

In defense of agriculture and science

Last year, Iowa's favorite son, Dr. Norman Borlaug, wrote to then-Senator Obama stating that "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." Borlaug, who died last month, was a man of passion and vision but, ultimately, a man of science. He never allowed his personal philosophy to trump sound science.

Borlaug's approach to resolving issues stands in sharp contrast to the current best-seller "In Defense of Food" by Michael Pollan. Pollan, a journalist from Berkeley, Calif., suggests that production agriculture is bad for the environment and causes obesity to boot. Pollan claims that "the chronic diseases that now kill us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food." On what basis does Pollan advise consumers to "reject the advice of science"? He answers the question he has posed by saying, "I speak mainly on the authority of tradition and common sense." In short, Pollan's personal philosophy trumps science. It is quite a stark comparison to the approach of Borlaug.

The world can meet the challenge outlined by Borlaug but only if there is a commitment to sound science. The "Green Revolution" and the use of biotechnology, which earned Dr. 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 the agriculture sector will increase further 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, D-S.D., and Bob Dole, R-Kan, who have led the country on nutrition policy for the last 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, one billion of the world's 6 billion people do not have enough to eat. As is usually the case, it is the children who are the most vulnerable. In developing countries, many millions of children go to school hungry. Every day 18,000 children die because of hunger.

Food is the critical tool for improving education, reducing the birth rate and helping in the fight against AIDS.

Our natural resources are, indeed, being depleted every day. By 2100, water may 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: Sustainable agricultural practices are important to protecting the environment. Most farmers, however, are already conservationists.

After all, farmers are business people who need clean water and productive soil for a profitable business.

Let's keep our eye on the ball. It is time to move beyond pitting organic agriculture against sustainable agriculture and commercial agriculture. American agriculture is one of the major strengths of the economy.

Consumers enjoy the benefits of American agriculture every day both in the variety of foods we have available and the low cost of those foods. Let's stop vilifying America's farmers and ranchers and seek a more thoughtful, science-based discussion of agriculture policy.

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.



AP

Norman Borlaug, visiting professor at Texas A&M University and the 1970 Nobel Prize recipient, looks over some sorghum tests in this October 1996 photo taken in one of A&M's teaching greenhouses in College Station, Texas. The Nobel Prizewinning agricultural scientist has died in Texas at age 95. Known as the father of the "green revolution," Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in combating world hunger.

GUEST COLUMN



Marshall Matz

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Will green energy create millions of jobs?

Green jobs are springing up daily

By Keith G. Bell
A David Goldman, 64, has been a leader in the green energy industry for more than 20 years. He has helped create more than 100,000 green jobs in the United States and is now helping to create more than 100,000 more in the United Kingdom.

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Green subsidies will destroy more jobs than they create

By Jim Bakker
Don't let the hype about "green jobs" fool you. The global warming bill approved earlier this year by the House of Representatives might create a few jobs, but it could also destroy millions more.

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MAIL LETTERS

Look for young business owners in 2007

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