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Agriculture's next big challenge

By George McGovern and Marshall Matz

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President-elect [Barack Obama](#) has chosen Iowa's former Gov. Tom Vilsack to be his secretary of agriculture. Vilsack was an excellent choice, but some have criticized the appointment because he supports agricultural biotechnology and commercial agriculture. The critics assume that anyone who holds these views is an enemy of organic farming and sustainable agriculture. We disagree.

Norman Borlaug, a Nobel laureate and father of the Green Revolution, has concluded that the world will have to produce more food in the next 50 years than it has in the last 10,000. That is an extraordinary challenge. How does the world do it?

First, we must recognize that organic, sustainable and commercial agriculture play a part in feeding the world. There is an important role for organic agriculture and, indeed, some consumers are willing to pay a premium for foods that are certified as organic. Sustainable agriculture, defined generally as farming that adheres to practices more sensitive to the environment, is also of great importance. Commercial agriculture is still the backbone of the economy in most rural counties across the nation. And commercial agriculture is a big factor in offsetting our unfavorable balance of international trade.

We do not yet see the yields with organic agriculture that would feed a hungry planet of almost 7 billion people. During the recent presidential campaign, Obama, to his credit, often talked of supporting American agriculture, from the small sustainable farms that market to the community to the large commercial farms that feed the world. He was exactly correct. The Department of Agriculture should be supporting research into organic and sustainable agriculture. Clearly, we must be more sensitive to the relationship between agriculture and the environment. But to criticize someone for supporting all sectors of agriculture seems shortsighted.

When we look to the future of agriculture we see these challenges:

- The primary goal of agriculture is to feed ourselves and those around the globe who lack America's productive resources.
- We must not forget those who receive assistance through school breakfast and lunch programs, food stamps and nutritional supplements for low-income pregnant and nursing mothers and their young children. In poor, developing countries, more food assistance is needed to support the fight against AIDS.
- Agriculture is key in our becoming less dependent on foreign oil by converting crops into biofuels and renewal energy.
- We must accomplish the first three goals without plowing up environmentally fragile land.

America's farmers have become so efficient that 1 percent of the population can feed the entire country and much of the world. One of the downsides of this efficiency is that consumers have forgotten where our food comes from and what it takes to get our bounty into supermarkets.

We all want a safe, ubiquitous and inexpensive food supply. Even with the recent food price inflation, Americans still spend only 10 percent of their disposable income on food, the lowest in the world. A case can be made that our entire consumer economy is fueled by cheap food. There would not be as many cell phones and other conveniences if Americans had to spend 20 percent or more of their disposable income on food.

We need to get beyond ideology and depend more on science. We need to develop a new understanding of agriculture based on our larger goals if we are to craft a long-term food and farm policy that works. Agriculture has a responsibility to adjust and contribute to improving the environment. But let's stick to science and avoid an ideological debate about agricultural practices.

Former Sen. George McGovern was chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition. Marshall Matz was its general counsel. They both are on the board of directors of the World Food Program..

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