

# CULTIVATING COMMON GROUND

Linking Health  
and Sustainable Agriculture

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## LINKS BETWEEN AGRICULTURE AND HEALTH

### Over Production of a Range of Unhealthy Food Products

- US subsidies (direct- and in-direct) create incentives to over produce crops that are integral ingredients in cheap, high-fat, high-sugar, processed foods. A high-fat diet and excessive calorie consumption are linked to chronic diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary heart disease, cancer, and stroke.
- At least one-fourth of all energy intake comes from food groups that provide large quantities of refined sugar and fat and few micronutrients.<sup>2</sup>
- On an annual basis, US corn is consumed as follows: 1.2% as a vegetable, 8.0% as a sweetener, 50.1% as animal feed, 2.6% as starch, 5% as alcohol (ethanol), 22.6% as exports, 10.3% as reserve stocks, 0.2% as the seed.<sup>3</sup>

### Use of and Exposure to Toxins

- Pesticides used in conventional agriculture accumulate in the human body and can cause cancer, birth defects, decreased fertility, neurological damage and other health problems.<sup>4</sup>
- Every day, 9 out of 10 US children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years are exposed to combinations of 13 different neurotoxic insecticides in the foods they eat.<sup>5</sup> More than 8 million Californians drink water from systems where some or all of the water is contaminated with nitrate levels above government health standards.<sup>6</sup>
- Hormones found in food may be associated with breast cancer and the increasingly earlier onset of human female puberty.<sup>7</sup>
- The use of agricultural chemicals known to cause cancer in California increased 127% from 1991 to 1998.<sup>8</sup>

### Dangers to Farmer & Worker Health and Safety

- Farmers and agricultural workers develop occupation-induced health problems from chemical exposures. Occupational exposures to pesticides have been associated with health problems including miscarriages, birth defects, and decreased sperm counts.<sup>9</sup>
- One health survey of California agricultural workers revealed that the predominantly young male work force is at high risk for chronic disease, due in part to difficulty accessing a healthy diet.<sup>10</sup>
- US family farmers typically lose money each year. Their average income declined by over 60% in 2001 alone.<sup>11</sup> Suicide is a leading cause of death for farmers.<sup>12</sup>
- Analysis of farm communities in Nebraska and Wisconsin show that the loss of 1 family farm results in the loss of 8 “white collar” jobs and the loss of 7 farms results in the loss of 1 business in town.<sup>13</sup>

### Antibiotic Resistance

- The use of antibiotics in animals is linked to antibiotic resistant strains of food poisoning bacteria and may cause reduced effectiveness of related antibiotics used to treat humans.<sup>14</sup>
- 70% of US-produced antibiotics are fed to animals to promote growth.<sup>15</sup>
- The American Medical Association adopted a formal resolution opposing the nontherapeutic use of antibiotics. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers animal use of antibiotics to be the major cause of foodborne illnesses that resist treatment with antibiotics. The World Health Organization has called for an end to animal antibiotics important to human medicine.<sup>16</sup>

### Foodborne Illness

- 76 million Americans get sick every year: more than 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die from foodborne illnesses, according to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>17</sup>
- The crowded conditions of factory farms and the high-speed, automated methods of slaughtering and processing the animals increase bacterial contamination.<sup>18</sup>
- Salmonella cases in the US have doubled in the last 2 decades. Similar increases are reported for other foodborne bacteria.<sup>19</sup>
- As much as 8% of the weight of supermarket chicken is not meat, but a “fecal soup” from water used in processing chickens into meat.<sup>20</sup>

### Respiratory Illness and Poor Air Quality

- Non-sustainable methods of agricultural production contribute to poor air quality through pesticide drift, field dust, waste burning, gases from manure lagoons, and diesel exhaust from transporting food long distances.<sup>21</sup> Associated health problems include asthma, cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, and respiratory illness. Poor air quality also limits physical activity, increasing risks for chronic disease.
- Secondhand pesticides from pesticide drift, just like secondhand cigarette smoke, can cause serious adverse health effects.<sup>22</sup>
- 2.2 million Californians suffer from asthma, the number 1 cause of hospitalization for children. In Fresno, California’s leading agricultural county, childhood asthma is 3 times the national average.<sup>23</sup>