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UNITED STATES FOOD POLICY, 1978 - 2000 A.D.

by

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A framework for food policy development.

"Agricultural Policy" vs.
"Food Policy"

Introduction

The United States of America has never had an enunciated, comprehensive futuristic national food policy. Government, the food industry and consumers have been struggling with an almost unintelligible, expanding maze of legalistic procedures designed to solve innumerable short term, special interest problems, most of which have long disappeared from the scene. Although it may well be, "how the system works," it is characterized by:

1. Emphasis on procedures rather than substance.
2. Focus on the present or recent past.
3. Treatment of symptoms rather than problems.
4. Narrowness of vision.

We behold the world's richest nation drowning in a sea of red tape, seemingly incapable of collecting itself to approach the monumental resource allocation decisions required for feeding our people.

Historically, agricultural policy was based upon a specific set of issue oriented laws and procedures developed by and for farm and farm related interests. What would be the price of wheat? What is an appropriate level of "defects" in a product grade? How many acres of corn should we plant next year? Long range vision was limited by annual budgets, frequent elections and short range profit motives.

We floundered for many years trying to solve the "farm problem." Today, there are many other parties involved in food and food related issues, e.g., processors, distributors, consumers, labor groups, government agencies other than agriculture. Also the focus of interest is not exclusively the farm. It is on all aspects of the food production, processing, distribution and consumption system.

What is Food?

Everyone knows what food is, right? Not so! To the person ready to eat a meal, it is one thing. To the distributor, processor, farmer, regulator and politician it is for each in turn a

different thing. Our set of legalistic procedures have been focusing upon the commodities that make up our food and not upon our food per se. Each segment of the system has had its own view of "food", and depending upon its relative political muscle, has made varying impacts upon the evolving food industry.

What is important here is that in the future, food will be looked at in terms of the final end product ready for human consumption. The commodities and/or components that make up the "food" are important as a means of providing nutrition for our citizens and not as ends in and of themselves.

What is Food Policy?

Policies are generally thought to be guidelines or bench marks for future courses of action, within a prescribed set of circumstances. This implies a specific objective or set of objectives which tends to limit efforts to a specific area. This is where the great void exists. There is no general framework with which these specific issues can be solved for the greater good of society, over the long run. Thus we come up with a lengthy list of laws, procedures, regulations that are often conflicting and counter productive.

This paper will try to establish a broad framework for food policy development which will consider both long range constraints-resources, institutions and personnel, and individual specific issues within the broader context.

So, a food policy might be defined as "Guidelines for future courses of action relative to the production, processing, distribution, consumption system for feeding our people." The shifting of perspective to food, to systems thinking and to the future are critical.

Why a "Futuristic" Look at Food Policy?

Population growth, energy and material constraints, cost and availability of long term capital, increasing institutional impacts upon our lives and technological changes are but a few of the growing list of factors that make the short ranged, narrow visioned farm policy of the past inappropriate for the future. Food policy must take on an "anticipatory" character as opposed to the "reactive" character of the past. Life is too complex and it takes too long and costs too much for us to react to the day to day changes in this situation. From a total resource consumption view point, we must do a better job of long range planning in our food production-processing-distribution and consumption system. The development of an effective food policy is a major step in that effort.

Elements of the legalistic remedies designed to cure the agricultural ills of the great depression of the 1930's still impact upon the food industry of today. We simply must do a better job of anticipating changes, studying alternative solutions, implementing programs to solve problems and most importantly making provision for program to be phased out when either they have done that job or proved to be ineffective.

Two points must be made. First, the future doesn't start at some magic time in the foggy never-never land of tomorrow. It starts with the present-day. Second, we must live tomorrow (maybe many tomorrows) with the consequences of choices made today. This is why it is so important to be cognizant of possible future impacts of present policy decisions. As more diverse groups become involved with food policy making, the impact of choices upon the total society,

not just agriculture and farmers, must be considered as well.

Where do we Start?

An appropriate place to start might be to outline a general framework for the development of a food policy and to discuss its elements. Such a framework might be:

1. Objectives - general and specific, short and long range.
2. Choices - alternative procedures and systems to accomplish objectives.
3. Constraints - values, physical, institutional, political.
4. Criteria for success.
5. Feed back system.

One general objective might be: "To provide adequate supplies of safe, nutritious food and food products with desired service levels at prices that reflect true value to the United States consumer, at minimum total resource cost." This is but one of many possible objectives that could provide a broad overall starting place for food policy development. Yet it leaves much to be desired in terms of specifics. What is an adequate supply of food? When is food safe? What levels of nutrition are needed? What are proper levels of services to be added to foods? What is true value in food prices? What is the total resource cost of our food and how can we minimize it? The author will be the first to admit that he doesn't know the answer to these and many other related questions. However, we must have answers in order to make properly informed policy decisions.

Choices must be made between the many alternative procedures and systems that could accomplish whatever objectives that

can be agreed upon. Many constraints exist in each choice situation - physical, institutional, political and technological, as well as value systems. What makes the future so fascinating is that both the choices and constraints are changing over time at different rates. The challenge becomes one of choosing an option, with our present system of constraints, that will impact at some future date when a completely different set of constraints may apply. The fields of technology assessment and forecasting and value forecasting will be crucial to policy making as an art and/or science and to food policy making in particular.

Both the criteria for success and the feedback system must be spelled out and communicated to interested parties in detail before policy implementation.

This framework will allow us to determine (1) where we want to go, (2) the appropriate course of action, (3) how well we have done and (4) what we must do to keep the system in tune with (or ahead of) the times.

How do We get From Here to There?

A. The Here. It might be useful to document where we are before attempting to determine where we are going. To the writer's knowledge, we have no up-to-date, well articulated set of national objectives at the present time. The results of the last Commission on National Goals of the Eisenhower Administration have been modified slightly by ensuing administrations but not re-thought and updated properly.

As for the choices of food policies before us, they are greatly limited by the values system of the existing power structure which helped to forge the present food industry system, and which considers the status quo to offer less risk than change, even though change may

be needed. The basic set of choices that this group would offer has to do with "keeping the current system intact as long as possible despite societal changes external to the system?" This may be the "where it's at" of practical politics. However, in terms of meeting the national food needs with effective food policy development and execution, it is basic to clearly and specifically identify all the alternatives open for consideration and to identify all assumptions attendant there to. In addition, we must allow for differing sets of value systems with which to evaluate this widening group of choices. A great deal of work needs to be done to identify the present value system before we can consider any alternate set of values. Work also must be done in technology assessment and institutional change as well.

We do have an existing, functioning food production-processing-distribution system in place with all the attendant resources, institutions, functions and technologies. It is seldom recognized as a total system. More often than not we tend to get all wrapped up in our own little piece of the system and miss the "big picture." Worse, under present conditions there is little incentive for one to spend his time worrying about the effectiveness of the total food industry system, the rewards for concerns relative to specific parts of the system and short term issues are much greater. Hopefully, this will not always be the case.

As for criteria to measure the success or failure of the system, most of our measures suffer from the myopia previously mentioned. "We are the best fed nation in the world." With all the talk of malnutrition, pockets of starvation, and empty calories, one might well question that statement. Many people may have their "bellies" full but may not be getting proper nutrition. Even if we are among the world's best fed, one must ask,

"at what monumental cost in terms of total resource use?" And can we be better fed, nutritionally speaking at lower total resource cost?

We attempt to measure the productivity of our food system mostly in terms of one factor of production-labor. We largely ignore capital in the form of technology which has contributed greatly to increased productivity in recent years. We don't even talk about "institutional or systems" productivity. Yet the way we group specific factors of production to do a job (institutions), and the system with which we link institutions greatly impacts upon the productivity of an industry.

Feedback systems often have a way of giving back information which the designer wants to hear. If the criteria used are only those which are narrow in scope, then the feedback system can only provide information on these narrow criteria. If our criteria are not complete or appropriate, we only have a partial picture relative to the productivity of the present food industry system.

One more question before moving on to the futuristic aspects of food policy, Who is going to do anything about the shortcomings of the present system, let alone work toward a less resource consumptive, more satisfying system for the future? The guardians of the status quo won't! More about where the responsibility for national food policy development and implementation lies later in the paper.

B. The There. The old saying "A problem well defined is half solved" applies here. Once we have some idea of where we are, it is much easier to get a fix on where we want to go and the attendant costs and benefits of getting there.

There are two basic thrusts in our effort at this point:

1. Identify and quantify "future shaping" variables.
2. Formulation of alternative futures and assumptions.

If change is to occur, then pressure from certain elements will either cause change or make change possible. Such elements are:

- Population - rate of growth
- Income - rate of growth vs. productivity
- Education - longer vs. higher vs. continuous vs. quality
- Eating habits - tastes and preference
- Life style
- Resource utilization patterns, energy, materials, water
- Institutional change
- Technology
- Value placement
- Communications

and many others, which must be monitored to give one an idea of the various constraints to be dealt with in a variety of alternatives for "future situations."

When viewed in the broader perspective, many of mankind's "crises" have been predictable and acceptable remedies could have been suggested. Our recent energy crisis is a case in point. If all responsible decision-makers had relevant information on the energy situation, supplies, utilization trends, etc, it is possible that the situation of 1973 could have been avoided. A point should be made "perfectly clear." The possession of all the relevant information does in no way guarantee that responsible parties will make the "correct decision" in any given political situation. However, with more complete and relevant information, the proper decisions can be made and the risk of a "wrong decision" can be minimized. Mistakes will still

be made, but hopefully our batting average will improve substantially.

The second basic thrust has to do with clearly formulating a set of possible alternative futures together with attendant specific assumptions for each. Theoretically, there is an almost infinite number of alternative futures that food policy analysis could consider. This is when the knowledge of "future shaping variables" comes into play. Over time, the total number of viable alternative futures becomes limited to a manageable amount. Changes in behavior of the variables may allow an option to become viable or close it off from consideration.

Again the energy situation provides an excellent example. A relatively limitless supply of cheap petroleum based energy has been a definite factor in the formulation of today's food distribution portion of the food industry system. The way we process, transport, store and merchandize food products indicates that energy conservation was seldom a consideration in the planning process. Now, traditional, energy sources are no longer limitless or cheap. Hence, a whole series of food distribution options based upon limitless cheap energy must be removed from the planning framework, and another series of options based upon utilizing other forms of energy and energy conservation must be brought into play in the policy area.

Analyzing Future Food Policy Alternatives

Stemming from a clearly articulated set of national objectives, formed within a given value and constraint system, will be food related objectives such as this one repeated from page four: "To provide adequate supplies of safe, nutritious food and food products with desired service levels at prices that reflect true value

to the United States Consumer, at minimum total resource cost." This is one of many possible food related objectives formed within a given set of values. As value systems change, so will the objectives and the choices (alternatives) to accomplish the objectives. For each, objectives, assumptions and conditions must be carefully spelled out. Such questions on the following must be answered:

1. What are adequate supplies of food?
2. When is food safe?
3. What are proper levels of nutrition?
4. What is value to the consumer?

For each choice (alternative) there are many possible procedures (systems) to fulfill them, criteria to measure their progress, feed back systems to see the progress made. The logical way to proceed would be to search for the most likely future (alternative), based on costs and benefits and considering technical, economic, organizational and political feasibility of the option.

The Actors and the Stages

In the process of formulating and implementing a comprehensive futuristic national food policy, many types of actors practice their craft upon many stages. Four are pertinent here:

1. Those who help to identify and clarify food industry objectives and goals.
2. Those who identify and elaborate alternatives (choices).
3. Those who analyze and evaluate choices.
4. Those who act in the political areas upon the alternatives (choices).

It is possible that actors, type 1 through 3, could be the same person, or different persons could fulfill the roles. Most probably actor type four will be a

different person acting upon a different stage.

At this point the water gets a little "murky" relative to how one proceeds. Do the objectives and alternatives come from felt needs and awareness of the body politic? Are they then articulated by the political spokes person, analyzed and evaluated by the scientist? Or does the scientist perform stage one through three and present the "body politic" with a package for decision-making. Third, it could be a combination of both processes. Fourth, it could be none of the above.

What is important to realize is that those who may conceive, analyze and evaluate the policy alternatives most probably won't be those acting upon the choices. This presents, at the least, a monumental communication challenge.

Further, it will require much courage and vision to conceive, articulate, analyze and evaluate bold new food policy alternatives. In addition, for our governmental leaders to act as "statesmen rather than politicians" is optimistic at best and may well border on fantasy.

"Where the Buck Stops"

All this effort to broaden the scope, lengthen the time frame, focus attention on food and stimulate systems thinking must be directed at someone. Focus for the action phase of the discussion must be upon the executive and legislative branches of government and in the decision making centers of our nation's food industry. Focus for the conception of alternatives, analysis, evaluation, etc. must be in the scientific community. Hopefully each can utilize the best of each others thinking for the benefit of all our citizens.

Research Agenda

During this discussion, the author has touched upon many areas needing further study. Some of these are:

1. Precisely what is our food system delivering (quantity, quality, nutrition, satisfaction) for resources committed?
2. What are adequate supplies of food for the U.S.A.?
3. When is food safe?
4. What level of nutrition do we need? Want?
5. What levels of services do we want added to our foods? What can we afford?
6. How does the consumer equate "value" in foods?
7. What technologies are appropriate for the future?

8. What institutions are appropriate for the future?

This list is far from exhaustive but can provide much food for thought.

A Monumental Task?

One could easily be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems that have been discussed in this paper. The temptation to "chuck it all" in favor of something more manageable could be irresistible. To paraphrase an old saying "A journey of ten thousand miles gets started with one step."

Who will take the first step?