Peak Oil Issues

Agriculture

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For many, the understanding and appreciation of what is really involved in getting the food from the field to our plates is practically non-existent. The amount of fossil fuels used to feed us is absolutely staggering – and with the decline of oil and gas, clearly unsustainable. "Every single calorie we eat is backed by at least a calorie of oil, more like ten," revealed an article in Harpers Magazine in February 2004.

As Britain was the first country to industrialise, the 18th century saw the last British generation to be closely linked to agriculture. British food became dominated by imports from the Empire, then by the brand names of the large corporations who controlled or processed these products, and most recently by a few giant retailers. To most Britons, all that matters is that food is cheap. In contrast, many people in the rest of the world still have rural family links and therefore place a higher value on secure supplies of local produce.

Our food supply is among the most vulnerable on earth to an energy shortage. We are so dependent on road haulage that the nation's larder is actually our motorway system. Around 40% of the trucks on British roads move farm products and food from ports and airports and between huge processing plants, dairies and abattoirs, through vast central distribution depots, and finally to the supermarkets. Any major disruption in fuel supplies would quickly result in rows and rows of empty supermarket shelves and desperate shoppers hunting for anything to make do with. In such circumstances, would the prospect of violence at supermarkets be inconceivable?

Restricted supplies and ever-rising costs of oil and gas carry even worse long-term dangers. After the food shortages of the Second World War, great advances were made in increasing UK food self-sufficiency. Output accelerated further after joining the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) so that the last two decades of the 20th century were spent in dealing with surpluses through land 'set-aside' policies. This created the false impression that Britain, a small island of 60 million people, had a surplus of farmland. The dramatic increases in crop yields and the parallel reduction in the price of farm produce during the post-war period were the result of the worldwide 'Green Revolution'. Huge applications of natural-gas-dependent Nitrogen fertiliser to crops boosts production, but demands an arsenal of herbicides, fungicides and pesticides to protect them from disease. The manufacture of these chemicals and fertilisers requires massive inputs of oil and natural gas.

The resulting glut of food caused a steady fall in food commodity prices, which freed up incomes to help fuel the consumer and property booms of recent decades. Globalisation is now forcing farm prices down further as production moves to lower-cost countries. Along with most of the developed countries, agriculture in the UK is now derided as an 'occupation of last resort' as incomes have collapsed. As the average age of farmers approaches 60, vital skills are rapidly disappearing with them, and vast tracts of our best farmland are being swallowed up by roads, housing and out-of-town shopping centres.

The doctrines of consumerism and globalisation have become so pervasive that the British public and politicians could hardly be in a worse position from which to begin to understand the scale of the reversals in thinking necessary to regain a degree of food security in the UK. A savage combination of dwindling oil supplies for transport and chemicals, and dramatic declines in global food production as climate change begins to bite, will make the revival of localised, low-energy input agriculture a national priority. You can make a difference right now by sourcing your food from farmers markers and local farm food box schemes such as Riverford.