

AGSIGHT: FEBRUARY, 2012
NEVIL C. SPEER, PHD, MBA (nevil.speer@wku.edu)
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Last-minute Christmas shopping and long waits go hand-in-hand. And so it went with my daughter and me in our venture to purchase some stocking stuffers. We proceeded to the seemingly endless cashier line. To pass the time we joked back-and-forth during our fifteen-minute wait (seriously!) about the opportunity to “practice our patience.”

The wait also left plenty of time to ponder. I began to speculate about the plethora of stuff being sold and how much of it would ultimately just end up in the landfill without serving any real purpose. Were we adding to some wasteful, meaningless consumer loop?

But then I put on my food hat and began to reflect on our food system. (Somehow, somehow it always comes around to that – everything is viewed through a food lens.) Here I was amidst rampant consumption; I couldn’t help but wonder how and why agriculture becomes comparatively such a large fixation for the critics. That’s especially true when regarding the issue of resource utilization. What about waste associated with food and food production?

It’s often the primary point of contention for vegetarians and vegans. They consistently argue that meat consumption is inefficient and doesn’t fit within a model supporting sustainability. For example, PETA hosts a web page entitled, “Meat Production Wastes Natural Resources.” Not surprisingly the site promotes switching to an “Earth-friendly vegan diet...doing your part to help the environment...”

Alternatively, ongoing accusations about excessive use of nitrogen and phosphorus continue to find traction among various public-interest groups. And then there’s the stab about overuse of water associated with food production. All of that’s long-standing rhetoric associated with the issue of agricultural sustainability (which I addressed about a year ago in AgSight).

Any claim about waste, environment and sustainability needs to be authentic, though. With that in mind I turned to the Environmental Protection Agency data on municipal waste. Remember, my original observation was about the landfill.

EPA estimates that total municipal solid waste production in 2010 was 250 million tons (before recycling). Data further reveal that waste tonnage has increased nearly 65% during the past fifty years. The largest component of total production includes paper and/or paper products (coming in at 28.5%). Number two? You guessed it...food scraps accounting for almost 14% of landfill inventory – or **34.75 million tons** annually.

Need some perspective? Consider that a Boeing 747-8 has a maximum cargo capacity of about 175 tons. In other words, annual food waste is the equivalent of 199,000 full 747s. That’s about 545 flights each day – or one every six minutes continuously around the clock.

Here’s the real perspective, though. Assuming the U.S. population is approximately 308 million people, total food wastage in 2010 equaled 225 lb. for every man, woman and child in the United States - or the equivalent of 6/10 lb. on a daily basis. Accounting for the average person’s daily intake (somewhere between 4-to-5 lb. of food), the food waste rate runs about 13%!!

That luxury is the direct result of productivity advancements made by American agriculture in recent decades. Agriculture’s output during the 60-year period between 1948 and 2008 agriculture increased at an annual pace of 1.58%; aggregate inputs increased only .06%. Somehow, though, American agriculture remains a popular target - often accused of being wasteful or frivolous. Nothing could be further from the truth.

America’s farmers and ranchers are responsible stewards – they possess an enduring commitment to the wise and careful use of resources. Their very livelihood depends on it. The issue of waste really begins with us at home – not at the farm or ranch!