

## ANNA LAPPÉ KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### FOOD, FUEL, AND THE FUTURE OF FARMING: CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE\*

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Thank you all for being here for what looks like an incredible, incredible conference.

Just to begin, I absolutely never mind being introduced by association with my mother. I feel the work I have been able to do in carrying on this message that, as [the moderator] said, was so prescient in the early 1970s when my mother, Frances Moore Lappé, wrote *Diet for a Small Planet*, is a huge honor.

As my mother and I always say, the work that she is engaged in—that in my small, little way I’m trying to carry on—is multigenerational and transgenerational. Anything that is worth fighting for is going to take more than just one lifetime.

One of the things that we discovered together when we wrote *Hope’s Edge* and traveled to the many countries we visited while researching the book is how many people work with their families, how many mothers and daughters work together, how many fathers and sons. Yet, we were struck when we’d come back to the U.S. and talk to media about the book. One of the first questions people of all ages would ask is, “You mean you work with your mother, and you get along?” It struck us as so interesting, culturally, that it was so rare here for people to work with their families. Yet, it is so natural.

When we think about the long history of sustainable farming in this country, it is so natural for parents to pass on the tradition to their children and for children to carry on that tradition. I think so much of what all of you in this room are fighting for is a sustainable food system that allows the

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children of farmers to be farmers. It allows young people who maybe grew up in cities to become farmers.

I wanted to begin on that note and also to say one thing I have never said before at the beginning of a speech and might not ever say again: I loved your toilets!<sup>1</sup>

I also want to say how wonderful it is to be in Vermont. I feel like as soon as I cross into this state, I just become so much happier. My mother, for ten years, lived and worked in Brattleboro, so, I spent a lot of time in and around Brattleboro over those years. There's an incredible spirit here and thanks to all of you for embodying that spirit.

I'm really honored to be speaking to you in the context of a conference with such amazing speakers. For the last couple of months, I've begun work on a new book tentatively titled *Eat the Sky*,<sup>2</sup>—about food and climate change. For that book, I've been traveling to food industry conferences and have sometimes felt a little bit less comfortable, maybe shall we say, than I do in this room.

The last food industry conference that I went to was the Meat Marketing Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. As the daughter of Frances Moore Lappé, it was definitely an interesting experience. For instance, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association staff nutritionist had a flashy PowerPoint about the benefits of eating beef, critiquing the men—there were mostly men at this conference, retailers and marketers of meat—saying, “You know, I think when I look out at all of you, I think sometimes you don't even know how good you've got it!”

“We own protein!”

I harkened back to stories my mother would tell me about her experience of writing *Diet for a Small Planet*.<sup>3</sup> After the cookbook and the messages, even beyond the recipes in that book, [it] came out [that] the National Cattlemen's Beef Association actually hired a team of nutritionists to cook her recipes to prove that they would be inedible to human beings because humans cannot survive on a non-meat protein diet. So, it was a very interesting experience for me. It makes it, as I said, all that more lovely to be here.

What I want to share with all of you tonight are some of my reflections on this intersection between food and climate change.

It's hard not to feel that this crisis of global warming, climate change—climate chaos as I prefer to call it (and many people prefer to call it)—is

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1. Vermont Law School's Oakes and Debevois Halls utilize composting toilets, which do not require any water. Instead, aerobic bacteria convert waste into fertilizer.

2. ANNA LAPPÉ, *EAT THE SKY* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2010).

3. FRANCES MOORE LAPPE, *DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET* (1971).

one of our most pressing concerns. We can think about the fires blazing in northern California, the flooding in the Midwest, or the unforgettable footage from New Orleans seared in our minds.

With the mounting global food crisis that has potentially plunged one-hundred million more people into hunger, deeper into poverty, we start again thinking about these connections between food and climate change.

I want to share some reflections on this connection and also share, I hope, some ideas about hope. Because I think as much as the story about climate change is one of the most heartbreaking stories of our era, the grassroots movement embodied by many of the people in this room, and around the world, is fighting for and bringing to life an alternative path for feeding all of us. This is, I think, among the most hopeful movements in the world.

I'll start by talking about understanding this connection between food and climate change, and contrasting some of the solutions that I've been hearing from the food industry, with some of the solutions that we've been hearing from folks like those that have been speaking at this conference.

I was thinking about starting from the place of saying, "Okay, we are at a moment now where we have moved beyond the debate about whether global warming is real, into a debate about what to do about it, and what are the key sources of global warming." I was going to begin that way until I realized that there still are many climate change skeptic holdouts out there.

I discovered this very personally a few months ago when I posted an op-ed in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. It went online before it actually hit the newspapers. I was surfing online, and I stumbled on this op-ed that I had written, and I noticed that at 11:08 p.m. this op-ed about global warming and food had already been hit with more than two-dozen comments from climate change skeptics. They were very irate comments.

I'll just share this one and you'll get a sense of maybe what the rest said. The comment said, "Please stop this nonsense. Climate change has happened every few decades for 6,000 years." And, this was my favorite part of the comment: "I am so sick of the godless left with their huge egos thinking we are to blame for climate change. Get real people and start worrying about things that have real consequences." There's a whole lot in there that I found really interesting.

There were many other comments like that posted to this website. I guess we still have a battle to fight to convince people that, yes, manmade greenhouse gas emissions are causing climate change. Never mind that there is global consensus among scientists around the planet and we can see this with our own eyes. I live in New York City. I remember last year

seeing cherry blossoms blooming in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden in January.

How many of you are farmers? And how many of you are farmers who have seen changes on your own land? Almost everybody who raised their hand, raised their hand again.

I remember hearing upstate New York farmers talk, and one of them said that for years her customers in east New York had been asking her to grow peppers. There are neighborhoods in east New York who love their jalapeño and habaneras. She had been saying, “But our land doesn’t grow peppers well.” In the last couple of years, because of changes in the weather in her region, she has been able to grow peppers. She said, “And you should taste my jalapeños now.”

Scientists are telling us that unless we seriously reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we are at a dangerous tipping point beyond which we will never be able to return to the equilibrium of our climate as we know it. As much as we have this global consensus, despite some of the skeptical holdouts, we’re still at that point of reaching public consensus and public understanding about the key industries and activities that are mostly to blame for these emissions and which offer our best leverage points to address the crisis.

Most of us, although probably not most of us in this room, when asked to think about the climate change bad guys would probably conjure images of industrial smokestacks, or oil-thirsty planes, trains, and automobiles before they would picture Pop Tarts or pork chops. Yet, as many of us in this room are well aware, the global industrial food system—from how we grow crops to how we raise livestock to what we do with our waste—accounts for an estimated one-third of all human-made greenhouse gas emissions.

The United Nations Livestock’s Long Shadow Report tells us that eighteen percent of the world’s total global warming effect comes from livestock production alone. That is more than all the planes, trains, and steamer ships on the planet.

Why isn’t there greater public understanding about this connection? Johns Hopkins University did an incredibly robust media analysis of newspaper articles<sup>4</sup> that had been written about climate change since *An Inconvenient Truth*<sup>5</sup> was released, sparking media coverage of global

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4. See *News Media Overlook Food System and Climate Change Connection*, JOHNS HOPKINS PUB. HEALTH, Sept. 22, 2008, available at [http://www.jhsph.edu/publichealthnews/press\\_releases/2008/neff\\_media.html](http://www.jhsph.edu/publichealthnews/press_releases/2008/neff_media.html).

5. AL GORE, *AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH: THE PLANETARY EMERGENCY OF GLOBAL WARMING AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT* (Rodale 2006).

warming, until just a few months ago. They discovered that of the more than two-thousand articles written about global warming in this few-year period, less than two percent even mentioned food or agriculture, and less than one percent mentioned agricultural issues as a serious concern.<sup>6</sup>

So part of the reason we've missed having a more public conversation about food and climate change is that the media simply has not been covering the story. But, I also think it goes deeper into how so many of us think about food and the disconnect between food and the environment.

I was thinking about this when I was speaking to some Eckerd College students down in Florida. I was at an environmental studies class, and there were maybe thirty students in this class. I began by saying, "Well, I want us all to stop for a moment and think about our last environmental experience. When was your last experience with nature?" This was an undergraduate class of shy freshmen and sophomores, and a few timid students raised their hands. One said, "Well, I went kayaking." Another one said, "I was running on the beach." Another one said, "Well, does hanging out in the hammock on the campus count?" Granted these were college students in Florida. Slightly different than my Northeastern College experience, but I said, "Yes, hanging out in a hammock counts." That was it, those three students.

I said, "Nobody else had any recent experience with nature and the environment?" Silence. So we sat there for a moment. Then I said, "Well, how many of you have eaten today?" Of course, everybody raised their hand. To me that moment symbolized that so few of us connect what we eat with the environment. That is not necessarily a huge surprise when most of what we're eating seems very disconnected from nature.

I remember a Vermont school teacher who told me she's finding that she has to teach her students in elementary school how to use utensils because they're not using utensils to eat anymore. I thought, "They're not? I don't get it." Then I started thinking, "Well, if you have a Pop Tart for breakfast, and a burger for lunch, and a Ding Dong for a snack, and a slice of pizza for dinner, there is no need for utensils." Nor is there any real obvious connection to nature.

I think that part of our challenge then, to increase the public's awareness of this connection between food and climate change, is to deepen the public awareness of the connection between food and our environment. To give the broad strokes of the food and climate change connection, if you look at how we have shifted our agricultural system over a blink of a historical eye, we can see that most of the changes that have happened in

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6. *Id.*

our agricultural system have meant that our food system has increasingly become a source of greenhouse gas emissions by replacing natural sources of fertility and productivity with fossil fuel-based chemicals. This can be seen from de-linking geographies of production and consumption, adding to the food miles that we see embedded in our food; and developing industrial livestock production that de-links where animals are raised from where their food is produced, from where that animal is processed, from where that animal is shipped, and from where that animal has been eaten. Industrial farming is particularly problematic for global warming because it is a key emitter of methane and nitrous oxide, which have much higher global warming effects than carbon dioxide.

Part of the reason we aren't as aware of the emissions from the food system is that the food system impacts climate change through so many different sectors, invisibly. The food system crops up in emissions in the transportation sector—in waste. It crops up in emissions from manufacturing, and, yet, those are emissions that we rarely see associated with food.

The other reason it's so important to be talking about this connection between global warming and food is because all of the trend lines are telling us that unless we make a radical change in how we raise our crops and what we're consuming, the food sector will become an increasingly large contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. The very nature of industrial production means that we are stuck on a treadmill, using more and more of the very chemicals that are such culprits in the crisis. We are seeing increasing pest resistance, for instance, despite the fact that we're using more and more pesticides. We're seeing more and more topsoil loss.

And our global food system is increasingly controlled by fewer and fewer companies that have a concentration of power over food resources and ever-greater ability to eschew regulation, massage policy, and expand into unregulated, new markets. For instance, Nestlé, a sixty-five billion dollar company, has more in annual revenues than the GDP of Nigeria, a country of 129 million people. Unilever, with fifty billion dollars, makes more in annual revenues than Vietnam has in its GDP, a country of 84 million.

We're not just seeing these global food companies become bigger and bigger; we're seeing them take on more and more market share, so that the three largest grain processors now have seventy-five percent of the share of grain processing in the US. In the beef market, just four beef packers control eighty-one percent of the market. Pork is controlled by four pork packers, fifty-nine percent of the pork market is controlled by just four. And, fifty percent of the broiler market is controlled by just four processors.

What we're seeing is not just concentration within these sectors, but also companies that have control across them; we're seeing massive vertical integration. For example, a company like Tyson is the second largest pork packer and the largest broiler processor in the country.

These meat companies, which are enormous contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, are expanding fast all around the world. I've been reading their annual reports and 10K's, and every single one is reporting plans to develop and open new plants throughout eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Romania, and forming partnerships with companies in China. As Tyson says in its latest annual report, "A key element of our growth strategy is to strengthen and expand existing business in Mexico and China and develop new business in Eastern Europe."

I was just reading a meat-industrial publication and saw a feature article about how Perdue, the multinational meat company, is investing all of this money in preserving the original family homestead as a museum. I'm reading this article, just after turning the last page on the company's annual report I couldn't find a single mention of family-scale production in that annual report. The irony is that this company is trying to preserve the image that they're still embracing family farming, while doing everything but that in their practices.

The third reason it's so important to talk about food and climate change, so we get organized and activated to take a stand, is that all signs are pointing to an increase in greenhouse-gas-emitting food production globally. The UN estimates that at current trend levels, global production of meat will more than double between now and 2050 and that global production of milk will also more than double during that same amount of time. In other words, the environmental impact that we already have measured, which we're already concerned about, will have to be cut in half just to avoid increasing the level of damage beyond its present level.

As you've talked about today, the other huge demand being put on cropland is for inputs for biofuels production. That's an incredible new demand that wasn't here on this level five years ago, and it was certainly not an issue ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago.

If all that I've said is true, what is it that we're hearing from the food companies themselves? I'll share with you a couple of key points that I've been hearing.

The first thing that I'm hearing at these conferences, and maybe this won't surprise you, is "Don't worry about it. It's not such a problem."

Earlier this year, I went to the Grocery Manufacturer's Association's first ever Environmental Sustainability Summit. Probably all of you have heard of Coke, Pepsi, Dole, Cargill, and ADM. They're all members of this

association. They had their first ever Environmental Sustainability Summit at the Ritz Carlton in Washington D.C. They had many of the CEOs there from Kraft, Pepsi, Dow, Monsanto, ADM, and Cargill; along with some NGOs; and some representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency. Over two days I saw many PowerPoint presentations. I also heard a lot of jokes.

One of the jokes that got a real laugh out of the crowd was a PowerPoint image of some polar bears hanging out around an open fire grilling some fish. The caption said, "The real cause of global warming." The presenter obviously meant it as a light joke, and yet the subtext was, "We can kind of laugh about this." What I heard from presenters at this conference was an attempt to diminish the concern about climate change and especially the concern from the food sector.

At that meat conference in Nashville, Tennessee, I learned that the meat industry, which I would think would be slightly concerned about the connection between livestock production and global warming, did not mention the words "global warming" or any variation thereof during the entire three-day marketing conference. The big public concern was the videotape that had been leaked depicting animal abuse in a slaughterhouse and the public relations fallout from it. Climate change, the environment, and global warming were not on their radar. The corollary to "Don't worry about it" is "There's also no need to change your diet, right?" If you don't have to worry about the connection between global warming and the food system, then you don't have to worry about what you're eating.

I mentioned earlier the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's nutritionist telling her folks about how to market their products. I'm also noticing how increasing numbers of advertisements in the media are presenting meat eating as the cool thing to eat or the sexy thing to eat.

For example, Taco Bell has Chalupa sandwiches that you can get with beef and other meat. I just saw their advertisement that embodies this message. Two young women walk into a bar. One of them has a clutch purse that she has on the counter, and her friend starts sniffing the air, asking "Do I smell beef?" The other woman opens up her clutch for the big reveal: a Taco Bell Chalupa. She says to her friend, "Yes, guys really love the smell of beef." And, across the bar three young men start walking over to them and say, "Is that beef?" This Taco Bell ad seems to embody the message that the industry certainly wants the public to get about meat: "Don't worry about eating less of it," and "Not only don't worry about eating less of it, but having some beef in your clutch will be the number one way to attract the cute guys at the bar."

The second thing we're hearing from the industry is: "Still worried about this whole livestock climate change thing? You're still worried about the food-climate change thing? Don't be. We've got it under control; we've got the solutions."

But all of the solutions from the industry don't require actually radically transforming anything about the food system. They just require continuing to do things as usual, but shift them a little. One of the solutions that Tyson is exploring is a way to commercialize excess animal fat and their poultry litter and transform it into energy. In April of last year they partnered with ConocoPhillips to create Syntroleum Corporation. The alliance between Tyson and ConocoPhillips will, they say, take poultry, beef, and pork byproducts and fats to produce transportation fuel and renewable-synthetic fuels for the jet and military fuel market. I never thought I'd be saying this, but maybe next time we fly we'll be asking, "Is this plane vegetarian?"

The other message we're getting is that biofuels are a key part of the solution. We hear it described in the media as a renewable fuel source. There are many reasons why we might not want to be using the word *renewable* when it comes to biofuels. One of the major reasons why that word is so erroneous when applied to biofuels is that in effect what we're doing is mining the soil to get the fuels. As Martha Noble mentioned earlier, "We're treating soil like dirt." It's a complete disregard for the value of soil to be continuing the kind of production that's used to raise our corn for corn-based ethanol here in this country.

The other thing that we've been hearing is that biofuels create energy independence. Scratch beneath the surface of the production of biofuels, and you'd realize there's no true independence here when we, as a nation, are a net importer of the fertilizers that are required to produce the crops being used for the biofuels.

The third message we hear is, "Okay, we told you not to worry. We told you we've got it under control. You're still a little bit worried. Don't be. We will be policing ourselves and monitoring ourselves and regulating ourselves." At the Grocery Manufacturers Conference, I heard example after example of new initiatives companies were launching to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. What was notable about these initiatives was that they were all self-generated, self-monitored, and self-evaluated.

For instance, I heard a representative from Anheuser-Busch report on their self-regulated water reduction program, which sounded really good. Then I looked up the water releases inventory from the Environmental Protection Agency, and I saw that Anheuser-Busch plants rank among the top-five-worst emitters in the nation. Cadbury Schweppes, another huge

global food company, talked about their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But, when you analyzed how they were planning to measure their emissions reductions, they were determining what year they would start the clock and they would be the ones monitoring those emissions reductions. In other words, they were setting a baseline that allowed them to make big claims about how much they were reducing.

At one point during one of these presentations, a corporate executive leaned over to me and whispered, pointing to one of the PowerPoint slides with all of these statistics up on the screen, “You can say anything you want with statistics. It’s like saying the moon is half the size of the earth and twice as far.” It took me a second to get what he was saying. It’s like these new products that say, “We are more climate friendly.” Or, the ones that are simply saying, “We’re green.” Well, more climate friendly than what? Green in relation to what?

The fourth thing we’re hearing is, “Not only do we have the solutions and we’re going to self-regulate, but we are going to spend a lot of time patting ourselves on the back and letting you, our customers, know what a great job we’re doing.”

For instance, during this Grocery Manufacturer’s Association Conference, I heard claims of sustainability from top executives at the world’s biggest food companies. Coca-Cola’s John Brock said, “Corporate responsibility is vital to us and our future. The whole concept of sustainability: that’s where we touch the world and the world touches us.” Unilever President Kevin Havelock said, “Environmental stewardship is in our DNA.” I’ve seen this kind of posturing from the food industry in so much of the self-promotion coming out of the industry about what they’re doing about sustainability.

In a particularly candid moment at this Grocery Manufacturers Association meeting, during a question and answer period, a representative from the North American Miller’s Association raised his hand and said,

Joe Consumer is a lot more aware than six months ago or six years ago, but it’s only going to go so far. They just want to know the brand they trust is doing something. If they hear about a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, they know there’s a problem, but they just want to know that we share these concerns and feel we’re doing something.

The people in the room nodded. That comment sums up the real danger here. Yes, Joe Consumer does care. But Joe Consumer and Jane Consumer must be educated to learn to tell real change from greenwashing.

Educated consumers can learn to read between the lines of corporate press releases like the one announcing the new museum that Perdue is building on the original Perdue family homestead.

The PR themes we're hearing from the industry—don't worry, we're self-regulating, we're self-policing—are all areas that we need to pay particular attention to. We clearly have some education to do—especially of those elected officials who are still not aware of the connection between food and climate change—to emphasize that this goes well beyond just changing our consumption patterns. This is about changing our entire food system.

As you've heard here at this conference, many people [are asking]: “What are those solutions, How do we get there, and How do we actually move in a direction of climate-friendly farming?” I think clearly we do need to be talking about decreasing meat consumption, but again not putting that simply on the shoulders of consumers, but acknowledging, looking at, and shining a light on the policies that are subsidizing the livestock producers and taking, as you've heard today, our tax dollars and giving it to the very producers that are so responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. The other huge area that we need to move in—that we are working on—is promoting sustainable food systems that are truly about building healthy soil and that are about creating regenerative agriculture, which will help us not only not increase greenhouse gas emissions, but help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

I want to end with one final thought to leave you with, which is one of the things that I feel that we as sustainable food advocates hear all the time and is one of the most profound illusions I think about our food system. In my last book, *Grub*<sup>7</sup>, I talk about six illusions of our food system, including the illusion of cheap, the illusion of safe and clean, and the illusion of efficiency. But, there's a seventh illusion I would add: the illusion of inevitability.

What I mean by that is the sense that this increasingly globalized food system, a food system that is addicted to fossil fuels and chemicals, is inevitable. That [for] the countries that haven't moved in this direction yet, it's just a matter of time before they do; that [for] the farmers who haven't embraced this direction yet, it's just a matter of time before they see the light or before they give up.

I think this is one of the most powerful illusions we can shatter. We can shatter it through the labor of everybody working to create a different food system. We can shatter it through the stories I've heard from around

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7. ANNA LAPPE, *GRUB: IDEAS OF AN URBAN ORGANIC KITCHEN* (2006).

the world of farmers and communities building these alternative food systems.

For example, I was just in Italy at the International Forum of Organic Agricultural Movements. Every three years, they have an international gathering. There were about 1,000 people there, from about 100 countries, and each of them embodied the work to bring to light this alternative food system. Last year, I was in the West African country of Mali at an international summit of a global network of farmers called La Via Campesina. That summit brought together 600 people from eighty-three different countries. And, again, every single person there, their life story and their life's work, is shattering this illusion of inevitability.

What we can clearly see is that we have this illusion of inevitability because people say, "Well, this is progress. This is what progress looks like: [an] industrialized food system." Well, this industrialized food system has been the driving force behind turning our planet into a planet where now more people live in cities than live in the countryside. And, as author Mike Davis talked about in his most recent book, *Planet of Slums*,<sup>8</sup> most of those people who live in cities are living in increasingly-large-urbanized slums. That to me is not progress.

The message that is critical for those of us doing this work to spread is a message that will shatter the illusion of the inevitability of our industrialized food system, and to shatter it through celebrating the stories of farmers, food activists, and food advocates who you and I know are bringing this alternative path to life.

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8. MIKE DAVIS, *PLANET OF SLUMS* (2007).