

Healthy Farmer

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Making Connections

People who grew up or live in the agricultural areas of this country are typically familiar with crops and livestock. Most people in these areas can name where different types of meat come from and they know what corn or wheat fields look like. Increasingly, however, people are becoming more separated from the origins of their food and food production. For many children—and even adults—food originates in the packaging at the local supermarket.

This disconnection from agriculture has prompted some leaders in the field to suggest that farming has an “image problem.” The millions of people in the U.S. who have no connection to agriculture are viewing only media-developed images of farmers and farming which they think are accurate, but are actually stereotypical. Many commercials and popular shows portray farmers as people removed from the technological and civic advancements of this century. In reality, farming technological advancements are equal to most others and, in some cases, precede advancements used in office work.

Last October, Mike Rowe, the host of Discovery Channel’s popular show “Dirty Jobs,” was asked to deliver the keynote address to the National Convention of the FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America). Prior to Rowe’s appearance, he was given an FFA “briefing packet” and the information included in that packet provided the basis for his remarks to the group.

Rowe’s full report about the visit is here: <http://www.mikeroweworks.com/mikes-office/farming/> (This article will not be addressing the part of Rowe’s remarks which focuses on government agencies and some activist groups.)

Rowe notes that his briefing packet included this statement, “The FFA currently faces an image and perception problem. The previous name of the organization, “Future Farmers of America,” lends itself to stereotyping by the public. The FFA faces a continuing battle to redefine itself against narrow perceptions of ‘agriculture,’ ‘vocational’ and ‘farmers.’ The name ‘FFA’ is now used instead of ‘Future Farmers of America.’” Rowe is incredulous as he wonders how the U.S. has become so disconnected from food that “farmers no longer wish to be called farmers” and “How is it that 300 million Americans—all addicted to eating—have become disconnected from the people who grow our food?”

Rowe offers his theory in response to these questions. He states that all jobs and all tangible necessities begin by either being pulled from the ground in mining or grown from the ground in farming. He says that, “polite society is only possible when skilled workers transform these raw materials into something useful or edible.”

He continues by saying that he believes that many people have forgotten about their dependence on farming and mining and that a “good job” has changed from anything that resembles farming or mining. This has created the detachment from food and farmers. He claims that the U.S. has tried to distance itself from traditional notions of work and that farmers embody that traditional notion.

In the end, Rowe chastises the non-farming public for not supporting the farmers who provide everyone with the food they need to live.

Agricultural producers also can improve the image of farmers. We can point out that less than 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (i.e., funds available for purchasing any goods or services) is spent on products purchased at the grocery store and on all food purchased outside the home (including restaurants). Less than 20% of the value of the finished product is returned to the producer. No other country in the world is able to produce such an abundance of food and fiber so inexpensively.

Agricultural producers should push for point of origin labels that indicate the producer and processor of each food item. This type of labeling will improve consumer confidence and connections with the producers. Consumers like connections with the producers of their food, which explains partly why farmer’s markets are so popular.

Urban gardens also will help strengthen the connections of consumers with the production of food. As gardeners in the cities tend their plots, they look to expertise from rural farmers and agricultural producers.

What are your suggestions? Please share them with AgriWellness. Have a nourishing and healthy summer!

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