

David Festa, Vice President, Environmental Defense Fund
38th Annual National Food Policy Conference
Panel Discussion: What Would a National Food Policy Look Like?
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I'm fairly certain I was invited to be a member of this panel because I wrote a blog about Ricardo Salvador's op-ed in the Washington Post. He and his co-authors called on President Obama to establish a national food policy.

I said that asking the president to establish policy by executive action was a recipe for the status quo.

I still stand by that.

Our federal policy-making family is deeply polarized. If one party says X, the other party will say Y, and battle lines are drawn. It's made getting vital change quickly extremely difficult.

We can see this dynamic playing out in the USDA, which is currently revising the country's dietary guidelines.

An advisory panel is recommending that Americans increase their intake of greens, whole grains, nuts and legumes and dial back their consumption of animal-based products. Not just because it's better for our health, but because it's also healthier for the environment – novel criteria in the U.S. food pyramid.

Dietary choices affect the natural systems that sustain life on Earth. People should understand the impact that food production has on our air, land and water so they can make informed decisions about what to eat.

But some people don't like the taste of federal food policy. So now we have "get your government hands off my hamburger" squaring off with "everyone go vegan."

The debate has been acrimonious enough to force an extension of the public comment period.

Healthy discussion is a hallmark of democracy. But here's the question: is the top-down policy approach the most productive path to change when it comes to environment and food?

By 2050, we're expected to add another 2 billion to this planet. They will all need to eat.

Historically, when we've had to meet growing human needs, we've gone to nature's vast warehouse and made withdrawals. In doing so, we've filled wetlands, dried up rivers, degraded habitat, and polluted our air and water. Climate change is exacerbating the problem.

We can't extract much more without extreme consequences. Which means we're going to have to meet growing food demands in ways that *improve* the ecosystems that serve us.

Business as usual just isn't going to cut it.

I'm a policy wonk. I have a masters degree in public policy. I've served two Commerce secretaries as policy director. I love policy. But I think we've come to over rely on federal policy-making as our first approach to problem solving.

We need an alternative – one in which the public sector still plays a critical role, but which allows the *private* sector to act as the locomotive, pulling everything forward.

Let me give you an example of one place where we can make progress quickly with this model.

How many of you wake up every morning thinking about fertilizer losses?

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Not too many. I'm not surprised because fertilizer pollution is the Rodney Dangerfield of environmental problems. It gets no respect – even though the Environmental Protection Agency said more than 6 years ago that it could become one of the *costliest* and *most difficult* environmental problems of this century.

The biggest problem of the century? Fertilizer? Who knew?

Fertilizer is essential to agriculture.

The problem: what isn't absorbed by plants emits a powerful greenhouse gas. It also runs off into waterways, where it contaminates drinking water and creates dead zones.

A lot of farmers use fertilizer efficiently, but many do not. And I'm not just talking about big conventional agriculture. This is a problem that affects small organic farmers too.

For the past 40 years, government has tried to manage nutrient runoff through policy. We've tried the Clean Water Act, farm bill payments and voluntary programs. While these programs have produced results, they haven't done nearly enough.

The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico is now the size of Connecticut – more than 5,000 square miles – and last summer a toxic bloom shut down Toledo's water supplies for two days. Half a million people without water. *In the U.S.*

Clearly, a policy-only approach is not adequate.

The supply chain, however, *is* an effective driver of practices that can dramatically cut fertilizer pollution.

By collaborating with retailers, food companies, agribusiness and farmers, EDF is helping to generate demand for *fertilizer-efficient* grains.

If the phrase “fertilizer-efficient grains” doesn’t convince you I’m a policy wonk, nothing will. Let me explain in plainer English.

Grains are America’s biggest crop – corn, soybeans and wheat. They’re in everything. Beverages and snack foods. Baked goods and sauces. Salad dressings and cosmetics. They’re an ingredient in meat, chicken and dairy products. Grains are also used to produce fuel and plastic cups you can compost.

You may not agree with the way grains are used, but used they are. And they are America’s most fertilizer intensive crop.

Five years ago, Walmart – with EDF’s help – made a commitment to eliminate 20 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions from its supply chain. When the company analyzed its top 100 products, they found that fertilizer from grains – particularly corn – constituted the top GHG hotspot.

In 2013, Walmart asked its top suppliers to submit fertilizer optimization plans. 15 companies have responded.

That may not sound like much, but these 15 companies account for 30 percent of all food and beverage sales in North America.

These food companies are now sending a signal through the supply chain that they will give purchasing preference to regions that use fertilizer more efficiently so less winds up in the environment as pollution.

Crop advisors and the people who supply fertilizer to farmers are taking notice. One company – United Suppliers – has developed a program to help farmers meet the demand. They’ve committed to optimizing nutrient use on *10 million acres* by 2020.

In just 24 months, the private sector was able to scale up the demand for farming practices that cut fertilizer pollution.

Of course, I'm not advocating a laissez fair approach to food production. Fertilizer optimization strategies will not get us all the way there.

We'll need to build strategic wetlands to filter out the nutrients that do escape into the environment. That will require some kind of national policy.

So... back to my premise at the start of this talk.

At a basic level, big policy announcements work when all but a few key ingredients have been assembled.

I saw that firsthand with dolphin safe tuna when I was at the Commerce Department. When consumers found out how many dolphins were being killed, they cried out. Companies responded swiftly, telling their suppliers to switch their fishing methods to ones that were more dolphin safe.

That immediately helped the dolphins. It took the regulators several years to come to consensus on the rule governing a dolphin-safe label.

Having that label is a good thing, but if we had gone the policy-first route, millions more dolphins would have died, and we might still be arguing about the label today.

When it comes to food and sustainability, having the president put a stake in the ground is more likely to elicit long debates rather than immediate action. Given the state of our planet, we don't have a moment to lose.

This is the perfect time for the private sector to lead. Consumers need to play a role in prodding the market forward.

Pay attention to what food companies are doing and vote with your wallet. They'll respond, and when they do, the government will take notice.

Thank you. I look forward to our discussion.