

# Cheap Food At What Cost?

by Bob St.Peter

In the middle part of the country, where endless rows of corn and soybeans dominate the landscape, a very telling event takes place each Spring. This is the time of year when chemical fertilizers are applied most heavily and the Spring rains carry run-off into the rivers and drinking water. When the nitrate levels, from the nitrogen-based fertilizers, get real high, "blue baby alerts" are issued. Pregnant women are told not to drink tap water and parents are warned against giving it to infants under six months. High concentrations of nitrates in the body interfere with the blood's ability to carry oxygen and in small bodies can lead to the suffocation of the brain, thus the term "blue baby."

Astoundingly, it doesn't stop there. Fertilizer run-off that enters the tributaries of the Mississippi River travels south and gets dumped into the Gulf of Mexico, now industrial agriculture's sewer system. The fertilizers give algae a big boost in growth, causing large algae blooms. When the unnaturally high amount of algae die off and begin to decompose they absorb oxygen from the water, suffocating fish, shellfish, and plants. As a result of agricultural pollution there is now a dead zone in the Gulf the size of New Jersey, where aquatic life cannot survive.

The rise in the use of chemical fertilizers can be traced to the end of World War II, when munitions plants began to convert from producing nitrogen-based bombs to nitrogen-based fertilizers in order to maintain production and stay in business. Some observers have noted that World War II actually never ended; it just changed fronts.

If the benefits of an abundant supply of cheap food outweighed the harm caused in producing it, then proponents of industrial agriculture could argue that such actions are justified. But are 99-cent hamburgers a suitable trade-off for non-lethal drinking water? Who made the decision that we were going to forgo thriving ecosystems so that food processors like Cargill, ADM, Coca-Cola, and Nestlé could have access to cheap ingredients? One only needs to consider the rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer to wonder whether we're getting our money's worth.

Research conducted by the Institute for Food and Development Policy, (Food First) has found that throughout the world smaller, diversified farming systems are upwards of 1000% more productive in terms of the overall amount of food produced than large-scale industrial farms. Food First has also found that there is already plenty of food for every-

one and that the push by industry and governments for even larger yields is not solving the underlying problems of poverty and lack of access to productive land. There are alternatives to blue babies, dead fish, and hunger, but none that earn agribusiness the enormous profits as in the present way of doing food.

For farming to be ecologically sound it must be economically viable. This means rewarding those whose farming does not compromise the surrounding ecosystem and our health. As consumers, we can do this by paying what they ask. Sustainably-produced local food reflects the true cost of production and often a very small profit. It is unreasonable, and perhaps reflects a common ignorance about how good food is produced, to expect those who keep us fed and the land and water viable to be martyrs.

As citizens, we can lobby and agitate for an overhaul of the federal subsidy system that prioritizes high commodity yields, which reward corporate agribusiness at the expense of diverse, ecologically sound farming. If those who practiced just and sustainable farming were eligible for federal subsidies, a price support system was put in place, and agribusiness oligopolies were broken up we would be looking at a much different, and much healthier, food system.

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