

How is it that something with an inordinate draw on fossil fuel can cost the consumer so little?



Why does a hamburger

Brendan Brazier on the subsidies that are keeping the population and the planet sick.

As I write this article, in summer 2008, the oil price has just hit a new record high of \$147 per barrel. Never before in history has fossil fuel cost so much. Of course, gasoline cost is among the first to rise in reaction to the escalated price of crude oil, yet that's only the beginning.

With oil at an all-time high, the end consumer will pay more for *everything*. Since absolutely everything takes energy to produce, products that require the burning of copious amounts of fossil fuel will cost considerably more.

Or at least they should.

So why are we still seeing hamburgers on sale at fast food restaurants for under \$1? When a locally-grown organic apple that uses a fraction of the energy to produce costs the same, or more? How is it that something with an inordinate draw on fossil fuel can cost the consumer so little? The short answer: government subsidies.

In the US, these happen through legislation known as the Farm Bill – the government's chief food policy tool. While it was introduced with the best of intentions, the Farm Bill has veered off course and no longer benefits the people as a whole.

It was originally brought about with the aim of achieving food security and helping struggling farmers make enough money to stay in business. However, the subsidies became misdirected. They began chiefly flowing to the meat and dairy industry. Had the government not stepped in and bailed out this exceptionally inefficient industry with subsidies, meat and dairy would be cost-prohibitive to almost all consumers. Instead it turned these products into cheap commodities, causing consumption to skyrocket – and with it pollution and disease.

Such is the fossil fuel usage involved that almost no one would be able or willing to pay the true price of these products. Experts have estimated, for example, that a hamburger in a fast food restaurant

would cost anything from \$12 to \$30 if the true costs were reflected in the price. However, with subsidies structured as they are, the meat and dairy industry continues to consume resources at an ever-increasing rate.

What some may find most disturbing is that we, the tax payers, are footing the bill for this inefficient industry which is so destructive to both human and environmental wellbeing. The most health and earth-friendly diet is one comprised of primary-source nutrition, minimally processed. Primary-source nutrition means eating solely plant-based foods, without adding the wasteful extra step of feeding plants to animals and then eating the animal.

By doing this, a considerable amount of energy is conserved – about 30 per cent in fact. 30 per cent is huge. When energy gains measured in the one and two percent range are termed “significant,” 30 per cent is absolutely massive. Imagine if North America reduced its energy usage by 30 per cent? If every North American were to eat a diet that was based on primary nutrition that is exactly what would happen.

As we know, meat and dairy consumption have also been linked to numerous degenerative diseases. Health costs due to poor diets have been estimated to be \$250 billion per year in the US alone, and the US National Institute Of Health has predicted that obesity will lower Americans' life expectancy by up to five years over the next few decades. From obesity, to type-two diabetes, to osteoporosis, to cancer, to the number-one killer in North America, cardiovascular disease, nearly 100 percent of these cases can be prevented and reversed by eating a whole food, plant-based diet. The so-called “diseases of affluence” are one problem that we *can* eat ourselves out of.



Brendan Brazier

is a professional ironman triathlete, author of the best-selling book *The Thrive Diet*, and the creator of the award-winning Vega range of whole-food nutritional products. For more information, see BrendanBrazier.com and ThriveDiet.com. The book and the Vega range are available in the UK and Europe from fresh-network.com.



Almost three-quarters of US government agricultural aid goes, either directly or indirectly, to the meat and dairy industries

cost less than an apple?

Sarah Best on why meat and dairy are anything but cheap, no matter what the price tag may say.

According to recent estimates almost three-quarters of US government agricultural aid goes, either directly or indirectly, to the meat and dairy industries. Vegetable and fruit growers, meanwhile, muddle by with an almost non-existent 0.37 per cent.

In other words, the financial assistance flowing to businesses producing foods that are bad for health and bad for the environment is 200 times that received by businesses producing the foods that are best for health and the environment.

Confused? You should be.

But the US government is far from alone in demonstrating a profound disconnect between its health and environmental policies and its agricultural policies. This is a phenomenon that exists throughout the western world.

We are told that agricultural subsidies are necessary to guarantee a fair income for farmers and ensure food security. But if these subsidies were really “for the greater good”, they would be focused squarely on rewarding farmers growing healthy foods using sustainable methods – thereby (a) encouraging more farmers to grow these foods and (b) ensuring these foods are affordable for everyone.

So why is it that the present system does just the opposite? Two of the most heavily subsidized crops in the US are corn and soybeans. In both cases, the majority of the harvest is turned into animal feed, enabling meat and dairy to flood the market as cheap commodities. Most of the remainder is processed into junk food mainstays such as high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated soybean oil.

You don’t have to do much investigation to uncover the fact that our governments are supporting the production of the very foods that are responsible for the biggest problems of our time – poor health, pollution and poverty. What is going on? Who is this actually benefitting?

In what will surely be looked back on as one of the biggest scandals of our time, a system that was originally introduced for the good of the many is now good for only an elite few: those with a financial interest in “Big Agribusiness”.

Subsidies began in times of hardship – during the Depression in the United States and after World War Two in Europe. Today they are a wasteful and destructive anachronism. Western countries are drowning in food surpluses. At epidemic proportions are the diseases caused by an *excess* of cheap food, not by a lack of it.

Yet the world’s wealthiest nations continue to give more than \$300 billion of subsidies to their farmers every year. And in the past few decades, the biggest food producers have steadily gained the lion’s share, with an increasingly unsustainable price paid by small-scale farmers, third-world countries and the environment.

Why? Because of Big Agribusiness’s influence over government policy. These powerful interests do not only have millions to spend on propaganda campaigns to ensure that the average person thinks these products are essential to health. They also have seemingly bottomless budgets when it comes to lobbying activities designed to ensure the handouts continue to flow.

And flow they do. Did you know that each European cow attracts the equivalent of \$2.50 a day in subsidies – more money than half the world’s population has to live on? As Jessica Williams pointed out in the book *50 Facts That Should Change The World*, “What makes this even more remarkable is that the EU’s cows aren’t the most heavily subsidized in the world. That prize goes to Japanese cows, which receive \$7.50 every day.”

The unfair advantage enjoyed by livestock farmers includes not only direct payments, but a host of other benefits such as heavily subsidized land, grain and water. For example, it costs the US taxpayer \$1 billion a year to keep animal feed growers supplied >>

“Meat-industry subsidies emerge from what one would think was an impossible dilemma: how to remake what has always been a luxury good – with its high production costs – and turn it into one that is universally consumed. It simply cannot be done without an extremely efficient PR engine that sees to it that this industry’s costs are externalized onto society as a whole. The heavy burden is transferred back to several victims that are unable to fight back: the animals, the environment and the taxpayers.”

Pamela Rice, *101 Reasons Why I’m A Vegetarian*.

“More people die because of the way they eat than by tobacco use, accidents or any other lifestyle or environmental factor. We know that the incidence of obesity and diabetes is skyrocketing and that Americans’ health is slipping away, and we know what to blame: diet. So shouldn’t the government be leading us to better nutrition?”

T.Colin Campbell, *The China Study*.

“Current agricultural and public health policy is not coordinated. We heavily subsidize the growth of foods (e.g., corn, soy) that in their processed forms (e.g., high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated corn and soybean oils, grain-fed cattle) are known contributors to obesity and associated chronic diseases, including cancer.”

The 2006-2007 Annual Report of the President’s Cancer Panel.

“Compared with a bunch of carrots, a package of Twinkies, to take one iconic processed food-like substance as an example, is a highly complicated, high-tech piece of manufacture, involving no fewer than 39 ingredients, many themselves elaborately manufactured, as well as the packaging and a hefty marketing budget. So how can the supermarket possibly sell a pair of these synthetic cream-filled pseudocakes for less than a bunch of roots? For the answer, you need look no farther than the farm bill.”

Michael Pollan, *New York Times*.

Our governments are supporting the production of the very foods that are responsible for the biggest problems of our time

with irrigation water, so livestock producers can enjoy the kind of bargains usually only seen in the January sales all year round. All this, and more, has led to the coining of the phrase “welfare ranching”.

The privileges don’t stop there, but extend to exemption from the environmental legislation other industries have to comply with by law. As Pamela Rice writes in her book *101 Reasons Why I’m A Vegetarian*, “There is no way to put a dollar figure on it all. How could you put a dollar figure on the exemptions [the livestock] industry enjoys from the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act?”

The west’s agricultural subsidies create massive surpluses of both grain and animal products. You’ve probably heard of the EU’s fabled “grain mountain”, “beef mountain”, “butter mountain” and “milk lake”. But did you know these gluts are often dumped in the third-world at rock bottom prices?

Farmers in developing countries can’t compete, so are unable to operate in their own markets, let alone export their produce. Some campaigners argue that there would be no hunger or food scarcity in the world if the affluent west did not artificially cut the prices of its agricultural products.

Poverty is one world problem the current system of agricultural subsidies has to answer for. Pollution is another. Leaving aside the subsidized land, water and grain that factory farming relies on, if it simply had to pay its own clean-up costs it would cease to be economically viable.

But while most industries have been required to adapt their

Cheap as chips?

Several years ago, obesity researcher Adam Drewnowski discovered that a dollar buys 1,200 calories of cookies or potato chips and 875 calories of soda, but only 250 calories of carrots and 170 calories of orange juice.

In many supermarkets you can buy a whole chicken for less than the cost of a bag of organic kale. Subsidies have turned the unhealthiest and least ethically produced foods into the cheapest foods, and therefore the ones that get consumed the most.

The purchaser may appear to get the mother of all bargains at the cash register, but that doesn’t mean that they – and we – are not paying dearly for these foods in other ways.

ways in response to concern for the environment, agribusiness gets special treatment. For example, livestock farmers are curiously exempt from measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And despite a 2006 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations which found that livestock production is responsible for 18 percent of greenhouse-gas emissions (dwarfing transportation's 13 per cent contribution), agriculture remains a blind spot in most governments' climate protection policies.

But a Germany-based organization called Foodwatch is determined to see all this change. It is calling for a radical restructuring of agricultural subsidies and the introduction of emissions taxes and environmental duties for livestock farmers. These costs would be passed on to the consumer in the shape of vastly increased prices for meat and milk products.

And in September of this year the UK-based Food Climate Research Network urged that rationing people to one litre of milk a week and 500g (1.1lb) of meat is necessary to avoid runaway climate change. Current average consumption in the UK is considerably higher at 4.2 litres of milk and 1.6kg (3.5lb) of meat. The recommendation follows a four-year study by the group of the impact of food on climate change thought to be the most thorough of its kind.

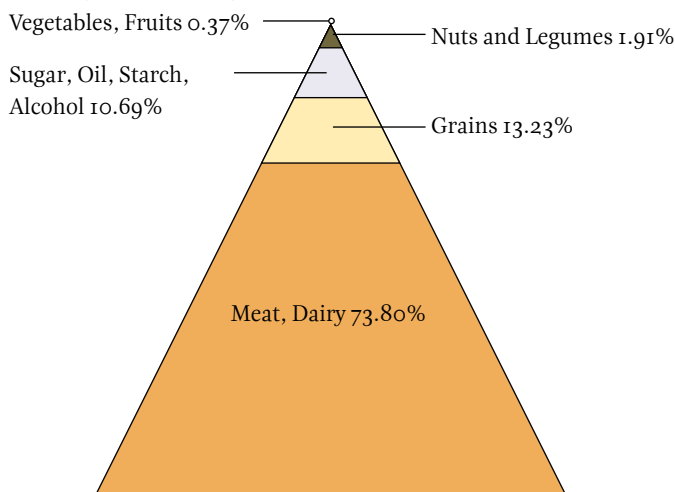
The only question remaining at this stage of the game is whether government action to achieve a massive drop in the consumption of animal products will be taken in time to prevent the major environmental catastrophe the planet is heading for, or only after.

And it wouldn't take a fallback to wartime-style rationing to achieve the necessary drop in meat and dairy consumption; just a restructuring of the subsidies that have turned these foods into cheap commodities.

Anyone who thinks this would be a bad idea can take heart from the example of Poland. The Polish government stopped propping up the country's meat industry in 1995. The result? An almost immediate 25 per cent drop in the incidence of cardiovascular disease. Scientists who studied the phenomenon declared it "without precedent in peacetime". ■

US government's subsidies for food production, 1995-2005.

Source: Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine



“In the US we can buy a hamburger for 79 cents. The same hamburger meat would cost over \$12 if it were not for the American taxpayers subsidizing the grain, the irrigation water, the electricity, the grazing on public lands. How many people – even in America – would go and spend that amount of money on meat? We can’t afford roads, or schools, or health care, and yet we are paying \$11.21 for every \$12 of something that is helping kill one out of every two Americans today.”

Howard Lyman, cattle-rancher-turned-vegan, and author of *Mad Cowboy*.

“Modern agriculture will have to change radically if the international community wants to cope with growing populations and climate change, while avoiding social fragmentation and irreversible deterioration of the environment.”

Salvatore Arico, UNESCO biodiversity expert.

“The European Union spends enough money each year on farmers to pay for a round the world trip for all 21m European cows. Thanks to the generosity of Europe’s taxpayers, the cows could touch down in London, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Hanoi, Siem Reap, Brisbane, Raratonga, Los Angeles and San Francisco and still have enough left over for £400 spending money each.”

Charlotte Denny and Andrew Clark, *The Guardian*.

“RESOLVED, that our American Medical Association support efforts (1) to reduce health disparities by basing food assistance programs on the health needs of their constituents, (2) to provide vegetables, fruits, legumes, grains, vegetarian foods, and healthful nondairy beverages in school lunches and food assistance programs, and (3) to ensure that federal subsidies encourage the consumption of products low in fat and cholesterol.”

The American Medical Association in a resolution passed by the AMA House of Delegates in 2007.