

Food security equals national security

By **ERIC MORTENSON**
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Terrorists seeking to damage or contaminate the U.S. food system wouldn't lack for targets. The country has about 2.2 million farms, 113,000 food warehouses and 44,000 food processing plants in addition to a sprawling distribution network, according to a report by the federal Department of Homeland Security.

The danger from terrorists, enemy nations or "malicious insiders" might be limited, however. The U.S. food system is so decentralized that an attack might severely damage a local economy or reduce the availability of a particular product, "but the population will not go without food as a result," according to the 2010 report.

For example, a single Oregon processor, Norpac, produces the equivalent of 1.6 billion 4-ounce vegetable portions a year.

The greater risk may lie elsewhere. Increasingly, experts describe international food security and U.S. national security as completely intertwined. In addition to health problems caused by malnutrition, regions without access to nutritious food are prone to violent upheaval. The Middle East and North Africa, where murderous groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram hold sway, is a prime example.

"It's in our national

See the study

To access the Chicago Council on Global Affairs study go to www.thechicagocouncil.org/globalagdevelopment

interest to see the economies of developing nations do not suffer," said Dan Glickman, who was U.S. agriculture secretary during the Clinton administration.

Agriculture's role

Nations and charitable organizations can provide food during a humanitarian crisis, he said. "The longer term goal should be to develop much stronger agricultural systems in developing countries, where they are producing more of their own food in a sustainable way."

Glickman took part in an international food security study released in April by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

With the world population projected to exceed 9 billion by 2050, "Investing in food security and improved health and nutrition for the world's people is not simply a humanitarian matter. It is squarely in the interests of the United States," the report's authors concluded.

"Such investments can help build self-reliant and stable nations that are less likely to succumb to conflicts and humanitarian disasters that are even more costly and destabilizing."

Sonny Ramaswamy has seen it work first-hand.

Ramaswamy, director of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture in Washington, D.C., and former dean of Oregon State University's College of Agricultural Sciences, grew up in India, the world's second-most populous nation.

When famine threatened in the 1960s, his family obtained food with ration cards, and the sight of burlap food bags stenciled with the American flag and hands clasped in friendship is seared into his memory.

The emergency aid held famine in check while Indian agriculture transformed during the "green revolution." Its universities adopted the American land-grant model of agricultural education, research and extension.

Indian and U.S. researchers, including eventual Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman Borlaug, developed compact, high-yield wheat and rice. By the early 1970s, India was a net exporter of grain, Ramaswamy said.

"It's absolutely true," Ramaswamy said. "Food security equals national security."

The "Arab Spring" movement that toppled governments across the Middle East, and which provided the vacuum that ISIS filled, grew from 2008 riots over food

price increases, he said.

Universities' role

The Chicago Council study recommended the U.S. use its agricultural research and education infrastructure to train the next generation of leaders in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Land-grant universities such as OSU, Washington State University, the University of Idaho and the University of California-Davis "should be at the center of a cooperative international effort to reduce hunger and malnutrition around the world."

The report estimates more than 25 percent of the world population is at risk from malnutrition.

Relatively simple fixes, such as expanding primary processing plants and building cold-storage facilities, could improve the food supply in low-income nations. The report estimates 40 to 50 percent of fruit and vegetables and 35 percent of fish is wasted due to inadequate storage and refrigeration.

The report says women are the "cornerstone" of the agricultural sectors in developing nations. They often grow, harvest and market the crops in addition to preparing meals. Any effort to improve nutrition "must include investing in women at its core."

Stable societies become good markets for American agricultural exports, which include 30 percent of the wheat, corn and rice on the global market.

"With growing unrest around the globe, investments that lead to healthy and prosperous economies are worthy of U.S. policymakers' time and attention," the report says.

Other issues

Other problems could impact U.S. agriculture. Natural causes such as drought and climate change, or political causes such as regulatory requirements or GMO crop bans could disrupt production.

Portland attorney Tim Bernasek said he urges agricultural clients to evaluate their liability risk for such things as food-borne illness.

"If there's an issue, people will be looking up and down the food chain, and you're the first leg on the food chain," Bernasek said he tells clients.

Dale Moore, public policy director with the American Farm Bureau Federation, said farmers "want enough regulation to protect our crops and livestock, but not enough to impede trade around the world."

On issues such as climate change, farmers want help dealing with it rather than

argue about its cause, Moore said.

"You don't have to tell a producer that the climate is in a bad loop, they experience it day in and day out," he said.

Greg Page, executive board chairman for the agricultural giant Cargill, spoke for many when he defended GMO technology in January interview.

"The demonization of this technology, and even more broadly of science in our food system, in our opinion isn't going to lead to a great outcome," Page said in a podcast with economist Russ Roberts.

At the same time, the industry must not "frighten people into these technologies" with warnings of famine.

"We could feed the world without GMOs, there are other practices we could follow," but they would require more land, more water and more energy, he said.

Katy Coba, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said water, transportation, land-use, labor and plant and animal diseases are on farmers' worry lists.

Diversity in agriculture, from crops to practices to markets, is a defense against disruption.

"Farmers will figure out ways to adapt," Coba said. "We can move and adjust depending on what's going on."



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