

Farm Subsidies Don't Make Us Fat – Red, Green, and Blue

<http://redgreenandblue.org/2011/04/11/farm-subsidies-dont-make-us-fat/>

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Last week Dr. Robert Paarlberg published an article in GOOD titled “The Inconvenient Truth About Cheap Food and Obesity: It’s Not Farm Subsidies.” In the article he debunks the assertion by Michael Pollan in *Omnivore’s Dilemma* that farm subsidies make unhealthy foods artificially cheap. He points out that (for different reasons) libertarian-leaning groups like the Cato Institute and the columnist George Will make similar claims that are not supported by the facts.

The Response To This “Heresy”

The incendiary comment stream after this article (over 230 responses) reveals that Paarlberg has touched a nerve among Food Movement “true believers” for whom the Subsidy/Obesity linkage is a central dogma. In the face of Paarlberg’s careful logic and facts, those that cling to the dogma turn mainly to *ad hominem* attacks. Frankly, Paarlberg is far more qualified to answer this question than Pollan or almost anyone else. He spent a long and distinguished career as a professor of Political Science at Wellesley (hardly a mainstream Ag-connected institution) and specializes in the intersection of politics and economics in the global food system. He is an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. All of his grant support has been from public sources. While he is a defender of modern agricultural technologies, he is not associated with companies involved – a charge that is regularly hurled by the defenders of Food Movement Orthodoxy. Paarlberg is an independent, academic expert who also challenges certain food processor practices and aspects of the livestock industry. He also points out the moral ramifications of the precautionary principle as projected by the rich world on technology access for the poor world.

The Actual Effects of Subsidies

Paarlberg is not defending subsidies in this article, but simply pointing out what effects they actually

have on food prices. In fact, the farm programs are designed to supplement the income of farmers, which actually makes food artificially expensive, not cheaper. This makes sense when you think about Europe where even larger farmer subsidies contribute to their higher food costs. This is just basic economics. Paarlberg estimates that American farmers produce about 4% more corn than they might without subsidies which could slightly lower prices, but between trade restrictions and the federal corn ethanol program (credits and tariffs) the net effect is definitely to make food prices higher.

Why Is Our Food Relatively Cheap?

So, even though Farm Programs actually raise food costs above what they might be, food is still relatively “cheap” for most Americans who typically spend less than 10% of their income feeding themselves. Paarlberg points out that this is first because our incomes are high, and second that agricultural production-efficiency is constantly improving because of new technology development. No wonder so many families can afford the added expense of eating out or buying “value added” foods to make preparation more convenient. There is an excellent recent study published by the USDA that analyzes the “American Food Dollar” and it shows that food for “at home” consumption returns about 20% to farmers while that purchased “away from home” returns less than 5% to the farm.

Why Are Americans Obese?

If farm subsidies cannot be blamed, what can? I would submit that it mainly comes down to education, life-style, and personal responsibility with a possible role for genetics. We all make choices about what we eat and how much of it.

That is somewhat of an over-simplification, because American consumers are certainly given misleading information about food, and nutrition and they lack the background to see through it. We need to teach our children the basics of nutrition and food preparation and how to resist clever marketing schemes. They also need to understand enough science and have the critical thinking skills to resist the irresponsible disinformation about our food supply put out by anti-technology groups. One example is the “dirty dozen list” put out by the Environmental Working Group, which has been documented to discourage many consumers from purchasing fresh produce.

The solution to the obesity epidemic is not to make food expensive enough to reduce its consumption. It really comes down to giving people accurate information about food. Paarlberg’s article contributes to that effort by shooting down a false excuse.

Obesity image from mor10am.

You are invited to comment here or to email me at feedback.sdsavage@gmail.com. My website is Applied Mythology.