
The High Cost of Cheap Food

by John Ikerd

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At a recent organic farming conference in Winnipeg, Canada, a woman in the audience stood up and said: “Organic foods are not going to become popular with mainstream consumers until they became quick, convenient, and cheap.” My immediate response was that true organic foods were not going to be quick, convenient, or cheap—at least not for some time to come. Fortunately, more and more people are finding organic foods to be worth the time, effort, and money. The comment, however, has caused me to think further about the nature of our food system and about what we have done to try to make foods quick, convenient, and cheap for consumers.

First, at the farm level, our never-ending quest for cheap food is the root cause of the transformation of American Agriculture from a system of small, diversified, independently operated, family farms into a system of large-scale, industrialized, corporately controlled agribusinesses. The production technologies that supported specialization, mechanization, and ultimately, large-scale, contract production, were all developed to make agriculture more efficient – to make food cheaper for consumers. Millions of American farmers have been forced off the land, those remaining are sacrificing their independence, and thousands of small farming communities have withered and died – all for the sake of cheap food.

These were the consequences of progress, so we were told. The agricultural establishment has boasted loudly that ever fewer farmers have been able to feed a growing nation with an ever-decreasing share of consumer income spent for food. The increases in economic efficiency have been impressive, but what about the human costs. Economists have totaled up tremendous savings for consumers from lower food costs, but they have never bothered to place a value on the lives of farm families that have been destroyed by the loss of their farms, their way of life, and their heritage. They have never bothered to consider the value of the lives of rural people—with roots in rural schools, churches, and businesses—who were forced to abandon their communities as farm families were forced off the land. The human costs of cheap food have been undeniably tremendous, but since they couldn't be measured in dollars and cents, they have gone uncounted.

The ecological costs of cheap food, likewise not measurable in dollars and cents, also have gone uncounted, and thus, largely ignored. Today, only the most diehard industrialists bother to deny that we have degraded the productivity of the land through erosion and contamination, and that we have polluted the natural environment with agricultural chemicals—in our never-ending pursuit of cheaper food. Certainly, we had soil erosion in the “dust bowl” days, but we were making great strides in soil conservation, before the dawning of industrial agriculture in the late 1940s. In spite of stepped up soil conservation efforts of the 1990s, American farms still are losing topsoil at rates far exceeding rates of soil regeneration. Feeble efforts to control soil loss through reduced tillage leave farmers increasingly reliant on herbicides that pollute our streams and groundwater and that disrupt or destroy the biological life in the soil.

All life on earth is rooted in the soil. As farmers destroy the natural productivity of the land, they are destroying the ability of the earth to support life. We are destroying the future of humanity to make agriculture more “efficient.” What is the value of the future of humanity? Are we in fact willing to risk the future of human life on earth just so we can have cheap food?

With increasing corporate control of agriculture we may be approaching an end of agriculture in America—at least agriculture as we know it. The globalization of agriculture, through “free-trade” agreements, means that food in the future will be grown wherever in the world it can be produced at the lowest economic cost. High costs of land and labor in the US—consequences of favorable employment opportunities and the urban-to-rural population migration—may keep production costs in the US well above costs in other food producing regions of the world. The multinational food corporations that increasingly control agriculture are not people—they have no heart, no soul, nor citizenship in any particular country. They will produce or buy agricultural commodities wherever they can produce or buy at the lowest cost, without regard for national origin. Our continuing quest for cheap food could mean the end of American agriculture.

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The US in the future could well become as dependent on the rest of the world for food as we are today for oil. Economists argue that it doesn't matter where our food is produced. If producing food elsewhere in the world will be cheaper, we will all be better off without agriculture in the US. But how long will it be before an OFEC (Organization of Food Exporting Countries) is formed to restrict world food supplies causing our food prices to skyrocket—just as we have seen skyrocketing prices of gasoline. Perhaps we can keep food imports flowing—through our military might, if economic coercion fails. But, what will be the real costs? How many small wars will we have to fight, and how many people will we be “forced to kill”—just for the sake of cheap food? Can we afford the real costs of cheap food?

The costs of making food quick and convenient probably are no less than the cost of making food cheap. Nearly eighty cents of each dollar Americans spend for food goes to pay for marketing services—processing, packaging, transportation, storage, advertising, etc. All of these costs are associated with making our food convenient—getting it into the most convenient form and package, getting it to the most convenient location, at the most convenient time, and convincing us to buy it. So, we pay far more for the convenience of our food than we pay for the food itself. In fact, we pay more to those who “package and advertise” our food than we pay to the farmers who produce it. So by far the greatest part of the total cost of food is the cost of convenience.

Our addiction to convenience also is placing control of our food supply in the hands of a few giant, multinational corporations. As Dr. Bill Heffernan of the University of Missouri has pointed out previously in *Small Farm Today*, the global food supply today is dominated by a handful of giant agribusiness firms, allied by various means, forming three “global food clusters.” These firms influence and, in many cases, control nearly everything that happens to our food because they control the processes that make our food “convenient.” The price of convenient food is not just the eighty cents of each dollar we spend for food. The greatest cost of convenient food has been the loss of control of our food supply.

The costs of quick food are similar in nature to the costs of convenience food. Our growing addiction of “fast food” is evident in the ever increasing share of our food dollar spent at restaurants and other eating establishments—a share approaching half of total food purchases.

And, “fast foods” places, such as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut, account for nearly half of all food consumed away from home. Erick Schlosser, in his recent best seller, *Fast Food Nation*, addresses the cost of our “love affair” with fast foods. He states that “fast food has triggered the homogenization of our society. Fast food has hastened the malling of our landscape, widening of the chasm between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and propelled the juggernaut of American cultural imperialism abroad.” He documents how quick food has lured us into choosing diets deficient in nearly everything except calories, supporting practices deceptive in every aspect from advertising to flavoring, and systems that degrade nearly everyone and everything involved in the process.

The fast food industry has lured low-income consumers, along with the affluent, into paying ridiculously high prices for low-quality meats, potatoes, vegetable oil, and sugar. However, the high dollar-and-cent costs are but the tip of the iceberg. The true costs of quick food must include the costs of poor health, lost dignity in work, degraded landscapes, and ethical and moral decay in business matters, including international trade and investment. We are paying a tremendously high price for the time saved by choosing quick food.

Thankfully, we still have alternatives—at least for many of the things we eat. We can buy from local farmers who are committed to producing foods by ecologically sound and socially responsible means—i.e. sustainable agriculture. We can locate such farmers through “community food circles,” which provide directories of local producers who sell direct to consumers. We can “shop” at farmers markets, join CSAs, seek out restaurants that buy from local farmers, or buy those few items in the supermarkets that are supplied by local sustainable growers.

The food we buy from these local people may not be as quick, convenient, or cheap as the food we could buy at a local fast food joint or supermarket. But, it may well be more than worth the time, effort, and money that we have to spend to get it. A friend of mine is fond of saying, “eating is a moral act.” It is. The food we choose has an impact upon the lives of other people, upon the earth, and upon the future of humanity. When all of the costs are counted, we simply cannot afford the high costs of cheap food.

-John Ikerd

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