

Free flow of information assists consumers' purchasing decisions. Obstruction encourages suspicion.

As a society of consumers, we depend on the free flow of information as we strive to make informed decisions concerning many of our purchases. If we are purchasing a new or used automobile, we may look at the online or printed ratings given a vehicle we have our eye on or we may talk to friends who own a similar vehicle from the same manufacturer. As woodworkers, the two of us turn to various woodworking magazines to check out the ratings these publications gave to the various brands and models of a tool we are thinking of purchasing. The higher the cost of the tool the more important the ratings become.

But when it comes to purchases, nothing is more important than the food we eat. Each individual item, be it a piece of meat or a loaf of bread, may seem small, but over a year we spend more on the food we eat than the vehicles or tools that we purchase. More importantly, the food we eat has a direct impact on our health.

So, as a society, where do we get our information about the food we eat? For recipes, we turn to cookbooks. For nutrition, we can read the label on the back of the package. But how does the urban consumer access accurate information about agricultural practices in crop and animal production?

A couple of generations ago in the US, a large portion of urban society had spent time with a grandparent or other relative who was a farmer, so farming practices were familiar to them. That level of familiarity with agriculture no longer exists for a large portion of society. The closest many Americans get to a farm is when they pull off the Interstate to fill up the gas tank.

While they lack direct familiarity with agriculture, consumers are not without questions. They want to know what it means when the label for the salmon they are about to purchase says "farm raised," and "color added." When they hear that "farm raised" salmon is raised in the ocean while "farm raised" catfish and tilapia raised in freshwater farm-ponds, they want to know about the environmental impact of their seafood choices.

They also have similar questions about the poultry, beef, and pork products that are on the grocery store shelf. For many, the organic label answers those questions.

In the past, advocates for the humane treatment of animals raised for food have released videos showing abhorrent animal raising practices on some farms. In response to these videos, some farm groups have developed what can best be described as "ag-gag laws" that limit the opportunities for animal rights advocates to film these practices.

From our perspective, it makes little sense for the average farmer to support the enactment of these laws. The adoption of such laws reinforces the worst suspicions of consumers. It makes it look like most farmers have something to hide.

We think that transparency is the best strategy whether we are talking about crop or animal agricultural production practices. If farmers and consumers differ in their views, the answer is the open sharing of information. Often that discussion takes place in the legislative arena whether we are talking about how much space laying hens have or what chemicals farmers are using on their crops. The resulting legislation may not meet the goals of either side, but that is better than closing off the discussion before it starts.

While it may not work for grain farmers on the prairies of Kansas and Nebraska, the “grandparent model” offers significant openings for farmers in areas surrounding larger communities to hold an open house for city folk who have never been on a farm. This is especially important for those who are engaged in the direct marketing of their crops and animals. These visits allow each group to hear the perspective of the other in a friendlier environment than a legislative hearing room.

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