



***Food, Inc. - The Movie
And
Farming - The Reality***

A Canadian Perspective

American filmmaker Robert Kenner released *Food, Inc.* in 2009 as an exposé on the American food industry. The film gained popularity after its Oscar award nomination and appearances by its producer on popular talk shows. Now available as a rental, *Food, Inc.* is also being shown in select communities across Ontario by a variety of groups to generate discussion about food and farming.

In general, more people are asking questions about the source and quality of the food that they eat, regardless of whether they are Canadian or American. This is a great opportunity for farmers and people who work in the agri-food sector to have a discussion with the people who purchase our food to answer their questions and address their concerns.



Synopsis of *Food, Inc.*

“Filmmaker Robert Kenner lifts the veil on our nation's food industry, exposing the highly mechanized underbelly that has been hidden from the American consumer with the consent of our government's regulatory agencies, USDA and FDA. Our nation's food supply is now controlled by a handful of corporations that often put profit ahead of consumer health, the livelihood of the American farmer, the safety of workers and our own environment. We have bigger-breasted chickens, the perfect pork chop, herbicide-resistant soybean seeds, even tomatoes that won't go bad, but we also have new strains of *E. coli*—the harmful bacteria that causes illness for an estimated 73,000

Americans annually. We are riddled with widespread obesity, particularly among children, and an epidemic level of diabetes among adults.”

“Featuring interviews with such experts as Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma, In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*) along with

forward thinking social entrepreneurs like Stonyfield's Gary Hirshberg and Polyface Farms' Joel Salatin, *Food, Inc.* reveals surprising—and often shocking truths—about what we eat, how it's produced, who we have become as a nation and where we are going from here.”

Source: <http://www.foodincmovie.com/about-the-film.php>

What to say about Food, Inc.?

If someone has watched the movie, seen something about it on TV, or read a book recently on similar topics, this is a great starting point for a good discussion. In general, it's not about American statistics versus Canadian statistics or their scientist or “expert” versus ours. It's about getting the truth out about how our food is produced in Canada, which is often a bit different than in the US.

There are many issues covered in *Food, Inc.* Here are some key messages on topics of most interest to OFAC and AGCare members that are covered in the documentary.

1) “Made in the USA” is not “Made in Canada” – Safe Food

Talk about your role as a farmer or member of the agri-food sector in providing safe food. For example, many livestock and crop farmers are enrolled in on farm food safety programs to help reduce, control and eliminate disease. Food chain partners such as animal feed and food companies have extremely-detailed food safety, inspection and traceability protocols in place already. The Canadian Cattle Identification Program is an example of a mandatory traceability program that all cattle farmers must participate in.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is different from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the US: the CFIA is an independent agency of the Canadian government whereas the FDA is an agency of the US federal government. Both agencies have the responsibility to test and approve food products. Canadian and American farmers have the responsibility to abide by the regulations that are set out by these two agencies.

Unlike in the US, CFIA is a separate agency that has the legislated powers of inspection, seizure, recall and quarantine. Among others, the CFIA is responsible for federal meat, fish and produce inspection, livestock transportation, livestock feed inspection, fertilizer regulations, food labels, organic foods, pet foods, foreign animal disease, food recalls, veterinary drugs, plant breeding and biotechnology.

At the federal level, Health Canada establishes policies and standards related to the safety and nutritional quality of food sold in Canada. The CFIA enforces those policies and standards plus additional regulations under 25 acts.

In addition to federal oversight, provinces each have additional acts and regulations governing food safety, animal health and welfare, environmental stewardship and marketing. Food and farming is one of the most highly regulated sectors in Canada.

Key Message: Show your care and commitment to providing safe food - your family eats the same food they do.

2) Family Farms vs. Factory Farms

The film implies small farms are good and big farms are bad. Factory farming is a vague and emotional term coined by activist groups opposed to agriculture on many fronts. It has a variety of meanings, but many believe factory farms are owned by multinational companies and are extremely large. The definition of “large” and “factory” varies greatly – from 100 animals to someone from downtown ‘wherever’ to 100,000 animals to someone from an agricultural background. Don’t get caught up in the factory vs. family farm debate!

There are a wide variety of farms and farm sizes in both Canada and the U.S. – in general, Canadian farms are smaller than U.S. farms, and we also have a smaller population and fewer farmers. The number of farms continues to decline so today’s farms are larger and more specialized than in the past. This trend is happening for many reasons, but it reflects the need to grow more food for larger centres of people on less land using more expensive technologies. For example, a farm that specializes in growing produce will invest in the latest irrigation and water recycling equipment, which can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The cost to run a farm (or a food business) also continues to go up because of the need to follow more costly regulations and standards today.

The other reality is that today less than two percent of our population feeds the rest. To return to the day when half of our population farmed and grew their own food is not practical or realistic.

Key messages:

- ***Whether you have 40 acres or 4000 acres, focus on the responsibility that you have as a farmer to take care of your land and the environment 365 days a year.***

- ***All farms, regardless of size or production methods, are expected to meet the same industry-wide standards and rules in Canada.***
- ***Whether incorporated or not, 98 percent of Canadian farms remain family owned and operated.***

3) What about Contract Farming?

The film argues that the agriculture and food system is run by corporations that exploit and control farmers. In Canada, poultry (chicken, turkey and egg) and dairy farming are controlled by farmer-run marketing boards that manage supply and demand. This supply management system means that by law these farmers are guaranteed a set or negotiated “industry price” based on their cost of production plus a reasonable income. In the dairy industry, farmers must market their milk through their marketing board. For the poultry industries (chicken, turkey and egg) it is the farmers’ choice who they market to.

Most field crops, produce, beef, veal, sheep and goats in Canada are sold through the open market. Food company ownership in the hog sector, for example, is less prevalent in Canada than in the US due to differing market and economic forces. Contracts, where they occur, whether for meat or crops, may require the farmer to follow certain procedures. This can include meeting food safety, environmental or animal care standards that go beyond government and industry requirements. With a wide variety of markets, farmers can find a buyer whose product specifications best fit their own farm. Consumers benefit with a wider range of product choices.

4) Open Door Policies – or Not?

With a growing interest in food, there is also an increasing desire among consumers to visit farms and experience farm life. The film suggests that no farmers were interested in providing a farm tour during the film. However, OFAC has learned that a pig farm in North Carolina hosted the filmmakers on a day-long tour, but these images were left out of the final product.

Food safety, insurance rules and biosecurity are three reasons to limit the visitors to your farm, but there are other ways for consumers to learn firsthand more about the food they are eating.

Key messages:

- ***Encourage people to visit OFAC’s virtual farm tours at www.farmissues.com/virtualtour to see what really happens on a farm from the comfort of their home computer.***

- ***Visit their local fair or agriculture awareness event or go on a farm vacation.***

5) New technology

The film argues against mass production, automation and genetic technology and argues for “natural”, customized and local food. Technology continues to improve in all facets of business, including farming and it’s not necessarily a bad thing. Advancements in technology over the 50 years has allowed for benefits in food safety, environmental protection and animal health and care.

Genetically modified crops, crop protection products and animal health products are all tools that you as farmers use to help you do your job – that is to grow safe and nutritious food. These tools in particular undergo testing and a rigorous approval process before being made available to farmers. Over the past 20 years, farmers have reduced their pesticide use by over 50 percent and continue to invest in ways to further reduce it.

Talk about the technological innovations you have adopted on your farm. Robotic milking systems allow cows to be milked at their leisure. Farmers using GPS technology can map their fields to show exactly where and how much fertilizer or chemicals are needed in precise or reduced amounts, sometimes not at all. Feed automation, temperature and humidity controls and alarm systems are all advancements that are helping you take good care of your animals, making sure that the animals are comfortable and content.

Key messages:

- ***Your farm uses new technologies, just like the rest of society.***
- ***New technologies have benefits for food safety, environmental protection, animal health and care.***

6) E.coli O157:H7

The film suggests that cases of E.coli has exploded because cattle eat a diet of corn rather than grass, and that simply switching cattle to a grass diet for the few days before slaughter would help considerably.

The digestive systems of all animals, including humans, are home to billions of essential bacteria. E.coli is one group of naturally occurring bacteria in both human intestines as well as in cattle, pigs, poultry, sheep, goats, pets and wildlife. Because this bacterium is naturally occurring, the presence of it in an animal is not influenced by the type of diet that an animal is fed – be it a grass or corn based diet.

E. coli contamination can also come from sources other than meat. Recent outbreaks have been linked to fruits and vegetables, unpasteurized milk and contaminated drinking water. It's important for consumers to thoroughly wash and cook their food before eating, drink pasteurized milk and have their water tested regularly. This will greatly reduce the risk of illness from E. coli.

Billions of dollars are spent every year worldwide to research and eradicate animal diseases and health problems. Due to vaccines, culling diseased animals, indoor housing and better animal health management practices, many animal diseases and food pathogens have been eradicated in the past century. New ones have emerged and will continue to do so naturally since bacteria are constantly evolving.

Key Messages:

- ***E. coli is found in livestock in all countries regardless of their diet or the farming methods used.***
- ***Research is always being done to eradicate animal diseases and health problems like this one.***

7) Taking Care of the Environment

Are cows contributing to global warming? Farmers are the original environmentalists. In fact, Ontario farmers are world leaders in on farm environmental initiatives. Canada has strict nutrient management regulations, which require farms to have a plan in place to match the amount of manure their animals generate to the land base they use. More than 70 percent of Ontario farmers have completed an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP), which assesses the environmental risks on their farm and helps fund ways to reduce these risks. As a result of the EFP, more than \$600 million dollars have been spent on on-farm environmental improvements in Ontario to date.

Many recent criticisms blaming livestock for global warming are attributed to a United Nations (UN) study released a few years ago. A study out of California released in 2010 refutes the UN study's claim, and the UN is planning to release new data later this year. See the articles posted on the Farm Animal Council groups' blog www.letstalkfarmanimals.ca for more details.

Key Messages:

- ***Your family, your animals and your business depend on taking care of the environment. Talk about what you have done to improve the environment on your farm.***
- ***These messages are more powerful when you include specific examples that are happening on your farm; how many trees you've planted, how you've fenced cattle out of streams or perhaps you're using solar powered water troughs.***

8) Consumer labelling

The film points a finger at weak food labelling laws. In Canada, food labelling is controlled by the federal government and nutrition labelling has been required in Canada for many years. Canadian law requires method of production food labelling only if the final product is substantially different from products derived by conventional methods. In addition, Canadian regulations provide for a consumer complaint process.

9) Biotechnology, seeds and patents

The film states that GMOs are not healthy and that claims that patented plants have “torn apart rural communities”. Biotech crops and their food products have been in use worldwide for about 14 years, since the first commercial planting in 1996 and more than two trillion meals containing ingredients from biotech crops have been safely consumed since then.

Bodies like the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Council for Science, the American Medical Association and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have all declared biotech foods safe for human and animal consumption. Testing of biotech crops before they are introduced to market generally takes about 6-12 years at a cost of \$6-12 million.

The film also targets Monsanto's approach to patents and its protecting of those patents against farmers who save seeds. Genes and cells are patentable, and Monsanto is one of many companies that patents its innovations – they own patents on processes (specifically patents on plant genes and cells) that, when inserted into a plant, confer certain benefits.

Patents allow the creator of the technology the opportunity to commercialize their innovation and are necessary to obtain a return on their investment of time and money. This, in turn, helps fund additional research and innovation for developing plant varieties with human health benefits or that can better tolerate extreme climate, like heat or drought. In the US, several

lawsuits have been fought between seed companies like Monsanto and farmers who do not agree with their rules for using the seed.

Key messages:

- ***Biotech crops are subjected to extensive scientific testing before they are declared safe for human or animal consumption.***
- ***Research and innovation are important to help us feed a growing population while using less land and less water than we have in the past. Focus on doing more with less, rather than Monsanto; unless you work for them or are comfortable speaking on their behalf, stick with what you know and are familiar with.***

10) Labour

The film accuses the American meat industry of exploiting illegal workers. Canada's immigration is managed differently than in the US, resulting in fewer illegal immigrant workers in this country overall. The Canadian fruit and vegetable sector, particularly in Ontario, employs many foreign workers through a seasonal worker program. Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Eastern Caribbean Islands (Antigua and Barbuda, Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts-Nevis, Saint Lucia and St. Vincent and The Grenadines) and Barbados all have formal government agreements in place with Canada that allow agricultural workers to work on Canadian farms.

Many workers have been with the same farmer or on the same farm for many years. Seasonal agricultural workers receive the same minimum wage rates as do Canadian workers, and many earn a much higher rate. The wages they earn working on farms in Canada far exceeds what they would be able to earn during a comparable time in their home countries.

Farm employers must provide their seasonal workers with free suitable housing, which is inspected by the Ontario Ministry of Health annually, as well as by a foreign government official representing the workers' country of origin. Seasonal workers also receive the same health coverage under OHIP as Canadian workers do, and are eligible to receive Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance benefits.

The program operates on a "Canadian first" premise, meaning that only when an employer's attempt to hire domestic seasonal labour is unsuccessful can they apply for foreign seasonal labour help. Each worker is subject to a four-way employment agreement that includes the employee, employer, the foreign government, and the government of Canada.

Key messages:

- ***Certain sectors of agriculture – especially fruit and vegetable farming – are very labour intensive and these tasks can't easily be mechanized. Many seasonal workers have been with the same farm for decades.***
- ***Seasonal agricultural workers have the same labour rights and benefits as regular workers. By working on Canadian farms, they can earn considerably more money than they could during that same time at home, which helps sustain their families and their communities back home.***

11) Other Issues Covered in the Film

The film covers other issues like obesity. Many are not experts on these issues. We would encourage you to talk about what you know. It's highly likely that you are no more an expert on this issue than the person asking the question.

Let's talk about Food and Farming in Canada

Farmers and those who work in agriculture can use the interest in *Food Inc.* and others like it to have a good discussion with anyone who eats!

- Focus on the people and the caring. It's not about the type or size of farm or operation, it's the level of care and commitment to the animals and the environment that is important. Good food from good people.
- Buy local. Local can mean the farm next door, your county, Ontario or Canada.
- Made in Canada is different from Made in America.

Tell your story with pride. Don't rely on someone else to do it for you, or you might not be happy with what they have to say.

Stand up for our industry and talk about your goals and values – to provide enough safe and nutritious food to feed the population, while taking care of your animals, your crops and the environment.

It's good for people, animals and the planet.

Ontario Farm Animal Council/AGCare, 2010.

Looking for more information or tips on talking about food and farming?

1. Online ag-awareness tool kit at www.ofac.org A wealth of information ranging from how to write a letter to the editor, to how to run a farm tour, to fun and interactive educational ideas for the classroom or a local event.
2. Media and Ambassador Training – contact the OFAC/AGCare office to find out when the next training workshop is being held or to host one in your area.
3. The Real Dirt on Farming – Over 100,000 copies of this booklet have been distributed across Canada. Great resource answering common questions about food and farming, in English and French. Online at: <http://www.ofac.org/pdf/Dirtfinaleditiontwo.pdf>
Note: This document is out of print. OFAC is currently fundraising to update and reprint this resource later in 2010.

OFAC is the voice of animal agriculture, representing the province's livestock and poultry farmers and associated businesses. AGCare is the environmental voice of Ontario's 45,000 field crop and horticulture farmers. If there's a question on farm animals or crop production, OFAC and AGCare are here to answer it. Become a member and support our efforts today!

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