

## ***Two Takes on Scale, Efficiency, Food Safety, and How to Change the Food System***

*Food, Inc.* is the more critical and sharp-edged of the two films. It does not attempt to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the food system. The film strives to inform and motivate the viewer to demand change in the food system and does so through piecing together a series of images that are designed to surprise, and sometimes shock the viewer.

*Food, Inc.* is the first film to fully recount the tragic story of Kevin Kowalczyk, the two and a half year old child who was exposed to *E. coli* O157:H7 when eating hamburger on vacation in the Pacific Northwest in 2001. Twelve days after consuming the tainted meat, after a painful fight for his life, Kevin died from the infection and general organ failure triggered by HUS (Hemolytic-uremic syndrome), the always serious, sometimes fatal complication of *E. coli* O157:H7 poisoning.

The film also covers, very effectively, the so-far unsuccessful efforts by Kevin's mother and grandmother to urge Congress to craft and pass legislation making sure that no other family has to endure their loss. Their effort has led to the drafting of a bill now known as "Kevin's Law," legislation that would give the USDA greater authority to shut down meat processors shipping contaminated product. According to the film, "Kevin's Law" is still languishing in Congress, despite hundreds of additional *E. coli* O157:H7 deaths, several hearings, and a mountain of evidence that has triggered near-universal agreement that the country's food safety system is broke.

On a positive note, the major food safety reform legislation crafted by Congressman Henry Waxman and Edward Markey that recently passed the House Energy and Commerce Committee provides the Food and Drug Administration the authority to inspect and shut down unsanitary fruit and vegetable processing plants, a provision fully in accord with the spirit of Kevin's Law. Unfortunately though, the Waxman-Markey bill is focused on the fruit, vegetables, nuts, and grains side of the food safety equation, where FDA reigns supreme, and does nothing to address serious and lingering food safety problems in the meat industry, where USDA is in "charge," but to a surprisingly modest degree.

*Food, Inc.* is most effective when documenting the human toll of our contemporary food system. The segment on the workers in a Smithfield pork slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, North Carolina is captured very effectively on film. Conditions faced by workers at the plant are described by Eduardo Pena, an employee of a local union.

In Tar Heel, the company and INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) has apparently reached an informal agreement that only a small number of illegal workers, mostly Hispanic, will be handcuffed and arrested, prior to being deported. During one of the raids captured on film, 15 workers were arrested and taken away. Apparently, some number around 15 satisfies an unstated INS quota, but is low enough not to sacrifice productivity during any one shift at the Smithfield processing plant.



This segment is one of several that drive home the point that animals are not the only victims of abuse and exploitation in the modern food system.

### **Seeds of Hope**

The strength and appeal of the movie *Fresh* stem from the positive and uplifting stories of people that have taken concrete actions to create a piece of an alternative food system, or at least a healthier island within the larger food system. Diana Endicott started Good Natured Family Farm Coop in Kansas City, Missouri. The Coop is an alliance of 75 family farms in the surrounding area and provides with direct access for them to local stores. Russ Kremer founded the Ozark Mountain Pork Cooperative, out of frustration with the conventional pork business, and again, business is doing well, farmers have regained hope, and consumers are getting a healthier, tastier product from hogs raised with a much higher degree of commitment to animal welfare than typically the case on large, conventional hog farms.

The remarkable success of the three acre urban farm in the middle of Milwaukee also provides hope to the viewer that change is possible, in large part because people are hungry for it and need change to combat the twin threats of obesity and diabetes. This farm is the home of the Growing Power Food Community Center, an organization started by Will Allan some several years ago. Will is an ex-professional athlete, whose physical presence alone commands attention. *Fresh* captures the intense interest on the faces of visitors to his farm, young and old, as they listen to him talk about nutrient levels in tomatoes, how to feed and care for worms, and the need to take responsibility for one's own diet.

Joel Salatin and the healthy looking pigs, chickens, and beef cows raised by him and his family on Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia play major roles in both films. Salatin combines the wisdom of a successful farmer-marketer, the country charm and eloquence of Wendell Berry, and the passion of a country preacher. A wonderful scene in *Food, Inc.* covers chicken processing on Polyface Farm. The job is carried out in an inviting, open-sided building that benefits from the afternoon breeze. Workers in the building look out over the surrounding fields and woods. Joel and a crew of about five are shown carrying out the routine tasks necessary to transform a chicken into a broiler ready for the pot or barbecue.

The Polyface Farm chicken-processing team carries on with its tasks, camera rolling, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Joel seamlessly maintains the flow of his critique of the problems with the American food system as he eviscerates chickens on a pace of about three per minute. The whole operation appears remarkably calm and pleasant.

The chicken processing scene works so well because of the inevitable contrast to the many earlier clips in the film of the same process in conventional, large scale slaughterhouses, where the chicken carcasses are flying by with line speeds of 50 or more per minute, and workers struggle to even begin to keep up with the pace of the line and their assigned task. Salatin and his co-workers show that it does not have to be that way, but he also acknowledges that he cannot provide chickens to his customers at the prices common in supermarkets.



In *Food, Inc.*, Joel Salatin reflects upon the consequences for a society that allows animals and workers to be treated as cogs in a machine that is set to run at such unnatural, and sometimes inhuman, speeds. He states –

“A culture that just views a pig as a pile of protoplasmic inanimate structure to be manipulated by whatever creative design the human can foist on that critter, will probably view individuals within its community, and other cultures in the community of nations with the same type of disdain and disrespect, and controlling-type mentality .”

### “What’s Wrong with That?”

Both films contain a few, usually short scenes featuring people who are proud of the efficiency and productivity of the American food system. For example early in *Food, Inc.*, a chicken industry spokesman says that:

“What the system of intensive production accomplishes is to produce a lot of food on a small amount of land at a very affordable price. And somebody explain to me what’s wrong with that.”

The rest of the film stands as a response to the “...what’s wrong with that?” question. Recurring themes include the dirty, stressful conditions on many Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), pollution from manure lagoons and the greenhouse gases emitted from CAFOs, reliance on antibiotics to keep animals growing, and the toll on workers and contract farmers.

While *Food, Inc.* touches on the heightened reliance on antibiotics in CAFOs, *Fresh* delves into the details of how daily, low doses of antibiotics can trigger the emergence of resistant strains of bacteria, eventually infecting people and eroding the utility of once-effective human antibiotics.

Tight quarters and near-constant stress require daily administration of low-doses of antibiotics through feed or water on essentially all, large-scale, conventional pig and poultry farms. In fact, as documented in the book *Hogging It* published by the Union of Concerned Scientists in 2001, about 70% of the antibiotics and antimicrobials used in the U.S. were given to farm animals (access the Executive Summary at [http://go.ucsusa.org/food\\_and\\_environment/antibiotic\\_resistance/page.cfm?pageID=264](http://go.ucsusa.org/food_and_environment/antibiotic_resistance/page.cfm?pageID=264)). In fact, *Hogging It* estimated that the 24.6 million pounds of antimicrobials were then being used on hog, chicken, and beef farms, while some 3 million pounds were used in treating infections in humans. Accordingly, about 8 pounds of antimicrobials are administered to three major livestock species for every one pound used in human medicine.

Another problem – CAFOs with tens of thousands of pigs and beef produce a lot of manure, and in one place. CAFO operators deal with the mountain manure and rivers of urine by constructing lagoons that are, on a good day, unpleasant and dangerous places. Too many animals in a given region lead to grossly excessive manure application rates on farmland, contaminating water, triggering health problems among neighbors, and greatly increasing greenhouse gas emissions.



In *Fresh*, Pollan offers a clear explanation of what happens when animals are concentrated in feedlots and on large farms, away from the cropland growing the feed needed to raise the animals –

“You created a pollution problem where you didn’t have one, because if you keep animals on farms, their manure is a blessing, you can use it to grow other crops...We took the solution – plants and animals working together – and we divided it neatly into two problems. One is this pollution problem on the feedlot, where the manure becomes a pollutant instead of a blessing. And the other is on the farm, where we have a fertility crisis, because there are no animals, so we have to buy synthetic fertilizer.”

Unhealthy animals undermine animal welfare and increase food safety risks. Hormones given to animals to speed growth or production undermine their health and pose their own unique food safety risks, including heightened risk of *E. coli* O157:H7 gaining a foothold in the digestive tract of cattle, a point made in both films.

Farmers also are exploited by the current food systems in ways that deserve much more attention. Carol Morison, a contract chicken grower for Perdue, explains in *Food, Inc.* how the companies have near-complete control of every facet of their operations. Moreover, growers must borrow on the order of \$500,000 to build two houses for raising broilers, an investment that might generate \$18,000 profit in a good year, and only then after a lot of hard, dirty, often dangerous work. After a chilling scene where dead chickens are picked up and disposed of, she sums up her experience by saying “...to have no say in your business is degrading.”

The films cover most of the significant hidden costs of cheap food, especially low-cost, mass-produced animal products. Both stress the need to move these costs onto the balance sheet of our contemporary food system, so that costs and benefits, and the risks and social impacts of alternative ways to produce, process, and market food can be more fully appreciated. While many individuals and organizations in the conventional food system, and many farmers, are working to adopt healthier and more sustainable ways to produce food, for now in conventional agricultural circles, the fear of change still trumps hope that change will be for the better.

### **The Nature of Efficiency**

In *Food, Inc.* Pollan introduces a new segment of the film with the point that each step taken by scientists, agribusiness, and farmers to increase the efficiency of food production tends to create new and unforeseen problems. The film then turns to a scene composed of an industrial operations center filled with computer screens and TVs, from which a few people are reportedly controlling the operations of ten-plus BPI (Beef Products, Inc.) meat slaughter plants across the United States. Here again, the pictures are worth a thousand words.

Eldon Roth, the founder of BPI, is interviewed (the only agribusiness leaders willing to go on camera). He explains that “...from a food safety standpoint, we think we’re ahead of everybody.” BPI pioneered the application of ammonium and ammonium hydroxide in the hamburger making process, chemicals



capable of killing *E. coli* O157:H7, according to BPI. Asked about BPI's marketshare, Roth estimates that BPI product is in 70% of the hamburgers sold in America today. He adds "...in five years, we think we will be in 100%. We do have some competitors; I think we are going to beat them. You know, again, it's a marriage of science and technology."

Pollan then returns to assert that "...we've skewed our food system to the bad calories...it's directly related to the kind of farm policies we have." This observation leads to a now familiar critique of U.S. farm policy as set forth in Pollan's recent books and the commentary of many other experts. The gist of the argument is that farm policy must change so that carrots become cheaper than potato chips. Once this happens, the hope is that meaningful progress will be made in addressing obesity and diabetes, and other public health problems rooted in the modern American diet.

These themes are also addressed in *Fresh*. After explaining how the integration of animals and grass on Polyface Farm generate some \$3,000 per acre in sales (mostly direct to consumers), compared to about a \$150 per acre on the neighboring beef farm, Salatin explains that –

"...we're not talking about going back to grandpa's farm. We're talking about marrying the best of the technology and innovative we have..." with the collected knowledge and experience of farmers.

Pollan also highlights differences in the nutritional quality of food in *Fresh*. He explains that when the emphasis is simply on increasing production and efficiency, the quality of food often suffers. Organic eggs from chickens with access to pasture that cost \$4.00 to \$5.00 a dozen are "...a completely different product..." higher in Omega 3s and Vitamin A. He says that "We've made food cheaper, but we have also diminished it nutritionally." He goes on to assert that USDA data shows that key nutrients have declined by 40%.

### **Two Views of Wal-Mart**

In *Food, Inc.* both Joel Salatin and Gary Hirshberg, CEO of Stonyfield Farms address the enormous impact of Wal-Mart on the food industry. Hirshberg says "For me, when a Wal-Mart enters the organic space, I'm thrilled...When I run into my old environmental friends, many are initially horrified by the kinds of company that I'm keeping these days. But when I go on to explain what the impact of one purchase order from Wal-Mart is in terms of not pounds, but tons of pesticides...tons of chemical fertilizers...we get away from the emotion and we get down to the facts."

But Salatin has "...absolutely no desire to be at Wal-Mart. As soon as you grasp for that growth, you're gonna view your customer differently. You're gonna view your product differently. You're gonna view your business differently..."

