

FOOD SECURITY IS NATIONAL SECURITY

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The author pictured with leaders from the esteemed organization “American Agri-Women.”

Introduction

America is the world’s greatest producer of food. Americans take their food supply for granted, but the dependability of that supply is fragile. The 2020 Covid pandemic made that vulnerability apparent. The US has no national strategic reserve of food. For the average citizen, the pandemic brought home the effects of competitive and hostile foreign actors, supply chain disruptions, centralized distribution systems, technological failures and abuses, flawed central government policies and systems, influence operations, and a public tendency to rely on central authority for the answers.

Food security is national security. The federal government does have a role. Yet food security is one of the few national security issues in which each citizen can take measures to look out for oneself, one’s family, and one’s community. It’s an issue that can elevate existing communities and create new ones without relying on centralized bureaucracies.

This report inaugurates a new Center for Security Policy program to promote awareness and provide solutions for the multiplying threats to America’s food supply. It seeks to kick off a national discussion about food security, the role of the federal government, the role of states and communities, and the role of the individual. Even more than discussing the problem, the Center’s program is designed to help empower citizens to address food security for themselves. This report provides a broad overview of the problem and an **initial** list of recommendations at the federal, state and local, and individual levels. Over time and through collaboration, we intend to grow that list and encourage action at all levels to enhance our nation’s food security.”



Photos from Fort Worth grocery store, February 18, 2021 – MichaelMabee.info

America's Food Consumption & Lack of Preparedness

The average American consumes almost 5.5 pounds of food per day, or 2,000 pounds a year. Most Americans store only a few days' worth of food in their own refrigerators or pantries. In 2019, the average American made 1.6 trips to the grocery store a week. Online grocery pickup and delivery is increasing in popularity, meaning that less and less food is stored at home.

The concentration of America's population in urban and suburban areas means that the food distribution structure is a constant supply from far-off areas with little space for interim storage or focus on stockpiling.

Products from distant farms are moved through processing and distribution centers by rail and interstate trucking to grocery stores nationwide. For the sake of efficiency and profitability, the grocery

sector uses electronic systems to track and order inventory through just-in-time food distribution systems.

This very sound, successful strategy results in a reduction over time in the amount of food being stored in supermarkets and regional warehouses. However, the just-in-time model presumes stable energy, transportation, and communications infrastructures. This is a significant vulnerability.

The result is that a typical supermarket chain will have only enough food on the shelves of its storefront groceries and local warehouses to support the local population for one to three days. Regional warehouses may be able to store enough food to supply a multi-county area for about one month under normal circumstances, but when circumstances *are not* normal, grocery stores can go empty, and may remain empty for a long time.

The cold weather-induced blackout in Texas in

February 2021 is a case in point. Photos from a Fort Worth grocery store on February 18, 2021, show what can happen within hours of a power outage or panic. The scene, empty shelves on every aisle, was the same throughout the entire region. No milk, no eggs, no bread, no frozen meals – no food, and no bottled water.

Not only does the bulk of the American population live and work a great distance from where their food is produced, but most citizens are culturally far removed from the process of growing and cultivating that food. In 1988, less than two percent of the population worked in agriculture. Today, that percentage is even smaller, about 876,900 Americans (including those in the fishing and forestry industries), work in agriculture – which is just over on-half of one percent.

These numbers stand in contrast to when America was being built as a country. In 1820, 72 percent of the population were farmers. In 1920, farmers made up 30 percent of the population. There was a large connection between the people and the production of food.

Large-scale farming operations that feed our population today are heavily reliant on electricity, computers (from South Korean and Taiwanese microchips to distribution algorithms), the internet, open lines of communication, large scale commercial transportation networks, and access to large amounts of fertilizer and fuel. This elaborate system is full of vulnerabilities. Given the prospect of potential disruptions, does America have a reserve or stockpile of food on which it can rely during a major disruption or other national emergency?

National Food Infrastructure

The nation’s food infrastructure is critical to everyday life. “Critical infrastructure” is more than pipelines, transportation, electric grid systems, water systems, and communications networks that power and move the nation’s commodities and goods. It is the vast system that helps to grow and process our food, and move it to the stores and restaurants where we shop and eat. The Food and Agriculture (FA) Sector is one of the 16 critical Infrastructure systems of the United States.

Those sectors are designated as chemical, commercial facilities, communications, critical manufacturing, dams, defense industrial base, emergency services, energy, financial services, food and agricultural, government facilities, healthcare and public health, information technology, nuclear reactors and related areas, transportation systems, and water and wastewater systems.

The Food and Agriculture (FA) Sector, designated in 2003, “is composed of an estimated 2.1 million farms, 935,000 restaurants, and more than 200,000 registered food manufacturing, processing, and storage facilities,” according to the Department of Homeland Security’s Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The entire FA sector accounts for about 20 percent of America’s economic activity.

The agencies responsible for developing “sector-specific plans” and coordinating with public and private sector partners are the US Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services. The last time these agencies published a Food and Agriculture Sector-Specific Plan was in 2015. At the time, the stated mission of the FA sector was “to protect against a disruption anywhere



National Infrastructure Protection Plan (NIPP) [Food and Agriculture Sector-Specific Plan for 2015](#)

in the food system that would pose a serious threat to public health, safety, welfare, and or to the national economy.”

Foreign threats. Policies and conditions in other countries directly affect US food security and infrastructure.

Incidents in recent years show that vulnerabilities in the FA sector are the targets of malicious actors. These dangers include the 2020-2021 Covid-19 pandemic which severely interrupted production and supply chains, the 2022 war in Ukraine which disrupted grain and fertilizer markets, a series of cyberattacks, a major railroad strike, and, some argue, a number of potentially suspicious fires at major food production and distribution facilities across the United States since 2020.

Dire predictions of the worst calamity are now mainstream concerns. *The Economist* predicted a “coming food catastrophe,” underscoring the gravity

with a cover illustration of strands of wheat with kernels replaced with human skulls. The magazine cautioned that the “widely accepted idea of a cost-of-living crisis does not begin to capture the gravity of what may lie ahead,” citing a possible worldwide food shortage that “could last for years.”

The Economist warned that China – the world’s largest wheat producer – was about to have its “worst year ever,” that India – the second largest producer – was also struggling and now cutting off exports, and that northern Africa was being ravaged by its worst drought in 40 years. It isn’t a just a foreign problem. American farmers are struggling. USDA reported that, due to cold weather, only 11 percent of Minnesota’s spring wheat crop was in the ground by mid-May, 2022, down from 100 percent the year before.



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