

Save Family Farms, Save America

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As one of the founders of Farm Aid, I have watched with admiration and a good amount of satisfaction the growth of what many now call the "Good Food Movement" -- the growing interest in and demand for organic, humanely-raised and family farm-identified food that is transforming the way America grows its food and how our food gets to our tables.

While it might seem obvious to many, good food comes from farms with healthy soil and clean water. I've always believed that the most important people on the planet are the ones who plant the seeds and care for the soil where they grow. As the stewards of the land, family farmers are the foundation of this movement, as well as its guarantor.

No one can say they planted the original seed that gave rise to this movement, but many can claim they have helped nurture and cultivate its growth. Farm Aid's vision for America is to have many family farmers on the land -- a vision born out of our strong conviction that who grows our food and who cares for the land and water is of vital national importance; that farmers and their fields are the fabric that holds our country together.

Many have asked me, "What is the Good Food movement?" The Good Food movement isn't just about good and delicious food -- although this is certainly one of its greatest achievements. The Good Food movement is at the center of some of the most important issues and debates that will define American society for years to come: issues like stewardship of our soil and water, local and democratic control of decision making and land use, health and nutrition and a thriving and sustainable food and farm economy needed to feed and fuel America.

While good, healthy, fresh food from family farms is the most visible product of the movement that each of us can enjoy, the movement stands for much more. It represents the interests of all who care about the future of this land, its resources and its people. As members of this movement and as eaters, the food we choose to buy connects us directly to those who produced it and to the multiple reasons why it is in our own interests to see this movement flourish.

Natural resources

The future of safe and sound food production depends on taking care of the most basic resources needed to grow food: soil and water. Family farmers eat the food they grow in their fields and drink the water from their wells. They know that they have to take care of the soil and water in order to pass on the promise of the farm's bounty to the next generation. Sustainable family farms are the alternative to the large-scale industrial farms that erode our soil and pollute our waterways. Excessive chemicals, soil erosion, runoff from hog factories laced with hormones and antibiotics and the growing threats of widespread genetic contamination from genetically engineered crops threaten our capacity to grow the food we need to feed our country. By supporting family farms through the Good Food movement, we are all helping to ensure that our children and our children's children inherit a healthy and resilient environment.

Health and nutrition

Good food leads to good nutrition and good health. There's no comparison between fresh, organic food at the local farmers market and the mass-produced, additive-laden, highly processed stuff that corporations would have

us think is real food. The rising epidemics of childhood obesity and diabetes are clearly linked to the highly processed food peddled to kids and served in school cafeterias. The Good Food movement is helping to turn this situation around, bringing farm-fresh food grown by local farmers into school lunch programs. A diet of fresh, wholesome food will improve health outcomes for kids and provide new direct markets for family farmers.

Strong local economies

Family farms are the engines for economic vitality, in both rural communities as well as urban areas that benefit from jobs created by vibrant local and regional food systems. When family farms thrive, so do main street businesses. The Good Food movement is creating new markets and opportunities that help farmers stay on their land and provides hope for new and young farmers to make farming their life. A growing number of those now participating in direct farm-to-consumer marketing are first generation farmers! The more we keep farming local, the stronger the community. Participating in local and regional food and farm markets helps keep food dollars circulating in the local economy -- rather than increasing the profits of distant corporations that suck the dollars and the life out of our communities.

Energy

Many Americans are becoming aware of the startling and troubling fact about our food system known as "food miles:" on average, each food item travels 1500 miles before arriving to our tables. It makes little sense to burn fossil fuels that pollute the environment to ship apples across the country and around the world when local growers can provide us with fresh apples, the purchase of which keeps dollars in the local economy. By strengthening local food production, the Good Food movement is reducing the distance food travels and the ecological footprint of American agriculture.

Keeping farmers on their land also enables them to use their know-how and ingenuity to help us achieve more energy independence. Farmers are key to our energy future -- growers and harvesters of renewable energy that will power our vehicles and heat our homes. Farm Aid is working to link The Good Food and Green Energy movements as two sides of the family farm-centered agriculture system we envision.

Animal Welfare

The Good Food movement increases the demand for humanely-raised beef, pork and poultry products by family farms. As opposed to the factory livestock farms, where thousands of animals are raised under one roof and never see the light of day their entire lives, family farm-raised animals are fed natural diets and allowed to live in healthy conditions with access to open pastures.

Democracy

I believe keeping family farmers on the land is inextricably linked to a strong and thriving democracy. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens; they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." Family farmers are the backbone not only of a strong economy; they are also the defenders of local, democratic control of decision making.

In communities across farm country, large and powerful food corporations are working their political connections at the State House and on Capitol Hill to change local and state laws to take local control and decision-making away from communities, stripping local communities of their democratic right of self-determination. In many examples, corporations are working to change state laws so that communities cannot block the construction of hog factories.

We live in a time when all of us must take our responsibility to exercise our democratic rights seriously -- before it's too late. Family farmers are standing up for their rights -- and they're standing up for our rights too. The Good Food movement is about democracy at the grassroots level- building decentralized, sustainable and locally controlled farm and food economies.

Farm Fresh Food

And yes, the Good Food movement is about better food. Growing up in Texas, I learned at an early age the difference between a fresh tomato, a fresh farm egg and the stuff most other people eat and think is food. There is just no way to compare a family-raised ham to a ham from a factory farm, or fresh strawberries to berries shipped thousands of miles. To understand this, you have to taste it yourself. The next time you drive by your local farmers market, stop by and pick up some farm-fresh food. I guarantee you won't regret the flavor and freshness of food from the family farm.

Growing the Movement

If you enjoy good food and care about the issues behind this movement, I invite you to take action today to ensure the future of family farming and your right to choose food from family farms. The most direct and regular action you can take is to search out and buy as much of your food directly from farm families in your area. Our food choices today shape tomorrow's agriculture. Buying organic milk today strengthens tomorrow's outlook for organic dairy farmers. Think about one food item that you can buy from local farmers and commit to buying it. These small and simple actions are building the Good Food movement and changing American agriculture for the better.

The other opportunity we have to further this movement is the upcoming debate over the next Farm Bill. If you value good food from family farms, call your legislator and demand a Farm Bill that strengthens local and regional food economies.

If you care about local and democratic control, demand a Farm Bill that curbs the power of factory farms and the influence of lobbyists for large food corporations. If you care about health and nutrition for children, demand a Farm Bill that puts more fresh, wholesome food in our cities' schools. If you want your children and grandchildren to enjoy the benefits of a clean environment, demand a Farm Bill that increases protection of our natural resources by helping farmers transition to organic and more sustainable growing methods. The future of good food depends on you.

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