

Back to Where they grow our junk food

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Margaret Webb

Follow the flow of food. That's what any farmer will tell you. Because apples don't grow in supermarkets.

So to get to the root of the exploding obesity epidemic, I went in search of a junk food farm.

Such farms are not so easy to spot. No fields of Dorito bags waving in the breeze, no orchards blooming with soda pop, no soil bursting with 99-cent burgers.

What you do see are vast operations growing the raw materials for junk food: soybeans and corn.

The two crops go into the production of many things: pharmaceuticals, industrial products, animal feed – and inexpensive calories.

Tonnes of soybeans and corn are turned into "edible food-like substances," as food system critic Michael Pollan calls them, used in virtually all processed foods, beverages and junk food.

Last year, Ontario farmers planted 2.4 million acres of soybeans and just over 2 million acres of corn. That's nearly half of all cropland in the province, a near-colonization of Ontario farms by the soy and corn industry.

It has provided an abundance of cheap calories for a food system that operates by Doritos economics. A bushel of corn produces some 440 two-ounce bags of 99-cent chips. Farmer grosses \$3.70 for the bushel of corn, Doritos more than \$440.

Dave Ferguson grows ingredients for junk food on his 364-hectare farm about an hour west of London, Ont. With no market for local food in his area, he has few other options than to grow soybeans and corn, along with wheat and a little alfalfa.

A portion of his harvest heads to Windsor, to American-owned ADM Agri-Industries Ltd., and to London, to Casco Inc., an affiliate of U.S.-based Corn Products International.

ADM crushes soybeans, producing feed for livestock, which helps make the 99-cent burger possible, while extracting the oil for lards, frying oils, shortening and margarines. Soybean oil is responsible for much of the added fat in our diets.

From corn, Casco produces syrups, sweeteners, starches and oil. Some 55 per cent of the sweeteners used in the food and beverage industry derive from corn. Corn supplies our diet with its sugar high.

Ferguson, a fit 50-year-old, says the demand for cheap food, combined with competition from ever cheaper global imports, has placed relentless pressure on farmers not only to grow these crops, but to expand (Ontario is beginning to sprout 2,000- to 4,000-hectare crop farms, which dwarf Ferguson's and are even less environmentally sustainable than his).

He says the demand for cheap food also puts pressure on farmers "to work every corner, every square inch" – eliminating woodlots, wetlands and buffer strips near vulnerable waterways. He knows that current farming techniques – growing too few crops in limited rotation, with chemical fertilizer, and returning too little organic matter to the soil – is mining his land of fertility, and that the current methods will not feed increasing populations.

Ferguson is trying to turn things around. He is the volunteer chair of the Rural Lambton Stewardship Committee. When he's not farming, he encourages fellow farmers to create wetlands and native grass buffers to protect waterways in the local Sydenham River watershed.



Dave Ferguson grows mostly corn and soybeans on his 364-hectare farm.

CRAIG GLOVER FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Ferguson himself has taken several acres out of production for such "ecological functions" – at his cost, he says, though it's society that benefits.

The Sydenham is a lazy stretch of water that oozes through the last remnants of Carolinian forest south of Lake Huron. It has the greatest diversity of flora and fauna of any Canadian river, including some 80 species of fish and 32 kinds of mussels.

The Sydenham once supplied drinking water to some area communities. But it has turned the colour of chocolate milk. Bacterial levels are high, the water quality too poor for swimming. Some 14 aquatic species have been designated endangered, threatened or of special concern.

Muriel Andreae, co-chair of the Sydenham River Recovery Team and a biologist, can pinpoint the cause of the damage – topsoil erosion and runoff from intensive crop farms and livestock feeding operations, as well as some outdated septic systems. "Nitrogen and phosphorous from manure and chemical fertilizers are big issues," she says, as well as "historically high levels of glyphosate," a widely used agricultural herbicide.

Walk upstream of the Sydenham, or any waterway in Ontario's agricultural belt, and you can find a junk food farm. Turns out environmental degradation and junk food farming go together like fries and a Coke. Or a Coke and insulin.

The Sydenham is just a snapshot of what's happening to waterways around the world. Nutrient runoff from agriculture starves water of oxygen, fish of life, and us of a healthy, once-reliable source of protein.

In all, some \$1.5 million in grants have been spent on 240 projects in the Sydenham watershed. That doesn't include the value of land voluntarily retired, without compensation. Not surprisingly, only about 5 per cent of landowners have done so.

Ferguson says farmers alone can't shoulder the expense of caring for the environment. "Until society gets in their mind that they have to pay to get these farms sustainable ..."

"If you want cheap food, that's what you're going to have."

In the 1950s, before farming started to industrialize in Ontario, we spent about 20 per cent of our income on food. Most of us spend less than half that now, less than any other nation in the world.

But we're paying in other ways – environmental degradation, health-care costs and transportation (half of Ontario's soybean harvest, for example, is exported).

Instead of an official food policy, Canada has an unofficial cheap food policy that no one voted for, yet it shapes our food system all the same. It lets private companies largely drive our food system, without paying for health and environmental repercussions. They have had a heyday.

Ferguson recommends a read of the report, "Compare the Share," written by his father, Ralph, a former Liberal MP. The National Farmers Union has produced similar research, "The Farm Crisis and Corporate Profits."

The reports show that an incredibly small number of large food processors, retailers and agricultural businesses are generating massive profits delivering cheap food by squeezing farmers' incomes, forcing farmers into environmentally unsustainable practices – or out of business.

Those corporations also manage to make massive profits from cheap food by cheapening food.

Just follow the flow.

"Unfortunately, there is a real disconnect between agriculture, food and health," says David Jenkins, one of Canada's top nutritional researchers. "We've compartmentalized too long."

Jenkins, a professor at the University of Toronto, is conducting a study of 720 Toronto families to find out what level of intervention is required to get people to eat healthier. He says it's a massive challenge to turn families off processed food and toward fruits, vegetables and grains.

Former federal health minister Carolyn Bennett said the same thing at a 2006 conference on food policy organized by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. Bennett voiced frustration at being unable to make progress on health issues because there's no Ministry of Food. Instead, responsibility falls between the silos of government: Health, Education, the Environment and Northern Affairs, which must deal with the consequences of Industry, Agriculture and Fisheries treating food as commodities produced for profit rather than public good.

Jenkins would like to see policy changes: better food labelling, health claims on fruits and vegetables, healthy food cheaper than junk food, government support for farmers who grow good food in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Improving our diets through education and persuasion alone will take decades, Jenkins believes. What's required is an overhaul of Canada's food system through focused public policy. "We're paying too little for our food. We're losing farmers like soil erosion. They're being lost to factory farms. What we're doing is screwing the land and screwing the farmers. It's almost a crime. We've got cheaper food and we've become fatter. We've got pollution closing beaches. We have built ourselves a mini hell and food is part of that problem."

But there is good news in this bleak harvest.

Food is powerful. Change is possible with every purchase we make, in every link we forge between good food and good farming, and in every bite we take.

And instead of an unofficial cheap food policy, we can create an official good food policy.

If we built this food hell then we can also fix it.