



**AgEcon** SEARCH  
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

*The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library*

**This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.**

**Help ensure our sustainability.**

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search  
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>  
[aesearch@umn.edu](mailto:aesearch@umn.edu)

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*



# **Does the World Need U.S. Farmers Even if Americans Don't?**

**Mary K. Hendrickson  
Harvey S. James, Jr.  
And  
William D. Heffernan**

*Department of Agricultural Economics Working Paper No. AEWP 2006-06*

September 2006

The Department of Agricultural Economics is a part of the Division of Applied Social Sciences of the  
College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources at the University of Missouri-Columbia  
200 Mumford Hall, Columbia, MO 65211 USA  
Phone: 573-882-3545 • Fax: 573-882-3958 • <http://www.dass.missouri.edu/agecon>

## Does the World Need U.S. Farmers Even if Americans Don't?

**Mary K. Hendrickson\***

Department of Rural Sociology  
University of Missouri  
[hendricksonm@missouri.edu](mailto:hendricksonm@missouri.edu)

**Harvey S. James, Jr.**

Department of Agricultural Economics  
University of Missouri  
[hjames@missouri.edu](mailto:hjames@missouri.edu)

**William D. Heffernan**

Department of Rural Sociology  
University of Missouri  
[heffernanw@missouri.edu](mailto:heffernanw@missouri.edu)

Draft date: September 2006

### **Abstract:**

We consider the implications of trends in the number of U.S. farmers and food imports on the question of what role U.S. farmers have in an increasingly global agrifood system. Our discussion stems from the argument some scholars have made that American consumers can import their food more cheaply from other countries than it can produce it. We consider the distinction between U.S. farmers and agriculture and the effect of the U.S. food footprint on developing nations to argue there might be an important role for U.S. farmers, even if it appears Americans don't need them. For instance, we may need to protect U.S. farmland and, by implication, U.S. farmers, for future food security needs both domestic and international. We also explore the role of U.S. farmers by considering the question of whether food is a privilege or a right. Although Americans seem to accept that food is a privilege, many scholars and commentators argue that, at least on a global scale, food is a right, particularly for the world's poor and hungry. If this is the case, then U.S. farmers might have a role in meeting the associated obligation to ensure that the poor of the world have enough food to eat. We look at the consequences of determining that food is a right versus a privilege and the implications of that decision for agricultural subsidies as well as U.S. agriculture and nutrition policies.

---

\* We appreciate the constructive comments of Molly Anderson. Please direct correspondence to Mary Hendrickson, 201 Gentry Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211. Tele: 573-882-7463 and email: [hendricksonm@missouri.edu](mailto:hendricksonm@missouri.edu).

## Does the World Need U.S. Farmers Even if Americans Don't?

### Introduction:

There are two trends that suggest Americans do not need U.S. farmers. First, the number of U.S. farmers has steadily declined during the twentieth century. For instance, according to USDA statistics, in 1900 roughly 40 percent of the U.S. labor force worked on farms. By the end of the century that had declined to less than 2 percent. A second trend in U.S. agriculture is even more telling. Since World War II the U.S. has consistently exported more agricultural products than it has imported. Increasingly, however, Americans are consuming more food grown in places outside the U.S. For example, by 2000, the import share of U.S. consumed food had reached 11 percent, up from less than 8 percent in 1981 (Jerardo, 2003); in 2002 that ratio was 13 percent (Jerardo, 2004). The share of vegetables consumed that were imported nearly doubled, while imports of fruits, juices and nuts went from around 14 percent to over 20 percent. An article in *Farm Journal* (Hilgren, 2005) reported that supermarket needs for year-round fruits, vegetables, juices, nuts, beer and wine accounted for 44% of imports in 2004. Beef, pork and cheese imports made up a fifth of our imports, while grains accounted for less than 10 percent. Importantly, USDA data show that between October 1975 and February 2006, the U.S. reported five months in which imports exceeded exports. One occurred in May 1986, the other four during a period of one year (June and August 2004, and April and June 2005). In short, Americans seem to be adding more and more imported food to their diets, suggesting relatively less reliance on U.S. producers.

There are at least two rationales that have emerged to justify these trends; one is economic and the other is political. First, agricultural economist Steven Blank (1998), side-

stepping many issues involved in comparing the efficiency of U.S. farmers relative to farmers in other parts of the world, argued that U.S. farmers are among the highest cost producers in the world. Given the high cost of land, labor and the environmental regulations with which U.S. farmers have to comply, he concluded that the United States could import most of its food cheaper from poorer nations than it can produce it. Therefore, he suggested that the U.S. should import all its food from less developed countries, while utilizing its land for higher value uses such as recreation and urban expansion. According to Blank, this would improve consumer welfare. In fact, one of Blank's major conclusions could be restated as the hypothesis that U.S. consumers do not "need" U.S. farmers to meet their food needs.

Second, some policymakers argue that a diminished reliance on domestic food production could have important political benefits for the U.S. because of the impact such a change would have on the larger arena of development. For instance, former President Clinton (2000, pg. 5), addressing a British audience at the University of Warwick, said, "If the wealthiest countries ended our agricultural subsidies, leveling the playing field for the world's farmers [and thus importing more food into our countries], that alone could increase the income of developing countries by \$20 billion a year." Clearly Clinton was seeking to address larger development goals by suggesting that Americans source their food from other countries. However, he also recognized the difficulties of such a step:

Not as simple as it sounds...But I see these beautiful fields in Great Britain, I have driven down the highways of France; I know there is a cultural, social value to the fabric that has developed here over the centuries. *But we cannot avoid the fact that if we say we want these people to have a decent life, and we know this is something they could do for the global economy more cheaply than we, we have to ask ourselves what our relative responsibilities are,* and if there is some other way we can preserve the rural fabric of life here, the beauty of the fields, and the sustainability of the balanced society that is important for Great Britain, the United States, France and every other country. (Emphasis added)

In spite of these economic and political justifications, it is important that we not overlook how these trends fit into the broader picture of structural changes affecting the entire food system. If the trend were just declining numbers of farmers, we could simply point to changes in the supply-side of the equation, such as consolidation and technological change in the agrifood sector during the twentieth century. However, the complementary trend in food and crop imports suggests demand factors are also controlling. Many argue that changes in consumer tastes have spurred the rise of imports. A conventional argument is that more Americans are exposed to ethnic foods in grocery stores and restaurants and expect a greater variety of foods (Hilgren, 2005). Coupled with expanded tastes, many Americans have lost touch with the seasonal nature of food produced in the U.S. requiring off-season fill-ins from other countries. Others argue that exports have been dampened by the strong dollar that reigned throughout the 1990s, which tipped the balance to imports (Jerardo, 2004).

There is little doubt that restructuring in the agrifood systems – led in part by global food retailers – is reshaping how we source our food. Analysts from many perspectives have examined how global supply chains in the food system are reorganizing (Rama, 2005; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Wilkinson, 2002; Heffernan, Hendrickson and Gronski, 1999). One trend that is most apparent is the reorganization and restructuring of produce chains (and others such as fish) by the major global supermarkets. Through the imposition of quality standards, major retailers such as Wal-Mart, Carrefour and Tesco, not only have managed to re-regulate these production chains, but also have reorganized production and distribution. Another major trend has been the consolidation and concentration of farm input and output sectors worldwide. For instance, in 2004 six companies sold 77 percent of agrochemicals while five

companies provided 29 percent of the world's commercially available seeds (UNCTAD, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, three companies trade the majority of grain that moves between nations (Heffernan, Hendrickson and Gronski, 1999). While differences exist in the protein sector, major transnational corporations like Smithfield, Tyson and CP Group are employing similar vertical integration strategies in pork, beef and poultry in different regions of the world, including the U.S., Poland, Thailand and Brazil (Burch and Goss, 2005; Wilkinson, 2002; Reardon and Berdegué, 2002).

The consequences of this restructuring are felt by both producers and consumers. Consolidation at the input and processing stages, as well as the growing prevalence of production and marketing contracts, implies that producers have fewer choices in what and how to produce (see Hendrickson and James, 2005). For example, the vast majority of eggs and broilers are raised under contract in the poultry industry, which means that farmers have limited ability to adopt alternative production practices, since virtually all decisions regarding their operations are specified by the integrating firm (Hinrichs and Welsh, 2003). Many times, the smallest farmers are left out of the reorganized chains, and even uneducated workers may no longer be useful. Consumers, on the other hand, apparently have a great deal of choice in the grocery store. However, consumers still have a hard time understanding how their food is produced and who produces it, given constraints on labeling and the very nature of supply chains. Therefore, neither primary producers nor end consumers are very involved in the major decisions of where, what and how food will be produced, and who will produce that food. Instead, many of these decisions are left up to boards of directors and managers of global agrifood firms.

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent moves include the acquisition of Seminis, a global vegetable seed firm, by Monsanto in early 2005. A good discussion of U.S. seed industry changes is available from USDA-ERS (Fernandez-Cornejo, 2004).

Given the data on imports and the restructuring of global food chains, it is clear that U.S. farmers are meeting relatively less of America's food needs and that Americans, as a comparatively wealthy nation, will likely continue to import more of their food from abroad. Does this mean that Americans do not need U.S. farmers? If so, do U.S. farmers still have a role in the world's agriculture? We consider the implications of the trends outlined above by asking questions designed to raise issues and spark conversation and debate. Although we offer some thoughts disguised as answers, our objective is principally to promote a healthy discussion of the role of U.S. farmers and agriculture.

*1. If the U.S. does not need U.S. farmers, does it still need U.S. agriculture?*

It is important to define the different concepts embedded in this question: U.S. farmers, U.S. agriculture and productive farmland. The distinction is not trivial. In reality, these are delineations about the structural as well as productivity issues of American agriculture. The United States has done well in the twentieth century even as the number of farmers continued to decline, suggesting that, other things being equal, the U.S. did not need (as great a quantity) of U.S. farmers. But, does the U.S. need U.S. agriculture? Moreover, if the world also does not need U.S. farmers, does it need U.S. agriculture?

On the one hand, we could use the terms farmer and agriculture somewhat interchangeably. A farmer is, by definition, someone who produces raw agricultural inputs. On the other hand, the last half of the twentieth century saw a decrease in the number of American farmers, yet the productivity of American agriculture soared. Agriculture transitioned from a relatively small-scale, labor-intensive system to large-scale farming dominated by machinery and technology requiring much less labor. For example, according to USDA data, in the 1930s the



average farm was 155 acres, and there were 10 million people employed on just under 7 million farms using 1 million tractors. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the average farm was approximately 500 acres, while the number of farms declined to 2 million, with under 2 million employed in farming using 4 million tractors.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is clear that U.S. agriculture in its entirety is something distinct from U.S. farmers, which form a subset.

This distinction leads to the question of the role of productive farmland, which includes cropland and pastureland. Some commentators argue that the U.S. needs to keep its land as farmland to guarantee food security for future generations (see Tweeten 1998; Libby 1997; Pimentel and Giampietro 1994). This is generally the perspective from which groups like American Farmland Trust argue for the protection of farmland from urban sprawl and development. The reason is that as U.S. and world populations continue to increase, the productive capacity of other nations to meet the growing U.S. demand for food imports will become increasingly strained, unless technology develops allowing production on land currently not recognized as arable.<sup>3</sup> However, most countries, particularly developing ones, do not have the agricultural labor and land capacity to increase the scale of food production needed to meet future U.S. food import requirements yet alone their own demand for food (see Giampietro, Bukkens and Pimentel, 1999). For example, Pimentel and Giampietro (1994, tables 3 and 4) show that the U.S. is fourth behind Australia, Canada, and Argentina in terms of the amount of arable land per person available.<sup>4</sup> However, it is third in terms of arable land per farmer and first in terms of agricultural labor productivity. All other countries have less arable land per capita

---

<sup>2</sup> See [www.usda.gov/nass/pubs/trends](http://www.usda.gov/nass/pubs/trends). Furthermore, more than half of all farms in 2000 were small, with annual sales less than \$10,000. These accounted for only 2 percent of total farm sales. Thus, most agricultural production is accomplished from medium to large farms.

<sup>3</sup> We are beginning to see some activity in this direction. For example, Frommer, Ludewig, and Rentsch (1999) argue that biotechnology can result in the development of plants that are tolerant to salt, thus allowing crop production on land current unfit for production.

<sup>4</sup> Notably absent from the Pimentel and Giampietro analysis is Brazil.

and per farmer available for farm production, suggesting that most countries face greater constraints in farm production than the U.S. Since population growth rates in developing nations exceed those in developed countries,<sup>5</sup> the amount of arable land per capita will be reduced even further in developing countries, thus limiting the feasibility of U.S. consumers being able to rely on future food import from those countries if countries decide to feed their own populations first. If U.S. consumers continue to increase their demand for food imports, particularly from developing countries facing constraints in agricultural labor and land productivity, are they taking food that ought to be retained for consumption in the developing nations?

Even developed nations face constraints. For example, Pimentel and Giampietro (1994) note that in Canada it is cold weather, and in Australia it is water. European countries are constrained by the amount of arable land per farmer, as is much of Africa. The United States, on the other hand, currently faces relatively low demographic pressures and limited biological constraints, and it possess more equipment and better technology in agricultural production than other countries. If anything, developing nations may need to increase their reliance on food production within the U.S., rather than the U.S. increasing their demand for food produced abroad.

Pimentel and Giampietro argue that the amount of arable land and grassland currently available in the U.S. is sufficient to provide theoretically for all the dietary needs of Americans. If future prices of imported foods rise because of diminished production capacity wrought by continued world population growth, the U.S. may be required to shift toward a relatively greater reliance on domestic production to meet the its food needs. However, population growth, reductions in productive farmland, and the rising cost of fuel could force even the U.S. to

---

<sup>5</sup> According to WorldBank data population growth rates between 1998 and 2015 in low, middle and high income countries are expected to be approximately 1.2 percent, 0.95 percent and 0.2 percent respectively (see <http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/modules/social/pgr/>, accessed May 16, 2006).

confront constraints. Even now the Natural Resources Inventory, conducted by the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, showed an 8 percent decrease in cropland in the U.S. between 1982 and 1997. Competition from the biofuels industry might also place constraints on land available for crop or livestock production. All of this suggests the following question: Does the world need U.S. farmers or the productive farmland of the U.S., however it is farmed and whoever farms it?

## *2. Does the world need U.S. farmers or U.S. agriculture?*

The recent trends of a narrowing of the U.S. agricultural trade surplus do not tell the full story. Changes in the relative composition of U.S. agricultural exports and imports suggest that U.S. farmers – at least farmers of certain commodities – will continue to be relevant to the world. On the one hand, the preferences of U.S. consumers appear to be changing, at least relative to what U.S. farmers are producing. The U.S. remains a net exporter of oilseeds and grains.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. is also relatively self-sufficient in the production of meat, poultry and dairy products as well as vegetables (Jerardo, 2004). Significant gains in U.S. exports have also been achieved in certain high valued products, such as processed meats and grains (Whitton, 2004). Furthermore, U.S. exports to mainland China increased more than 24 percent between 2000 and 2003, while imports from China increased only 10 percent. Similarly, exports to Indonesia increased 8 percent, while imports increased less than 4 percent. In contrast, exports to the European Union decreased 1 percent while imports increased nearly 6 percent between 2000 and 2003.<sup>7</sup>

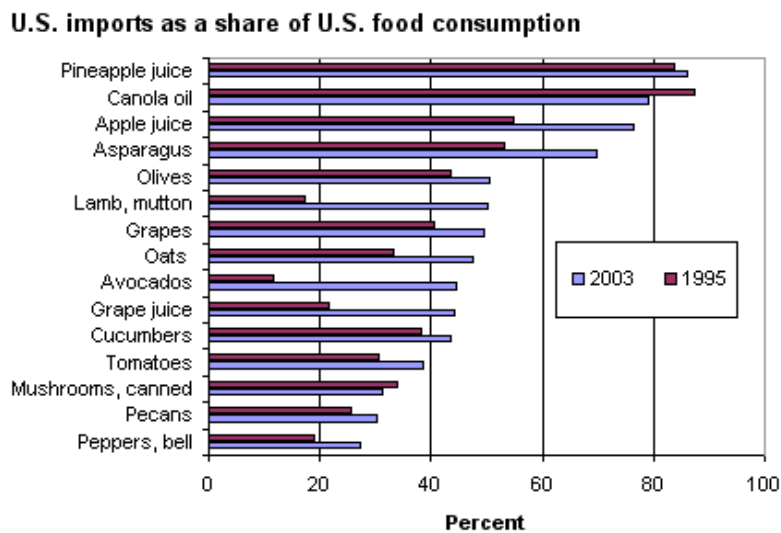
---

<sup>6</sup> One reason for the United States' relative advantage in grains and oilseeds is that major agricultural subsidies go to program crops such as corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, as well as cotton and sugar, which do not readily appear as preferred by Americans. However, it is widely reported that about 70% of processed food contains processed soy, while high fructose corn syrup is widely used as a sweetener for soda and processed foods.

<sup>7</sup> See USDA Economic Research Service Briefing Room: U.S. Agricultural Trade, available at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/AgTrade/usagriculturaltrade.htm>, accessed June 4, 2005.

On the other hand, consumers are increasing their demand for healthier foods and for greater diversity of ethnic foods, fueled in part by continued growth of minority populations in the U.S. Imports are also rising for horticultural crops. Indeed, Jerardo (2004) reports that 42 percent of all U.S. imports are horticultural crops. As shown in Figure 1, between 1995 and 2003, U.S. imports as a share of U.S. food consumption increased for pineapple juice, apple juice, asparagus, olives, lamb, grapes, oats, avocados, cucumbers, tomatoes, pecans, and bell peppers.

Figure 1.



Source: USDA

The point is that the variation in trading patterns suggests a continued need and desire in certain parts of the world for certain U.S. agricultural output, even though U.S. consumers are shifting their preference away from some U.S. products. This, in turn, suggests that, at least for the foreseeable future, the world will continue to need U.S. farmers and agriculture. Of course, the crux of the question is this: As long as some U.S. agricultural sectors remain viable, is the

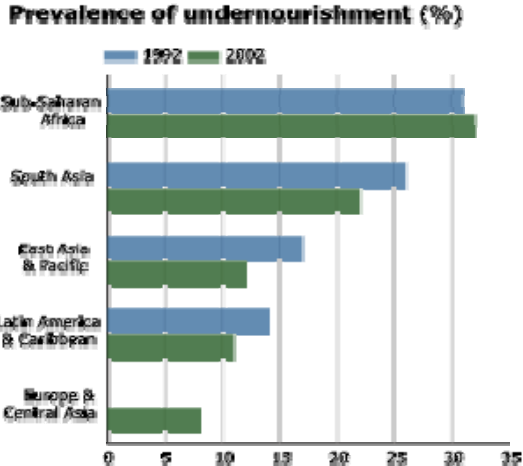
decline of U.S. farmers acceptable? As we show below, the changing food consumption and production patterns in the U.S. provides a potentially important rationale for a need at the global level of U.S. farmers.

*3. How is the U.S. food footprint of consumers and producers felt around the world? What implication does this have on what role U.S. farmers and agriculture have vis-à-vis the poor, hungry and malnourished of the world?*

The discussion above of U.S. agricultural land and labor productivity vis-à-vis other nations illustrates another basic reason why U.S. farm production might be important to the world – it is the amount of productive farmland here that cannot be sacrificed if everyone in the world is going to be able to eat a basic diet. As Wiebe (2001, 2003) argues, currently the most extensive areas of highly productive agricultural land lie in North America and Europe. Using World Bank figures, Wiebe calculates that 29 percent of land in the developed countries, and over 50 percent of cropland in Eastern Europe, is classified in the top three land-quality classes compared with 6 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 16 percent in Asia, and 19 percent in the Middle East. However, given population, weather, water and other biological constraints, as well as technology and other productivity considerations, the U.S. is arguably in the best position to meet the worldwide food security needs that cannot be dismissed given the current state of hunger and poverty around the world. The Millennium Development Goals proposed by the United Nations and other international institutions (e.g. the World Bank) adopted aggressive targets for reducing the “proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day to half the 1990 level by 2015 - from 27.9 percent of all people in low and middle income economies to 14.0 percent. The Goals also call for halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990

and 2015” (World Bank, 2005). These goals attack some very substantial, intractable problems. In 2000, about 1.2 billion people lived on less than \$1 per day, while 2.8 billion lived on less than \$2 per day, or less than \$730 in annual income (Phillips, 2000). One International Monetary Fund commentator suggested in late 2003 that “the global incidence of poverty is currently over 50 percent and is expected to decline only to about 40 percent by 2015,” far exceeding the targets set in the Millennium Development Goals (Loungani, 2003).

Figure 2.



Source: FAO.

Closely related to poverty is the number of hungry in the world. Absolute numbers of hungry people have increased since 1995, despite some early gains in addressing hunger, including a reduction of 27 million undernourished people between 1992 and 1997 (Knight Ridder, 2004). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2004), “852 million people worldwide were undernourished in 2000-2002. This figure includes 815 million in developing countries, 28 million in the countries in transition and 9 million in the industrialized

countries.” More disturbing is the increase of 18 million people who are undernourished between 1997 and 2002, resulting in a net reduction of 9 million undernourished people globally between 1990-1992 and 2000-2002. As shown in Figure 2, certain regions of the world are still hard hit by hunger.

The restructuring of the global agrifood system has altered the “food” footprint of the average American consumer and farmer on other countries in the world. Although the largest share of agricultural imports comes from developed nations, such as the European Union and Canada, the growth in imports from developed nations is increasing as well. Between 2003 and 2005, the largest annual growth in imports came from China, Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia, India and Mexico.<sup>8</sup> When Blank (1998) pointed out the U.S. can buy its food from poorer nations at a lower price than it can produce the food within its own boundaries, he suggested that American consumers would benefit from cheaper food; however, he did not mention what often happens to the poor in the exporting country.

Vorley (2003) observes that agriculture’s role in the rural economies worldwide has declined. It is a view that is echoed by agribusiness leaders at the World Agricultural Forum (Manternach, 2005) and in the U.S. by Drabenstott (2000). However, one of the growing concerns of the increased concentration of the agrifood system and the evolving private regulations it fosters is the uneven development it creates across rural regions globally (Marsden, 2003). Marsden examines how demand for specific types and qualities of grapes in England significantly impacts the life chances of Brazilian agricultural workers. Producing a perfect bunch of grapes for the European supermarkets that serve European consumers requires

---

<sup>8</sup> See USDA data on Foreign Agricultural Trade of the United States, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/fatus/>, top 15 ranked countries by import sources, calendar year, accessed May 16, 2006. Calculations cover change from 2003 to 2005. Actual increases in imports between 2003 and 2005 as follows: China (46 percent), Argentina (43 percent), Colombia (39 percent), Indonesia (38 percent), India (34 percent) and Mexico (32 percent). In contrast, imports from the European Union increased 25 percent, while imports from Canada increased 19 percent.

increased paperwork trails that make it feasible to hire only literate farm workers, thereby pushing the illiterate workers out of the production chain. One of the biggest problems resulting from the entrance of supermarkets is the system of procurement they require and how local farmers can be a part of the system. In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, large retail firms require large distribution systems, more commonly referred to as supply chains, that can deliver sizeable volume of a consistent product at predetermined times. Thus, the large retail firms are forcing changes in the supply chains back to the producers. The retail firms can, because of their dominant size and economic power, dictate much of what gets produced, how it gets produced and who produces and processes it. The globalization of the retail stage reverberates back through the whole food system. Small farmers in Latin America are having difficulty in meeting the demands of the large retail firms. Thus, the restructuring of the food system is also about restructuring the farming (primary producer) stage. Weatherspoon and Reardon (2003) and Vorley (2003) note that there are some efforts to help farmers to work together more cooperatively to meet the new demands, but not all such efforts are successful.

There are other examples. Increased demand for shrimp by American consumers and other developed world consumers resulted in a radical and rapid transformation of mangrove and coastal regions of southeast Asia, particularly in areas traditionally reserved for the cultivation of rice. Intensive shrimp production has been shown to be harmful for coastal mangroves as well as for local agricultural production systems. For instance, in Thailand inland rice paddies were converted into cultured shrimp farms, a process that required the transportation of large quantities of saline water inland. Many environmentalists have raised concern because salt contamination in neighboring rice fields would affect the production of rice for local consumers (Flaherty and Vandergeest, 1999). Some scholars believe that the destruction of mangrove



swamps in Southeast Asia contributed to the damage caused by the Indian ocean tsunami of 2004 (Athukorala and Resosudarmo, forthcoming).

The point here is that changing patterns of U.S. food consumption and production will have an impact on the world. It follows that if the impact is harmful, then perhaps the U.S. ought to compensate in some meaningful way, which could involve U.S. farmers. If growing demand for foreign foods by U.S. consumers adversely affects the food stock or production and consumption capabilities of other nations, especially developing ones, then there might be a moral role for U.S. farmers to restore in like kind – food for food. The world might need U.S. farmers to supply certain foods that the poor, hungry or malnourished cannot provide themselves. The degree to which it is perceived that U.S. farmers have a duty to provide such foods for the world might depend largely on whether food is considered a right or a mere privilege.

*4. Is the role of U.S. farmers in the world dependent on whether food is seen as a privilege or a right?*

America is a relatively wealthy nation. That wealth allows its citizens to purchase the types and quantities of foods they desire. American preferences for low-cost foods, and the resulting impacts on global trade patterns in agricultural products discussed above, suggest that Americans have *de facto* accepted that food is a privilege, available to those who have the money to secure it from wherever they can. The agribusiness leaders present at the 2005 World Agriculture Forum reinforced this point. As summarized by Manternach (2005:5), speakers discussed the challenge of feeding an additional 2.6 billion people in the world by 2050 when the population of developed countries – the populations that provide the bulk of buying power and

food demand for today's farmers – is in serious decline. They agreed that this projected “‘need’ does not translate into ‘demand’ unless the need is accompanied by the ability to pay.”

This is in contrast to the belief of many others around the world that food is a right of everyone, well-fed Americans and malnourished citizens of developing countries alike. The Rome Declaration of World Food Security affirms “the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger (FAO, 1996).” Does the role of U.S. farmers and agriculture depend on whether food is seen as a privilege or a right?

If food is a privilege, then it may be consumed by anyone willing to pay the price to receive it. Those who have means may eat enough, while those who cannot meet the price demands of producers will go without, unless those who have the means feel a moral obligation to feed the hungry out of charity. In the U.S, Americans have a great variety of foods from which to choose, with access to local markets, supermarkets, fast food establishments, full service restaurants, and in most instances the choice of purchasing ingredients or ready-made meals. In her book *What to Eat*, Nestle (2006:11) takes consumers through the supermarket aisle by aisle to help them make healthy choices, a complicated undertaking in a country where the food industry makes available “3,900 calories per day for every man, woman, and child in the country, whereas the average adult needs only a bit more than half that amount.” Indeed, there is rising epidemic of obesity among Americans,<sup>9</sup> which has been linked not only to increased incomes but also to the rise of mass produced high-fat, high caloric processed foods that have

---

<sup>9</sup> According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) at the U.S. Center for Disease Control, between 1976/1980 and 2003/2004 the percent of adult Americans who are overweight (defined as having a body mass index of 25 or higher) increased from 47.1 to 66.2, while the percent obese (defined as body mass index of 30 or higher) increased from 15.0 to 32.9. In no year reported by the NCHS during this time period did the percent for either overweight or obese decrease (see [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/obese03\\_04/overwght\\_adult\\_03.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/obese03_04/overwght_adult_03.htm), accessed August 16, 2006).

decreased the real costs of preparing and consuming meals (Cutler, Glaeser and Shapiro, 2003). Importantly, when food is seen as a privilege, then those who are unwilling or unable to pay for certain foods will not get them – and those who have enough money will get what they *want*, which may be too much.

However, if food is seen as a right, then the question arises as to what claim right-holders have with respect to that right. Claims may involve negative or positive duties. Negative duties imply a claim by the right holder against non-interference from others. In some respects, the right to food might imply a claim against others not to interfere with their ability to produce and consume food. If so, then this raises an interesting dilemma. If Americans see food as a privilege, and, as a result, use their incomes to secure food from around the world, then does that interfere with the rights of others to produce and consume? When Americans import foods from developing countries, because they are ostensibly willing to pay more for the foods than local consumers, is that a case of interfering with the rights of local citizens to acquire food? If poor country farmers produce for American (or even European) markets, does that displace their own country's food production and consumption possibilities, affecting who gets to eat within their own countries? Most – but not all – consumers in the *developed* nations will be able to purchase food from the emerging global agrifood system and will even have the financial ability to select for non-price characteristics. However, as the agrifood system restructures, what happens to poorer consumers in developed nations, as well as those in poor nations, who cannot purchase adequate food supplies? It is possible that U.S. farmers will have an important role to play in returning to developing nations' foodstuffs they produce but that Americans do not wish to consume.

Positive claims, on the other hand, are those that imply a duty to do something with respect to the right-holder. This means that if food is a right involving a positive claim, then others – whoever they are needs to be determined – have a duty to provide that food. In other words, if food is a right in the positive sense, then people who do not have sufficient quantities of food and who are either unwilling or unable to purchase the food have a claim nonetheless on others for the food. If so, then who should provide that food, and how?

If food is right of people in the world, as suggested by the Rome Declaration, then perhaps U.S. farmers have the obligation to participate in a system whereby people who suffer hunger and malnourishment can eat. This is particularly true if the U.S. is least constrained by population and other factors in its ability to produce foods now and in the future. Interestingly, U.S. citizens seem to believe it appropriate to subsidize farmers in order for them to “feed the world.” A joint Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) and Knowledge Networks poll of 1,896 U.S. citizens from 17 farm states, conducted between December 19, 2003, and January 5, 2004, reveals that 54 percent of respondents agree with the statement: “It is good for the US to subsidize its farmers because then they are able to provide food to people around the world at very low prices, enabling poor countries to feed their populations and reducing hunger.” In contrast, 37 percent of respondents agreed with the alternative statement that it is not good to subsidize US food because doing so will flood the world market with cheap subsidized food (PIPA/Knowledge Networks, 2004). Does this suggest that U.S. citizens accept the idea that food is a right of the poor and malnourished around the world, even though their behavior, as described above, suggests a belief that food is a privilege for themselves?

*5. If the world needs U.S. farmers and agriculture, should U.S. agricultural subsidies be continued?*

The role of subsidies in U.S. agriculture production is an extremely contentious and controversial arena of politics in the U.S. and globally – meaning there are a multitude of viewpoints and policy prescriptions of the programs that have shaped American agriculture since the New Deal. However, we consider subsidies in part for the following reason: As stated above, if food is a right in the positive sense, then others have a claim on food regardless of willingness or ability to pay. Thus, someone will have to supply that food. It is in this sense that agricultural subsidies *might* continue to play a role, particularly if U.S. farmers and agriculture are seen as possessing the capacity to meet the food needs of the world’s poor and hungry.<sup>10</sup> Subsidies, in effect, encourage the production of agricultural products beyond what a market otherwise would supply. Subsidies allow producers to supply a greater quantity at a lower price to buyers. If food is a right, then subsidies to producers might be one way of ensuring that the claims of the impoverished and malnourished are met. On the other hand, the Rome Declaration also states, in objective 4.2 paragraph (c) of the Plan of Action, that governments should “reduce subsidies on food exports ...” Of course, subsidies could interfere with the negative right to food, in the sense that they distort world markets and otherwise interfere with the ability of non-subsidized producers to compete with subsidized producers. This conundrum suggests that, for better or worse, the issue of subsidies is related to the question of what role U.S. farmers might have in the world.

---

<sup>10</sup> We recognize that we are treading closely to the “is-ought” fallacy with this statement. The “is-ought” fallacy is that statements of what ought to be cannot be derived solely from factual statements of what is. In this case, a normative premise stating that those with a capacity to help have an obligation to do so, such as argued by Singer (2000), could be used to fill the “is-ought” gap.

While subsidies of some sort *could* be necessary to meet the food rights, if they exist, of people around the world who do not have access to safe, nutritious foods, one could argue that farm subsidies in the U.S. have not acted much to guarantee a right to food, and have been market distorting as well, because of their farm production and supply management concerns. The other question not addressed by U.S. farm subsidies relate to nutrition and poverty goals. The U.S. does subsidize some minimal access to food for limited resource consumers through food stamps, federally subsidized school lunch programs, and the Women, Infant and Children's Program, in addition to a few other programs.

The question for U.S. subsidies is should they be continued or reduced/eliminated? The "if food is a right, then food should be supplied" argument could be a compelling one for the continued use of agricultural subsidies, as long those subsidies actually related to nutritional goals already established through other programs and did not distort markets here or abroad. If this argument for subsidies were to be accepted, a potentially thornier question arises, "Who should be the recipients of subsidies?" If food is a right, should farmers be subsidized, or should producers or even consumers of food be subsidized? Although it might be politically feasible to shift agricultural supports to, say, poor consumers (through expansion of WIC and other welfare programs), it is not likely the U.S. will directly subsidize food consumption in developing nations. An additional concern is whether subsidies supporting the "food is a right" argument remove the responsibility of individuals to obtain food for themselves and their families. Therefore, if the question is what role U.S. farmers would have in the world, perhaps the issue of subsidies ought to be framed differently, "Should the U.S. subsidize U.S. growers and producers, or should foreign governments or foreign aid organizations subsidize the poor and hungry consumers of the world?"

### **Concluding Comments:**

Some trends and even commentators suggest that there is a declining role of U.S. farmers in meeting the food needs of U.S. consumers. However, the world's population might need U.S. farmers. We have outlined, by means of a series of questions, ideas regarding a role for the American farmer. For example, is it enough that the U.S. agricultural sector stays viable even though U.S. farmers may disappear? Do U.S. consumers have a "right" to regard food as a privilege and to continue to procure it as cheaply as possible no matter from whence it may come? Is it appropriate to subsidize current American agricultural practices despite possible impacts on the world's food security?

Our objective is to raise questions in the context of our exploration of the role of the U.S. farmer, not necessarily to answer them, except insofar as to suggest that the world may need U.S. farmers even if Americans don't. In doing so, we know we have raised more questions than we have answered. Our intention is to spark a healthy debate reflecting the implications of pursuing our current food production and consumption trends on farmers in the United States, on consumers both here and abroad, and for food security policies globally.

### **References:**

- Athukorala, P. and Resosudarmo, B. P. (forthcoming). "The Indian Ocean Tsunami: Economic Impact, Disaster Management and Lessons," Asian Economic Papers from <http://eprints.anu.edu.au/archive/00003203/01/wp-econ-2005-05.pdf> (May 16, 2006).
- Blank, S. (1998). The end of agriculture in the American portfolio. (Westport, CT:Quorum Books.

- Burch, D. and Goss, J. (2005). Regionalization, globalization, and multinational agribusiness: A comparative perspective from Southeast Asia. (In Ruth Rama (Ed.), *Multinational agribusiness* (pp. 253-282) Oxford: Haworth Press).
- Clinton, B. (2000). Remarks by President Bill Clinton to the community of the University Of Warwick, Coventry, England. [Electronic version.] Federal News Service, December 14.
- Cutler, D., Glaeser, E. and Shapiro, J. (2003). Why have Americans become more obese? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 17(3), 93-118.
- Drabbenstott, M. (2000). New directions for U.S. rural policy. *The Main Street Economist*, June, 1-6. Retrieved July 17, 2006, from [http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/mainstreet/MSE\\_0600.pdf](http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/mainstreet/MSE_0600.pdf).
- FAO. 1996. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome declaration on world food security, November. Retrieved May 2, 2005, from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>.
- FAO. 2004. State of food insecurity in the world. Retrieved June 7, 2005, from [http://www.fao.org/documents/show\\_cdr.asp?url\\_file=/docrep/007/y5650e/y5650e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/docrep/007/y5650e/y5650e00.htm).
- Fernandez-Cornejo, J. (2004). The seed industry in U.S. agriculture: An exploration of data and information on crop seed markets, regulation, industry structure, and research and development. *Agriculture Information Bulletin Number 786*, (Washington, DC: Resource Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture).
- Flaherty, M. and Vandergeest, P. (1999). Rice paddy or shrimp pond: Tough decisions in rural Thailand. *World Development*, 27(12), 2045-2060.



- Frommer, W. B., Ludewig, U, and Rentsch, D. (1999). Plant biology enhanced: Taking transgenic plants with a pinch of salt. *Science*, 285(5431), 1222-1223.
- Giampietro, M., Bukkens, S.G.F., and Pimentel, D. (1999). General Trends of Technological Changes in Agriculture. *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences*, 18(3), 261-282.
- Heffernan, W., Hendrickson, M. and Gronski, R. (1999). Consolidation in the food and agriculture system. February. (Washington, D.C.: National Farmers Union).
- Hendrickson, M. K. and Heffernan, W. D. (2002). Opening spaces through relocalization. *Sociologia Ruralis* 42(4), 347-369.
- Hendrickson, M. and James, Jr, H.S. (2005). The ethics of constrained choice: How the industrialization of agriculture impacts farming and farmer behavior. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 18(3), 269-291.
- Hilgren, S. (2005). Trade surplus evaporates. *Farm Journal*. January 23. Retrieved on July 18, 2006, from [http://www.agweb.com/get\\_article.asp?pageid=114814](http://www.agweb.com/get_article.asp?pageid=114814).
- Hinrichs, C. C. and Welsh, R. (2003). The effects of the industrialization of us livestock agriculture on promoting sustainable production practices. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 20, 125-141.
- Jerardo, A. (2004). The U.S. ag trade balance...more than just a number. *Amber Waves*, 2(1), 36-41.
- Jerardo, A. (2003). Import share of U.S. food consumption stable at 11 percent. Report # FAU-79-01. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service)
- Knight Ridder. (2004). World's hungry grew by 18 million in last 5 years, group says. December 10, 1.

- Libby, L. (1997). Efficiency, equity and farmland protection: An economic perspective.  
Retrieved May 8, 2006 from Swank Program in Rural-Urban Policy at the Ohio State University website  
[http://aede.osu.edu/programs/Swank/pdfs/efficiency\\_equity\\_and\\_farmland%20protection.pdf](http://aede.osu.edu/programs/Swank/pdfs/efficiency_equity_and_farmland%20protection.pdf).
- Loungani, P. (2003). The global war on poverty: Who's winning? Finance & Development, 40(4), 38.
- Manternach, D. (2005). World ag forum still sees food miracle needed. Doane's Agricultural Report, 68(20), 5-6.
- Marsden, T. (2003, April). Retailer power in the UK and EU: Impact on producers in Brazil. (Invited presentation at Food in a Failed Market conference by Grassroots Action on Food and Farming, Reading, United Kingdom).
- McGranahan, D. and Sullivan, P. (2005). Farm programs, natural amenities and rural development. Amber Waves, 3(1), 28-35.
- Nestle, M. (2006). What to eat. (New York, NY: North Point Press).
- Phillips, M. M. (2000). World Bank rethinks strategy for poor -- political change is necessary, not economic growth alone, a study suggests. Wall Street Journal, September 13, A2.
- Pimentel, D. and Giampietro, M. (1994). Food, land, population and the U.S. economy.  
Retrieved May 6, 2006 from the website <http://www.dieoff.com/page55.htm>.
- Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)/Knowledge Networks. (2004). PIPA-Knowledge Networks Poll: Americans on Farm Subsidies: Questionnaire. Retrieved August 23, 2006 from the website

[http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/FarmSubsidies/FarmSubs\\_Jan04/FarmSubs\\_Jan04\\_guaire.pdf](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/FarmSubsidies/FarmSubs_Jan04/FarmSubs_Jan04_guaire.pdf).

Rama, R. (2005). *Multinational agribusiness*. (Oxford: Haworth Press).

Ray, D. (2005, April). Developments in U.S. agricultural policy. (Panel presentation at the Transatlantic Dialogue on Agriculture and Development, Washington DC).

Reardon, T. and Berdegue, J. A. (2002). The rapid rise of supermarkets in Latin America: Challenges and opportunities for development. *Development Policy Review*, 20(4), 317-34.

Singer, P. (2000). 'The Bread Which You Withhold Belongs to the Hungry': Attitudes to Poverty. *Ethics & Development*, 2000. Retrieved August 23, 2006 from the website [http://www.iadb.org/Etica/documentos/dc\\_sin\\_elpan-i.htm](http://www.iadb.org/Etica/documentos/dc_sin_elpan-i.htm).

Summers, M. (2000). A short history of agricultural institutions. (In M. Stumo (Ed.), *A Food and Agriculture Policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (pp. 95-102) Lincoln, Nebraska: Organization for Competitive Markets).

Tweeten, L. (1998). *Competing for scarce land: Food security and farmland preservation*. Anderson Chair Occasional Paper ESO 2385. (Columbus, OH: Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics, The Ohio State University).

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2006). *Tracking the Trend Towards Market Concentration: The Case of the Ag Input Industry*. (Geneva: U.N. Conference on Trade and Development). Retrieved on August 22, 2006 from [http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ditccom200516\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ditccom200516_en.pdf).

Vorley, B. (2003). *Food, Inc.: Corporate consolidation from farm to consumer*. (London: UK Food Group).

Weatherspoon, D. and Reardon, T. (2003). The rise of supermarkets in Africa: Implications for agrifood systems and the rural poor. *Development Policy Review*, 21(3), 1-20.

Whitton, C. L. (2004). Processed agricultural exports led gains in U.S. agricultural exports between 1976 and 2002. USDA Outlook Report No. FAU8501. Retrieved June 7, 2005 from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fau/feb04/fau8501/>.

Wiebe, K. (2001). Natural resources, agricultural productivity, and food security. *Issues in Food Security, Agriculture Information Bulletin Number 765-3*. (Washington DC: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture).

Wiebe, K. (2003). Linking land quality, agricultural productivity, and food security. *Agricultural Economic Report Number 823*. (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service).

Wilkinson, J. (2002). The final foods industry and the changing face of the global agro-food system. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42(4), 329-346.

World Bank. 2005. Millennium development goals. Retrieved June 7, 2005 from World Bank website <http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/MDG/gdmis.do>.