

The future of meat or is it the future of food?

It was our intention to end “The Future of Meat” series with the previous column (<http://www.agpolicy.org/weekcol/2021/1106.html>), but things don’t always work out the way one has planned.

In this case, the change was triggered when a customer in the store where Harwood works in the meat department came up to him and asked, “Where can I find the fake pepperoni?” It was as if she were asking, “Where can I find the ketchup?”

Think about it, “Fake pepperoni!”

We have kidded about the term “fake meats” in reference grain-based hamburger and breakfast sausage substitutes while being aware that the use of the term “fake” in this context is slightly pejorative. The implication is that the “fake” product is not as good as the “real” one.

But for this customer “fake” was not a negative attribute, it was a positive one. The way she asked the question made it clear that, for whatever reason, she found the fake pepperoni more desirable than pepperoni made the traditional way with ingredients from slaughtered animals. If fake had been a negative term for her, she could have asked for “vegan pepperoni” or “vegetarian pepperoni,” but she didn’t.

Growing up in the 1940s and 1950 we remember people talking about fake beer; they called it “near beer” and that was not a positive term. They described it as swill. But during Prohibition that was all one could get, legally. When Prohibition ended so did most near beer production.

We had mock apple pie only because 30 RITZ crackers were less expensive than out-of-season apples. When the apples were ripe, mock-apple pie disappeared from the menu.

Come to think of it we already have fake mashed potatoes and fake rice. They are made from cauliflower and are in the frozen food aisle of your local grocery store. When we were kids, cauliflower was not on our list of favorite foods while French fries and mashed potatoes were much close to the top.

If we think about fake mashed potatoes and riced cauliflower from an environmental perspective, cauliflower is a water thirsty plant—compared to potatoes or grains—that needs to be grown in places like California where water is an increasingly scarce commodity. How stable is that option?

What does all of this say about the current agricultural model?

With global warming and improvements in corn genetics we have seen farmers in the northern tier move from growing spring wheat and canola to corn and soybeans. But commercial cauliflower production from North Dakota down through Nebraska and from Indiana to Kansas? We don’t think so.

What is going to happen to all the rangeland that is no longer needed if a significant portion of the US public moves from eating meat from animals to grain-based or cell-based meats? What happens to all those ranchers and their families?

Are we going to synthesize our food from dryland crops? Will the demand for grains and oilseeds decline if it takes fewer acres of grains and oilseeds to produce our future food supply?

The agricultural community needs to identify the consumer concerns that are driving these changes and make the necessary changes to address their concerns.

What does the future agricultural model look like?

What are the implications of “fake foods” for the price of agricultural land lying at some distance from urban centers? What happens to the rural communities that depend on the surrounding farms and ranches?

How do farmers and ranchers reconcile consumer expectations for minimally processed “real” foods and the growth we see in the area of fully processed “fake” food products?

What leverage do farmers and ranchers have with consumers? It is one thing for a local farm couple who grows watermelons or pumpkins to get their picture on a display in local grocery stores. But what about wheat farmers who live 1,500 miles away?

Thinking back to the fake pepperoni, what is about that product that is desirable compared to the original? Is the sodium level lower? How about fat? Is the concern related to animal welfare? Those of us in the agricultural community need to figure out what is going on.

Ironically, most of the “fake” foods are products of the same industrial food system that captures an increasing portion of the retail food dollar. These companies don’t care about agricultural prosperity; their stock price is their highest priority.

While farmers have significant control over the way their animals are raised, they have little control over the treatment of the animals after they leave the farm/ranch. How do they change the system in ways that address the concerns of consumers? Answering that question is the first step in identifying ways to ensure rural prosperity.

The sooner farmers and ranchers of all stripes sit down with consumers of all stripes and identify elements of a food system that meets the needs and desires of most people, the better.

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