

Thought for Food

(as it appeared in the Creston Valley Advance newspaper, October 2, 2008)

Food Without Fossil Fuels

Gail Southall

Food without fossil fuels. Just think about that for a minute. Can you even imagine what this would look like? And before you get caught up in bucolic images of strapping young farmers guiding the horse-drawn plow through the fresh dark earth, take a moment to consider all of the ways our current food system depends on fuel. Unless you happen to be the above-noted farmer, this particular idea of food without fossil fuels isn't going to put vittles in your tummy. As the realities of peak oil start to sink in, it truly is an idea worthy of consideration.

Those in the know tell us the oil glass is half empty. Oil production will continue to decline and become increasingly expensive from here on out. The cheap oil party is over, folks. How will this affect our access to food?

Until the last century, virtually all of the food energy available on this planet came from the sun through photosynthesis. Either you ate plants, or animals that ate plants, and you worked your soil with animals that ate plants. The production of a few implements requiring coal-fired steel factories was pretty much the only place you would witness the use of fossil fuels. Skip forward a hundred years or so and you come upon a very different scene. In today's industrial system, except for the photosynthesizing role we still assign to the sun, the energy required to produce our food is wholly derived from fossil fuels. Seeding, irrigating, fertilizing, harvesting, transporting, processing, packaging, distributing, end-user purchasing, storing, preparing, and cleanup... all require vast amounts of fuel energy. According to a University of Michigan study conducted in 2000, it takes more than 80 calories of fossil fuel energy to get one calorie of food from farm to fork. We literally eat oil. But for how much longer?

With a system that currently spends about 17% of total energy on agriculture, in the face of rising prices and declining supplies, a re-engineering of how we feed ourselves is unavoidable. Experts still appear to be baffled by what the new system will look like, but agree on some basics:

- All infrastructure will be simplified but will likely not resemble a drive through Amish country. We've evolved in a different direction, they say.
- We will move the creation of our sustenance closer to where we live. No longer will we be shipping food from one end of the globe to the other.
- The growing of food will require more human, rather than machine input.
- Communities will have to work together in new and cooperative ways to ensure we all have enough to eat.
- Urban agriculture will be essential. Neighbourhoods will require higher density housing and the inclusion of green spaces devoted to food production.
- Those living in small, agricultural communities may be better off as long as they take steps now to preserve farmland for the future.

Oil won't run out tomorrow, but it will run out before long. What can you do today to ease the transition where your food is concerned?

- Start weaning yourself from oil-dependent food in small steps: eat locally grown; eat seasonally; eat naturally grown; grow your own; preserve and store food in ways that require minimal use of fossil fuel; avoid processed and heavily packaged foods; be conscious of where your food is grown and start to make some tough choices.
- Invest in creative programs that seek to address the challenges of food without oil: support farmers that are making an effort to move away from the industrial model, such as natural

producers and those engaging in community supported agriculture; make a steady transition to sustainable agricultural/gardening practices; support the initiatives of Creston's community greenhouse; check out the efforts of the Food Action Coalition; explore what others are doing around the globe.

- Get serious about demanding land use and planning measures that preserve agricultural land. Governments will naturally take the easy choices because they want to stay popular. Let them know you're willing to support them in making difficult decisions that will benefit us all on the bumpy road ahead.

Kicking our oil addiction will be challenging, but will present numerous opportunities for indomitable human innovation. Creston can be a model for sustainable self-sufficiency if we all start thinking, planning and acting now for a future without fossil fuels.

Gail Southall is Coordinator for the Creston Valley Food Action Coalition. The Coalition meets the first Monday of the month at the library. For more information call 250-254-0254 or email cvfoodaction@gmail.com.