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# Many woes, single cause: dysfunctional food system

By: Laura Rance

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As Prairie farmers were absorbing the magnitude of this year's unfolding crop failure this past week, news reports were warning of the looming health crisis rooted in rising obesity rates among Canadians.

Meanwhile, a small group called WinnipEGGers was appealing to a civic committee to allow hens in urban backyards.

Events like these are seemingly unconnected. But there is a common thread to that disconnection: They illustrate how dysfunctional our food system has become.

This year's unseeded and drowned-out acres combined with the already-marginal financial situation in farming threatens to overwhelm existing farm support programs. Yet, climate change models are predicting more of the same.

Our public health system is at risk of being overwhelmed by the rising cost of treating diet-related illnesses, as evidenced last week by a new study predicting one out of every 10 adults will develop obesity-induced Type 2 diabetes within the next decade.

All this is unfolding as urban consumers are finding it harder to access locally produced healthy food choices in their inner-city neighbourhoods -- a phenomenon known as "food deserts" -- due to consolidation of retail grocers. Urban land-use designs, zoning and lack of food knowledge prevent them from growing their own.

Not one, but two reports released last week pointed out that having disconnected food, farming and health policies have resulted in a food system that isn't working for farmers, consumers, taxpayers or the environment.

The Metcalf Foundation, a Ontario-based philanthropic agency formed by the late grocery chain

mogul George Cedric Metcalf, issued a series of well-researched and articulate papers under its Food Solutions project, while the Canadian Agricultural Policy Institute (CAPI) issued another in its series promoting the integration of food, farming and health policy.

Although focused on Ontario, the Metcalf Foundation's conclusions are nationally relevant. It says we suffer from a "good-food gap."

"The good-food gap represents the policy space separating the farm income crisis from the health crisis -- in other words, the fact that farmers find it difficult to make a living growing food, and consumers find it difficult to make the good food choices they want to make."

This gap results from "agricultural and health policies that are historically narrow in focus, with unconnected objectives and outcomes," it says.

CAPI calls this phenomenon "decision-making silos," and says "pan-government priority-setting should start with the most senior levels of government, such as a joint meeting of ministers of health, health promotion and agriculture."

It also flags a stark reality that Canada's export-oriented industry has so far failed to grasp. The "buy-local" trend is going global. "The growing mercantilism embodied in the 100-kilometre diets, buy national-local, geographical indications and country-of-origin labelling are strengthening around the world and may erode the natural advantages and image which Canada has enjoyed," it says.

One of the Metcalf solutions is shifting the policy focus away from export trade to domestic needs. The researchers point out export agriculture hasn't really done much for farm incomes; the majority of farmers rely on off-farm income to survive either in the form of employment or government support.

And it hasn't done much for national food security, either. "Over the past decade, (Ontario) exports have grown by 28 per cent while imports grew by 32 per cent. The upshot is the absurdity known as 'redundant trade,' whereby products are both exported as commodities and imported as food."

This is not to suggest export agriculture would cease to exist, only that government programs would stop propping it up. Obviously this has more appeal in a province such as Ontario with a population base that can absorb much of what its farmers produce, than a place like Manitoba where about 80 per cent of what farmers grow is sold elsewhere.

It also recommends changes to supply management to make room for smaller farmers and alternative production systems. But it is important to note none of the alternatives include getting rid of the system, in contrast to the position taken by trade-oriented analysts.

Other recommendations include supporting farmers for their environmental stewardship, policies that promote urban agriculture, incorporating good-food and food-production skills into schools, establishing local-food infrastructure through regional food clusters and encouraging public agencies to procure local, sustainably produced foods.

Although they are controversial and threaten the status quo, these are good ideas worth exploring.

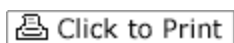
But what happened last week? Western premiers called for more farm aid, public health officials wrung their hands over our bad eating habits and Winnipeg promised to think about letting urbanites grow their own food.

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