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Opinion

U.S. farmers feed the planet

By Marshall Matz

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Most Americans give little thought to agriculture policy or food production, except perhaps when deciding what to eat for dinner. We are spoiled. America's capacity to produce food is so advanced that we can purchase virtually any food we want, anywhere, at any time.

Such productivity is unprecedented. Even with the recent spike in food costs, Americans spend only 10% of disposable income on food. It is the productivity of our farmers that allows us the disposable income to purchase those BlackBerries and flat screens that have become a necessity.

In recent days, however, this food production system has come under attack. Both Time magazine and Michael Pollan, writing in The New York Times, have raised the question of whether low food prices are responsible for obesity and whether we should address it by reducing production to increase the cost of food. This question deserves an answer.

The world's population is over 6 billion people, soon to be 7 billion or 8 billion. Norman Borlaug, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to agriculture, passed away recently at the age of 95. Last year, Borlaug wrote to then-Sen. Barack Obama, noting, "Over the next 50 years, the world's farmers and ranchers will be called upon to produce more food than has been produced in the past 10,000 years combined, and to do so in environmentally sustainable ways."

We can meet this challenge, but only if we use all the tools at our disposal. The "Green Revolution" and the use of biotechnology, which earned Borlaug the Nobel Peace Prize, must be transported to Africa and all countries with the land and climate necessary to grow food. Biotechnology will help us reduce the use of fertilizers, protect the environment and use less water.

The demands on our agriculture sector also will increase with the need to become energy independent. We can, literally, grow energy. Cellulosic fuels can be produced from trees, grass and a host of renewable crops.

Obesity is the nation's No. 1 public health problem. It cannot and should not be minimized. Former Sens. George McGovern of South Dakota and Bob Dole of Kansas, who have led the country on nutrition policy for the past 30 years, have urged President Obama to convene a White House Conference on Obesity. But reducing agricultural production as a strategy to fight obesity ignores the needs of the poor both here and abroad.

According to the United Nations, 1 billion of the world's 6 billion people do not have enough to eat. As is usually the case, children are the most vulnerable. In developing countries, many millions of children go to

school hungry. Every day, 18,000 children die due to hunger - more people than live in many Wisconsin towns. That is why, according to the World Food Program, "In the poorest countries, school feeding programs are emerging as a common social safety net."

Food is the critical tool for improving education, reducing the birth rate and helping in the fight against AIDS. We must consider agriculture policy from this vantage point.

Our natural resources are, indeed, being depleted every day. Many experts expect that by 2100 water will be more precious than oil. Our soil, water and energy supply must be conserved. Last year, in the 2008 Farm Bill, Congress created a new National Institute of Food and Agriculture specifically to focus on nutrition, food safety, renewable energy, natural resources and how these impact agriculture.

The bottom line is this: Farmers and ranchers feed the world, and they need to do more, not less. Agriculture policy in the United States must protect the environment and be based on science, but its primary goal is to feed the planet. The new secondary goal is to assist in energy independence.

Let's keep our eye on the ball.

Marshall Matz, former counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, is the founding chairman of Friends of the World Food Program. He practices law in Washington, D.C.



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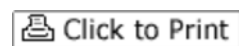
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