

SYSTEM MELTDOWN

## **It could happen to our food supply, too**

Friday, December 05, 2008

*The Oregonian*

Having spent the Thanksgiving weekend with a wide array of friends from across the state, I was afforded a chance to exchange views on the latest iterations of our financial meltdown and what it might mean to our Thanksgiving gatherings in years to come. While pondering the bounty of culinary options on the dinner table, I realized that the current financial bailouts in the banking and insurance sectors should be redirecting our attention to the sector that provides the most fortunate among us with a healthy and sustainable supply of food.

The term "food security" is still an abstraction for many of us. After all, we live in the country with the lowest consumer cost for food in the world. We also live in the most centralized zone of corporate food control, with a shrinking group of producers and distributors consolidating our nourishment into market shares through the efficiencies of vertical integration.

Much of the food that enters this chain of distribution is grown and transported great distances to reach our tables. This combination of centralization and wide geographical sourcing has everything to do with our recent history of bargain mortgages and bundled risk profiteering. It focuses on driving costs down, and profits up, while never looking beyond the ledger sheet toward safety or sustainability.

These practices should also conjure up the image of our current health care system, which has been constructed across the same fields of market efficiencies and company profits balanced against a public right to health.

In practical terms we are living in a time when a single failure in our food production and distribution chains could eliminate a large percentage of our available foods, while driving costs up on the remaining options. In this situation our model of cost efficiencies, which have undoubtedly reduced point-of-sale costs in the short run, would collapse in much the same way that mortgage funding has when confronted with the realities of unsustainable loans amid falling home prices.

Losing our food sources would certainly rival the loss of our homes as a crisis. In the event of a breakdown in our centralized food distribution system, we'd have to create local solutions, and such a move to local sourcing couldn't be quickly accomplished if our local options had in fact disappeared during the agricultural centralization of recent decades. I hesitate to follow this reasoning to its destructive conclusion, but it's high time we had the courage to address food from precisely this perspective.

All of these issues may sound like doomsday-scenario building, but when you start to pull the string on our current system of food production, it makes the control of oil and mortgage financing look more like minor inconveniences than modern tragedies.

Food is the centerpiece in our physical existence and should be guarded far more intensely than any other asset. Our national security is certainly premised as much on a solid food system as much as it is on the availability of high-grade tactical weaponry, yet we exert no effective influence on its sustainability or management.

The holidays are certainly a good time to exhibit a fondness for food, but until we truly consider sustainable practices to ensure that our food doesn't go down the same road as our failed financial sector, we are powerless to ensure its safe arrival at our tables in the years to come.

*John Rockefeller is chief development officer at Pacific Rivers in Portland.*