

DON'T BET AGAINST THE UNDERDOG

TYLER SCHNAITHMAN

OKLAHOMA FFA

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It seems at the height of every educational forum we hear the subject of bullying discussed. A real life incident simulating this very issue occurred recently on an airplane. A professional speaker was being questioned by the passenger next to him. What do you do for a living? He replied, "I do some speaking engagements, and I am also a farmer." The passenger then ridiculed him for over five minutes about the overuse of pesticides, herbicides, as well as genetically modified seed that many farmers use today. The passenger kept referring to his grocery store, Whole Foods, and the mantra that *sustainable food* must be organic, local, and prepared slowly. As the farmer couldn't even get in a single word of defense, he thought to himself, what has happened to the occupation that has been so well respected for generations? Am I literally having a nightmare?

And the sad truth is, he wasn't. Modern eco-foodies are running rampant (Paarlberg, 2010) and while I don't agree with their tactics, I'd like to think they have good intentions. They want to save the planet, help local farmers, and fight obesity (Paarlberg, 2010). There will probably continue to be a niche market for growing organic and local. I find it advantageous for an operator to try to add value to his products, and I'm encouraged by the way they connect with the consumer.

However, the problem lies when organic and local producers and consumers, too, slam and bash the way conventional food is grown. They like to advertise their food being more nutritious, safer, and more sustainable. Yet, just last year the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* published a study of 162 scientific papers from the past 50 years on the health benefits of organically grown foods and found no nutritional advantage over conventionally grown foods (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2012). Also, the Food

and Drug Administration, or FDA, surveys have revealed that the highest dietary exposure to pesticide residues on foods in the United States were so trivial that the safety gains from buying organic are insignificant (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2012).

And on the other hand, what has happened to the rallying cry to feed the world? How can organic and local grown food be more sustainable? The answer is it can't. Today less than 1% of American cropland is under certified organic production (Stalcup, 2011). If the other 99% were to switch to organic and had to fertilize crops without any synthetic nitrogen fertilizer, that would require much more composted animal manure. To supply enough organic fertilizer, the U.S. cattle production would have to increase roughly fivefold. And because these animals would have to be raised organically on forage crops, much of the land in the United States would have to be converted to pasture. There is no way this picture could ever support a global population expected to grow to over 9 billion by 2050 (Hodson, 2011).

Currently, farmers continue to have a large amount of pressure to produce more and more food from fewer acres ("Planet could be 'unrecognizable' by 2050," 2011). Farmers will have to produce as much food in the next 40 years as they have the last 8000 (Reichenberger, 2011). They will have to do this while fighting against a growing number of consumers who are two or three generations removed from the farm. Recently, the Whole Foods Company announced that they are going to start labeling genetically modified food items by 2018. This will produce a negative image on all GM products (Leon, 2013). What exactly does this mean for the American farmer? The United States leads the world in GM plantings with 170 million acres in 2012. Roughly

90% of the U.S. corn and soybean supply is genetically modified (Leon, 2013). Since the release of genetically modified seed, average corn yields in the United States have increased by over 30 bushels per acre (Reichenberger, 2011). With a growing corn and soybean demand in Asia, and ethanol demands, without GM commodities to protect yields, food prices would be substantially higher (Leon, 2013).

Much concern has occurred and will continue regarding chemical and fertilizer runoff. As the farmer continues to increase these inputs, environmentalists and consumerists worry. Are we moving in the right direction? Are we using abandoning greed or shepherd-like stewardship? Fortunately, agricultural technology has kept up and even surpassed that of many other industries. “Drift-reduction nozzles and auto-boom shutoffs have significantly improved excessive chemical application. In addition, the Conservation Stewardship Program has encouraged and rewarded farmers for using buffer strips along water sources and sensitive areas” (J. Betchan, personal communication, January 15, 2013).

Greenseeker is a recent innovation that allows the farmer to forecast future nitrogen plant needs without the risk of over or under application. This device is available as a handheld tool at local Oklahoma County Extension Offices and available for modification to any type of fertilizer applicator. Truly, high-tech farming has become significantly more sustainable (Donds, Hanson, Hepperly, Pimental, Seidel, 2005). It is far safer for the environment and demonstrates to the world that the American farmer is moving in the right direction to model conservation and longevity for the precious resources God has allowed us to borrow.

So let's check in on the bully. He was put in his place because the farmer gave serious thought to the way he was being pushed around and determined to have a better response when asked about his livelihood. The farmer now responds that he is involved in consumer services. Most people tend to ask what he provides. He always replies, "I provide the food you eat, the clothes you wear, perhaps the fuel in your vehicle, and the air you breathe. I'm an American farmer." The speaker continues, "I don't receive opposition when I say it like that."

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