

From the Director



In this issue of Rural Connections we highlight several programs that increase food security and attempt to improve the health benefits and safety of our food system.

Americans spend a smaller share of their income on food than at any time in history and they spend proportionally less on food than any other society in the world. The variety of food choices in a modern grocery store at any time is astounding. Fruits and vegetables that were once seasonal are now available throughout the year. Exotic tropical fruits that I had never heard of during my childhood are now always available at my local grocery store.

Despite these benefits, the very same global industrial food system that provides such cheap and abundant food has come under increasing attack during recent years. Among the concerns:

1. Communities and regions are no longer food self-sufficient. Even major farm states import the vast majority of their food. Most farms grow only a single item, or at most a few items that they then market to the global industrial food system. This raises severe food security concerns when one considers how easily this system could be disrupted.
2. The global industrial food system uses vast amounts of energy to produce, process, transport, and store food. Cheap energy led to the centralization of the food system. Increasingly expensive energy raises concerns about the future of the food system. And a system so energy consumptive is simply not sustainable.
3. There are growing concerns about the health consequences of a diet based on the modern industrial food system. At the present time, many Americans eat regular meals at fast food restaurants, and consume massive amounts of foods laced with sugar and preservatives. Among the consequences are high rates of obesity, especially among children, and the skyrocketing occurrences of diet related illnesses such as Type II Diabetes. It seems increasingly likely that for the first time ever, a generation of children will not live as long, on average, as their parents.
4. The highly productive crops grown in the monocultures that comprise the global industrial food system necessitate ever-larger amounts of fertilizers and pesticides to deal with increasingly resistant insects, funguses, viruses and other pests. These fertilizers and pesticides then wreak havoc on downstream waterways and the dangers from highly toxic pathogens emanating from the food system are a growing public concern.
5. Despite the abundance of cheap food, hunger and food insecurity are a significant concern for some segments of the population.

To address this litany of problems, researchers, extension specialists and others have been seeking solutions. Among the more innovative solutions include workforce development programs geared toward out-of-work farm workers, farm to school programs where schools purchase products from local farms, community gardens, community supported agriculture programs, and the local-farming and farmers-market movements. Each of these efforts seeks a solution to one or more of the problems described above. All are consistent in an attempt to provide nutritious, locally-produced food to a broad spectrum of community residents in ways that are environmentally sustainable and enhance rural economic development by expanding markets for local farmers and for locally-produced foods.

In this issue of *Rural Connections* we highlight several programs that increase food security and attempt to improve the health benefits and safety of our food system. Our goal is to increase awareness of the programs so others will implement them. Increasing the impact of these programs to ensure that they have the greatest possible impact will require communities, consumers, agencies and organizations to have the best information possible and will require a strong and reliable research, education and outreach base. ●

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Each November the USDA releases an annual report on household food security in the US. Food insecure households are those in which not everyone in the household “had access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.”

Among food insecure households are those that have “very low food security,” a condition where one or more adults’ food intake was reduced and/or their eating patterns were disrupted due to a lack of money. This group is often referred to by advocates (and formerly referred to by the USDA) as being “food insecure with hunger,” or experiencing “hunger.”

To learn more about the questions that households are asked regarding their food situation, visit the USDA’s Economic Research Service website: <http://ers.usda.gov/>.