

Look Forward, Not Backward

By Lynne Finnerty

Concerns about air pollution, a limited supply of oil and instability in parts of the world that are sources of petroleum have automakers developing alternatives to the internal combustion engine. Gasoline and diesel have successfully, reliably and, for the most part, economically fueled our vehicles for about 100 years, but it has become increasingly obvious that our reliance on these fuels is an imperfect system.

So, automakers are working on cars that run on electricity and hydrogen. More drivers are buying hybrid cars that burn less gasoline because they also have an electric motor. Alternative fuels like ethanol and biodiesel promise to lessen our dependence on foreign oil. More options and new technologies will be developed in the future.

In spite of our interest in finding a more sustainable way of fueling our vehicles, no one is talking about going back to the horse and buggy. Yet, that seems to be what a lot of people want for our food production system.

Their ideal vision for agriculture seems to be to go back to when many families had to raise much of their own food, when farmers thought they were doing well if they harvested 30 bushels of corn per acre and a farmer's tools included a mule, a plow and a pitchfork.

Just as the horse and buggy can't meet today's transportation needs, 1800s agricultural practices can't produce the food supply we need for today's population or accommodate the sort of lifestyle most of us lead in the 21st century. A freshly picked garden tomato is delicious, but not all of us have the time or even the inclination to raise our own. Few of us will want to raise and slaughter our own chickens.

Thanks to the productivity and efficiency of farmers and food makers, we don't have to. The grocery store is filled year round with dozens of varieties of hundreds of foods. Some may see this as a bad thing. That attitude would befuddle the drivers of those horses and buggies. Our grandparents and great-grandparents would laugh at us if they could hear us denigrating the bounty that we have at our fingertips today.

Just as Henry Ford made the production of the automobile more efficient so that it would cost less and more people would be able to buy them, food is more abundant and affordable today because of the efficiency of modern food production. We can produce as much as 150 bushels of corn per acre thanks to hybrid seeds and biotechnology. Foods can stay fresh longer. Meanwhile, we haven't given up anything in terms of variety or taste.

For some critics, this is an imperfect system, like reliance on petroleum-based fuels to power the internal combustion engine. But if they don't like the food system we have, then they should propose one that will meet today's needs, rather than delude consumers into thinking that yesteryear's techniques and technologies (or lack thereof) are more desirable. We have 6.5 billion people living on this planet. It's going to take every ounce of ingenuity we can muster to feed them all.

Let's have a healthy discussion about how to feed ourselves. But let's look forward, not backward, and let's recognize not just the imperfection of our food production system, but its benefits as well.

Like our search for new ways to propel ourselves down the road, the answer to feeding our world will only come through today's and tomorrow's technology, not yesterday's.