

The Humble Spud, Global Lifesaver

Written by Alex Baer

Tuesday, 06 January 2015 19:29

Any loose familiarity with current events, whether from last week or on back to 1492, and it's difficult to remain feeling upbeat and not beat up.

There is always terrible news. Things can always get worse of course, but they can't always, automatically, get better -- not using the same downhill-gliding autopilot that Reality tends to use. Rarely is there both good *and* amazing news. Today, there is some of both -- news that may even turn the world upside down.

Before we reach that particular cool, oasis spring of thirst-quenching information, we have a hot trek through desert sands ahead of us. The subject of travel is food. And, when it comes to food, it's a desert without end for many Americans:

- One in six Americans struggles to get enough to eat.
- One in seven Americans relies on food banks for their food.
- One in five children in America is at risk of hunger.
- Fifty million people in America struggle to put food on the table.

More stats: In 2013, 18 million households -- more than 49 million Americans -- lived in food-insecure households. (Food insecurity is not a politically cute term playing footsie with the notion that people don't have enough *wonderful* food -- it's a USDA term used where there's a lack of access to *enough* food of *any* kind at times for // family members.) a

And, yes, this is 2015, not the late 1700s and early 1800s. This is not the dust bowl of the 1930s, when you couldn't get the soil to stay in one place long enough to grow something, when the dirt itself tried to evaporate and flee, all the way down to immovable bedrock.

Add to this more grim tidings:

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It is true that it has become politically expedient -- even praiseworthy in some corners of the country -- to set one's jaw and fists, and not only talk about slashing food stamps and school lunch programs and standards, but to take hardline action on such things... things that would have been unthinkable not that long ago to any American, politician or civilian.

It is also true that America is the home of soaring rates of obesity and diabetes caused, most would agree, by a sedentary lifestyle and a diet way too high in sugars and fats -- a diet in which more calories are packed on and stored than strapped into use and burned up.

(At least, you'd tend to agree about that summation of the American diet, provided you weren't in the provider chain, weren't highly motivated and invested in upholding the sanctity of the myth of the wholesomeness of the foodstuffs stuffed into our faces, and providing you were not very much interested in the healthy increase of your wallet, when it came to the healthy notion that Americans should consume as much salt, sugars, and fats as humanly possible -- up to and including the point of bursting.)

And it is true that America continues to be the home of the all-you-can-eat buffet and the notion of competitive eating as a sport -- you know, celebrating *speed-eating* with piles and piles of food, showering celebrity on anyone with the ability to pack it all away like a mad steam-shovel, pumped on adrenalin and meth, ripping through a rock pile like a berserk brontosaurus, Flintstone style.

Now then, shift gears, here in The Greatest Country in the World, in the Land of American Exceptionalism -- *these have been registered and trademarked by us, right, so that no other country on Earth can make those claims, right?* -- and consider that 40% of all food in the United States is thrown out every year, uneaten, flushed away, dumped, tossed out, ejected, given the heave-ho.

Imagine burning 40% of your paycheck, throwing out 40% of your possessions, giving back 40% of the years of your life span -- yet, we freely waste 40% of our food. Imagine that -- food which could have fed 25 million hungry Americans, but we threw it out instead.

Consider:

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Getting food to the nation's tables uses up 10% of our total annual energy, uses up to half of the land, and uses 80% of our freshwater we consume.

There is waste all along the line, from the harvest to the home and back again. Some estimates are for 140 billion tons of food wasted, counting unharvested foods. Counting in just the amount that Americans throw out in their trash, estimates are 35 million tons a year hit the dumpster in 2012, which was 20% more than we pitched out in 2000.

The *waste curve* isn't decreasing. In 2012, we threw out 50% more than in 1990. In 2012, we wasted three times more food than what we threw out in 1960.

Every year, consumers in rich countries waste almost as much food as the entire food production of sub-Saharan Africa (232 million tons to 230 million tons), the United Nations notes.

One in nine people in the world still suffers from chronic hunger. At every level of use, and everywhere in the production-to-consumer chain, the statistics of waste are jaw-dropping.

Hold that thought.

* * * * *

There are times when you have a vivid memory of being at an exact place, and at an exact point in time, when you first heard about something happening, heard a piece of news.

Maybe it was when the space shuttle Challenger exploded while you watched it on TV, or maybe it was 9-11. Maybe it was seeing JFK assassinated, or maybe it was his brother, Bobby. Maybe it was hearing about a naval battle in the Gulf of Tonkin, a skirmish soon to bloom into

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one of our nation's wars of military-industrial convenience. Maybe it was from reading about a fascist plot by wealthy businessmen and financiers to overthrow the United States in the 1930s, about the same time the nation's topsoil was sailing out of the country...

Or, maybe it was during initial news reports that said bee colonies were being mysteriously decimated -- and your knowing that without bees, there is no fertilization of plants, and precious little food, or even no food at all.

No food for humans, no food for animals. That'll give you an icy chill, even on a hot summer day desperate to give away a free case of heat stroke to anyone strolling by.

Again: Hold that thought.

* * * * *

- Q: How much food do we use for biofuel instead of food?
- A: *Too much.*
- Q: How much food do we turn into sugars for beverages and needless food additives?
- A: *Way too much.*
- Q: How do these issues relate to food waste?
- A: *Ahhhh.... ummmmmm...*

* * * * *

One of the cornerstones of human understanding of agriculture has been immutable: *You can't grow anything in salt water.*

This has always been a darned shame, given that 70% of our planet is full up with the stuff.

Well, as of right now, you can officially toss out that cornerstone understanding of agriculture,

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and add it to the human junkyard of *Things We Were Absolutely Convinced Were 100% True Before Somebody Or Other Proved They Weren't*.

- And here's why: A team of researchers in the Netherlands has discovered that the humble potato can grow in earth fed by salt water.

More vegetables are being tested for the ability to be as salt-tolerant as the potatoes that did so well, and in ground most people thought forever unsuitable to agriculture.

To the hungry world: *This spud's for you.*

Increasing production when there's so much waste may seem like a crazy solution -- but the phrase, *growing potatoes in the desert*, may come into use as a synonym for *unexpected solution*.

As good news goes, anyhow, it's a start.

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EPILOG

A bit of good news helps, but it doesn't automatically banish our bouquet-and-bedlam of food problems touching all our lives. The U.N. tells us there's plenty of food for the world's billions -- we just have to figure out how to get it to everyone. There's lots to work on, and there's lots needing improving. The waste is outrageous, especially when the need is so high.

But, then, as we have seen, all it takes is a slight dip in the price of gasoline for the sales of low-mileage metal behemoths to again skyrocket to the top of the vehicle sales lists -- a revealing commentary on human nature and our willingness to learn lessons, trim waste, and

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behave as if intelligent life had already formed on this planet.

(Here's where Evolution could have given us a bit of a better poker hand to play with a bit more hive-mind-responsibility and a bit less me-first-individualism. Such is life.)

Some non-standard responses to food waste have been everything from reality-TV cooking shows and documentaries and cook books and how-to books, and goodness-knows-what, all *st arting* with food wastes. It's not a path everyone wants to travel.

Still, there's lots of need to trim food waste from another point of view: Reducing all the methane seeping, bubbling, and burbling from landfills choked with food wastes helps slow climate change. As is the case with the slow thaw of wild tundras under human-caused climate change, any release of methane is cause for alarm, as methane has 20 times more impact on climate change than carbon dioxide.

Landfills account for the third largest source of methane in the U.S., so trimming waste helps trim methane output. As usual, then, everything in life is related to everything else, and it's time for humans to treat a number of problems across a wide spectrum, at cause-and-effect levels and beyond, ignoring man-made boundaries and borders, rather than poking blindly at isolated issues and events, here and there, higgledy-piggledy.

Plus, the problem of waste is global, as agriculture is the number one source of planetary methane emissions -- and this includes the somewhat humorous area of bovine flatulent outbursts and the borborygmic expulsions of cows. We could simply write off the topic of cow farts and belches as being merely amusing side notes and giggling asterisks in our worldwide climate change considerations if the whole subject wasn't so deadly serious in its effects.

In the U.S. alone, we dump millions of tons of methane into the air every year -- 49 million tons in 2008 -- trapping in about as much heat as all the plane and vehicle traffic in six months.

It goes on and on, these blending effects, all chaining away like crazy. Those methane

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emissions keep increasing year after year, right along with all our other wastes. Right along with world population. Right along with our foot-dragging responses.

And, guess what? As the population increases, more people have been increasing their wealth around the world -- and an increasing number of those people are spending their increased wealth on meat and on dairy goods, raising the demand even higher for even more cows...

But, you know, methane is hardly a laughing matter, cow farts and belches included. In Argentina, for example, farmers have started using cow backpacks to collect the methane.

Don't laugh. At least *they're* doing something.

Salt spuds: <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-30670988>

Methane primer: <http://epa.gov/climatechange/ghgemissions/gases/ch4.html>

Today's Bonuses:

Raising the roof:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2547492/Flatulent-cows-cause-methane-explosion-German-dairy-farm-nearly-takes-entire-barn-roof.html>

Dumpster dining? <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/09/23/350565050/your-guide-to-dining-from-the-dump>

Dumpster Joe's:

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<http://nhpr.org/post/eating-trader-joes-trash-documentary-about-dumpster-diving>

Waste Cooking:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2013/01/04/168482950/dumpster-diver-tv-austrians-cook-up-food-waste-reality-show>

And:

For more serious and thoughtful reading, along with some hands-on suggestions, I recommend Bob Alexander's excellent October 27, 2014, piece posted here, *This Is Worse Than That*.

<http://tvnewslies.org/tvnl/index.php/editorial/bob-alexanders-commentary/34640-this-is-worse-than-that.html>