

Florida A & M University Law Review

Volume 8

Number 2 *Climate Change and Global Food Security,*
The Third Annual Environmental Law and Justice
Symposium Issue

Article 3

Spring 2013

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Recommended Citation

Mark Winne, *Good Policy, Good Food: Bringing a Just and Sustainable Food System to All*, 8 Fla. A&M U. L. Rev. (2013).
Available at: <http://commons.law.famu.edu/famulawreview/vol8/iss2/3>

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GOOD POLICY, GOOD FOOD: BRINGING A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM TO ALL

*Mark Winne**

*Keynote speech delivered to the Third Annual Environmental Law
and Justice Symposium at Florida A&M University on
November 2, 2012*

I hope you know how honored I am to be invited to share my thoughts on public policy with the Florida A&M and north Florida communities. It is a true privilege for me to be here today. For the students among you, let me say that your presence is a testimony to your concern for the future of food, the environment, and justice for the communities you come from. No matter what shortcomings and troubles the present holds, be assured that history amply demonstrates that we move in the direction of more democracy and more justice, and you will be the ones who will make the move faster. To that end, I think this conference is an excellent opportunity to increase your capacity to influence the direction of your local and regional food systems toward sustainability, justice, and equity.

My task, perhaps I'll call it my passion, is to consider how public policy can accelerate that process. How can we harness the broad shoulders of government to the task of moving systems in the right direction, by which I mean directions that serve the public interest? And, when it comes to food and farming, we need to answer the question, "what exactly are public policy and the public interest?"

Now, I'm not going to start with a concise definition and then move on. Instead, since many of you are law students, you know that learning the law is something you do inductively, case by case, from the ground up. Therefore, I will give you examples of food policy in action—pieces of the puzzle so to speak—that I hope will eventually give you the big food policy story.

As we know, the food story is getting bigger and more complicated every day. After a little research, I discovered how it started for me. It turns out I was born the same year that the following occurred:

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- The microwave oven came on the market
- Minute Rice was invented
- The Dunkin Donuts chain got its start
- The Kraft Corporation first extruded processed cheese into plastic wrapped singles
- Sugar Pops hit the shelves

You might say I was born under the holy American trinity of convenience, fat, and sugar. My 87-year old mother, who never met a processed food product that she didn't immediately fall in love with, experimented on me—her son—with these and many more such items of that dark era on me, her son. Like most people of her generation, she took food for granted—there would always be enough—and it was all supposedly healthy. It was not until recently, when she discovered her community's farmers' market and began reading numerous articles about food events in her local newspaper, that my mother began to understand what it is her son did for a living.

Food is such a big deal today that my own mother gets it. Kurt Vonnegut may have described the immensity of food's impact best when he said, "Take it from someone who's been around a thousand years, food is pretty much the whole story all the time."

That's never been more true than today.

Consider the food-related challenges we face:

- Climate change is responsible for producing unpredictable crop yields, which increase food prices and truncate supply.
- Peak oil and paradoxical choices between energy and food—which really are the same thing—are rarely accounted for on our domestic balance sheet: 19% of total U.S. energy consumption is necessary to supply our food and the agricultural production industry is responsible for 6% of all greenhouse gas emissions.
- The global population is expected to reach 9 billion people by 2050 and many agronomists do not believe we will have the resources to feed them all.
- The sheer size of the food economy, when taken in its totality from seed to table and farmworker to dishwasher, is usually the second largest economic sector in any region.
- Political upheaval—the hunger for democracy rumbling as loudly as the grumbling of empty stomachs—forces us to confront, like never before, the perils of global food insecurity and the limits to the earth's natural resources.

For these reasons and more, I feel a sense of urgency about food policy, food citizenship, and food sovereignty. In brief, these are concepts that suggest that citizens should be allowed to participate in shaping the marketplace in ways that don't only require that they spend their food dollars, and further, that communities, states, and tribes should be allowed to determine the direction of their food system.

To put it succinctly, food democracy is what's at stake, and the lack of food democracy is the biggest challenge we face in bringing the benefits of a just, healthy, and sustainable food system to every citizen of this country. As Langston Hughes powerfully and poetically observed, "I am the people, humble, hungry, mean— hungry yet today despite the dream."

Why food citizenship? While you can have food policy without democracy—a condition that is all too common in the United States where wealth and power call the shots—you can't have food policy that serves the people without engaged citizens working in a functioning democracy. Those who possess an inordinate share of power and wealth don't regard us as food citizens; instead, we're seen as little units of food consumption that have been neatly digitalized for the marketplace, not as sentient beings who feel, think, and act in ways that might serve their own and society's best interests.

We certainly know the outline of the big food issues of the day:

- We are witnessing record rates of overweight individuals, obesity, and diabetes. If current eating and physical activity trends continue in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that one-third of Americans will be diabetic by 2050. One in five American 10-year olds is now obese.
- Indeed, the leading reason for rejecting U.S. military recruits is now obesity. While I am an ardent fan of world peace, becoming too fat to fight is not the way to achieve it.
- Nearly 50 million Americans are food insecure and a record number of people—over 47 million—are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Threats, both man-made and natural, to farming, farmland, and ultimately our food supply are increasing: 60% of the United States experienced drought conditions in 2012, the worst since 1954; half of the U.S. corn crop is either poor or very poor; agricultural pollution of our waterways and the

overuse of antibiotics in livestock are reaching threatening levels.

For these reasons, citizen engagement in every aspect of our food systems is no longer just a nicety; it is a necessity.

As a tacit acknowledgment of our growing food vulnerability, cities and countries are starting, and I underscore *starting*, to develop longer term food strategies and food plans.

- London has a food strategy;
- New York City has a policy platform called Food Works;
- Canada is establishing a national food strategy;
- Australia is engaged in the development of a national food plan;
- I was in Seoul, South Korea in September. That city's mayor is announcing a food plan;
- Following a public hearing attended by over 700 of its residents on their proposed food plan, Edmonton, Alberta committed \$1 million to a citizen engagement process to develop a food plan.

Thus, this organized commitment to food planning and more integrated approach to food systems represents a kind of communal responsibility, taking recognition that we all have a stake in our food system. The closest we come to food planning at the national level in the U.S. is the Farm Bill, which is currently stalled in Congress. It is best known for rewarding large commodity producers and not doing enough to nurture the underlying reason for agriculture in the first place, namely to promote human health. Accordingly, these food policy developments worldwide, together with the hundreds of community food policy initiatives and thousands of local food projects within the United States, suggest three things: first, that we are now coming together around the collective recognition that we, the people, have a stake in the direction of our food system; second, that we, the people, care deeply about the legacy of health we leave to our children and environment; and third, that we, the people, are food citizens just as much as we are food consumers.

Food citizenship, just like our soil, must be enriched by community participation; it must, like nature and biology, embrace diversity; and, it must, like the bargain we make with the land, be stewarded and respected for its capacities. Widespread citizen engagement in all aspects of our food system speak to what the Nobel Laureate Economist, Amartya Sen, discovered after a lifetime of researching political economies, world resources, poverty, and famine. One of his major

conclusions was this: “[n]o major famine has ever occurred in a functioning democracy with regular elections, opposition parties, basic freedom of speech and a relatively free media (even when the country is very poor and in a seriously adverse food situation).” In other words, where citizens are engaged, where democracy is working, and where transparency exists, people and their governments will be able to feed themselves. The conclusion I draw from Amartya Sen’s work, and from my own 40 years of experience as a community food system activist, is that we don’t necessarily need more technology to feed a hungry world—e.g., GMOs, agro-chemicals and factory-scale farms—we need more democracy.

More evidence is available with regard to how food attitudes, values, and tastes have shifted dramatically over the last 30 years:

- There are now 7800 farmers’ markets compared to 1700 in 1994—over 2000 of them accept EBT/SNAP benefits as well as WIC and Senior vouchers, and in many cases, double voucher programs—all designed to promote access of lower income people to healthy, local food.
- 15,000 public schools now operate farm-to-school programs in all 50 states connecting local farmers to local kids. The first farm-to-school program didn’t get underway until the late 1990s.
- There are several thousands of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms compared to only a few established CSAs in the early 1990s.
- More policy initiatives, like Pennsylvania’s Fresh Food Financing Initiative, are bringing supermarkets back into food deserts where lower income people have traditionally had limited food choices. Since 2006, Pennsylvania’s program has developed 85 new supermarkets in so-called food deserts and created 5,000 new jobs.
- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative is supporting the development of local and regional food systems that are equitable and sustainable, and perhaps most important, engaging more citizens and stakeholders. We’ve nearly doubled the number of food policy councils from 111 in 2010 to almost 200 today: Two-thirds of those are local or regional, and the rest are state or tribal; Florida has a few at this time.

Do you know what the best news of all is? Food actually tastes good! We've finally substituted the concept of "deliciousness" for "nutritionism," which is the unfortunate idea that some foods are supposedly better for you than they taste. The dubious arguments of some nutritionists remind me of something Mark Twain once said about the music of Richard Wagner: "I have been told that Wagner's music is better than it sounds."

Part of this move to deliciousness is due to a "culinary cultural exchange." One day, at the CSA I founded in Connecticut. It seems that a little tussle had broken out over the collard green bin when the black folks grew concerned that the white folks had discovered how good collards tasted and that they would start to take more than they were entitled to. The staff intervened and negotiated a truce; we all exchanged recipes and made a commitment to increase the plantings of collards.

Believe it or not, most of these gains in food programs and consciousness were supported by small, but necessary acts of policy. Remember, part of my job today is to define food policy; one objective of which is to level the playing field of the marketplace, which, as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith noted, will always tip in favor of the wealthier members of society when left to its own devices.

My first foray into public policy was to establish a Farmers' Market Nutrition Program to enable lower income people to participate more easily in farmers' markets. That effort has been followed by the development of a variety of measures to make it easier for SNAP recipients to use their benefits at farmers' markets as well. The CSA I just told you about was able to include a large number of low income members because of special government programs that were established for lower income seniors.

Consider what Cynthia Hayes and her partners did with the SoGreen Network and Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON). They knew that policies and practices that were opening up the lucrative organic market to farmers were not working for African-American farmers. They organized their own network to provide training targeted to African-American farmers so that they could take advantage of USDA's organic certification process—an important example of food and farm policy—to give them the same access and opportunity.

When I think of my role in promoting social change, I must remember that it is accomplished on the ground, project by project. But it is vastly accelerated when the resources and spotlight of public policy are trained on the underlying problems. As Edmund Burke once said,

“[i]t is not only our duty to make the right known; it is also our duty to make it prevalent.” Public policy takes the good but small projects we do on a week to week basis, and replicates them a thousand fold—it “makes the right prevalent.”

In addition to government resources, local and state Food Policy Councils (FPCs) have also implemented programs to promote just and sustainable food policies and food systems. What do FPCs do?

- Influence policy;
- Coordinate food system stakeholders;
- Conduct food system planning;
- Focus on the full range of food system issues;
- Address government regulations, budgets, legislation, programs, and administration;
- Conduct food and need assessments;
- Conduct public education;
- Inform and advise policy makers; and,
- Build relationships between food system stakeholders.

Based on recent surveys, we know that over half of the councils are less than three years old. Almost 90% of FPCs work on policy, and the leading policy issues they are working on are better access to healthy food, increased procurement of local food, promotion of urban agriculture and preservation of farmland.

In only this last year, I’ve worked with food policy councils in places as different as Grant County, New Mexico; Cook County (Chicago, Illinois), Iowa; Buffalo, New York; Birmingham, Alabama; Oklahoma; Louisville, Kentucky; Newark, New Jersey; Hawaii; and the Cherokee Nation. Let me give you some examples of food democracy in action, which is another way of putting food policy to work:

- During my tenure in Connecticut, our FPCs removed bureaucratic obstacles that had reduced the caseload of women, infant, and children program participants in Hartford from 10,000 to 6,000 low-income mothers and children. The FPCs remedied the problem by conducting a public transportation study and advocacy campaign that established new bus routes for lower income residents to enable them to get to high quality supermarkets; conducting a six-year campaign to secure tens of millions of dollars for farmland preservation; securing state funding to invest in new supermarkets in underserved and low-income communities; and bringing the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) pro-

gram to farmers' markets to enable SNAP recipients to electronically use their benefits at those markets.

- In New Mexico, the FPC has secured millions of dollars of funding for programs that enable senior citizens to shop at farmers' markets and for schools to purchase locally grown food.
- In Cleveland, Ohio, the FPC made changes in the City's Zoning Code that enabled the development of urban gardening and farming, allowed for the raising of chickens and bees in homeowners' backyards, and gave a preference to the region's farmers when it came to the purchase of locally grown food by city institutions.

These may not sound like the kind of actions that by themselves end world hunger, eliminate the scourge of childhood obesity, or bring certain and swift justice to those who have been denied it for so long, but they are the kind of actions that caring and watchful citizens can take to improve the lives of millions. It is what Amartya Sen means when he cites the power of democracy to solve problems. These are the baby steps of food policy that lead to giant strides of change.

Each of us needs to belly up to the food policy table and demand our share of the abundance whose creation we have contributed to. Each of us needs to demand a menu that is truthful, transparent, and does not allow one set of rules for us and another for those with fatter wallets. We know that our system of policy making works very well for those with money and power. We see that in the disproportionate amount of agricultural subsidies that go to large commodity producers, the manner in which the beverage industry spends millions of dollars to fight taxes and regulations that are designed to get America's obesity crisis under control, or the way that large food and farm corporations gain access to policy makers that everyday citizens could never imagine being able to do.

Yet, when those with money and power know they can't win in the court of public opinion, they often use extraordinary measures as, for example, Monsanto Corporation did when it threatened to sue both Connecticut and Vermont when they were both on the brink of passing a bill requiring the labeling of foods made from genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Moreover, extraordinary measures were also taken by a host of the nation's largest corporations when they anted up \$45 million to defeat California's Proposition 37, which, if passed, would have done nothing more than promote a consumer's right to know what's in their food.

If you want examples of bad food policy, look no further than the legislatures of all fifty states where the food industry runs rampant over the will of the people. Not only does the citizen's voice get lost in the avalanche of dollars, the majority voice—the will of the people—is also stifled. But, believe it or not, the people want change. According to a recent Kellogg Foundation survey:

- 93% of Americans believe it's important that all Americans have equal access to fresh fruits and vegetables.
- 97% of Americans want their food to be healthy.
- Consumers are not just thinking about themselves: 88% are willing to pay more for produce if they know that farm workers are being paid fairly.
- Citizens are also thinking about children: In light of the egregious threat posed by childhood obesity—that this generation of children may be the first to live shorter lives than their parents' generation—60% of the people want the government to intervene to reduce what is fast becoming America's biggest public health problem.
- In spite of the enormous, but undeserved, ridicule that Mayor Michael Bloomberg has received for his restrictions on over-sized sugary soft drinks, almost half of New York City residents agreed with his proposal.

The numbers are on our side. Don't be afraid to speak truth to power.

As we consider the thrust and parry of smaller policy interventions, we can't lose sight of the big ones whose immensity will undercut the very foundation of our society if not addressed. Consider the economic injustice that is done to the people who pick, process, and prepare our food. They make up 15% of the U.S. workforce, the largest single occupational category in the United States. Yet, they have a median wage of only \$9.65 per hour; only 13% receive a living wage; 83% receive no health insurance; 79% don't receive paid sick days. Finally, as you might imagine, the vast majority of these workers are people of color. We depend on these individuals for our survival; yet, they are paid so little that they qualify for food stamps.

Low wages and no benefits, increased enrollment in the food stamp program, and on-going growth in the demand for free food at food banks are nothing more than the cumulative evidence of two nations—one for the rich and one for everyone else. As the following statistics illustrate, the injustices are stark and the consequences severe:

- America has the third highest level of income inequality of the world's thirty-three most developed nations.
- America claims the highest rate of food insecurity and one of the lowest life expectancies which, incidentally, is purchased with the world's costliest health care system.
- America's student performance ratings are at the bottom of the barrel when compared to those of these other nations.
- U.S. income going to the richest one percent in 1973 was 10%; today it is over 25%. When it comes to the battle over public policy, this is the biggest story of the day.

When gazing across this socio-economic landscape, it is hard to escape the solutions that some will call simplistic and others obvious:

- If you want to feed the hungry, tax the rich.
- If you want to expand the economy, protect the environment, and promote healthy eating, invest in sustainable and regional food and farming systems.
- And, if you want to reduce obesity and diet-related diseases, regulate the food industry.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

When it comes to making policy, one thing I have learned is that all institutions—private or public, non-profit or corporate—are by nature conservative. I don't necessarily mean politically, I mean in the traditional sense of the word whereby they are committed to preserving the status quo. Bold, innovative strategies—whether it's food, energy, or social welfare—are not typically the province of government or institutions. They percolate from the ground up from people like you who can only see a better future if it's based on change.

I can tell you this: like nature, institutions and communities that don't adapt to changing conditions inevitably decompose and ultimately collapse. As he did on many issues, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best:

It is both historically and biologically true that there can be no birth and growth without birth and growing pains. Whenever there is the emergence of the new we confront the recalcitrance of the old. So the tensions which we witness in the world today are indicative of the fact that a new world order is being born and an old order is passing away.

When it comes to changing public policy, I can offer no better guidance. I've been engaged in food system work now for 40 years. I suspect that the reason my mother has taken so long to understand what it is I do for a living is because, like most people in America, she took food for granted.

I can assure you that those communities that don't plan for the future of their food system will be left at the mercy of the marketplace. Communities that don't take food policy seriously will thereby forfeit the public interest to an ever shrinking band of private interests. Communities that take food for granted will not only run the risk of watching their people's health and economies decline, they will miss the joy and vibrancy that food, community, and land bring to us all.

I am convinced that our common desire for good food reveals our shared humanity. The low-income mother who wants the best food for her children is no different than the yuppie mother who spends whatever she must to feed the healthiest food to her children. We can never accept the notion that one class of Americans is entitled to eat high on the hog, while another class of Americans only gets the leftovers.

In light of the environmental and food security challenges facing our globe, we must develop new standards of community wealth that prize sustainability and justice over the booby prizes of American commercialism. It will not be the size of the estate we bequeath to our children that matters, but the legacy of healthy bodies, a clean environment, and sustainable communities that they will treasure. Our lives and the lives of generations to come will be enriched by the opportunity for intimate contact with nature, food, and the age-old struggle to wrest something of value from the earth. It will be those experiences that we remember, not the new wide-screen television that hung on our living room wall or the extra-large SUV parked in our garage.

None of you can be denied the right to build a food system that is sustainable and just. You cannot be turned back from the simple democratic imperative that you have both a right and an obligation to shape the development of your food system. If you speak up, be smart, get loud, and stick together, I can assure you, you will win. Thank you.
