Food, Glorious Food?

Report by: Jill Severn

The Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia hosted its monthly informal forum on Friday, February 19, 2010 at 3 p.m. at the Russell Library on the Campus. A group of students, faculty, and staff from the University of Georgia as well as some members of the Athens community gathered to deliberate the challenging topic of food safety and related issues using the National Issues Forums guide, *The New Science of Food: Facing Up to Our Biotechnology Choices* published in 2003. With the Georgia Organics conference happening at a nearby venue in Athens, it seemed like a great time to take up this challenging issue. Monica Pereira and Dyan Holt moderated the forum.

To begin, forum participants shared some general experiences and perspectives related to buying, growing, and eating food today in the U.S. Although almost everyone in the group said they paid some attention to the nutritional information labels on packaged food, most also expressed concern that the labels were often hard to interpret. One person raised the example of “natural flavorings” as an ingredient listing that appears in many processed food labels. He explained that natural flavorings might include ground up bug bodies that provided coloring to a product and that, really “natural” as a descriptor was meaningless. Another participant also noted that the food labels don’t address how the food was produced and where it was produced—factors that can have a huge influence over the cost, safety and environmental impact of a given product. The lack of clear labeling of food served to amplify forum participants’ concerns that much of the mainstream food supply contains a startling array of chemicals and unhealthy ingredients. There was strong consensus among participants that with the rise of allergies to peanuts and other foods, clear informative labels are essential. One forum attendee also expressed particular anger over the television commercials in favor of using high fructose corn syrup.
Another participant reminded the group that the notion of biotech foods is not a new concept and in fact farmers and the food industry have been employing chemicals and technology to improve crop yields and extend the shelf life on food for many years. He also pointed out that at the same time, organic approaches to food production are also not new ideas.

There was a general consensus that awareness of food safety and issues related to overall sustainability are becoming a growing concern in many American communities. At the same time, with the economic decline in recent years, many people find purchasing organic food—which typically costs more than regular food—challenging to afford. The forum participants agreed that economics on micro and macro levels would determine food choices for Americans and, in fact, people around the world in the years to come as costs of production rise in relation to the cost of petroleum. According to one participant, low fuel prices and government subsidies enable Americans to afford produce out of season that is trucked in from all over the world. If these costs rise, then people may find organic or locally grown food affordable in comparison.

Another factor that influences American eating habits tremendously is advertising sponsored by the food and restaurant industries that emphasize cheapness, quickness, and convenience to the American audience that perceives itself to be overworked, strapped for cash, and too tired to cook. The group moved from this overview of perspectives on food to consider each of the three approaches outlined in the issue guide.

The first approach for this issue, “Let Science and Enterprise Guide Our Food System,” proposes that we should enhance rewards for biotech food and agricultural innovations, foster free enterprise, and base regulations on scientific evidence to benefit the world with an improved food supply. The forum participants were skeptical of the efficacy of this approach on several fronts. One participant objected to the representation of agribusiness in the introductory film as a woman running a farm with her family, describing the image as false and misleading. For this participant a truer image of U. S. agribusiness and agriculture would have been a corporate representative in a suit. In his opinion, the views in this approach that contend that the free market should be allowed to control matters of food safety and that large scale food production that makes use of scientific innovation is essential for future global food needs represent the interests of large corporate food production, not small family farms. This objection to the representation of the agriculture industry was echoed by participants in their general disdain for the validity of scientific research that is sponsored by or funded by the food industry or related industries including, in some cases, the U. S. government. The group spent some time reflecting on the example of the scientific experts who claimed smoking was safe for many years before finally admitting that these findings were incorrect. From this discussion some of the group then asked, “What stops the food industry from funding similar types of scientific research that supports their economic interests with regard to the safety of genetically modified food crops?” This point reflects the group’s general concern that it is difficult for consumers to sort out when science is being employed to support an industry and its bottom line and when it is trustworthy and in the public interest. Tied to this concern is a general belief among several participants that the government may not be able to be an effective impartial regulatory body with the food industry and this oversight is crucial to a safe and responsible food supply system not only for the United States but around the world. Finally, the group
did consider the point that supporters of this approach make, that free enterprise and limited regulation encourage higher crop yields and a greater production of food for a growing world population. Some in the group acknowledged that hunger was a growing problem around the world, but did not see how this approach’s strategy would necessarily ameliorate this problem.

The second approach for this issue, “Safety First — Protect Our Health and Environment,” advocates taking extra precautions to ensure that all biotech food and agricultural innovations are safe for humans and the environment and monitor them to quickly resolve any problems. The forum group found much to favor in this approach to the issue, but some felt it did not address some basic concerns related to modern food growth and production such as providing safe, environmentally sustainable food to those with limited finances and poor access to good sources of food in the United States and in other countries where food is donated or exported. Still, many in the group strongly advocated the emphasis on robust labeling of ingredients in food as well as the techniques employed for creating/manufacturing and distributing food. “Labels help us make informed decisions, but they need to tell us everything—full disclosure!” Those in the group calling for better more exhaustive labeling also acknowledged that consumers have a responsibility to be as informed as possible about what they and their families are eating. To make this easier, food manufacturers should be required to make the subtle differences between food production schemes such as what makes something “organic” and what makes something “natural” clear. A tension in this line of discussion surfaced when fans of locally grown small scale farmers noted that narrow, USDA-approved standards for “organic” meant that many farmers growing food in a sustainable and generally organic fashion could not sell their food as organic and thus interfere with their ability to compete with larger growers who may be using many more resources to transport their organic food.

The third approach, “Encourage Multiple Food Sources and Full Disclosure” proposes encouraging a variety of methods in food and agricultural production as well as advocating for full disclosure to keep our options open as new information develops and preferences change. This approach’s twin emphases on vigilant oversight and flexible modes of food production methods found many supporters among the forum participants. The discussion of the need for expanded informative labeling of food and the tradeoffs that such expansion would incur echoed earlier discussions in approaches one and two. Someone speculated that full disclosure costs might add 15% to the costs of food. Other in the group disputed this assessment and argued that costs might rise, but not to this extent and might decline over time once they were generally implemented. Others suggested that the government could subsidize the cost for additional labeling/disclosure instead of subsidizing agricultural industries. The impact of any price increase on the poor was of particular concern to several participants who were frustrated that those with the fewest resources had to choose between cheap and potentially less healthy food options and prohibitively expensive and healthier more sustainable food choices. One participant mentioned that there were some efforts underway to address this choice between affordability and healthy sustainable food. The local Athens Farmer Market is working to make it possible for vendors to accept food stamps and other government food subsidies. Another mentioned the community garden movement and efforts to address the food deserts in communities like Athens, where people don’t have access to fresh healthy food. Another participant cited the evolution of the country’s attitude and
policies regarding smoking as evidence that laws and practices in the United States regarding food production could evolve and change, even though it might take several decades to do so. Another participant concurred and shared that the growing concern over obesity and its negative health implications in the country were likely to speed up a transformation of the country’s expectations of the food industry.

In closing, the group focused on the personal steps each could take to encourage and support sustainable, safe, and healthy food production. Here’s a sample of some of participants’ ideas:

“Eat local! Eat sustainable!”
“Buy organic when you can!”
“Support community gardens.”
“Be an informed consumer!”

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit [http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg](http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg), call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com