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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Obama's 'Secretary of Food'?

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

As Barack Obama ponders whom to pick as agriculture secretary, he should reframe the question. What he needs is actually a bold reformer in a position renamed “secretary of food.”

A Department of Agriculture made sense 100 years ago when 35 percent of Americans engaged in farming. But today, fewer than 2 percent are farmers. In contrast, 100 percent of Americans eat.

Renaming the department would signal that Mr. Obama seeks to move away from a bankrupt structure of factory farming that squanders energy, exacerbates climate change and makes Americans unhealthy — all while costing taxpayers billions of dollars.

“We’re subsidizing the least healthy calories in the supermarket — high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated soy oil, and we’re doing very little for farmers trying to grow real food,” notes Michael Pollan, author of such books as “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” and “In Defense of Food.”

The Agriculture Department — and the agriculture committees in Congress — have traditionally been handed over to industrial farming interests by Democrats and Republicans alike. The farm lobby uses that perch to inflict unhealthy food on American children in school-lunch programs, exacerbating our national crisis with diabetes and obesity.

But let’s be clear. The problem isn’t farmers. It’s the farm lobby — hijacked by industrial operators — and a bipartisan tradition of kowtowing to it.

I grew up on a farm in Yamhill, Ore., where my family grew cherries and timber and raised sheep and, at times, small numbers of cattle, hogs and geese. One of my regrets is that my kids don’t have the chance to grow up on a farm as well.

Yet the Agriculture Department doesn’t support rural towns like Yamhill; it bolsters industrial operations that have lobbying clout. The result is that family farms have to sell out to larger operators, undermining small towns.

One measure of the absurdity of the system: Every year you, the American taxpayer, send me a check for \$588 in exchange for me not growing crops on timberland I own in Oregon (I forward the money to a charity). That’s right. The Agriculture Department pays a New York journalist not to grow crops in a forest in Oregon.

Modern confinement operations are less like farms than like meat assembly lines. They are dazzlingly efficient in some ways, but they use vast amounts of grain, as well as low-level antibiotics to reduce infections — and the result is a public health threat from antibiotic-resistant infections.

An industrial farm with 5,000 hogs produces as much waste as a town with 20,000 people. But while the town is required to have a sewage system, the industrial farm isn't.

"They look profitable because we're paying for their wastes," notes Robert P. Martin, executive director of the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production. "And then there's the cost of antibiotic resistance to the economy as a whole."

One study suggests that these large operations receive, in effect, a \$24 subsidy for each hog raised. We face an obesity crisis and a budget crisis, and we subsidize bacon?

The need for change is increasingly obvious, for health, climate and even humanitarian reasons. California voters last month passed a landmark referendum (over the farm lobby's furious protests) that will require factory farms to give minimum amounts of space to poultry and livestock. Society is becoming concerned not only with little boys who abuse cats but also with tycoons whose business model is abusing farm animals.

An online petition that can be found at [www.fooddemocracynow.org](http://www.fooddemocracynow.org) calls for a reformist pick for agriculture secretary — and names six terrific candidates, such as Chuck Hassebrook, a reformer in Nebraska. On several occasions in the campaign, Mr. Obama made comments showing a deep understanding of food issues, but the names that people in the food industry say are under consideration for agriculture secretary represent the problem more than the solution.

Change we can believe in?

The most powerful signal Mr. Obama could send would be to name a reformer to a renamed position. A former secretary of agriculture, John Block, said publicly the other day that the agency should be renamed "the Department of Food, Agriculture and Forestry." And another, Ann Veneman, told me that she believes it should be renamed, "Department of Food and Agriculture." I'd prefer to see simply "Department of Food," giving primacy to America's 300 million eaters.

As Mr. Pollan told me: "Even if you don't think agriculture is a high priority, given all the other problems we face, we're not going to make progress on the issues Obama campaigned on — health care, climate change and energy independence — unless we reform agriculture."

Your move, Mr. President-elect.

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