Ag Under Attack — Is Food Processing Next?

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While stories critical of the ag industry are nothing new, there has been a recent flurry of coverage related to agricultural production. This time, critics are attacking the technologies that allow farmers to produce food more efficiently. Recently, the movie *Food, Inc.*, *Time* magazine's cover story *"The Real Cost of Cheap Food,"* and the book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* have all aimed to cast doubt on the integrity of America's agri-food system. In November, *Good Morning America* launched a series called, "*What's in your Food?*"

The agricultural community is clearly under attack as critics seek to restrict the technologies that allow farmers to produce food more efficiently. The logical question for those of you reading this is: Could food processors and manufacturers be next? While some within the food manufacturing community may feel removed from the attacks on agriculture, it seems likely that those opposing technology's role in agricultural production will continue to advance their efforts to restrict its use in other areas of the food chain, including food processing and manufacturing.

Consumers deserve objective, verifiable truths when it comes to information regarding the foods they purchase and consume. It is especially distressing to see popular media claim to reveal "shocking truths" about the nation's food system and then present factual errors. One is that corporate farms have displaced America's small farmers. In reality, corporate farms account for only about 3 percent of U.S. farms, and more than 97 percent of U.S. cattle farms/ranches are family-owned.

Similarly, opponents of technology claim that conventional (modern) farming is destructive to the environment. However, cattle growers today use two-thirds less

land to produce a pound of beef as it takes to produce a pound from “all-natural,” grass-fed cattle; and today’s dairy farmers produce 58 percent more milk with 64 percent fewer cows than dairy farmers could produce in 1944.

Why is the perpetuation of these inaccuracies so dangerous? Quite simply, technology drives improved efficiencies that translate into lower production costs. The same is true whether in agriculture or food manufacturing. So, what if efficiency-enhancing technologies were denied or removed from the food manufacturing industry?

Production efficiencies would decrease and costs would increase, which could, in turn, drive some distributors, retailers and consumers out of the market for certain foods.

Technology has a lengthy and highly documented history of improving the efficiency of American agriculture. The United States Department of Agriculture’s total factor productivity (TFP) for U.S. agriculture during the last half of the 20th century improved by nearly 150 percent. We also see the benefits of technology in virtually every other area of American life, from medicine to energy conservation. The consequences of lower efficiencies and higher production costs that would result from restricting food manufacturers’ access to technology would challenge all sectors involved in the food supply chain.

The United Kingdom’s agricultural production system serves as a grim example of what can happen when a vocal minority is successful in restricting farmers’ access to production technology choices. In the mid-1990s, the U.K. enacted laws that restricted, and in some cases, banned or placed moratoria on certain agri-food technologies. Subsequently, the U.K.’s import/export trade gap in food has widened, farmers’ incomes have declined, and 60,000 farmers and farm workers have lost their employment.

Those who say a similar situation could not happen in the United States need only look at the 2008 passing of Proposition 2 in California. The statute that affects the housing and confinement of poultry will not become effective until 2015, yet many are wondering whether California poultry farmers can remain competitive when choices on how to care for their flocks are restricted.

Beyond the economic challenges that arise when technology is restricted, there are also humanitarian and social implications. In 2008, nearly 1 billion people around the world did not have enough to eat. The United Nations (U.N.) has projected that the world will need to increase food production 100 percent, and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization has gone on record as saying that 70 percent of the increased production must be achieved through efficiency-enhancing technologies.

The late Dr. Norman Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize and often referred to as the “Father of the Green Revolution,” summarized the responsibility the world has to engage technology in fighting hunger when he spoke at the 30th Anniversary Lecture at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo on September 8, 2000, stating:

"I now say that the world has the technology — either available or well advanced in the research pipeline — to feed on a sustainable basis a population of 10 billion people. The more pertinent question today is whether farmers and ranchers will be permitted to use this new technology. While the affluent nations can certainly afford to adopt ultra-low-risk positions and pay more for food produced by the so-called 'organic' methods, the 1 billion chronically undernourished people of the low-income, food-deficit nations cannot."

Echoing Dr. Borlaug's sentiment, I authored a white paper in early 2009 titled "*Food Economics and Consumer Choice*." The paper was distributed at the 2009 World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogue symposium in October, and I encourage you to read it online at www.elanco.com [1]. The paper examines how collaboration across the food chain, access to efficiency-enhancing technologies and a market based on consumer choice, not restrictive regulation, can help the world achieve food security.

The challenges confronting agriculture and food manufacturing aren't so different. Together, we face the mission of doubling food production by mid-century. Yet sometimes, as in the case of the U.K., pursuit of this goal faces roadblocks: Criticism can evolve into extremism, and subsequent restriction of choice for producers and consumers. And what takes hold in one area of the agri-food system could potentially spread to another link in the chain.

There has never been a more important time for agriculture and food manufacturing to work together. Given the task at hand, we must all do our part to keep safe, proven and efficiency-improving technologies available. These three key concepts — choice, collaboration and technology — will form the pathway to our mutual success.

For more information, please visit www.elanco.com *[1].*

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