

Food System Costly for People and Planet, Professor Says

by Mairi Maclean, The Edmonton Journal, November 2007

EDMONTON --

Nettie Wiebe gets unimpressed glances from her graduate students when she begins a course on food in the rural community with a seemingly simple assignment -- to have students find out about a food they enjoy eating.

A Saturday night pizza, for example. The sophisticated, upper-level students roll their eyes, presuming it's a no-brainer project in an easy class. Then they discover that tracking down the information is no easy task.

"They're phoning head offices in New York to see where the tomatoes on the pizza came from," Wiebe said in a presentation to the Parkland Institute's fall conference on sustainable communities.

"(The makers) can tell you the places they source, but not where the tomatoes on the pizza in Saskatoon comes from. It could have been Mexico; it could have been California. They're not interested in telling you those things because it is proprietary knowledge."

As well as learning about the secrecy around food, students discover we have a very expensive food system in terms of energy use, with the long distance travel involved and the number of locations and processes that touch almost every food on the grocery store shelf.

Nutrition is lost in processing and harm is done to the environment, said Wiebe, an organic farmer near Saskatoon, a former president of the National Farmers Union and an ethics professor at the University of Saskatchewan.

"If the truism that you are what you eat were true, we'd all wear little tags like on the cheap toys, the ones that say 100 per cent unknown fibre," said Wiebe, to chuckles from the crowd. "This has serious implications for democracy. If you don't know anything about the food system and what you're eating, how are you going to make decisions around it?"

The key to the current system is how "disintegrated" it is, she said. Food has come loose from its local environment and culture; eaters are distanced from food processes and sources and in a fog about food content, despite complicated labels on packages.

The huge variety of far-flung foods on the shelves "actually masks a tremendous loss of biodiversity" and the monoculture style of growing that has destroyed many important food choices that should and could be available. At the same time, the language around food has become one of consumption, of waistlines and calories.

Wiebe called for a reimagining of the system. As a start, there is great wisdom in reviewing traditional cultures whose foods reflected, symbolized and infused their cultures with meaning, she said.

"We should take seriously the kind of wisdom and benefit there was in eating local and living within that context."

The 100-mile diet (choosing to eat food grown close to home) and the slow-food movement are positive signs that urban citizens are taking note of where their food comes from, she said, envisioning a more socially conscious food distribution system made up of small co-operatives and locally financed projects developed to suit their communities.

Government farm policy over the past 35 years has worked against the sustainability of small farms, Wiebe said, instead focusing on huge-scale agribusiness.

"Billions of dollars have gone into agriculture support, and if we'd supported small scale farming with that amount it would be in very good shape.

"Instead, we've put the money into dismantling the rail system, the elevator system and undercutting and systematically destroying small-scale hog production and beef feeding."

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