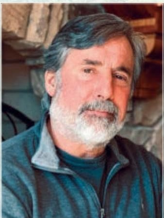


Eat Your View



By ROBERT TURNER

# THE MYTH IN THE MACHINE

## How the Farm Bill Impacts You and Your Money

In a telephone conversation from his home in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., Dr. Ricardo Salvador says this: “We’ve spent decades building up this system, and the system is the problem.” Salvador is the senior scientist and director of the Food and Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCC), and has more than four decades of experience working with other scientists, economists, farmers and politicians to transition our current food system to one that is more sustainable and equitable.

“It’s full of myths, based on false scales of production, row crops and CAFOs (confined animal feed operations)—and we don’t need it,” Salvador tells me. “It will take a while to dismantle it, to ‘de-scale it’ all.”

Prior to working at the UCC, Salvador was an associate professor of agronomy at Iowa State University where he served as program chair for the nation’s first sustainable agriculture graduate program.

Salvador speaks with an intelligent, metered cadence and a barely detectable accent that probably reflects his family heritage and the time he spent living and growing up in southern Mexico as a young boy.

“We have created certain myths in our food system, and the government price supports were created to prop up those myths,” Salvador says.

As a card-carrying member of the National Association of Science Writers with a focus on food and agriculture, I love speaking with scientists like Salvador. And I think that I have a pretty good understanding of these myths Salvador is talking about, the myths and beliefs that prop up the global food system and the multinational food corporations that benefit most from them.

As we sat on the phone together discussing the upcoming farm bill, the four-to-five-year plan for agriculture in the US that is currently going through Congress, it is difficult for me to come to terms with the understanding that our massive agricultural economy, and the billions of taxpayer dollars that are spent on farm subsidies to prop it all up, are so misguided and based on false truths. Worse yet, the whole system has become very harmful to the environment and the natural ecosystems that support all life on this planet, including soil, water and air.

The “big myths” began and took hold in the early

1970s when then Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, whose policies favored large-scale corporate farming, famously told farmers to “get big or get out.”

The farmers got big by increasing their debt loads and swallowing up smaller farms, and they grew more corn, as they were told. A lot more corn. Too much corn. So much corn that the prices deflated, and the subsidies were put in place to prop up the farmers who were growing a lot more corn but still going broke. Midwestern farmers are now dependent on the subsidies—40 percent of net farmer income in the Midwest comes from the farm subsidies, a government check.

The myths for supporting the overproduction of corn with taxpayer money have changed over the years. Initially, it was to support export markets and “feed the world,” then it was bioplastics, then processed foods, then corn sweeteners, until finally ethanol became the savior for this behemoth that was created—this Corn Belt economy—and Congress mandated that gasoline must contain 10 percent ethanol (made from corn). That quickly sucked up 40 percent of the US corn crop.

The truth has been ignored. According to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, ethanol generates just 25 percent more net energy than it took to produce it when you include the energy and fertilizers (made from fossil fuels) that are used to grow corn and process it into ethanol. Not a very good return on energy invested.

In another study published in the same journal, the use of an ethanol blend in gasoline releases more greenhouse gas emissions than straight gasoline when you add in the destructive nature of our monocropping system, which includes massive

amounts of fossil-fuel-based fertilizers, soil erosion and the breakdown of normal carbon-storing mechanisms in healthy soil. The land use change brought on by the corn ethanol mandate has been massive and devastating, resulting in reduced food crop diversity, biodiversity loss and ecosystem meltdown (what many scientists now call a “sixth extinction”) and overall higher food prices.

What the system really did was allow a few multinational corporations that supplied the seeds and chemical inputs to become very rich and powerful. And so did the companies that purchased this taxpayer-supported corn, like CAFOs who could buy feed corn cheaper than they could grow it themselves, and the processed food companies churning out junk food and soft drinks with lots of cheap corn derivatives.

“It’s been a while since anyone has been asked to justify these subsidies,” says Salvador. It’s time we started asking these questions.

The ‘Big Ag’ companies will continue to lobby Congress under the banner “Help the Farmer,” says Salvador, “while they’re really helping themselves to the taxpayer’s pocket. It will be an uphill battle to change an entrenched system like this, even as the burden falls heavily on the taxpayer.”

But what if taxpayers and policy makers start listening to scientists like Dr. Salvador and start asking questions? What then? Might the myths surrounding a global, destructive, monocropping system controlled by large multi-national food corporations simply break down and blow away like dust on a drought-stricken field?

*Robert Turner is a farmer and author of Lewis Mumford and the Food Fighters: A Food Revolution in America. Learn more at EatYourView.com.*