

**Securing Our Food Future***By Stewart Truelsen*

Imagine this real-life scenario: a young couple planting vegetables at a public garden. The plot they rented is just large enough for them to grow a supply of tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, green beans and zucchini over the summer.

The problem is the pair obviously knows little if anything about gardening. They have one tool, a trowel with an extended handle. The soil had been tilled awhile back by the city but consisted of so much clay that the surface was now hard. The man was able to turn over only the top two or three inches of ground.

This struggle continued for a short time before there was a rain shower and the couple left their tray of vegetable plants and fled. Even if they finish the garden, their ordeal is not over. They have to contend with rabbits, because the garden cannot be fenced, and insects that will chew on the surviving plants and reduce the harvest. They also have to water the garden periodically, unless there is sufficient rainfall during the growing season.

Even the experienced gardener will be tempted to frequent farmers' markets instead, after totaling up the cost of seeds, starter plants, top soil, peat moss, fertilizer and the time spent weeding and watering.

Of course, gardening can be an enjoyable, rewarding experience as well as a challenge, and it does serve to drive home a point. We'd all be in deep trouble without professional farmers. If growing fruit and vegetables seems difficult, then don't even think about raising animals for meat, milk and eggs.

The veteran gardener may have a vague idea of what it takes to farm, but novice gardeners generally do not, unless they have been exposed to programs like Agriculture in the Classroom. What they hear in the media, however, is often critical of mainstream agriculture and the nation's food system.

Government farm programs are scorned as unnecessary subsidies and agricultural research projects are held up to ridicule. "Don't we know enough about honeybees and pigs already?" scoffs the urban politician. "Why worry about food shortages when many Americans are overweight? Who needs commercial farms; we can grow all our food on community farms. Why issue grazing permits for public lands; can't those ranchers take their cows somewhere else?"

The less Americans really know and understand about food and agriculture the more we set ourselves up for a food crisis. *The Futurist* magazine took a look at possible "wild card" future events, the ones that catch us by surprise, and determined that "a food crisis might make the mortgage crisis seem mild by comparison." The article by futurist John Rockefeller theorized that losing a reliable food supply was worse than losing a home.

But averting a food crisis does not mean placing agriculture's future in the hands of the government as was done with financial institutions and U.S. automakers. The federal government can indeed print money, but don't count on it to grow your food.

Professional farmers and ranchers, both big and small operators, conventional and organic, are the ones who will keep the wild card of food shortages far from the top of the deck. Our nation's food security depends on it.