

# Agriculture's Friend or

Fast Food Nation *author criticizes, challenges modern ag.*

by  
**KINDRA GORDON**

"I support keeping farmers and ranchers on the land and working productively," says Eric Schlosser.

With those words, you might call Schlosser a friend of agriculture — and in some aspects, he is. But then you also learn that Schlosser is the author of the book *Fast Food Nation*, which debuted a decade ago and was largely critical of the industrialization of agriculture and corporate giants like McDonald's and Monsanto. It was also used as a resource for the documentary *Food, Inc.*, which misrepresented many aspects of today's farmers and ranchers.

The crux of Schlosser's criticism of ag? He abhors large-scale agriculture, saying, "I am a big supporter of independent farmers and ranchers, but big agriculture, not so much. In the last 30-40 years, the fast-food industry and its agribusiness allies have transformed us — what we eat, where we eat and what we look like."

Schlosser, who has a degree in American history from Princeton University, states, "A food system is the bedrock of every society. It is what makes civilization possible." But he blames "a handful of large corporations" for changing America's — and the world's — food system over the last four decades to one that is causing obesity, chronic illness and disease, and environmental degradation. Of food from corporate ag, Schlosser claims, "They don't want you to know where it comes from or how it's made."

Schlosser clarifies that he is not a vegan or vegetarian.

"I still eat hamburgers and fries, just not at McDonald's or Burger King, and never, ever at Kentucky Fried Chicken," he says.

## Against industrialization

Many of us could probably agree with some of the points made by Schlosser, but as you listen closer to some of his arguments against big ag, you might feel differently.

Schlosser argues that in order to produce uniform, cheap food, consolidation has replaced independent farmers and ranchers, and now commodities such as hogs and chickens are raised in industrialized factory farms where, Schlosser says, "they live their entire

lives crammed in buildings where their immunity is compromised and antibiotics are used to accelerate their rate of growth."

He calls the living conditions for confined animals — poultry, pigs and large feedlots — "pure misery" and states, "It amazes me anyone can treat a living thing this way."

During his presentation, which Schlosser regularly makes at college campuses across the country, he includes in his rant the question: "Why do you rarely see images of factory hog farms?" He answers by saying, "It's like a bad science fiction film when you see these places."

Schlosser also blames industrialized ag for being a leading source of pollution in the United States and raises concerns about the use of pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones, feedlots and biotechnology such as cloning and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the production of ag products for food.

"Personally, I would rather not eat meat of a cloned animal," he states. "I would rather eat this paper. ... Cloning comes out of industrialization's goal to make everything the same. There is no research that eating clones is safe. ... That's what we are doing to poor, defenseless animals."

Schlosser also is "concerned" over what consolidation is doing to farmers and ranchers.

**In 1950, one U.S. farmer fed 30 people. Today one U.S. farmer feeds 155 people thanks to the use of safe, innovative technologies.**

— Kelly Nelson

"What are we doing to farmers and ranchers?," Schlosser asked. "I would argue not much good. ... Big packers are taking money out of the pockets of independent farmers and ranchers."

He describes how meat companies "own the farmer" and have turned poultry farmers into serfs and are also doing it to hog and cattle producers. Specifically, Schlosser said, "90%



"I am a big supporter of independent farmers and ranchers, but big agriculture, not so much. In the last 30-40 years, the fast-food industry and its agribusiness allies have transformed us — what we eat, where we eat and what we look like," Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, says.

of the hog farmers in the U.S. have been driven out in the last 30 years due to this [consolidated] packer system."

He warns that a similar system is emerging in the beef industry, where the top four meat companies control 85% of the market for beef.

Schlosser suggests corporations could make ranchers and farmers "an endangered species" unless changes are made in how Americans eat and process food.

## Proponent for organic

After painting a picture of agriculture that Schlosser himself admits "sounds grim," he proposes that a different kind of system is still possible. Schlosser says that system is organic production, and he points to agriculture returning to production practices used 40 and 50 years ago that do not rely on modern technology.

"I want a food system that will conserve and preserve the land, respect animals and the health of people," he says.

He encourages supporting local organic farmers by buying from them, saying, "It sounds like a little thing, but that's how change starts."

Schlosser is less specific on how the nation's lower-income families could afford organic food; how

farmers could make a living at organic production; and if organic food production could be produced on a large enough scale to feed the world's population that is projected to expand to 9 billion people by the year 2050.

He suggests that instead of all ag producers going toward corporate industrialized ag, more farmers and ranchers should look at organic production. But he also failed to note that organic food production requires more intensive labor, which increases the cost of production and, thus, requires a premium at retail.

Schlosser also did not point out that a recent USDA report estimates that 50 million Americans are food insecure (not to mention that hunger is a global phenomenon), meaning people do not have enough to eat, mainly because they can't afford it.

## Rancher's response

This fall, South Dakota ranchers Jeff Smeenk and Eric Jennings, had the opportunity to hear Schlosser's presentation on a college campus.

They questioned many of Schlosser's statistics that portrayed a negative view of ag and encouraged others to do their own research and visit with real farmers and ranchers to gain a full perspective before drawing their conclusions.

# Foe?

She goes on to point out that agriculture is heavily regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), USDA and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) — and if research indicated something was not safe for people, livestock or the environment, it would not be approved.

Nelson says the take-home message

from Schlosser's presentations is that real farmers and ranchers must continue to educate and inform everyday consumers about agriculture.

“When opportunities like this come about, make an appearance and let it be known you are involved in production agriculture, proud of it and willing to tell your story. If you do not stand up and say something, someone like Mr. Schlosser

will, and your story may not be told the way it should be,” Nelson concludes.



**Author's Note:** *Schlosser, who lives in California and is married to actor Robert Redford's daughter, is currently working on books about the American prison system and nuclear weapons.*

“There are lies, damned lies and statistics,” Smeenk said, indicating that often statistics can be used out of context to portray misleading information. He notes that with the advancement of technology such as cell phones and the Internet, it is not practical to return to previous methods of how cattle were produced and marketed.

Kelly Nelson with South Dakota's AgUnited organization also had the opportunity to listen to Schlosser's remarks on the South Dakota State University campus. Nelson interpreted Schlosser's message this way: “Much of what he had to say was full of half truths and facts twisted to suit his message, which ultimately is: Organic production is best, and anyone who does not produce food this way is doing harm to the environment, livestock and people.”

---

**“If you do not stand up and say something, someone like Mr. Schlosser will, and your story may not be told the way it should be.”**

— *Kelly Nelson*

---

Nelson wants people to recognize that today's agriculture is the most sustainable it has ever been, and U.S. farmers and ranchers have the ability to produce more on less land. In 1950, one U.S. farmer fed 30 people. Today one U.S. farmer feeds 155 people thanks to the use of safe, innovative technologies, Nelson reports.

Nelson says studies have also shown U.S. agriculture has significantly reduced its carbon footprint. For example, a Washington State University study shows that the dairy industry has reduced its total carbon footprint by 44% since 1944. And, overall, animal agriculture accounts for only 2.8% of the total greenhouse gas emissions in this country.

Nelson adds, “Every day we use technology in our lives: cell phones, iPads, GPS, computers, satellite TV; the list could go on. If we do not live like we are in the 1950s, why do people think we should farm like we are in the 1950s? The use of GMO crops and confinement barns for cattle and hogs should not be condemned. Agriculture is moving on with the times like the rest of the world.”