

ENVIRONMENTAL VIEWS

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FOOD CHAIN NOT STRETCHED TO LIMIT—YET

BY DENNIS T. AVERY

CHURCHVILLE, VA—The cable network MSNBC is warning that the world food chain “has been stretched to the limit” by rising world demand and a series of crop failures in several countries. The TV network’s warning is premature. The U.S., in fact, could ease the current global food price spike with one administrative action—limiting the amount of U.S. corn that gets turned into corn ethanol.

Recently, about one-third of America’s huge corn crop has been diverted from food and feed into an ultra-costly auto fuel that gives consumers poorer mileage even as it drives up their food costs. The corn ethanol diversion creates an artificial scarcity of farmland, as it attracts more land into corn instead of wheat or other crops—and the price effects are felt globally. In 2008, the ethanol mandate drove food prices up by more than 50 percent worldwide, and triggered food riots in Mexico and several other countries.

But we didn’t learn the lesson. Half of the U.S. Senate thinks it needs corn ethanol subsidies to get re-elected. President Obama thinks corn ethanol is “rural development,” not realizing that half the increase in corn farmers’ profits comes from the pockets of their neighbors who are paying double for the grain they feed to chickens, hogs and cattle.

The real food crisis hasn’t hit yet. The crop shortfalls in the U.S., Russia, Argentina, and Australia aren’t even all that unusual. Bad weather happens, and it hasn’t gotten worse with “global warming.”

MSNBC is not wrong about the rising global demand for food, but they’re crying “wolf” before the wolf cubs are born. It’s true the world must double its food production in the short space of 40 years, to feed a human population that will peak at perhaps 9 billion people. Seven billion of them will be “rich” by today’s standards. After 2050, our declining birth rate will start the first-ever long term shrinkage in human numbers. It was lower death rates that caused the “population explosion,” by the way, and not farmers “producing too much food.”

The real joker in the deck is that a continuing food shortage will not even cause much hunger. If food is in short supply, farmers around the world will simply plow more and poorer land to grow more low-yield crops. The Green Revolution spared about 7 million square miles for wildlife in the 1960s—the land area of South America. That benefit from “high-yield conservation” could be lost in the coming decades.

MSNBC doesn't talk about solutions to the food chain tightening, but we will. We must triple the food yields on the planet's existing farmland, by intensifying production. The public must get over its chemo phobia, and license its farmers to use the pest controls that work best, whether they be chemical or biotechnological. Our ill-considered bans on such safe chemicals as DDT and Dursban have cost 50 million needless deaths in the tropics, are bringing widespread suffering from bedbugs in America today, and pest losses could lead to destruction of much of the planet's wild biodiversity in the decades ahead.

The Environmental Protection Agency "protects" us from "toxic chemicals" by moving their goalposts. The EPA can multiply the "no effect level" in rat tests by 100 or even 1000 to set the "acceptable daily intake." Thus, they can declare just about any chemical they choose too toxic for our children.

Lost in this arithmetic is the reality that anything is toxic in too large a dose, including salt and sunlight. "The dose makes the poison," as Paracelsus told us 500 years ago.

Oh, and there won't be much room on the more heavily populated planet in 2050 for organic farming. We'll need to shift our future concern from "toxic chemicals" to lost wildlife. Think "high-yield conservation." when you think of modern farming.

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