

## The Security Threat to End All Security Threats

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By Brian DeVore

NORTHFIELD, Minn.—In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, there has been a lot of talk about bolstering "food security" in this country. Much of that discussion has centered around such things as how we can make our processing plants impervious to contamination, or what to do if our cattle are infected with foot and mouth disease.

But maybe we're missing an even bigger opportunity to address matters of security. For example, does our current drive toward creating one world grocery store pose a danger to this country's stability? Yes, says John Ikerd, a professor emeritus of agricultural economics at the University of Minnesota. Ikerd spoke at the 11th Annual Conference of the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) of Minnesota, held in Northfield earlier this year. He's a respected economist (many of his papers can be downloaded from <http://www.ssu.missouri.edu/faculty/JIkerd/papers/default.htm>) who knows all too well the influence—both good and bad—his profession has had on agriculture.

"I'm an ordained economist. And I've preached in four different universities over 30 years," Ikerd cracked at the beginning of his talk.

Globalization is considered by many ordained economists—agricultural and otherwise—as a flat-out win-win-win for everyone. But as one can guess from the title of Ikerd's SFA talk, "The Real Costs of Globalization—to Farmers, Consumers, and Our Food System," there's at least one doubter.

Basically, says Ikerd, globalization is not about "competitive" advantage anymore, or who can raise the best corn most efficiently. Instead, it's all about "comparative" advantage. How does a particular Third World country compare to, say, the Midwest, in the environmental and worker safety limits

it puts on food production? Chances are it compares favorably, meaning its standards are lower. That makes it cheaper to produce and process food in that other country-an attractive thing for a multinational corporation focused exclusively on the financial bottom line. No matter how efficient a Midwestern farmer becomes at producing soybeans, meat or milk, there's always a country willing to lower its environmental and labor standards just a little bit more. Competing in that game is a breakneck race to the bottom.

"That's what it's about, is a moving to somewhere not necessarily where it's more efficient but where you have fewer constraints on the exploitation of people and the exploitation of land," Ikerd told the gathered farmers.

It's not that all global trade is bad, or that corporations are inherently evil. However, trade is increasingly controlled by business entities that are beholden to no one but their stockholders. These corporations simply aren't equipped to feel loyalty toward a certain piece of land, a community, or even an entire country. These rootless wonders are looking for the cheapest deal, no matter where it's being offered. That increasingly will not be the U.S.

Eventually that means the end of the American farm, as we know it. That's bad news, but not just because a way of life will have gone by the wayside. The death of farming will create a situation where we are as dependent on the rest of the world for our food as we are today for our oil.

"And what's the cost of keeping our oil flowing today?" Ikerd asks. "What is the military cost involved that you and I and everybody knows is directly related to our lack of independence with respect to oil? How many small wars will we fight in the future because of our dependence on other countries for food?"

Now that is a threat to national security. But Professor Ikerd didn't speak before the SFA to sow seeds of hopelessness. He sees local food systems as an effective anecdote to sacrificing homeland food security on the altar of

globalization. He says whenever farmers and consumers can connect through direct marketing, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture, "buy local" campaigns, and various other strategies, there is hope we won't become vulnerable to the food version of OPEC. Ikerd says meetings like the SFA annual gathering give him hope because they are attended by an increasing number of farmers who are finding innovative ways to bypass the conventional commodity marketplace.

"One-by-one over the years we transformed our local food system to a global food system," Ikerd says. "And when change happens in the future it will happen one-by-one. It will happen one-by-one as farmers like you here today decide to do something different, decide that you are going to sell your products somewhere different than you've been selling them, decide you're going to produce something different and connect with a consumer locally."

Brian DeVore is the editor of the Land Stewardship Letter. The Land Stewardship Project encourages distribution and republication, with proper credit, of this commentary.