

Why eating less can help the environment

July 23 2008

An estimated 19 percent of total energy used in the USA is taken up in the production and supply of food. Currently, this mostly comes from non-renewable energy sources which are in short supply. It is therefore of paramount importance that ways of reducing this significant fuel consumption in the US food system are found. In a paper just published in the Springer journal *Human Ecology*, David Pimentel and his colleagues at Cornell University in New York set out a number of strategies which could potentially cut fossil energy fuel use in the food system by as much as 50 percent.

The first, and very astute suggestion they put forward is that individuals eat less, especially considering that the average American consumes an estimated 3,747 calories a day, a staggering 1200-1500 calories over recommendations.

Traditional American diets are high in animal products, and junk and processed foods in particular, which by their nature use more energy than that used to produce staple foods such as potatoes, rice, fruits and vegetables. By just reducing junk food intake and converting to diets lower in meat, the average American could have a massive impact on fuel consumption as well as improving his or her health.

Further savings are possible in the food production industry. The authors suggest that moving towards more traditional, organic farming methods would help because conventional meat and dairy production is extremely energy intensive. Similarly, in crop production, reduced pesticide use, increased use of manure, cover crops and crop rotations improve energy

efficiency.

Finally, changes to methods of food processing, packaging and distribution could also help to reduce fuel consumption. Although well-established energy-saving considerations in lighting, heating and packaging materials all have their part to play, the authors again highlight individual responsibility as having the biggest impact. They contend that the most dramatic reduction in energy used for food processing would come about if consumers reduced their demand for highly processed foods. This would also help cut down food miles and its related fuel cost as US food travels an average of 2,400 km before it is consumed.

This study argues strongly that the consumer is in the strongest position to contribute to a reduction in energy use. As individuals embrace a 'greener' lifestyle, an awareness of the influence their food choices have on energy resources might be added encouragement for them to buy good, local produce and avoid highly processed, heavily packaged and nutritionally inferior food. As well as leading to a cleaner environment, this would also lead to better health.

Pimentel D, Williamson S, Alexander C E, Gonzelez-Pagan O, Kontak C and Mulkey SE (2008). Reducing energy inputs in the US food system. *Human Ecology*: DOI 10.1007/s10745-008-9184-3.

Source: Springer

Citation: Why eating less can help the environment (2008, July 23) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-07-environment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.