Food, Fuel, and Climate: the carbon connection

"The grain required to fill an SUV's 25-gallon tank with ethanol just once will feed one person for a whole year." And yet…. "If the entire U.S. grain harvest were to be converted to ethanol, it would satisfy at most 18 percent of U.S. automotive fuel needs." Lester Brown, Plan B 3.0

Carbon takes many forms. Corn, for instance. Feed it to people, and it's nourishment. Feed more of it to a cow, and the cow becomes food for a few less people (and produces methane - a planet-warming gas). Feed a lot more of that same corn to a vehicle as fuel, and it becomes carbon dioxide and boosts the planetary temperature, making it considerably more difficult to grow the corn and feed the people (and cars).

One could write a book on this topic. …in fact, quite a number of people have. We are fortunate enough to have two of them, the authors of "Plenty," in town on April 2nd to discuss the topic with our community. And a complex issue it is, worthy of discussion and key to our civilization's future well-being. I hope you can come.

Headlines this week are bringing the issue home, if your grocery bill hasn't done so already: higher food prices are challenging for us here, but for those in the world who are already hungry, they are life-threatening. Food riots have become increasingly common around the globe since last fall, while farming has become lucrative business.

What happened?

As many have said, it's a perfect storm of causes: limited oil supplies and resulting cost of fuel, climate change, increasing population, water shortages, loss of cropland, restrictions on migrant workers, and now ethanol. Any one of these could have affected the cost of food. Together, they are causing a crisis without an obvious end in sight. It's not unexpected. The Earth Policy Institute, among others, has been predicting this situation for years. It's the food/fuel/climate connection.

Is there anything we can do?

Yes. Probably the most important thing we can do is to encourage our government to back off from its ethanol goals, and replace them with increased fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles, and investment in electric hybrid technology, at least until cellulosic ethanol can be fully developed. But there are also actions we can take here.

We can support our local farmers – avoiding the transport fuels and packaging, and developing local food sources for the times ahead when transport costs may seriously affect food supply or affordability. In the U.S., fuel is used in fertilizer and farm equipment, processing and packaging, and in traveling the continent and crossing oceans to get to us. Burning that fuel is contributing to climate change – melting the glaciers that provide water to cropland in our own west, and around the world, and increasing crop-damaging floods and droughts. Any time we choose to buy produce that is locally grown we help to reduce the "carbon footprint" of our food.

Farmers markets have blossomed around the country, and "Farm to Schools" programs are sprouting up all over, providing a steady market for local farmers – why not in the midst of Ohio farmland? Community gardens provide fresh vegetables at low cost in urban neighborhoods around the country, helping to strengthen communities in the process – and Alliance? Organic farming techniques are proving their value, and reducing fuel use – why not here? We can move down the food chain, eating less beef, and a few more vegetarian meals. We can grow our own food in our backyards.

And of course anything we can do to reduce energy use and carbon emissions will help to limit the negative effects of climate change on food production. The "Plenty" authors have been part of a movement in Vancouver B.C. to go "carbon neutral." Could we do that here? As Brown points out, "Whether we bike or drive to work will affect carbon emissions, climate change, and food security. The size of the car we drive to the supermarket may affect the size of the bill at the supermarket checkout counter."

These changes would be good for our bodies, good for our wallets, good for our local economy, and good for the earth and future generations. Doing "the right thing" doesn't necessarily require a strict 100-mile diet (even the authors are eating chocolate again, and our family isn't ready to totally give up bananas, or the occasional wild salmon), but it does involve being more mindful of our effect on the food/fuel/climate mix, and making the choice to develop and support our local food markets. It involves purposeful action. We can do this.

"If every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (any meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil every week. That's not gallons, but barrels. Small changes in buying habits can make big differences." Steven L. Hopp, with Barbara Kingsolver, in Animal Vegetable Miracle.

Check it Out:

Plenty and The 100 Mile Diet website: http://100milediet.org/

Animal Vegetable Miracle, A Year of Food Life, Barbara Kingsolver, Steven Hopp, Camille Kingsolver. http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/

Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, Lester R. Brown, The Earth Policy Institute. Website: http://www.earth-policy.org/

Farm to School program: http://www.farmtoschool.org/index.php

Local Harvest website with guide to local farms and farm markets: http://www.localharvest.org/

American Community Gardening Association: http://www.communitygarden.org/