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Organic Food a Detriment To Public Health

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You Are What You Grow. That's the title of Michael Pollan's most recent *New York Times Magazine* [article](#). In it, he argues that the U.S. Farm Bill is a villain in our obesity crisis, especially for the poor. If only the government incented farmers to grow more broccoli instead of corn (and from corn, high fructose corn syrup), poor families would change their eating habits. Specifically, Pollan would like us all to eat more organic produce.

Is he right? Under the basic economic principle that as price decreases we'll consume more of something, and as price increases we'll consume less of it, he appears to have a point. So if the only effect of a Farm Bill overhaul were that it would lower the prices of low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods while increasing the price of high-calorie foods that don't offer a lot of nutrition, it might be step in the right direction. (Although we're probably better off investing in [new technologies](#) that can help fight the battle of the bulge.)

But if Pollan's argument for lowering vegetable prices is at all appealing to you -- and you know what I do about organic food, namely that it's significantly more expensive without being demonstrably healthier -- you ought to be troubled about the growing popularity of the \$15 billion dollar organic food industry. Here's one example where big business really is to blame for some of our problems.

If you know organics are more expensive but no more healthful, you might even be somewhat relieved that Wal-Mart's is [scaling back](#) their organic venture. But Pollan and others cheer organics rather than face some of these foods' economic and scientific problems.

The problem here is that higher prices for organic foods cause people to consume less of the healthful produce. Pollan and his acolytes claim the higher price is worth it because organic produce, without pesticides and chemical fertilizers, is "safer." [What a load of manure.](#)

Trace levels of pesticide residues -- which are found in organic food too, in any case -- are not dangerous at the levels at which we are exposed to them. In fact, we know from many studies over the past few decades that people who eat more fruits and vegetables actually live longer and healthier lives. And don't for a minute think that these large population studies included much organic food. These studies were being published before the first Whole Foods Market ever opened. Conventional produce is not shortening lives or causing illness (rare allergies notwithstanding).

Now you can make all sorts of arguments about why organic food is better for the environment. But people like Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Norman Borlaug will point out that you are going to have to chop down a lot of forests to feed the world if you try growing food without the benefits of modern technology. Organic agriculture is a pretty inefficient system. But Pollan tries to make his case on health, not environmental grounds.

Perhaps you think, "But organic food tastes better -- and that will get people to eat more of it." Please don't confuse organic foods with locally grown fresh produce, though. If you think organic food tastes better, it is because it is fresh, local, and in season -- sometimes offering greater variety simply because local growers are able to provide flavorful varieties of crops that would not keep well if shipped long distances. It is not the "organic-ness" that makes local produce taste good, in other words. I know. I grow some great tasting and healthful tomatoes with Miracle-Gro. And I even judiciously use pesticides if I need to. Bugs don't taste good in tomatoes, after all.

So the organic food movement isn't doing us any good, not in terms of health, not in terms of obesity.

The public health imperative is indeed for people to eat more, not fewer vegetables. And especially for those who are most price-sensitive, lower-cost traditionally-grown produce is the right way to go. Promoting the myth that organic food is more healthful actually works at cross-purposes with the laudible goal of increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables.

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