

**Susan Welch, Community Action for a Sustainable Alameda
Growing Food in Alameda (Sustainable Living Symposium, April 25th, 2009)**

Stefani and I are members of the CASA (Community Action for a Sustainable Alameda) and of CASA's Food and Water Task Force Group. CASA is a community-wide coalition empowered with our City's mandate and support to reduce carbon emissions substantially in the next 10 years. Some leaders like to use the term "curtailment" of Carbon rather than "reduction" to really emphasize the urgency of the action that's commensurate with the scale of the problems we face, two of the greatest challenges being Climate Change and Peak Oil. Fortunately, the solution to both is the same: "curtailing" carbon and increasing resilience. Local food production is an essential and empowering piece of our response to this dual crisis.

So, I'd like to speak a little about the "WHY" of growing your own food, and Stefani will follow up with the "HOW." There are lots of good reasons to grow our own food: tastes better, healthier, cheaper and it's better for the land. Now I'd like to highlight the food/oil connection just to really put Food on the table, so to speak, as a Carbon reduction strategy and as a critical component of community resilience.

Western industrialized farming has evolved into systems of essentially turning oil into food. By some accounts, a full 95% of all food products require oil in some way or another (Between synthetic fertilizers, oil-based packaging, and centralized, oil dependent distribution centers). Some of you may be aware of the local study that revealed that the average food item travels more than 1,500 miles from farm to table. This carries an extraordinary cost in greenhouse gas emissions AND as oil security deteriorates, so food security will deteriorate. We want to avoid a scenario in which there is a sudden interruption of oil supply, and thus, food supply.

This is what happened to Cuba in 1991 when it lost 90% of it's oil supply upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it also happened in England in ? when truckers went on strike because of the cost of gas. In England, people were suddenly taking store of how many weeks' food supply were in the supermarkets were discovering in some places that it was a matter of days, not weeks.

One might think that couldn't happen here in California which produces more than 50 percent of the country's organic produce, but if you look at it, California's food system is still a highly vulnerable, not to mention unsustainable, system. California is a net importer of food. We import nearly half of our raw farm products, and then export half of the harvest. We import more strawberries, asparagus, garlic and other fresh vegetables,

than we export, all of which are abundant California crops. The upside down, backwards nature of it is especially evident in these examples: Twenty percent of California table grapes are destined for China, when China is the world's largest producer of table grapes. California exports brussel sprouts to Canada and *imports* brussel sprouts from Belgium. \$70,000 worth of California pistachios go to Italy while we import \$50,000 of the same from Italy.

Another disconcerting fact is that 3 companies control 57 percent of the food retail market in California.

The good news is, there is a thriving local movement already underway here in Alameda and the East Bay to reclaim our food system. Farmers' markets have doubled in the past decade. Community Supported Agriculture (or CSA's), the Peoples' Grocery, Slow Food Alameda, Growing Youth Project, urban gardens, school gardening programs, and other county level initiatives — these are all great changes taking place on the ground: slowly, organically, and steadily.

But even with all of those great efforts to get involved with, the bottom line is, we need more farmers.

If you look at what happened in Cuba where they moved from industrialized agriculture to people-centric, people-intensive, organic agriculture after their oil crisis, the number of people involved in food production went from about 2% to about 20%. If you do the math on that in the U.S., that is 50 million people getting involved with food who are not farming right now. 50 million.

That might seem impossible, but we have actually been there before.

In the 1930s, ¼ U.S. population lived on farms. Today only 2% live on farms. And we've gone from 6 million farms down to 2 million farms in those 8 decades, a threefold decrease. Now consider how the population has grown.

Which means... we need YOU. And we need every corner of available growing space.

The good news is, the changes that we need to make in order to address Peak Oil and Climate Change are changes that are positive in themselves, and by making those changes we not only tackle the very real environmental crisis, but we also have the opportunity to lead more fulfilling lives, through stronger local communities, more vital local economies, and more local production and consumption.

Most importantly, keep in mind: Farming is sexy!

An on that note... Stefani...