

Recognizing Crisis, Sharing Opportuni

There is no future in which we merely feed ourselves

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

The grocery industry, like most of the economy, is experiencing flat or declining sales, with the possible exception of some big box retailers such as Wal-Mart. The natural and organic food sector, after three decades of strong expansion, also has slowed. In 2009, adding to challenges from shrinking personal income, the public will see more food price inflation, and retailers may experience supply problems from problems in farm production. Recall that the past year already brought price spikes for fuel and food, climate-induced weather disasters, and food shortages.

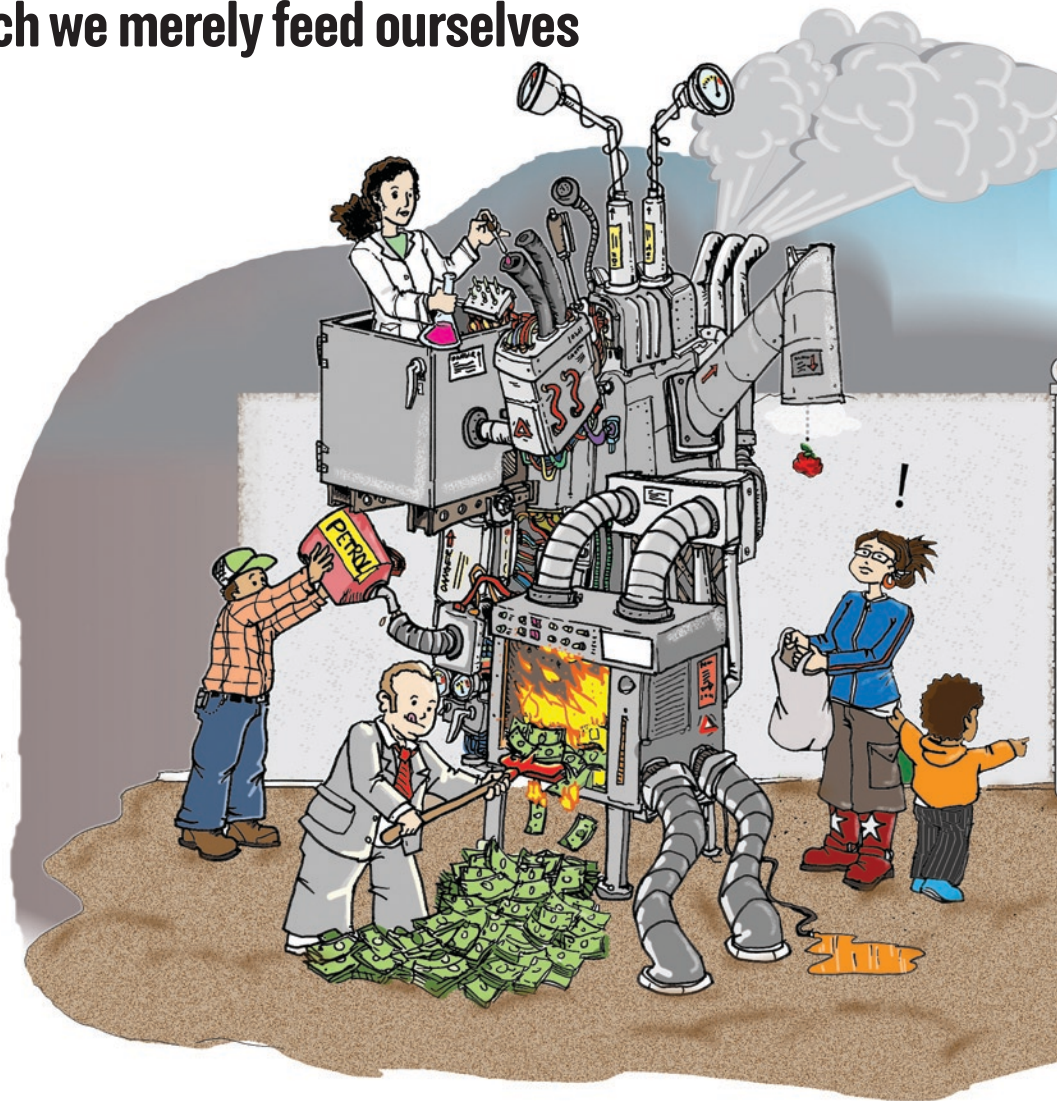
My premise in this commentary is that more disruption lies ahead. Behind the financial collapse lurks a food crisis. Given the depth of problems to be addressed, we should look ahead and anticipate a deeply changed environment rather than expect a return to the past.

Much more than banker bailouts and borrowing from the future, we need major investments in food production and resource conservation, along with a financial stimulus to help a million new growers get started. In this vein, at present there are small but encouraging trends among new farmers, legislated gains in public funding for organics, and very strong growth in home gardening. Public support for conservation and local food is gaining, and new enterprises are springing up. Let a hundred flowers blossom!

Clearly, solutions to our food crises will include more intensive, organic and localized food systems. While these elements are what most food co-ops already support, further strengthening of local food economies is necessary and offers many allies. Campaigns addressing the need for safe, quality food continue to generate opportunities for growers and food enterprise. In addition, however, if we are to recognize the food needs and dignity of all members of society, the values of sharing and mutual sacrifice will have to be included in proposed remedies.

Local solutions

Recently, a thoughtful friend made sure I received the spring 2009 issue of *Yes!*, which has informative contributions around the theme of "Food for Everyone" (www.yesmagazine.org). David Korten, the publication's co-founder and a keynote speaker at last year's Consumer



Any real recovery for our society will offer a growing expectation of sharing wealth and work—and there will be less financial wealth but more physical work.

Cooperative Management Association, summarizes the outlook for local economic revival:

...The Main Street economy is composed of local businesses and working people who produce real goods and services to meet the real wealth needs of their communities. It has been battered and tattered by the predatory intrusions of Wall Street corporations, but it is the logical foundation on which to build a new, real wealth

economy of green jobs and green manufacturing, responsible community-oriented businesses, and sound environmental practices.

Let Wall Street corporations and their phantom wealth machine slip into the abyss of their own making. Devote our public resources to building and strengthening Main Street businesses and financial institutions devoted to creating real wealth in service to their local communities.

In this changing environment, is your cooperative adapting and preparing for assurance of its food supplies and services? Well beyond primary distributor relationships, the way forward will have co-ops making stronger commitments to food allies among local producers, as well as with community food organizations and programs.

The need for greater community food security is increasingly evident. A lot of rebuilding is

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ILLUSTRATION BY MELECK DAVIS

needed, yet so far, very little of the huge injection of federal funds is reaching Main Street or the farmland. Economic uncertainty is deep, spending and lending is sharply down in most industries, and unemployment keeps growing. And for a real turnaround, as this depression unfolds, we need to make an even bigger transition. While launching new enterprises and evolving beyond failed business structures, we face an urgent need to reduce the buildup of global warming gases.

Fossil fueled food

Food co-ops, over 30 years after being founded on an ethos of environmental health, have continuing opportunity to walk their talk. It's not news that energy conserving measures can lower carbon emissions as well as save money for the business and its owners. Green design and operating practices are essential, and co-ops

are among those providing visible and instructive examples.

But in a grocery store, the main story is the groceries. The largest part of a food store's carbon footprint, greater than coal burned for its electricity, is from the embedded energy in selling items that have been produced, stored, and shipped over a very long distance. Food co-ops can make their greatest contribution to reduced carbon emissions and their best contribution to the economy by significantly expanding the production and sales of local and regional products that are less energy-intensive. (By contrast, the comparative impact of an individual household's food choices may depend more on the amount of meat and dairy, which are especially resource-intensive.)

In requiring an estimated 10 calories of energy for every food calorie delivered, the mainstream U.S. food system is inherently unstable and unsustainable. The problem is familiar, but now the cheap long-distance

production and shipping of food is lurching to an end. For shoppers, some choices will become much more expensive or simply unavailable, and retailers will have to deliver the news. There's no better time to put more resources into supporting food production that is closer at hand.

(For an excellent summary of the way forward, with specific proposals for households, communities and government, see "The Food and Farming Transition: Toward a Post Carbon Food System," available as a pdf at postcarbon.org/food.)

Immediate prospects

Farm and food issues need much attention, but they are being overshadowed by the administration's continuance of trillions of dollars in financial sector bailouts plus attempts at economic stimulus in other areas. For many businesses and cities, the short-term effects of financial disruptions will be unavoidable, with no likely turnaround for the economy at large—just some buffering of business closings, high unemployment, declining public revenue, and ongoing social damage. ■>

◀ In agriculture, the expansion of food stamp funding (now used by nearly 32 million Americans), increased support for organics, and other federal remedies for urgent food needs are necessary but tiny steps in building food security and sustainable food economies. The appointment of a leader in organics, Kathleen Merrigan, as USDA deputy secretary is very positive, and there are other signs that members of the new administration understand that changes in agriculture must include more organics, more local

food, and less use of fossil fuels.

Increased appropriations for these directions have been proposed, but they won't be easily secured in a very difficult economic environment. Comments to Congress from your co-op and its members are urgently needed in support of increased funding for sustainable agriculture, conservation, and organics. If you are not current, check with our new national coalition and its "Grassroots Guide to the 2008 Farm Bill" found at sustainableagriculture.net.

Turnaround opportunities

Change and disruption are upon us, and opportunities abound. The obstacles are enormous, yet those barriers, too, are part of what is breaking down. A radically different food system is central to surviving these crises.

Local food potential is enormous, yet the demand for local food already is greater than the supply. Food gaps also characterize the system as a whole—food shelf programs, for example, are overwhelmed but under-supplied and, like many other nonprofits, are being forced to cut back. There already are shortages and there are likely to be more.

Consequently, there will be a need for more sharing of food resources and also of the labor it takes to produce food. As summarized in a new book, *A Nation of Farmers: Defeating the Food Crisis on American Soil*, by Sharon Astyk (sharonastyk.com) and Aaron Newton:

Most of us, once we begin to move past our immediate panic responses to the changes in front of us, realize that we serve ourselves by serving others, that our communities matter as much as our homes and families, that there is no future in which we merely feed ourselves.

For the foreseeable future, support for farmers and helping to grow new local food producers will likely be among food co-ops' chief concerns.

More sharing is a necessary message but it is not always a popular one, despite what one might wish. Yet it offers an element that is not getting enough attention, namely helping each other. Adapting to restrictions is going to strengthen mutual aid in the neighborhood because life is better and easier that way, at least for those who choose it. Put differently, only with good neighbors, stronger community, and public programs will many people be able to eat a healthful diet and to maintain a tolerable but significantly lower energy adaptation. Any real recovery for our society will offer a growing expectation of sharing wealth and work—and there will be less financial wealth but more physical work.

More community ties and greater sharing sure sound like more cooperation to me. But this kind of change won't necessarily come easily. Food co-ops in many communities already are committed to building local food resources and production, and they will be pressed to do more. And even in co-ops, embracing a new outlook of deeper sharing may be difficult for behind-the

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◀ curve marketers, human resource managers, and members of the board of directors. Yet the co-op's mission and its stated ends take us beyond the physical store. Rather than an attitude of, "We've got ours," food co-ops can look outside the box and say, "We're in this together."

The outlook remains that slower sales and reduced consumption are strong trends, by sheer necessity. Such limits and doing with less are not only inevitable, they can be positive. Meeting greater needs also can support stronger co-ops and local communities. The people facing food challenges may not include many of your co-op's members—but they are your neighbors, and their numbers are growing. You need not wait for the government to announce that there is a food emergency.

In pointing out the need to extend the existing co-op, I'm not suggesting less emphasis on the cooperative values of self-help and self-responsibility. But co-ops may need to go beyond previous efforts to help other producers and communities to establish cooperative values and business foundations. Like today's co-ops that once were not yet born, new ventures depend not merely on the member-owners' commitment but, additionally, on professional and inspirational help from established organizations. Co-ops are stewards of the investments of past cooperators and also must plant seeds for the future.

Cooperative contributions

If the country is able to arrest its rapid economic decline, we will have a chance to secure a major expansion of public support for energy conservation and local food economies. Such a major shift is not happening today, but eventually the combined crises will require marked changes in food policy and production.

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Many farmers, food sellers, and food services already operate at tight margins, and their business challenges are likely to increase. Local and regional innovations, with or without government support, will be needed to fill gaps in services and supplies. In many a cooperative and community-based enterprise, organizational culture and social cohesion will be strongly tested.

These words are intended as a warning that the highly predictable food supply we presently assume will become less reliable. At the same time, new businesses and trade relationships can be established and nurtured. Cooperatives continue to offer foundation elements for this recovery of food economies and communities: democratic ownership, participatory culture, and enterprise based on shared investment and shared services. These components support cooperative business development in a difficult environment.

For an outlook that addresses food needs and boosts struggling communities, enhanced local production offers exciting directions. This could include expanded versions of food co-ops working with other cooperatives, with farmers and farmers' markets, with community-supported agriculture and community gardens, with value-added producers and community kitchens.

For the foreseeable future, support for farmers and helping to grow new local food producers will likely be among food co-ops' chief concerns.

Step it up

Denial about the sea change in our country's circumstances is deep, hindering our ability to create and spread new ways of meeting present and future community needs. Much innovative thinking and enterprise is necessary in order to build a safe, healthful and adequate food supply.

Fortunately, some essential resources are *not* peaking. Among these are common human elements such as work satisfaction, artistry, ingenuity, humor, courage, solidarity and of course cooperation. These are critical and renewable resources that we need to draw upon in building a sustainable future.

The generation of food co-ops that was founded over 30 years ago, like other waves of cooperatives, arose from movements for peace, fairness, and health—public campaigns that were driven by ethics and outrage. This time around, in a deeper crisis but strengthened by a generation of cooperative experience, we will again need to tap into the desire for social justice. Rather than merely being positioned to highlight issues of consumer comfort and discomfort, food co-ops are challenged to build solidarity and to achieve solutions that benefit the widest share of the public. Our cooperative values and principles, if truly embraced, call upon us to extend them to the largest possible community of users and owners. ■

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