

AGSIGHT: NOVEMBER, 2009
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Drip...drip...drip: the fall of dropping water wears away the stone. So it goes with shaping public attitude and policy. If you repeat something often enough it must be true (not!), thus politicians are always coached to stay “on message”. The constant drumbeat creates foundation for impact. It often appears that some significant precipitous event or incident leads to change. In reality, transformation is more the result of doggedly sustaining a message over time and wearing down your opponent.

That’s exactly where agriculture finds itself – under siege from an unrelenting campaign bent on denigrating our mission to feed the world. The battlefield is seemingly mounting across a growing range of issues (more later). And the ranks of insurgency are expanding; some knowledgeable, most emotive – some genuine, many misguided. Worse yet, vilifying food production has become popular sport these days among the main-stream media of late. Dealing with each respective issue is impossible given space limitations here.

What’s most important is the over-arching perspective and attitude towards food production among activists. Those enlightened about the ills of agriculture now have traction in agriculture. They’re emboldened because of it. That’s not surprising. There were some important indicators along the way. For example, Mr. Obama’s *Time* magazine interview (Oct 23, 2008) in which he was quoted as saying:

I was just reading an article in the *New York Times* by Michael Pollen about food and the fact that our entire agricultural system is built on cheap oil. As a consequence, our agriculture sector actually is contributing more greenhouse gases than our transportation sector. And in the mean time, it’s creating monocultures that are vulnerable to national security threats, are now vulnerable to sky-high food prices or crashes in food prices, huge swings in commodity prices, and are partly responsible for the explosion in our healthcare costs because they’re contributing to type 2 diabetes, stroke and heart disease, obesity, all the things that are driving our huge explosion in healthcare costs.

That perspective gained significant direction when Kathleen Merrigan was named as Deputy Ag Secretary, USDA’s second-in-command.

Dr. Merrigan most recently served as Director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment program at Tufts University. The program’s mission is as follows:

To educate future leaders at the nexus of agriculture, food, and environmental science and policy, and empower them by providing rigorous training, an ethic of social change, and an intellectual community generating visions and models of alternative systems.

The ideology of “social change” and “alternative systems” plays out with endorsements from groups such as Food Democracy Now which included the Deputy Secretary in the “Sustainable Dozen”: “A list of progressive, reform-minded candidates...” (The ObamaFoodOrama blog, Feb. 23).

This all really matters when you begin to connect the dots. Food Democracy Now is sponsored by Free Range Studios. Free Range Studios was responsible for producing and promoting a very popular internet movie, *The Meatrix*, on behalf of Sustainable Table. The latter celebrates itself as one which “...educates consumers on food-related issues and works to build community through food...” Sustainable Table’s organizational perspective would have everyone believe that the food industry is defined by draconian “factory farming” such that: “Small family farms have been replaced by huge livestock facilities, where animals suffer horribly, workers are mistreated, the environment is being destroyed, and where rural

communities are falling apart.” Bottom-line, either you sanction that ideology or you question its validity.

From all appearances the new administration, by naming Merrigan as its Deputy Ag Secretary, identifies with that type of agenda. That’s not really anything new; unfortunately, we’ve accustomed ourselves to that particular genre of opposition. .

Now let’s go one step further and consider further President Obama’s most renowned and avid campaign supporters: Oprah Winfrey. She actively advocates her participation in a 21-day Vegan fast initiated by her association with Kathy Freston (*Quantum Wellness*). Ms. Winfrey noted, “The goal is to allow the body to rid itself of toxins, but Kathy’s thoughts on the ‘health, environmental, and spiritual implications of the foods we choose to eat’ got my attention too.” Get the inference? New enlightenment leads to ability to discern all kinds of personal and global connotations (or lack thereof) for all types of food (e.g. McDonald’s hamburgers and bean sprouts) and/or production systems.

Now the final and most important step; this is where it all comes together. Consider USDA’s recent announcement that that 2010’s annual Outlook Forum theme will be: “Sustainable Agriculture: The Key to Health & Prosperity.” What the heck does that mean anyway? I don’t think anybody really knows. However, there is one HUGE inference here that makes this alarming. Go back to Mr. Obama’s ideology cited from last October’s interview in Time: agriculture is “...partly responsible for the explosion in our healthcare costs.”

Let’s bring this all full circle. It’s one thing to fend off the activists. But it’s an entirely different matter when we’re staring down the barrel of healthcare regulation. The battlefield has been extended; in fact, now we’ve now got an entirely new theater of operations to fight. Anti-agriculture activists and food police potentially have a new-found venue to unite. That convergence enables them to leverage their ideology and impose new regulation. Agriculture and the entire food industry has as much, if not more, stake in this debate than any other industry!!! We better get with it.