

## (pt. 1) Family Food Security

Due to Y2K-related disruptions in the retail, shipping and processing industries, there may be problems with food processing and distribution in January 2000. There's no lack of raw food products in the country, but the processing, transportation, and marketing of groceries is vulnerable to Y2k disruptions. Each bite of your dinner travels an average of 1500 miles to get to your table. Most grocery stores stock less than a week's worth of food; without daily deliveries, their shelves will empty fast. The entire food processing system has only 60 days of product in it. There is not an expected shortage of food; but the ability to process and deliver it to consumers may be problematic if there are Y2K disruptions.

There is little or no independent, verifiable, visible assurance about Y2k compliance in the food processing and distributing industries. The United States Senate met with "significant resistance... from both industry trade organizations/associations as well as major corporations within the retail and manufacturing sides of the food industry" as it tried to gather evidence regarding Y2K issues in the food distribution system. Investigating the Impact of the Year 2000 Problem, U.S. Senate Report, February 1999, page 130.

There's a lot of loose talk in the media disparaging the household management practice of keeping 2 or 3 months' supply of food on hand. When I hear this, I know that the commentator has never been poor and has probably led a relatively sheltered and comfortable life. Having such a life is not a bad thing of course, but it should be tempered with humility. Typically, the only flexible item in a poor family's budget is the grocery money, and if there is an emergency, that is where they go for money for the doctor, car repairs, or whatever. If the family has extra food, they can do this and still put dinner on the table. If they have no extra food, they are out of luck and out of food. The less economic security a family has, the more important it is that they keep savings in food.

There's other reasons to stock a full pantry. Buying large containers usually results in a lower price per unit. Every time you go to the store for just 1 thing, you often end up with "just 10 things", so one secret of saving money is staying out of grocery stores as much as possible. It is easier to do this if you have a well-stocked pantry. You also save quite time as you don't have to go to the grocery store so often, you have what you need at home, ready to go. A well stocked pantry is a good idea what-ever happens in January 2000.

Do the people disparaging this household management practice as hoarding think about these issues? Not likely, that's why they're preaching against frugality, prudence and food security. Grocers and food processing corporations don't like such thrifty habits. They make extra money when we go to the store 7 days a week, without planning menus or making a list, and buying whatever "looks good."

Is there a connection between the full court press from politicians and news media against this traditional and frugal practice -- and food industry advertising revenues and political contributions? I don't know the answer to this, but would it surprise any of us if it turns out to be true? Unfortunately, this isn't a question that will be asked by today's mass media.

Mergers over the past decade have brought most of the wholesale food processing and distribution systems under the control of a half dozen major transnational corporations. Today our food distribution resembles an hour glass -- a lot of producers, a diverse retail system, constricted in the middle by a handful of big players. Due to competitive demands to minimize expenses, production capabilities have been streamlined. There are fewer processing facilities. A lot of small operators have gone out of business or merged with one of the big players. Since there are fewer food factories, the processed food must travel longer distances to reach the customers, and at each stage of those transportation systems there are Y2K vulnerabilities.

This year prices of pork to producers plunged to all-time lows because the over-supply of pigs coming to market could not be handled by the processing industry. Across the wheat belt, grain may be piled on the ground because of lack of storage facilities, but the corporations who control the processing of the grain may not be able to process enough to meet increased demand. Have corporate consolidations and mergers in the food processing industry placed our food supply at risk for the sake of extra profits for stockholders? From the way food industry executives are publicly discouraging stocking up for Y2k, it would appear this is so. But we're not supposed to notice that the Emperor is naked.

This has implications also for food safety, as well as Y2K. With fewer, but larger, food processing plants, and contamination in one plant can cause an international recall of tainted foods. Such recalls are rapidly increasing. In a similar way, Y2K disruptions in even one plant can cause trans-continental problems.

Since the existing players seem to have worked their way into a box, increased demand for processed food due to Y2K concerns may mean opportunities for direct marketing relationships between farmers and consumers. Corporate concerns about the possibility of competition may be the real reason behind industry statements discouraging people from buying extra food.

Historically and in the present context, food storage is a prudent response to valid concerns about the brittleness and lack of resiliency of the food production and distribution systems. Putting food by for storage when it is plentiful is not hoarding, it is a traditional household management practice. When it comes to food, we've always hedged our bets and limited our risks in the face of uncertainty, especially when hard times were on the horizon. Increasing your food

purchases sends important market signals to the food processing industry to move more products into the stores. Buying stimulates the food production and distribution supply line and create opportunities for small businesses (such as farmers and local processors) to compete on a more equitable basis with the big players. . As basic products move through the system from farmers to processors to retailers to consumers, everybody benefits by the increased economic activity. If you hear people in the food industry discouraging people from buying food, their motives are more mixed than they would like for us to believe.

Buying directly from farmers and local processors and urban agriculture greatly contribute to community food security. Throughout all of China's tumultuous history this century, one social policy has remained constant under both Nationalist and Communist governments: cities should get their food from the vicinity of the city. Chinese governments discourage shipping foods long distances (although some of it happens, of course). Shanghai, for example, is self-sufficient in vegetables, and gets most the rest of its food from within a 100 kilometer radius circle around the city. Calcutta produces 1/3 of the fish and vegetables consumed within the city. Around the world, many of the urban poor report that they would starve if it wasn't for food that they were able to grow within the city.

People who are very hungry may refuse to eat food that is unfamiliar to them. Calories count for nothing if we don't recognize them as food. So if you can avoid it, don't try a new diet in the midst of a stressful emergency. The best advice is to store what you eat and eat what you store.

One: Determine how much of what foods your family eats in a month. Do this by totaling up your grocery lists, or saving your receipts, or examining your menus.

Two: Decide how well those products will store over a period of months. If you are using a lot of foods that need refrigeration, think about substituting alternatives that don't require refrigeration such as canned or dried, pickled or salted.

Three: Make your list, check it twice, buy and store the food. It's not rocket science, it's home economics. You are unlikely to need a special food consultant.

Store a variety of foods. You need dried whole foods like beans and grains and you need canned goods like tuna and chili and soups. If you expect that fuel for cooking will be a big issue, store more canned goods (which require less cooking), and less dried beans and rice (which require more cooking), or build a solar oven. Cream soups are particularly useful; they make excellent instant sauces that can be combined with pasta and rice and are a key ingredient in many casseroles.

Store some comfort and specialty foods. Hard candies, chocolate, coffee, herbal teas, favorite snacks and meals, all these are important not only for nutrition, but also for morale.

Stock your spice rack liberally, and don't forget condiments, baking powder and soda, cooking oil or shortening, bouillon, and yeast. Beans, rice, flour, and etc. can be a bland diet without spices to liven things up a bit.