

Our View: Pollan Drift



Pollen drift is defined as unplanned movement of pollen from one variety to another & associated with contamination. Journalist Michael Pollan is author of “In Defense of Food” the UW’s “Big Read” book choice of the year.

By Rick Tolman,,Chief Executive Officer, National Corn Growers Association

The prolific and talented author and contributor to *The New York Times*, Michael Pollan, is at the center of a self-initiated movement to redo our nation’s food system. The movement is built on a platform of opposing biotechnology and conventional agriculture – especially animal ag – while promoting the slow food movement, local production and organics. He is a frequent critic of corn production and puts it at the epicenter of his axis of food evil.

Pollan is very persuasive in written and oral presentation and has embarked on an active and aggressive speaking tour and campaign to sell books (“In Defense of Food”); help promote films that espouse his philosophy (“King Corn,” “Food, Inc.”) and lead a movement to revamp the U.S. food system. Pollan’s arguments have resonance and appeal with consumers and the general public and they have garnered growing support among the urban elite and more extreme environmental groups. His books and articles are increasingly well read and widely quoted by the “influential” class in our society.

At another end of the spectrum is Norman Borlaug, an American agronomist, humanitarian, Nobel laureate and the father of the Green Revolution. Borlaug is one of only five people in history to have won the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal. According to language contained in the official Congressional Action that awarded the Gold Medal to Borlaug, "Borlaug has saved more lives than any other person who has ever lived, and likely has saved more lives in the Islamic world than any other human being in history."

Borlaug is 95 years old. He is still a distinguished professor of agronomy at Texas A&M University. He continues to speak out in support of modern agriculture and the need for advancements to address world hunger. He is the founder of the World Food Prize, an international award recognizing the achievements of individuals who have advanced human development by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food in the world. Last month, Borlaug wrote an editorial that was published in the *Wall Street Journal*, titled “Farmers Can Feed the World,” where he argued that “better seeds and fertilizers, not romantic myths, will let them do it.

In what I took as a direct reference to the type of movement that Pollan so persuasively espouses, Borlaug said the following: “Even here at home, some elements of popular culture romanticize older, inefficient production methods and shun fertilizers and pesticides, arguing that the U.S. should revert to producing only local organic food. People should be able to purchase organic food if they have the will and financial means to do so, but not at the expense of the world’s hungry—25,000 of whom die each day from malnutrition.”

Pollan is a very talented and well respected author and is very driven in his beliefs. Much of what he says is true or based on fact, but his artful mixing of fact and fiction lead to very serious and erroneous as well as naïve and dangerous conclusions and recommendations. I am reminded of the language that Rick Berman, Executive Director of the Center for Consumer Freedom, used several years ago when commenting on a movement very similar to that of Pollan’s: “Sometimes self-indulgent utopianism is harmless. Not here. As a wise man observed, ‘The boy throws the stone in jest; the frog dies in earnest.’ The consequences of this ideological lark, exploited by old-fashioned greed, could be more than dead frogs.”

Pollan’s movement needs to be aggressively countered with fact and reality to our general consumer population who do not know any better and have been seduced by his skill with words. For, as Borlaug says, now is not the time to be limiting the tools available to our farmers and ranchers, as we need a second green revolution. As he says, “given the right tools, farmers have shown an uncanny ability to feed themselves and others, and to ignite the economic engine that will reverse the cycle of chronic poverty.”

U.S. farmers have an outstanding track record of doing just this and will continue as long as we don’t allow ourselves to become apologists for or victims of “Pollan Drift.” **Farmers it’s time to speak out!**

If you have not read it, read “The Omnivore’s Delusion” by farmer Blake Hurst (online at www.american.com/archive/2009/july/the-omnivore2019s-delusion-against-the-agri-intellectuals).