

We are introducing Benjamin Gisin, publisher of Touch the Soil magazine. Touch the Soil focuses on Local Food First, Sustainable Agriculture, Responsible Organics and Food Security.

Ben's presentations cover two general areas

First is the food and farming landscape. At home and abroad, the demand for food is outpacing production and there is a simultaneous decline in the ability of conventional food to sustain human and ecological health. In spite of these challenges, food and farming security are issues individuals can still have a direct influence on. Fortunately as well, solutions are emerging from the local and sustainable food movement. A significant portion of the nation's move to a more sustainable future will evolve out of work being done on the local food and farming landscape.

Second is on the archaic and ailing financial system. The financial system's inability to save the economy grows with each new wave of exclusions be they homelessness, food and utility insecurity, home foreclosures or mounting financial insecurity. The financial industry cannot find enough qualified borrowers to maintain the economy or service the debt used to facilitate what economic activity we have had in the past. The message from the financial industry is that we can no longer afford ourselves. The truth, however, is the exact opposite - humanity cannot afford the financial system. The exciting challenge of engineering a new exchange system, that has cooperation as its fundamental principle, is the turning point in the survival of the human species.

Ben comes from a 20-year banking career culminating as the senior agricultural approval officer for one of the nation's top ten agricultural banks. Upon leaving the banking industry, he consulted farmers and ranchers struggling to survive financially where he negotiated some of the largest and most complex debt settlements between farmers and their creditors. Author of Farmers and Ranchers Guide to Credit and hundreds of published articles he is now publisher of Touch the Soil magazine and lectures around the nation.

Food and Farming: What Lies Ahead?

Hello Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rural and urban farming have become the stage for change, change in our approach to food, the environment and economics. Millions of people, family farmers and innovative grocers are joining forces to fix what is wrong with food and farming today.

Many industrial food and farming practices have compromised ecological and human health. These losses are precariously chalked up as a cost of doing business. So is it any wonder health care costs have grown from 5.5 percent of the gross domestic product in 1960 to almost 17 percent in 2007. Some economists predict health care costs will grow to 25 to 35 percent of the gross domestic product by 2050. One must ask why food no longer sustains our health.

Millions of people, family farmers, and organic retailers are becoming one voice in favor of foods not genetically modified, grass-fed meats without antibiotics, hormones or nitrates, grass based milk produced without hormones, fresh produce raised without the use of toxic chemicals and the preservation of the nation's farmland, water and food-producing talent.

Consider for a moment that the national farmer's market movement, as an unofficial franchise with 4,385 markets as of year end 2006, is much larger than Wal-Mart with only 3,700 retail outlets in America. And the number of farmers markets is growing by about 10 percent per year.

When we add the explosion of other ways in which consumers and farmers are hooking up directly, such as in CSA's where a family gets a fresh box of produce each week from a local farm, new food cooperatives that link local farmers with local eaters, and the move by the nation's organic-type stores to feature products from local and regional farmers, an influential and vocal new agricultural system has emerged.

In contrast is the nation's industrial food movement, striving to serve inexpensive, highly processed, convenience foods, loaded with hormones, antibiotics, genetically modified and chemical ingredients to families with limited financial and/or limited time budgets.

So today we have two food and farming systems, and the chasm between the two continues to grow. It is critical that bridges and friendly communications be maintained so that unsustainable and unhealthy food and farming models can cross the chasm to sustainability and healthfulness.

On another note, the nation's competitive financial landscape, which materially directs the activities of the physical economy, maintains a vision of continued growth in every aspect of human activity.

A vision which requires the loss of farmland, water and food producing talent to feed broader economic growth.

The nation's competitive financial landscape has us doing with our hands and minds, what is often recognized in our hearts as a path with no future – the unsustainable loss of the world's farming assets.

Today, America farms 275 million acres less than in it did 1954, the peak farmland year. This agricultural decline is contributing to a global food situation in which demands for food are outpacing agriculture's capacity to produce food.

Today, on a per-capita basis, America farms only 27 percent of the land it did in 1900. And other nations are on a similar treadmill – exploiting agricultural assets to facilitate economic growth. While I wish there were another way to say it, our archaic financial structure is directing the larger economy towards a head-on collision with the sustainability of food and farming.

On another front, we are now part of a global marketplace. The largest portion of America's agricultural production moves into channels that can be tapped for exports to nations far less food-secure. This means Americans must compete with giants such as China, India and dozens of food-insecure nations for who gets to eat what comes off American farms.

In one of the most explosive food dramas ever to unfold in America is the recent exportation of wheat far in excess of production requiring a draw down of domestic wheat stocks to 60-year lows. This has America's baking industry competing for a pool of wheat so small that advances in prices for baking ingredients threaten the industry's financial picture and create concern over spot shortages. Unfortunately, the challenges of America's baking industry are minor compared to the global wheat and flour shortages causing demonstrations, political instability and black markets for flour around the globe.

Ethanol production is now materially competing for the same agricultural resources as food. Skyrocketing feed costs as feed crops and corn for ethanol compete for a limited pool of farmland has the meat, poultry and dairy industries demanding the government rethink its position in subsidizing ethanol.

Concurrently, the world's cereal grain farmers, (wheat, barley, rice and corn) have raised enough grains to meet consumption only one year out of the last eight. So for most it comes as a shock that we have not been eating totally off of current production, but a portion of our diets has been from the draw-down of food stocks built up by farmers of almost a generation ago. And so we come

full circle to understand that the solutions, activities and models emerging in the local and sustainable food movement are the lifeboats now docking alongside our major metropolitan areas.

Knowledge of world's tentative food and farming situation is something every child, family and community organization should be conversant on. For in many respects, food is something that people can take action on. They can change how they spend their food dollars, they can establish direct relationships with farmers, they can build personal or community food stocks, and they can participate in the emerging urban agriculture mega-trend.

It will be common people, their sustainable farmers and innovative retailers that will provide the solutions to this tentative food situation. To bring about an awareness of the food and farming landscape and the people and ideas that are moving towards solutions, is the focus of Touch the Soil magazine and our related speaking presentations.

For those interested in how the financial industry influences the course of events in food, farming and our economy, presentations on our archaic and ailing financial system are a must. Presentations that include the knowledge of how our mechanisms of exchange (inaccurately called money) are created, destroyed and distributed, have been received with stunning success and audience interest.