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Immigrants march in Chicago March 2006.

Immigration, the 2007 U.S. Farm Bill, and the Transformation of our Food and Fuel Systems

The current immigration legislation attempts to balance the fears of a post-9/11 electorate with the management of the largest single migration in the modern history of the Americas. At this writing, this bill focuses on symptoms rather than causes and faces strong opposition from all sides.

Rather than immigration reform, sweeping reform of our national and international food & agricultural policies could do much to address the underlying causes of immigration—grinding poverty that drives people to abandon home and family.

For decades the U.S. Farm Bill has used taxpayer subsidies to keep grain prices low, causing overproduction that benefited big grain companies who then dumped cheap grain abroad at below the cost of production. This subsidized overproduction—coupled with free trade agreements and the devastating policies of the International Monetary Fund—forced millions of small farmers in the Global South out

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The Institute for Food and Development Policy—known as Food First—is a member-supported, nonprofit “peoples’” think tank and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to establishing food as a fundamental human right.

Transformation of our Food and Fuel Systems ...

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of farming. Many of the 1.1 million immigrants crossing the U.S.’s southern border each year are these farmers, who can no longer afford to farm. In the U.S., over-production of grain encourages over-consumption of cheap, processed, unhealthy foods. It has concentrated market power in the agri-business sector, making farmers worldwide dependent on a handful of corporate giants for their inputs and their markets.

Though the economic power of the agri-foods industry (and their lobbyists) is strong, many observers maintain that conditions for far-reaching agricultural reform in the U.S. have never been better. This is because our food systems are in a profound state of flux and transformation.

First, as the Food First Backgrounder, *Biofuels: Myths of the Corporate Agro-Fuels Transition* explains, the “agro-fuels boom” is transforming our food and fuel systems worldwide, bringing both under one enormous industrial roof. There will be big winners and losers in this transition. The question is not whether agro-fuels have a place in our future—they are inescapable—but whether or not we allow a handful of global corporations to determine the future of our food and fuel systems.

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A co-op farmer's shade coffee nursery in Matagalpa, Nicaragua

Thanks to a public outcry, a temporary victory for organic coffee growers

On May 2, 2007, under heavy public pressure, the USDA National Organic Program reconsidered its recent decision to abandon the group certification process used by hundreds of thousands of small-scale organic coffee farmers in the Global South. More than 3,700 consumers and activists wrote to protest the USDA's recent ruling which would have made Organic certification too expensive for millions of small-scale farmers and their cooperatives. The USDA announced that certification for grower groups will continue as it has since 2002 until they come up with a new rule at their fall meeting. When the National Organic Standards Board meets in October, any change in the Organic Standard will have a public comment period before they are put in to effect. The next challenge is to make sure that the new rules maintain strict standards for Organic certification while allowing small-scale farmers to continue to participate.

Another major element transforming our food systems is the global liquidity crisis: money is backing up in the world's banks. Globalization has efficiently concentrated enormous wealth over the past 20 years. We now have 500 billionaires and over a million millionaires in the world—while the number of people living in poverty continues to grow. Banks are driven to loan; otherwise they are stuck paying interest, with no income to offset that interest. . . . Extractive sectors including agro-fuels, oil and mining are prime investment opportunities because of their capacity to absorb large sums of investment capital quickly. Multilateral development banks, including the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, provide governments with loans to re-structure laws, markets, and local infrastructure to favor corporate investment—often at the price of local food security. Two pending 2007 Food First Development Reports will detail how the World Bank's territorial restructuring in favor of mining corporations is driving farmers from the land, channeling precious natural resources to foreign businesses, and undermining food security in Ghana and Guatemala.

At the same time, activism in the U.S. and worldwide on food, environment and social justice issues is at an all-time high. From underserved neighborhoods of people of color fighting to ensure health and nutrition, to slow food advocates seeking quality food, to farmers producing for the local market, people are taking back their local food systems from the corporate agri-foods industry. Paul Hawken, author of *Natural Capitalism* and *Blessed Unrest, How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming* claims that there are a minimum of 130,000 registered civil society



A child holds out a handful of seeds at South Central Farm 2007.

organizations working for social and environmental justice on the planet—there may be as many as one million. These organizations are reacting to the negative changes in our food systems and then advancing alternatives, shaping outcomes, and building parallel systems serving millions of people. They have held the largest anti-war demonstrations in the history of the world and the largest immigrant rights demonstrations in the U.S. since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. They are taking matters into their own hands by setting up thousands of gardens in schools and on vacant lots, challenging government on food regulations and strengthening local food systems through farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and by educating themselves about where food comes and how much energy it takes to transport it to market. They are creating markets and extending the meaning of organic, fair trade, and direct trade, and are re-building local economies by re-investing the food dollar in local production, local processing and local distribution systems.

All of these actions are pieces of an international movement that is organizing and putting pressure on government officials for food sovereignty—the right of people to control their own food system. The struggle for food sovereignty is the struggle for control over the transformation of the world's food and fuel systems.

The 2007 Farm and Food Bill could advance the process of agricultural reform in favor of food and fuel sovereignty. There are a number of “marker bills” before the Agricultural Committee in Congress with provisions to ensure a fair price to family farmers, put a cap on subsidies, encourage fruit and vegetable production, resource conservation, research in organic agriculture, and the rebuilding of local food systems in underserved communities. Contact your congressional representative and Senators to urge them to vote for a 2007 Farm and Food Bill that provides for a fair price for all farmers—not just the large corn, wheat, soy, rice, and cotton farmers.

Help Food First produce “El Camino del Migrante”: Documenting the Mexican Immigrant Struggle for Food Sovereignty

Current debate around immigration reform is devoid of discussion of the underlying causes of the continent's largest migration in recorded history. Economic globalization has created a global movement of people in desperate search of work. In this documentary, Mexican immigrant families on both sides of the border will tell their stories so that U.S. citizens can understand why so many undertake the risks of crossing the border. In addition to revealing the root causes of Mexican migration, the documentary will cover the tortilla crisis, agro-fuels, and the spread of GMO corn. Campesinos and organizers will share their visions, projects, and actions undertaken to confront the crisis in the Mexican countryside. Viewers will learn about the Campesino a Campesino Movement, the Water Forum, the “No Corn-No Country” campaign, the Oaxacan uprising, and the Transgenic Forum.

El Camino del Migrante will demonstrate how activists and villagers are weaving transnational advocacy networks to stand up to NAFTA, the WTO, and the world's agri-food giants including Cargill, Monsanto, and Wal-Mart. It will document how farmers and activists are working together to forge food sovereignty by establishing farmer-enforced, GMO-free zones--sanctuaries for agro biodiversity that may eventually re-seed the Americas with GMO-free corn.

You can help by sending a check to Food First with the notation *El Camino del Migrante documentary*. If you can donate \$100 or more, we will send you or your favorite library a copy of the DVD.

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