



4 September, 2009

To the editor of Time Magazine:

The American Association of Bovine Practitioners, an association composed of more than 5,000 veterinarians devoted to the care and well-being of cattle, would like to respond to misinformation in your recent article “America’s Food Crisis and How to Fix It.”

While we welcome an open and honest dialogue on the production of food in the U.S., and are pleased to see a national magazine devote a major story to the issue, we think it’s important that your readers be given chance to understand the multi-faceted nature of American agriculture and the many people working hard to improve it.

While there were numerous mischaracterizations in the article, as a veterinary medical organization we are most concerned by the comments regarding antimicrobials. The authors are extremely critical of the use of antibiotics in agriculture, but seem to be unaware that these products must be used in a manner that follows carefully defined guidelines that have been approved by the FDA. The authors repeat the oft-stated but unsupported assertion that there is an alarming rise in the incidence of antibiotic resistant bacteria among farm animals, but give no credible citations to support that claim. In fact, surveillance data regarding bacterial isolates obtained from cattle by the National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System is not supportive of that claim.

We’d like to mention just a few other such examples. The author states that ranchers and farmers are not raising food in a sustainable way, yet “sustainable” is never defined and seems to be used in a manner that is interchangeable with the term “organic.”

While foods produced using organic production methods do meet a small portion of the market demand, we are not aware of studies that support the author’s claim that conventionally raised beef cattle get sick more easily than organically raised animals.

As to the claim that somehow organically produced food is more nutritious, Mr. Walsh is ignoring a recent study, “Nutritional quality of organic foods: a systematic review”, published in *American Society for Clinical Nutrition* that could demonstrate no scientifically measurable nutritional difference between conventionally and organically produced foods. With regard to manure production, 1000 head of cattle, regardless of where or how they are raised will produce roughly equivalent amounts of manure, which virtually every farmer and rancher values as a nutrient source for any crop they are raising, and as a means of reducing production costs of those crops. However, grass-fed cattle actually require more time to reach market weight, and thus, ultimately require more total pounds of feed and produce more waste.

America’s tremendous agricultural productivity is one reason that our country has led the world in experiencing economic stability. While it is reasonable for journalists to examine agricultural production practices, our expectation is that such efforts would be balanced, rely on scientific evidence and avoid the use of hyperbole to inflame opinions.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF BOVINE PRACTITIONERS

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The fact is, less than one percent of Americans are feeding the remainder of the population of the United States, and many of these farms are run by multigenerational families who live on their farms and work extraordinary hours to produce the food that the rest of us consume. These people do a phenomenal job, enjoy what they do, and are good at it.

Finally, it appears that Mr. Walsh would like the US go back to the production practices of the early 20th century where all of the food was organic and the average US lifespan was 58 years. Would he also propose that 21st century Americans visit physicians trained only to the standards known 100 years ago? Or might he consider the idea that technological changes contribute to both the greater societal good and to the sustainability of the individual farm itself, as reported in “Conservation Agriculture and Soil Carbon Sequestration: Between Myth and Farmer Reality” (*Critical Reviews in Plant Science*) and “Global Estimates of Potential Mitigation of Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Agriculture” (*Nutrient Cycling in Agroecosystems*).

Dr. Richard L. Wallace

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. L. Wallace". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "R".

President, AABP