

FROM POLLAN TO THE PRESIDENT

I've been arguing for a while that Michigan—the state with the second greatest agricultural diversity after California—ought to use innovations in sustainable agriculture as part of its plan to drive economic recovery. Agriculture is going to have to be more sustainably produced in the future, and MI is uniquely suited to lead in developing the policies and technology to accomplish this goal.

But then, we should be talking about how to pursue this sustainable future more widely.

Which is what Michael Pollan does in this long letter to the next President, recommending a number of changes to our food policies. Here are Pollan's comments on the ties between our food and the petroleum that goes into it.

After cars, the food system uses more fossil fuel than any other sector of the economy – 19 percent. And while the experts disagree about the exact amount, the way we feed ourselves contributes more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than anything else we do – as much as 37 percent, according to one study.

Whenever farmers clear land for crops and till the soil, large quantities of carbon are released into the air. But the 20th-century industrialization of agriculture has increased the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by the food system by an order of magnitude; chemical fertilizers (made from natural gas), pesticides (made from petroleum), farm machinery, modern food processing and packaging and transportation have together transformed a system that in 1940 produced 2.3 calories of food energy for every calorie of fossil-fuel energy it used into one that now takes 10 calories of fossil-fuel energy to

produce a single calorie of modern supermarket food. Put another way, when we eat from the industrial-food system, we are eating oil and spewing greenhouse gases. This state of affairs appears all the more absurd when you recall that every calorie we eat is ultimately the product of photosynthesis – a process based on making food energy from sunshine.

[snip]

The F.D.A. should require that every packaged-food product include a second calorie count, indicating how many calories of fossil fuel went into its production. Oil is one of the most important ingredients in our food, and people ought to know just how much of it they're eating.

[snip]

And you should also let it be known that the White House observes one meatless day a week – a step that, if all Americans followed suit, would be the equivalent, in carbon saved, of taking 20 million midsize sedans off the road for a year. Let the White House chef post daily menus on the Web, listing the farmers who supplied the food, as well as recipes.

There are many other great suggestions in the letter. The only problem is that Pollan uses arugula as an example—one I'm sure the lizard brains will use to discredit these ideas.