The Performance and Future of Ag Supply Chains
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We live during remarkable times. In the course of a living farmer’s lifetime he has seen a tractor replace his team of plow horses. He remembers the “ice-man” and the “coal-man” bringing blocks of ice for the ice box and lumps of coal for home heating. Some of us remember the first color tv in the neighborhood...the first office fax machine, the first computer, the first man on the moon. In just the last 100 years an avalanche of new technologies and new thinking continues to mark an acceleration of mankind’s potentiality to evolve on our path of civilization for better and for worse. The idea of a 21st Century Agricultural Renaissance is certainly not speculation. It is the realization that this cascade of invention is altering our theories for change. It opens the door for a Change of Theory in how mankind may embrace successful agriculture in the decades ahead.

In 1985, the United Nations rolled out their Millennial Goals, a list of aspirational objectives for the betterment of humanity that all nations could work to achieve by turn of the century. The successful accomplishment of those modest, but important goals led to the UN’s 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s). The timeline for completion of these ambitious 17 goals was set for a rapidly approaching 2030. For those who spend their lives working in the world of policy and development, the SDG’s at first glance seems to be an over-reach of what is possible for humans to deliver in a 15 year span of time. How will the world’s nations eliminate poverty and hunger (Goals #1 & #2) by 2030? Many of the other 17 SDG’s seemed equally daunting and unachievable when examined one by one. Indeed, that is how the 20th century global community has approached so many of our world’s greatest problems: One issue area at a time, with silo-like thinking and narrow discipline methodology driven by carefully hoarded streams of funding. Old thinking for old problems that never get solved.

When we look at the SDG’s as a whole set of incredibly achievable challenges that require interconnected solution pathways, it calls out for innovative collaboration, that is, new thinking. Like a quilt comprised of many aligned and woven components, it suddenly becomes clear that these SDG’s cannot be accomplished individually, but only collectively. And the remarkable observation that has emerged for many dedicated world changers is that Agriculture must play a primary role in order to accomplish them. The many “Solutions from the Land” are the catalysts for a multi-benefit platform upon which the SDG’s can be delivered.

“You cannot trust your judgement if your imagination is out of focus.”
Mark Twain

When we see the world through a different lens our vision changes. The SDG’s let us imagine a world of human endeavor that has never existed and yet is within our grasp...and imagination. The pace of change, delayed by old thinking and old conflicts is giving way to an accelerated kind of progress daylighted every day by the expanded sharing of knowledge and events world
wide. New tools, new thinking driven by liberated imagination can create a unique and exciting
tapestry of life for every region of the planet.

What makes us believe that an Agricultural Renaissance is well underway? With eyes open, it’s
happening all around us in all corners of the world where food is produced, harvested,
processed, prepared, cooked and delivered. We can be frustrated with the perceived pace of
change…but the rapidity of this transformation is staggering.

In 1994, I participated in a Western Growers trade tour to China to explore the opportunities
for exporting fresh produce by ocean and air freight. What we found was a country with no
existing infrastructure of cold storage, transportation and market distribution for our perishable
products. We turned around and said let’s focus on Japan and Australia. The point to be made
is that 17 years later the world has certainly changed. China is soon to be the planet’s biggest
economy and the opportunities for trade expansion continues to progress as old ways of
going things done give way to new alliances. Today global sourcing is on steroids as a world of
almost 8 billion step into the century with new appetites, expectations and desires to leave the
past behind.

What does a Renaissance look like? On my farm, in the 40 plus seasons that I’ve had the
privilege of stewarding, the progression of our farming method has been staggering. We’ve
gone from furrow to sprinkler to precision drip irrigation and fertigation. We’ve gone from
molecular chemistry pest control to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to bio-control with
biological predators, repellents and antagonists. We have fertilized and augmented our soils
with chicken and dairy manure, petroleum based NPK products, seaweed, fish and bone meal,
green waste compost blends, earthworm castings, pulverized volcanic rocks delivering micro-
nutrients. We are experimenting with oxygen enriched nano-bubbles, hydroponics, aquaponics
and aeroponics in various arrays of vertical, horizontal and platform above ground
systems...always looking for a new practice or methodology to add to our tool box of crop
implements, technology and knowledge. Our hand guided tractors are now satellite driven for
precision field cultivation; we anticipate demo use of a hydrogen fuel cell tractor in the year
ahead; and autonomous driverless tractors on the horizon. Our fresh produce is food-safety
tracked and scanned and ID’d so that a consumer knows when and where, and even who might
have harvested the product. We sell our products at farmer’s markets, terminal markets,
restaurants, Food Service, chain stores, school cafeterias and food banks. The world is our
market place and our strawberries can be airfreighted to the other side of the world faster
thank we can get them to the state next door. We have learned to partner with other growers
in other countries and teach them how to grow the products we want to sell all year-round.
Not surprisingly, with time, the transfer of knowledge turns the table and we find out that our
farm partners have learned to grow crops better than we do and we now learn from each other
how to be better, safer and more efficient. This “leap-frogging” of talent and technology is
accelerating at unprecedented levels.

The enormous global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic must be viewed from many
angles. While it is clear that the impact across so many sectors of human activity was severe
and unpredictable, it is also important to observe that many sectors responded with a never-
before seen competency and focus. The swift reaction of the food supply chain sectors were
remarkable. Yes, weaknesses and vulnerabilities were exposed and panic almost prevailed in
some regions. We learned that essential services are defined in terms of critical infrastructure
and among the most important core services to protect was agriculture. The ability of the
global agricultural food supply chain to turn and pivot and still deliver sustenance to a
demanding public sector was admirable. For those who claim that the “food system is broken”,
it may well be that the performance of our 21st century agricultural system here in the U.S. was
more than resilient in the face of the food service shutdown...it was innovative and
collaborative. One clear example of “pivot and turn” took place when the Navajo nation
approached a desperate grower-shipper of fresh produce who had been disking down his fields
of perishable lettuce and vegetables during the early days of the food service shutdown.
Certain communities who live in so-called “food deserts” around the country found themselves
with no back up food supply when their primary convenience or liquor store and restaurants
shut down. The Navajo nation redirected their own revenue sources to work collaboratively
with the farmer and in just days he was able to redirect his fresh produce to their own
struggling communities. What happened next is a lesson in the unexpected consequences of
innovative solutions. The families were given 30 pound boxes of farm-fresh produce delivered
directly to their homes. These communities exist at the tail-end of a food chain that delivers
some of the oldest and worst quality, end of life perishable products. The tears of joy from
family members who had never seen or tasted such fresh produce daylighted the unacceptable
conditions that had become the norm. These communities suddenly became collaborative
partners in a shift in priorities and resource alignment.

Because of the pandemic, the disruption has caused many producers to reassess their own
farms and reimagine how to streamline their operations. Many are asking how can they
become a more productive member of their communities. We are in the process of
significantly expanding our production of nutrient dense foods for a direct link to regional food
banks. For over 30 years we have been custom growing food for our local food banks with
small proof of concept community hunger projects of 2 to 8 acres annually. We asked
ourselves why isn’t it 20, 40 or 80 acres? Or 200, 400 to 800 acres? And suddenly we realized it
was because our imagination had been stalled in single minded thinking. Innovative
collaboration has opened our eyes and minds to what’s possible. We are focusing on being a
“do tank” and no longer a “think tank” waiting for some perfect solution to leap forward. In an
Agricultural Renaissance, the limitations we place on ourselves are ours to own.

And that’s why the global community needs to brace for dynamic transformation and embrace
and support agriculture like never before. We are currently watching a significant leap forward
in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and data driven decision making. There are eye opening
systems and technologies already being used: Comprehensive farm monitoring and control
systems that irrigate, chemigate and fertigate autonomously; sound wave chamber
pulverization of grains, volcanic rocks, waste by-products; mineral extraction from brackish
water where commercial grade potassium and phosphorous leaves potable water as a by-
product; atmospheric water extraction; temperature and humidity controlled clean rooms for
nursery production that use 60% less energy; new plant breeding breakthroughs such as
nitrogen fixing grains, vitamin fortified cultivars, drought, salinity, heat, disease tolerant and
resistant plants. We are witnessing the development, production and introduction to the
consumer of new and surprising foods: Novel protein products, seaweed, insects, earthworms
and grubs. How we eat, what we eat and how we procure our daily bread continues to evolve.
The capacity to feed a planet is improving at just the right moment.

The performance and future of agricultural supply chains has never been more exciting. These
remarkable times are characterized by the unprecedented acceleration of invention, design,
manufacturing, transport and delivery. Humanity has moved to a new framework of whatever
is possible is feasible and whatever is feasible is now achievable in record time. An Agricultural
Renaissance thoughtfully guided and supported can deliver the abundance and multiple
benefits to society, the environment and the economies of rural towns to urban metropolis’.
Agriculture in all its different forms and sizes needs to be successful in order for the world to
thrive. Anything less moves us towards a world of survival, not living.