



USDA's Outlook Forum features food and farm critics

By Sara Wyant

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Washington, Feb.18. In the midst of USDA's annual forecast of how farmers and ranchers will fare in 2010, the agency showcased several speakers who were highly critical of U.S. food production, calling for less use of pesticides and antibiotics and more local and organic foods.

The theme for USDA's 86th annual event "Sustainable Agriculture: the Key to Health and Prosperity" was designed to reflect some of the new approaches being undertaken at USDA under the Obama Administration and consumer attitudes.

For organic and sustainability advocates, who have long been overlooked at the department's biggest annual event, the renewed focus on their key issues was a dream come true. For conventional agricultural interests attending the first day's sessions, it was more like a nightmare.

One of the most outspoken critics was Fedele Bauccio, CEO of Bon Appetit Management Co., a food service company with 400 locations in 30 states.

Bauccio said that his chefs came to him about ten years ago and complained about apples not having as much flavor as they used to and that was the impetus of a "Farm to Fork" initiative where the firm started buying from local farmers. "Now, at least 20% of our ingredients are purchased from a small local farm or artisan within 150 miles of each kitchen and are seasonal and minimally processed," he said.

His company has also stopped purchasing meat that was produced from livestock raised with the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics. "I don't know why we can't get that passed," he said of a ban on non-therapeutic use of antibiotics that has been proposed in Congress. "What we are doing is harming ourselves and when we need those antibiotics, they are not going to do us any good."

Bon Appetit launched a "Low Carbon Diet" to make the connection between food and climate change, and reduced its beef purchases by 33% and use of cheese by 10% because of the impact livestock have on greenhouse gas emissions.

Citing other challenges with the current food system, Bauccio said, “We still have waste management problems, problems with concentrated animal feeding operations, nitrogen run-off, worker and community health, and inconsistent regulations from state to state.

“There is a lack of transparency in the supply chain....and a veil of silence hiding unfair farm labor practices,” he added.

Walter Robb, co-president and COO of Whole Foods Market told participants that, “We are in a food revolution like no other,” including a renewed interest in gardening and the “pleasure of sitting together at the table.” With what consumers want, USDA’s “Know your farmer, know your food” is “spot on,” Robb said.

He said that organic and locally-grown foods are here to stay, citing a 2.1% increase in sales of organic food during challenging economic times, but acknowledged that the interest in local foods is stronger than the interest in organics. He also said there is growing demand for food from non-GMO corn and soybeans.

Richard Schneiders, who recently retired as CEO for Sysco, a food distribution company, challenged his fellow panelists to think more critically about some of their ideas. He cited an example where the salad greens from a 40-acre farm would actually be larger than the carbon footprint associated with shipping large quantities of salad greens on a semi over 2,500 miles.

“Sometimes we kid ourselves about what is sustainable. If a farmer cannot feed his family and buy insurance, that’s not sustainable,” Schnieders pointed out.

Sysco has been actively recruiting local farmers and building local food aggregation points to provide an increasing share of their products, but still relies on traditional sourcing.

“Is there a middle way?” Schnieders asked. “Let’s not ignore the possibility of integrating the large and the small to the benefit of farmers and customers. USDA should provide more assistance for smaller farmers and help with additional training and resources.”