

Ag response to IPTV airing of "Food, Inc."

On April 21 (the day before Earth Day), Iowa Public Television will televise "Food, Inc.," an academy award nominated documentary that demonizes the U.S. food system and large-scale modern agriculture.

One example of the movie's approach involves Dr. Lawrence Johnson, Iowa State University (ISU) professor and director of the Center for Crop Utilization Research. When the movie's producers approached Johnson and ISU regarding an interview, they did not make their purpose clear. After Dr. Johnson spent two hours speaking on camera about the marvels of food science, his comments were edited to 20 seconds and clearly taken out of context to fit the movie's message.

"I do not support the political positions that the movie advocates," says Johnson. "To be front and center in it is disappointing. I worked my whole career to better the food industry, to better what is available to consumers, and to support sound science."

When Iowa Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF) was contacted by Iowa Public Television (IPTV) and asked to participate in a panel discussion following the movie, IFBF's first course of action was to try to get them to pull the program from their schedule. IPTV declined; they did, however, offer IFBF President Craig Lang an opportunity to rebut the erroneous claims made in the movie. Lang's rebuttal will be part of a 30 to 45 minute IPTV analysis and panel discussion, with details still in the works.

The Iowa Soybean Association joins IFBF and all of our other partners in the Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers (CSIF) in encouraging agriculture's response to be strategic and proactive in "putting a face" on agriculture today and showing consumers how farming contributes to their communities. Following are some ways you can help tell agriculture's story.

1) Use Earth Day as an opportunity to talk about how farmers care for the environment, while feeding their communities and beyond. Among other things, "Food, Inc." characterizes large-scale livestock and crop (particularly corn) farmers as "chronic polluters." We all know that's not the case, and we need to find ways to show that to consumers by sharing the good news about our environmental practices. Your local newspapers, radio stations and TV stations will be more receptive to your environment-focused editorials and story ideas if you submit them in advance of Earth Day. NOTE: Your editorials and story ideas leading up to Earth Day should relate to your proactive conservation efforts, not "Food, Inc." We don't want to raise the movie's profile even more or pique consumers' interest in watching it.

2) You can also "tweet," post a Facebook message or write a blog entry for Earth Day! A few talking points/facts for Earth Day are included at the bottom of this message.

3) Prepare yourself to answer questions that may arise from your neighbors and local media leading up to IPTV's showing of "Food, Inc." and after it runs on April 21. (See talking points below.)

4) Call Iowa Public Television at (515)242-3100 and tell them you don't appreciate this kind of "out of touch/one-sided" programming being shown on public television. Tell them you hope that they will provide adequate time for the other side of the story. You can also do that online. Here's a link:

<http://www.iptv.org/contact.cfm>.

Here are some typical "Food, Inc." criticisms of agriculture and responses that may help you in your outreach efforts:

The "Food, Inc." movie makes numerous accusations against modern agriculture and those involved in it. Here are three of the most cited accusations made in the movie and consumer-friendly talking points you can use to respond. If you want more information about the accusations made in "Food, Inc.," check out the synopsis below.

Movie claim #1: "Food is more dangerous today than it was in the past. A few large corporations own the food production system and hide things from us."

- Today's farming practices and current regulations are rooted in the desire to keep livestock and consumers safe and healthy. Modern barns and preventative treatment (We give our animals preventative antibiotics just like you give your kids vaccinations.) help keep animals healthy, which allows us to send healthy animals to market. Keeping our animals safe is one reason why our barns are closed to outside people. Livestock are susceptible to diseases brought in by humans and wildlife.
- Around 96 percent of the farms in this country are "family farms," according to the most recent ag census. I understand that modern agriculture looks different from what it did in the past. Our farm is larger than it used to be because that's what is required to support our family. But the changes our family farm has made have been in the interest of food safety, environmental protection and animal welfare. If I don't take care of those things, it will compromise your food safety and costs and my ability to be successful.
- I'm not going to defend the action of all large companies, but people should know that being a good farmer is not size-dependent. Many conventional and organic farms have grown to meet consumer demands. In fact, large organic farms account for more than 2/3 of organic sales in the U.S., according to the USDA's first full-scale census of organic farming. My farm has grown over the years, but I maintain the same commitment to food safety, environmental protection and animal care.
- If you have questions about farming today, ask a farmer or visit an informative website like www.farmersfeedus.org.

Movie claim #2: "Emphasis is being placed on producing a lot of cheap food, without thinking about the impact on health, worker conditions, animal welfare or the environment."

- Improved farming methods, genetics, seed technology, etc., over the years have given us the ability to feed more people, while using less land and reducing our environmental footprint. Thanks to their advancements, today's average farmer is able to feed 155 people, 100 more than the average farmer fed 50 years ago.

- We can agree that food safety and environmental protection shouldn't be compromised when producing food, but we can't ignore the growing population and poverty in our world. Just consider these facts:
 1. Even here in Iowa, 4.8 percent of our children are hungry, and 11 percent of Iowa households are "food insecure," according to USDA.
 2. More than 1 billion people in the world are hungry right now.
 3. Our world population grows by one billion every 12 years, and meat consumption is expected to double by 2050.
 4. Experts estimate that the world will have to increase food output by 70 percent by mid-century.
- While organic farming is a choice farmers are happy to provide, the simple truth is that not everyone can afford it, nor can we feed the world using only that style of farming alone. The same can be said for open-range and cage-free farming methods. Only a small percentage of the world's landmass is suitable for growing crops and raising livestock (about two-thirds of the North American landmass is unable to grow crops). Temperature, landscape, urban sprawl, soil fertility and the sensitivity of the environment all play into that. If everyone were grazing cattle in open pastures and growing organic crops, that would require more land to be put into production and have serious consequences for the environment.
- This film asks us to eat fresh, healthy food that's grown locally. We agree, but how many Iowa farmers are able to raise produce in the middle of winter?
- The way we raise our livestock today is the result of years (even generations) of experience caring for animals and the recommendations of veterinarians. We understand that it's best to keep our animals warm and comfortable year-round. Just ask experts like Dr. Scott Hurd, ISU professor, 25-year veterinarian and former deputy undersecretary for food safety at the USDA; preventing illness by using preventative measures (such as antibiotics) judiciously helps reduce animal suffering and helps assure food safety.
- We can all agree that food safety regulations need to be in place and that we all need to consider food safety – from the farm to the family table; that's where responsible food handling comes into play as well.

Movie claim #3: "Our emphasis on corn and soybeans is bad for health and the environment and is a result of subsidies and lobbying."

- The purpose of farm support payments (like those found in the Farm Bill) is to assure food security in this country, which, clearly, we need. Eleven percent of Iowa households are in serious need of food assistance right now, according to the USDA, and there are even more people living in hunger throughout the rest of the country. We'd have an even bigger problem on our hands if we didn't have programs that helped farmers produce a consistent (and growing) supply of food for our nation. Also, two-thirds of the funding in the Farm Bill goes toward nutrition programs (i.e. food stamps and school lunch). The Farm Bill is really a food security bill.

- Obesity, diabetes and poverty are major problems that are not likely to go away by simply making food more expensive to produce or consume. Education, responsible food choices and exercise are key. We've all read reports saying that our children are not getting enough exercise, and in this economy many Iowa schools are being forced to scale back their P.E. programs. Now, more than ever, it's up to parents to lead by example and teach their children how to choose wisely.

Following are Earth Day talking points, for your proactive outreach efforts:

Earth Day is April 22.

- Farming isn't just my job; it's my life's calling. My family and I drink the same water and breathe the same air as our neighbors. I want to protect and sustain our natural resources for family, my community and future generations. There are strict standards in place for nutrient and waste management; I respect, support and abide by those standards.
- Improved farming methods over the years have given us the ability to feed more people, while reducing our environmental footprint. In my grandfather's day, a farmer fed 50 people. Today, it's three times that number.
- Seven major conservation practices used on Iowa farms are estimated to remove as much as 28 percent of the nitrate, 38 percent of the total nitrogen, and up to 58 percent of the phosphorus that otherwise would be present, according to the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development.
- One of those seven practices is no-till farming. Iowa farmers devote millions of acres to no-till and conservation tillage every year. By leaving stalks and other crop residue on top of the ground (rather than plowing it under), farmers reduce water run-off and soil erosion.
- A recent survey of rural well water by the University of Iowa showed a decline in the number of wells with detections of nitrates and herbicides. In the survey of 473 rural wells, no well had a pesticide reading exceeding or even close to violating drinking water standards. That's thanks, in large part, to advancements in on-farm conservation, including more acres being planted to grassy buffer strips that reduce run-off (Iowa leads the nation in acres devoted to buffer strips), advancements in seed technology (which have virtually eliminated the need for certain pesticides), and equipment improvements that allow farmers to use just the right amount of fertilizer and pesticide.
- For more environmental facts, check out a recent entry from the *Farm Fresh* blog: <http://iowafarmbureau.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/greener-than-your-beer/>