Your on the Street Reporter

Uyless Black

Uncle Sam Fixes our Food

Uncle Sam Fixes Our Food (I)

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During my visits to the east coast, I spend some time walking around our Nation's Capital. On my way to the Hirshhorn Museum, the subject of a later piece, I passed by the Department of Agriculture, located on Independence Avenue, and depicted in Figure 1. The building reminded me of the recent *E. Coli* spinach scare. I wondered what this agency was doing about the problem.

Figure 1. The Department of Agriculture.

This building also brought back old memories. In the 1970s, I taught software programming classes for the Agriculture Graduate School. Today, I decided to visit my classroom. I walked into the lobby, encountering the usual post 9/11 phalanx of guards, gates, scanners, and X-ray machines.

- "Hello. I used to teach classes in this building. Thought I would check-out my old classroom. Here's my ID."
- "Driver's license won't do. You need a pass, sir. Or proper identification."
- "No visitors, eh?"
- "Maybe. See the Visitor's Center, across the hall."

Visiting the Visitor's Center

What should I have expected? Security is practically everywhere, even around farmlands and farmland agencies. Osama bin Laden may have poisoned America's fresh spinach crops. Who knows? If he's targeting our agriculture, he could also be targeting our agriculture department. I walked over to the Visitor's Center to check-out how my tax dollars had been put to work.

Unless you are a farmer, you will not be happy with my findings.

The Center is impressive. Parts of it are shown in Figure 2, which illustrates a video kiosk. Here, a visitor can watch movies about our tax dollars in action, a topic explored shortly. Also on display are canned vegetables, pieces of linen, a picture of a cow, a fluff of cotton, and other assorted agricultural artifacts of Americana. The setup was impressive. I spent well over an hour looking around. I was the only visitor during this time. Most of the tourists were down the street at the Air and Space Museum.

Figure 2. The Visitor's Center.

- I approached a guide, "May I take these brochures with me?"[1]
- Guide, "Certainly, and here is one of our publications. It's a monthly magazine that keeps our farmers informed about USDA's programs." She handed me a copy of *Agricultural Research*.
- Reporter, "Thanks. Say, I read articles about how America is losing farmers and farms. Is that true?"
- Guide, "Yes." She hands me a pamphlet. "Read this:" *There are 2.1 million farms in the United States today, down from the peak of 7 million farms in 1935.*[2]
- Reporter, "Yeah, that's what I've heard. Just wondering, has the USDA shrunk as well?"
- Guide, "I doubt it. We continue to bring in new programs and research projects to help our farmers."
- Reporter, "How many employees does the USDA have?"
- Guide, "About one hundred thousand."
- *One…hundred…thousand.* "What do they do?"
- Guide, "All sorts of things. Read your copy of *Agricultural Research*. It will give you an idea of what USDA is all about."
- Reporter, "By the way, the USDA agent in my hometown had a nervous breakdown."
- Guide, "Really? What happened?"
- Reporter, "His farmer died."
- Guide, "I've heard that one before. And as you might now know, it's twenty-one farmers to every USDA employee. "
- Reporter, "Yeah. Well, thanks."

These numbers represent a 1 to 21 ratio of farmer bureaucrat to farmer. That number is incredible. And that includes all the people in this building and who knows how many labs around the country. I'll bet there's a USDA agent somewhere in this country

[1] This conversation is taken from my notes, which I jotted-down during and after this meeting. I was not about to turn on my voice recorder.
[2] "Quick Facts About the USDA," United States Department of Agriculture, August 2005.

"looking after" only one farmer. When this farmer dies, the agent will not lose his job. He'll be transferred to another farming "community" where there will be two agents looking after one farmer. Think I'm exaggerating? Somewhat, but not a whole lot.

More of Your Tax Dollars at Work

The lead article of *Agricultural Research* is about a USDA program whose goal is to make genetic alterations to a pepper. Don't worry. We're not talking about a Little Shop of Horrors mutant. Just a few tweaks to the DNA of the Black Pearl Pepper in order to do what? This:

> The eye-catching Black Pearl, released in 2005 and honored as a 2006 All-America Selections (AAS) winner, attests to (the success of USDA) in developing new cultivars with both aesthetic and culinary appeal.[3]

Released? Released from what? From the lab of a mad USDA scientist? From Pepper Purgatory? And cultivar? I had to look up the dictionary definition of a cultivar: "A variety of a cultivated plant that is developed by breeding and has a designated name."

The article goes on to say the USDA looks forward to releasing several new pepper cultivars in the future. One being an "orange pumpkin-shaped fruit for seasoned applications, such as Halloween."[4] Hm. Halloween is under assault from some folks who think it has religious overtones, or witchcraft overtones, or whatever. Anyway, should we have our USDA involved in Halloween-oriented cultivars? It's a separation of church and state issue, even a separation of witchcraft and state issue.

I'm making light about our Agriculture Department. To be fair, the USDA is doing a lot of useful research, but for the life of me, I can't see why we should be ponying up our tax dollars for research that private industry should be doing. If Taco Bell wants a pretty pepper, let Taco Bell's genetic scientists produce it. I am sure it will make a big difference in my selection of Taco Bell's menu entry of, "Bean Burritos, with Black Pearl Peppers."

Other Endeavors?

Illustrating why the Department of Agriculture has 100,000 employees, here is a list of the articles in their monthly magazine, with a few comments from this writer. Hold on to your hat and grab yourself a hybrid Margarita:

- "Controlling Tropical Spiderwort in the Southeast" It is a big problem, because Spiderwort has developed an immunity to Roundup. The article states that America resorts to, "widespread use of Roundup ready crops." I don't know about you, but I'm not fond of Roundup. It can't help but find its way into our food system. It's banned in some countries because (a) it's poison and (b) it makes cauliflowers taste good.

- "Sticking it to the South American Cactus Moth," A forerunner to our sticking it to Venezuela.

- "Tenderizing Tough Brahmans," A research article from the USDA branch office in India.

[3] "Twice as Nice: Breeding Versatile Vegetables," *Agricultural Research*, USDA, September 2006, Vol. 54, No. 9, 4.
[4] Ibid., 5.

- "Probing Peppers' Water Needs," Especially for orange peppers on a hot Halloween night.

- "For Innovative Pest Control, A New Gene-Transfer Technique," A quote from this article: "…masses of male insects are sterilized…and then released to mate with wild females. No offspring result, and the population diminishes." Just think how exciting it must be for the USDA guys to find wild female insects:

    - "Horace, look over there, there's a female insect hanging out at the bar. Does she look wild enough?"
    - "Naw, she's drinking a Shirley Temple."

- "Beeting Back the Enemy," A genetic research project to make the beet less susceptible to root maggots. The article states, "Up to now, farmers have kept the maggots at bay by using a cocktail of insecticides." No wonder few people have taken a liking to beets. The good news is that the maggots in the beets we have been eating are dead (that soil-like taste in beets comes from more than just soil). The bad news is that the fermenting insecticides that were put-on the beets are likely alive in our colon. Wash those veggies before you slice and dice them!

- "Making a Better Barley for Brewing," The article starts with, "Some say there's a science to appreciating fine beer." I add, "And there's an art to drinking it." The USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientists "Are constantly scrutinizing barley kernels to find those with the best malting qualities." And this fact, my friends, is why America's beers taste so good…Ha. Anyway, let Bud do it. Why is a government agency doing work that private industry should be doing?

Am I being too crabby by suggesting that this *very small sampling* of the programs in *one* federal agency is just a bit excessive? Multiply them by scores, probably hundreds of other government departments and agencies, and it is easy to see how the term *Big Government* got its name. I would have liked to have seen a research program title in the table of contents dealing with E. Coli and spinach, or even E. Coli and black pearl peppers.

Before closing out this piece, one more thought: If you re-read the bullet items, you will discover many of the projects deal with altering the genetic composition of food. You want to eat food that has not been genetically tweaked? Good luck.

Uncle Sam Fixes Our Food (II)

Having recently visited the Department of Agriculture, and having recently eaten fresh spinach, I've been following the E. Coli problem with keen interest. I read the spinach contamination is only one of several food-borne illnesses that have cropped-up (no pun intended) in recent years.[5] In case you were tuned to Reality TV these past few months, you might have missed the news of illnesses stemming from cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, strawberries, raspberries, cantaloupes, apple juice, and orange juice. Talk about reality.

There were 86 vegetable or fruit "outbreaks" in 2004, compared to 29 in 1997.[6] These data do not include the folks who died from a food-borne illness but were cited in the Obits of dying from acute indigestion (of which there are many). Nor do these figures deal with illnesses from faulty beef, poultry, and fish---only vegetables and fruit.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) now releases information in a more detailed manner. The number of illnesses and associated specimens is leveling off. However, the number of U.S. citizens affected annually is huge, as shown in table 1.[7]

Table 1. Estimated annual number of domestically acquired, food-borne illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths due to 31 pathogens and unspecified agents transmitted through food, United States.

Food-borne Agents	Estimated annual number of illnesses	%	Estimated annual number of hospitalizations	%	Estimated annual number of deaths	%
31 known pathogens	9.4 million	20	55,961	44	1,351	44
Unspecified agents	38.4 million	80	71,878	56	1,686	56
Total	47.8 million	100	127,839	100	3,037	100

In the first segment of this piece, I made reference to the increasing use of genetics to modify our food. I think we might be altering the wrong set of stuff. Maybe we should be doing research on humans' DNA to make us immune from the emerging Frankenfood Industry.

If you are one of those people who look at life through rose-colored glasses, read a book titled, *Fast Food Nation*. It will acquaint you to a bit of Reality Non-TV about how your Porterhouse ends up on your table. I read it several years ago and have never looked at my Big Mac in the same way. Oh, I admit, I never *really look* at a Big Mac. It's down the hatch before my eyes can focus on such a short range object.

I still love Big Macs. After all, the cow is already dead, and it's not my fault how the critter died in the slaughterhouse. As long as cowboys don't put DDT in the beef doing their roundup, I'll take my patty medium rare without Roundup.

[5] Marian Burros, "Produce is Growing Source of Food Illness," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2006, A12.
[6] Ibid.
[7] http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html.

You Are What You Eat

Still, I find reading the daily newspapers is having an effect on my once carefree eating habits. I have tried to ignore the health cliché, "You are what you eat." My take on it now is, "In spite of what you eat, you still are."

Today, when I think of ordering some fine fare from, say, the Chesapeake Bay, I recall a study that stated chicken waste flowing into the Bay has led to massive contamination. A significant number of fish have been caught with deformed heads, as well as sores, lesions, and strange looking bumps on their bodies.[8] Some fishermen took ill after they handled the fish. They complained of skin lesions, fatigue, and light-headedness.

Granted, I'm eating the fish, not handling them. Still, doesn't this sort of news give you pause? No? Fine, how about this: It is suspected that the runoffs of cattle dung and sheep urine, permeating the wetlands of some Florida land, has resulted in the mutation of frogs. It is believed it took about 60 years to happen, but some of the frogs are now growing five legs."[9]

OK, I get a deal when I order frog's legs at the local French café. Still, I think about my ingestions more than I used to.

[8] www.usgs.gov/themes/FS-189-97/.

[9] Scott Allen, "Widespread Abnormalities Stump Scientists. Pesticides, Parasites Among Explanations," *The Boston Globe*, July 28, 1997, p. B01.