouri and Alaska, and organic agriculture research in North Carolina and Washington state.

Bruce Babcock, an economist and the director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development at Iowa State University, said it was "ironic" that the senators and others objected to the USDA spending \$65 million on Know Your Farmer when commodity producers received \$5 billion during the past two years, and the crop insurance industry received \$7 billion.

"We should welcome alternative producers if we want to see entrepreneurship grow in rural America," Babcock said. "How can it hurt? It can only help."

Supporters of Know Your Farmer, such as Dan Nagengast, the executive director of the Kansas Rural Center, said that critics have ignored the program's larger goals: To spread the word about the economic value

of local food production and thereby preserve America's rural heritage.

"Cultivating these new markets — not replacing old ones — is critical to revitalizing rural America," Vilsack wrote to Roberts, McCain and Chambliss.

About 40,000 mid-sized farms disappeared between 2002 and 2007, according to the U.S. Census. For many, it's too costly to compete. They're too big to market their own goods directly, but often not big enough to use wholesale.

"Towns are emptying in western Kansas because medium-sized farms don't count any more," said Nagengast, whose agency is a nonprofit research and family farm advocacy group. "Generally, he's (Roberts) got better judgment than to gratuitously dismiss something the health industry, environmental industry, rural development industry and people in small towns are interested in. It's a whole other layer of the economy that he's dismissing."

The Agriculture Department's efforts reflect a growing movement toward healthier eating and fresh-from-the-farm cooking. It embraces more than just foodies who scour the farm stands for the perfect baby eggplant and devour issues of Bon Appetit.

Followers include everyone from public school officials who want to cut fats and sugar out of their cafeteria menus, to restaurateurs such as Jane Zieha, whose Blue Bird Bistro in Kansas City, Mo., has been serving farm-to-table food for a decade.

"I am working very hard to change the myth that local food — you know what you're consuming and who's growing it — is only for the affluent," she said. "My customers come from all walks of life."

The local food movement has no bigger symbol than first lady Michelle Obama, who started a kitchen garden on the South Lawn of the White House and leads a campaign against childhood obesity.

Just this week, for instance, several major food manufacturers, spurred by her efforts, agreed to start offering more healthy choices. Meanwhile, Missouri lawmakers have created a task force to study urban farming.

Roberts is a former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee and currently sits on the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee along with Chambliss, the panel's ranking member.

He said this week that they never meant

to sound dismissive of small farmers and niche producers, or their customers.

"The more people that go to the farmers markets, the more people understand agriculture and they eat a better diet," Roberts said. "There's nothing wrong with that. As a matter of fact, it ought to be encouraged. . . . But you can't go back to Walden Pond agriculture and expect to feed America."

Diana Endicott, who runs a 400-acre naturally raised cattle ranch with her husband, Gary, near Fort Scott, Kan., said she doesn't expect to feed America, nor do the 100 or so other organic farmers in a local growers' alliance she helped organize.

But what's wrong, she asked, with giving a boost to farmers who aren't interested in tilling 10,000 acres?

"Know Your Farmer is not saying we support only small-scale agriculture," said Endicott, who sells her beef and organic tomatoes to several local supermarkets and a food cooperative. "We need to be educated about our food and we need to know how to make wise choices. We have a new generation of farmers coming, and people who want to be reconnected to land. It's trying to find the right balance for everyone to be able to participate."

The squabble goes back to the rise in popularity of organic food when its producers felt that USDA was ignoring them and listening only to big agriculture. It's been a battle for who has USDA's ear ever since.

The American Farm Bureau, the industry voice, declined to comment on Know Your Farmer, beyond calling it "a good thing" that members of Congress and USDA were talking, according to spokesman Mace Thornton.

However, the criticism could hint that the conventional farming industry worries that advocates of organic and community-supported agriculture are gaining influence.

"In this Department of Agriculture, they have a more sympathetic view," said former Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeutter, who served under President George H.W. Bush. "They have been able to get significantly increased funding for what they like to do. Know Your Farmer fits that overall niche very nicely."

Yeutter shared some of the critics' concerns, however. If there's to be more attention to smaller farms, he said, "How do you feed the immense number of people in the world, and the additional 3 billion likely to be here by 2050?"

Santee Sioux Nation Has Hopes For Better Health

BY JIM HALLUM
NICC Extension Coordinator

The Santee people have decided to make their health a priority. For too long the original inhabitants of this land have been plagued with some of the highest rates of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure along with obesity. Now something else has come along and that is high — cancer rates. Thirty years ago it was very rare to know of anyone who had cancer. But today it is here and is becoming almost as common to our people as diabetes or heart disease.

I only recently found out that cancer in the state of Nebraska is the No. 2 leading cause of death for American Indians, and for certain other races No. 1.

According to reports from the Department of Health and Human Services of Nebraska, the leading causes of death in the state are cancer and heart disease. A lot of people think that cancer is only something that you get from smoking but that is only partially true. There are a lot of other things

that cause cancer — from pesticides and other chemicals, to the air you breathe, and even sometimes the water you drink.

Increasing reports are linking processed foods to cancer rates. Reading labels and researching what some of those ingredients that are hard to pronounce really are just might scare you.

A lot of additives in foods are carcinogenic or mutagenic, which means they can and do cause cancer or can mutate cells. But it doesn't say that on the labels.

I think it is time for the people to take notice and do something about it. One way people can help themselves is by eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. But for people on fixed incomes, they can be expensive at the store.

With this all in mind, we decided to do something about it. With the help from a grant for diabetes prevention and health promotion along with some expertise, equipment and some technical know how from the Nebraska Indian Community College's (NICC) extension program we did it.

Four big gardens that are roughly 100 by 40 feet were established in the four districts of the reservation, along with over 30 individual gardens.

I feel that is quite an accomplishment for our small reservation. Now we can have fresh fruits and vegetables, and maybe through this we can fight these silent killers of our people.

To help with educating the public about the benefits of gardens and fresh produce, NICC is also offering gardening classes during its summer session. Through the extension program of NICC, gardens were tilled in the districts and for individuals, and the Santee Clinic's grant for diabetes prevention and health promotion provided seeds and plants for the community gardens. Community gardens were also established in South Sioux City, Macy, and Walthill.

If you are interested in the gardening classes offered at NICC this summer, contact the college at 402-857-2434.

Three separate classes are offered; one at each campus location.

GPI Launches Energy Choice Simulator

Online Tool Allows Users To Design And Analyze Energy Legislation

MINNEAPOLIS — Researchers at the Great Plains Institute (GPI) and the University of Minnesota have created an online tool to "test drive" energy policies and study their effects on the region's energy production, state government budgets, and greenhouse gas emissions.

The Energy Choice Simulator (ECS) was developed to study the impacts of policy options on the Midwestern economy. ECS can model policy options that include incentives for renewable energy and carbon capture, low carbon fuel standards, cap and trade, a carbon tax, and moratoriums on polluting technologies.

"We think the Energy Choice Simulator will help shed light on critical energy policies being debated right now at the state, regional and federal levels," said Steve Taff, a University of Minnesota economist who helped develop the model. Researchers worked with

experts in energy companies, utilities, regulatory agencies and nonprofit organizations to program the model with the most current economic and greenhouse gas information.

"This model is the culmination of two years of work and builds upon GPI's core competency of stakeholder facilitation," said Dane McFarlane, GPI energy policy analyst and one of the researchers who developed the model. "We are excited to release it to the public and hope that it will spark informed dialogue about energy policy among regional leaders."

The model's online user interface is free and available to the public to construct scenarios, change data assumptions or perform new experiments. Users can also download a copy of the model file and edit individual data points themselves. Learn more about the model at www.energychoicesimulator.com.



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