COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Food, Fuel and Society panel discusses complexity of biofuels issue

By Pavan Vangipuram
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COLUMBIA — Both supporters and detractors of biofuels have credible evidence on their side, a panel observed at the Food, Fuel and Society conference Tuesday, making biofuels one of the most controversial forms of renewable energy.

The panel featured an economics professor from Iowa State University, a communications professor from Radford University, the international affairs program director from MU's Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute and a scientific communications manager from Monsanto.

Together, the panelists shared their research and highlighted the complexity inherent in the biofuels debate. Too often, they said, reporters fail to provide a nuanced perspective on the costs and benefits of bioethanol, a common biofuel.

Dave Swenson of Iowa State University devoted his speech to exploring the job creation a bioethanol-based economy might yield. His research concerned the total number of jobs each plant would create.

Swenson's findings flew in the face of official estimates from the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association. The fuels association in 2006 estimated that switching to corn ethanol would create 50,000 new jobs in Iowa, but Swenson's research indicated biofuels would net Iowa only an extra 4,500 jobs.

"I'm not going to say 'fraud' or 'lie,' " Swenson said of the fuels association's estimates. "I'll instead say 'misperception of value for this enterprise.' "

Swenson estimates that the current government mandate calling for 8 billion gallons per year of biofuel production by 2016 will net almost 90,000 new jobs.
"Yet analysts and policy makers promise over a million jobs from biofuels," Swenson said. "To that I say, 'not in my lifetime.'"

Proponents of biofuels may have overstated their economic benefits, but research from panelist Pat Westhoff of the research institute at MU suggests that detractors of biofuels have oversold its role in the 2008 food inflation crisis.

Although an increase in biofuels production from 2004 to 2008 had a strong correlation with an increase in food inflation during the same period, biofuels production continued to increase from 2008 to 2010 while food inflation leveled off, Westhoff said. The argument that biofuels create food inflation is exaggerated, Westhoff said.

"There's lots of spin," Westhoff said. "It's difficult when you have these issues that are difficult to summarize."
Summit focus on coverage

Food, fuel need more attention.

By Janese Silvey

Tuesday, October 12, 2010

For decades, food and fuel have remained in the backdrop of daily life: People ate, put gas in their cars and didn’t think much more about it.

“For the first time, we’re at a critical crossroad where society cares about food and cares about fuel,” said Charlene Finck, vice president and editor of Farm Journal Media out of Mexico, Mo. “That’s the good news and the bad news. People give a flip.”

While the public interest is exciting, she said, the struggle is that many people are at least a generation removed from family farming, making it more important than ever for agricultural and science journalists to understand those issues to help educate the public.

That’s the crux of a daylong symposium at the Reynolds Journalism Institute on the University of Missouri campus today. Food, Fuel & Society brings together journalism and agricultural experts to discuss the future of biofuels, the push toward local food production, immigrants’ role in agricultural and food safety — and how it’s important for journalists to understand and report on those issues. The summit is supported by Mizzou Advantage, a new initiative that promotes interdisciplinary collaboration on campus.

The program’s keynote speaker, Ira Flatow, host of NPR’s “Science Friday,” set the stage for the conference by assuring participants that audiences are interested in science-related news. He pointed to results from a poll that showed audiences, regardless of political affiliation, cited science as the topic they’d like to see more in media coverage.

“There’s a huge thirst for science-related news,” he said, adding he wants “science to be a topic of discussion around the dinner table as much as business or sports is.”

There are challenges, though. For one, many Americans lack basic science understanding, which has caused broadcasters and reporters to “dumb down” science news, he said. Another challenge is convincing media managers that science coverage is important, he said, noting that CNN and the Boston Globe both shut down their science units.
On the flip side, though, a new media outlet has emerged to provide coverage of food production and health from the Midwest. Harvest Public Media is a network of six public broadcasting stations, including KBIA on the MU campus, which aims to report on food, health and energy.

“It’s clear there’s not only an appetite for this stuff, but it’s also very interesting,” said Frank Morris, news director of KCUR in Kansas City.

Unlike trade magazines such as Farm Journal, Morris said the Harvest Public Media website, blog and broadcasts will reach broader audiences and provide coverage that matters to daily life.

Food, Fuel & Society continues this evening with a showing of Edward R. Murrow’s “Harvest of Shame” at 5:45 p.m. at Ragtag Cinema. Originally aired in 1960, the program chronicled the experience of U.S. migrant workers. The program will be followed by a panel discussion about how far the United States has come 50 years later.

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Panel discusses migrant labor at food, fuel and society event

By Leif Kothe
October 12, 2010 | 8:57 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — We are living in the "age of migration," according to Domingo Martinez.

Martinez, an agricultural economist and director of the Cambio Center, was one of three panelists to speak Wednesday at a session concerning immigration and labor on American farms.

The session, moderated by MU journalism professor Bill Allen in the Fred W. Smith Forum, was part of the Food, Fuel and Society conference held at the Reynolds Journalism Institute.

Martinez pointed to a number of statistics reflecting a sizable shift in the demographics of the United States. Since the year 2000, he said, the population of the United States has increased 9.1 percent.

"Hispanic people have come here to work," Martinez said. "And they've come here to stay."

Matt Foulkes, a professor of geography at MU, said that demographic shifts of this proportion have an indelible impact on labor markets.

"Labor markets are structurally changed when immigrants enter them," Foulkes said. "Once they enter a market, the market is forever altered."

In terms of the agricultural industry, Foulkes said, this has created a shift in public perception over labor-intensive jobs on the farm. Because some of the physically demanding farm jobs are stigmatized as being "immigrant jobs," farmers are seeing fewer and fewer "Anglo-Americans" occupying them. This is known as structural inflation, Foulkes said.
“Certain jobs become ‘immigrant jobs,’” Foulkes said. “There are stigmas, fair or unfair, attached to those jobs. Then it becomes difficult to get Anglos to take those jobs because they are viewed as low-tier jobs.”

So who will milk the cows? This is the question Jim Dickrell, editor of Dairy Today magazine, posed during his floor time.

“Who will milk the cows as we lose folks from rural areas who are actually willing to go into milking parlors and do this kind of tough labor?” Dickrell said.

Dickrell noted that dairy farms can “mechanize and roboticize” future labor, but this is highly expensive, and manual labor would still be required.

In a concluding message, Martinez emphasized that more social science research is needed to reconcile what Dickrell described as “a whole matrix of complex issues” pertaining to the agricultural labor force in America. If progress can be made, Martinez’s vision comes closer to fruition.

“We want healthy communities in which everybody can prosper and be a valid citizen,” he said.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU hosts Food, Fuel and Society conference

By Lydia Mulvany
October 12, 2010 | 9:37 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA—Holding one conference per year is a condition of the two-year grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that created Harvest Public Media, a collaboration among six midwestern public broadcasting stations.

This year, academics, journalists, foodies and aggies congregated at MU’s Reynolds Journalism Institute for the Food, Fuel and Society conference, held Tuesday. The conference drew an estimated 170 people for lectures and panel discussions on topics such as biofuels, local food movements, farm labor and food recalls.

“The conferences have a public outreach function,” said Frank Morris, executive supervisor for the grant and news director at KCUR, NPR’s Kansas City affiliate. “(The Corporation for Public Broadcasting) really wants people to know this is going on, and it’s also useful for our reporters to be exposed to these conversations.”

Online participants also joined in on panel discussions via Twitter, Facebook and a live blog. The event was streamed live online.

“We’ve had a really good response with people contributing in multiple ways,” said Tim Lloyd, Harvest Public Media’s multimedia editor. “I’d say we’ve been pleasantly surprised by the number of people getting involved online.”

The conference closed with tastings of local wine, beer and food, and a showing of Edward R. Murrow’s 1960 documentary “Harvest of Shame.”

The Reynolds Journalism Institute has made live blog transcripts available.