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Opinion

Our View

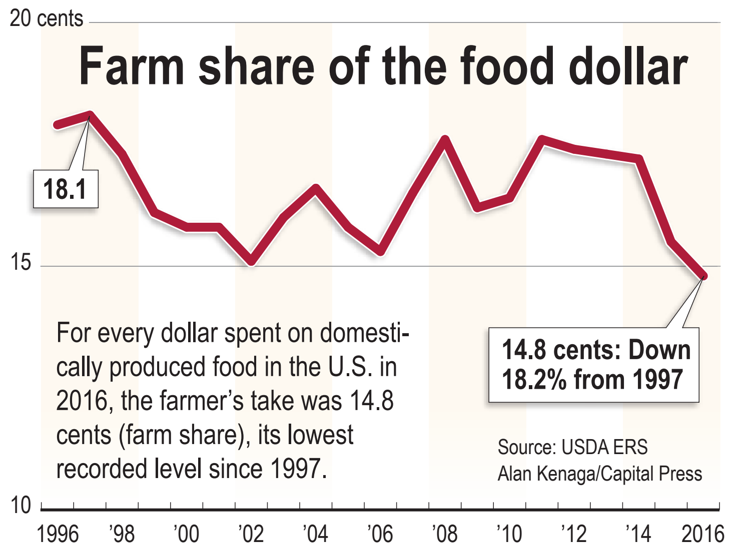
Farmers' share of food dollar shrinks

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported recently that the farmer's share of consumer food dollars is at its lowest point since 1993.

According to data collected in 2016, the most recent available, farmers received just 14.8 cents of every dollar spent by consumers for food.

That's a 4.5 percent decline from 2015 and nearly a 14 percent drop from 2014. It's also the all-time lowest share since the USDA Economic Research Service began the Food Dollar series 25 years ago.

"It kind of tells me the farmer's share of what the consumer is eating is getting smaller," John Newton, director of market intelligence for the American Farm Bureau Federation, said.



Adjusted for inflation, the real farm share is 12.2 cents compared with the baseline share of 17.5 cents in 1993, he said.

The experts at USDA's Economic Research Service say there are two reasons for the drop. First, commodity prices have dropped from the highs of five years ago. Second, Americans are eating out more and restaurants claim the greatest share of the food dollar — 36.3 percent.

Farmers have long received a relatively small part of the dollar Americans spend on food. Unless food is purchased directly from the farmer, the people who process, package, transport and market food add more than 80 percent to the cost.

Farmers are really the only ones in the process who are price takers, not price makers. To one extent or another, everyone else in the supply chain can add a pennies, nickels or dimes to their price to cover their increasing costs.

The proof? As commodity prices continue to fall from their highs of 2013 the price of food has increased.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of food between 2013 and 2016 increased by 1.5 percent.

And, they can raise prices with impunity. As food prices rise we hear no cries from the public blaming processors, whoever they are. It's always the "rich farmer," not the "rich grocer."

There's not much that can be done about this, other than farmers and ranchers redoubling their efforts to educate consumers about the economics of agriculture.

Our View

Washington tries to hijack interstate trade

The American Farm Bureau Federation is joining the legal battle against Washington state's efforts to block the export of coal from ports within its boundaries.

We agree with the Farm Bureau. Further, we believe that Washington state's refusal to allow coal trains to use a port near Longview amounts to an attempt to hijack interstate trade. As such, the courts should reject the state's efforts, and Washingtonians should see it for what it is — a naked effort to cripple an industry that is out of favor with the Seattle crowd and its fellow travelers.

Lighthouse Resources Inc., the parent company of Millennium Bulk Terminals, has gone to court to protect its rights against Washington's attack. A growing list of other states, counties, railroads, organizations — and anyone else who knows that the U.S. Constitution protects interstate trade — have added their voices, too.

Mining coal is legal, and so is transporting it. So is selling it, and exporting it to overseas customers. The only way Washington "leaders" can stop this or any other legal activity is to cook up a list of "impacts." Like coal dust that blows off hopper cars, and noise made by locomotives — and don't forget the exhaust from those locomotives.

All of which would be of only passing interest to the Farm Bureau and others, but for the fact that no state regulators have the right to stop or power interstate and international trade. If the Seattle crowd gets together with the San Francisco crowd and the Portland and Los Angeles crowds and starts dictating what can and cannot be exported and imported through West Coast ports, every industry will have a problem.

Agricultural products could also be victimized by such power grabs. Billions of dollars worth of crops grown in the U.S. are exported through West Coast ports. If Washington, Oregon and California get together and gin up some regulatory rigmarole to stop a crop or product from being exported, then what?

The eager beavers among Washington's regulators who want to score points with the environmental purists believe they are saving the world. They should tell that to the folks overseas who could lose their jobs for the lack of fuel for power plants or to power industrial development. Efforts on the part of wealthy Americans to tell other nations what to do show only their short-sightedness.

No matter what you think of the coal industry, you would have to agree that Washington state has overstepped its authority in trying to stop the legal transportation of coal within its boundaries.

This is not a complicated issue.

Coal is legal. What Washington state is trying to do is not.

ABOVE: Anti-coal activists demonstrate in Longview, Wash., against a proposal to export coal along the Lower Columbia River.
Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

Readers' views

Through the organic looking-glass

Lewis Carroll couldn't have envisioned anything as topsy-turvy as what we are seeing with the USDA's handling of the Organic Livestock Rules. How often do we hear of an industry sector suing the government for NOT implementing more stringent regulations? If that were not ironic enough, the USDA's rationale for not moving forward on what both organic farmers/ranchers and consumers have unquestionably indicated that they want is that USDA lacks the statutory authority. How often do we hear of a government agency saying that they lack statutory authority these days? Normally, we are trying to rein agencies back from their stretching of their regulatory mandate and producers are complaining about the hardships of added regulations.

The USDA and the organic movement have always had different visions for the future of the organic industry. In the years leading up to the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, the two groups fought tooth and nail over the development of the National Organic Standards to which the USDA now certifies. In Carol Ryan Dumas' article "Animal welfare groups join lawsuit over USDA organic rules" in the April 20 edition of the Capital Press, she pointed out that these proposed new standards for livestock and poultry were finalized after over a decade of public input from organic farmers/ranchers and consumers.

When USDA indicated that it wanted to withdraw the proposed new standards from implementation their website received 63,000 comments that opposed withdrawing and only 50 comments supporting the USDA's withdrawal. By anyone's math, that is an overwhelming vote by the interested parties to implement those standards. That is 1,250 saying go ahead with the finalized new standards to every 1 vote for withdrawal. It will certainly be interesting to see what the federal judge thinks of all this.

If organic or conventional farmers/ranchers choose to voluntarily follow these new standards — a private certifying agency, in the model of the non-GMO project verified certification, could create a label that allowed consumers to identify these more stringent standards in the market place. As USDA has already admitted, they would have no statutory authority to intervene. The added private label would allow consumers to know that the product had met the more rigorous rules for animal living conditions, animal health care, transportation and slaughter. Perhaps that will not be necessary if the judge rules in favor of the plaintiffs; however, the large agri-business interests that do not wish to see these regulations put into effect are powerful and will go to great lengths to deny organic farmers/ranchers and the consuming public the more stringent livestock rules that they obviously want.

Brian Quigley
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Another look at targeted grazing

By GEORGE WUERTHNER
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
George Wuerthner

The Idaho BLM is implementing what is sometimes called "targeted grazing" with livestock in an effort to reduce large wildfires. The theory is that if livestock graze enough of the "fuel," then large wildfires like the 600,000-acre Murphy Complex or the Soda Fire which burned across southern Idaho in recent years could be more easily controlled.

On the surface, this strategy seems plausible. Less fuel should mean fewer large fires. But here's the rest of the story.

First, nearly all the acreage burned annually is the result of a very few large fire complexes. For instance, in the years 1980-2003 there were 56,320 fires in the Rocky Mountain states.

Of those fires, 96 percent of the blazes were responsible for charring only 4 percent of the total acreage burned. By contrast, 0.1 percent of the fires — less than 50 — were responsible for over half the acreage burned during that time.

Therefore, the fires that are the biggest threat to both human communities and the ones fuel treatments like targeted grazing seek to control are those very infrequent but large blazes.

However, large blazes occur during what are categorized as "extreme fire weather" conditions. These conditions include serious drought, low humidity, high temperatures and, most importantly, high winds.

The reason winds are key to fire spread is they "fan" the flames, and toss embers 1-4 miles ahead of the fire front, making any attempt at containment impossible.

A narrow strip of targeted heavily grazed rangelands is not going to stop a wind-driven blaze since burning embers will easily be blown over any fuel reduction.

Numerous studies of large fires have acknowledged this, including a University of Idaho study, following the 2007 Murphy Complex fire, that burned more than 600,000 acres, which found "much of the Murphy Wildland Fire Complex burned under extreme fuel and weather conditions that likely overshadowed livestock grazing as a factor influencing fire extent and fuel consumption in many areas where these fires burned."

Another widely cited study done in Arizona heralding the benefits of "targeted grazing" on wildfire reduction concluded that while fuel removal by livestock might reduce fire spread under low and moderate fire weather conditions the situations where it might be beneficial were limited to small areas and under less than extreme fire weather.

The authors concluded, "Targeted grazing treatment did influence fire behavior in grass/shrub communities, but its effects were limited.

"Although it is a promising tool for altering fire behavior, targeted grazing will be most effective in grass communities under moderate weather conditions."

In other words, targeted grazing is limited in affecting fire behavior and outcome under the extreme fire conditions agencies like the BLM seek to control.

To have any effect on fuels, the areas targeted for grazing need to be scalped down to stubble. This removes the hiding cover for wildlife, results in soil compaction, serious impacts on native grasses due to "overgrazing" and destruction of soil crusts.

Loss of soil crusts is important because this facilitates the establishment of cheatgrass, a highly flammable annual. So in effect, target grazing often creates a more flammable zone of cheatgrass.

Another issue is the very low probability that a fire will encounter any fuel break. Because the conditions under which a blaze is transformed into a large, unstoppable wildfire are so rare most fuel breaks never encounter a fire, making their implementation a waste of time and money.

Target grazing is like "investing" in the lottery. Yes, you can always point to someone who is a winner, but most people buying lottery tickets are just throwing away their money. It's the same with "fuel treatments" like targeted grazing.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist, former BLM biologist in Idaho, and has published 38 books. He lives in Bend, Ore.