



Commentary

More Food On Less Carbon

Daniel Martino and Franz Fischler 10.28.09, 12:01 AM ET

The law of unintended consequences says that good intentions aren't enough. Noble purposes can lead to tragic blunders. Without careful deliberation, it's easy for things to turn worse even as we try to make them better.

Consider the debate over climate change. Its worthy goal is to bring about a more livable world. But what if we wind up creating one that doesn't produce enough food for its people? That's the very definition of an unlivable world.

The problem of global warming is genuine. World leaders are wise to think about how they might deal with it effectively. To achieve a true success, however, they will need to balance their bold plans against another global threat: food insecurity.

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations says that to satisfy the needs of people everywhere, our planet must more than double its food output by 2050. Meeting this ambitious goal, and also addressing climate change in a meaningful way, will require farmers and ranchers to confront the twin challenge of producing more food while emitting less carbon.

It's a tall order--and there's no guarantee of success. Two years ago, we saw how efforts to take on one part of the problem, in isolation from the other, can lead to troubling results. The push to turn crops into biofuels sprang from a desire for clean energy, but it also may have played a role in the sharp spike in commodity prices around the globe.

The world's poorest people spend more than half of their income on what they eat. When they can't keep up with price jumps, they suffer dearly. The unfortunate results can include everything from malnutrition to political instability. These outcomes also have a way of concentrating our minds on the urgent crises of the moment, rather than the long-term danger of climate change.

And it's a serious danger. A warming planet is a less productive planet, especially for agriculture. If farmland turns dry and crops wither in a global hothouse, we will experience the very worst of what global warming has to offer.

If we don't improve the yield on existing farmland, food shortages will create pressure to devote wilderness areas to agriculture. That would lead to deforestation, which accounts for 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Agriculture is responsible for about another 14%, which means that any serious attempt to deal with climate change will have to include this sector. Both conservation agriculture and novel technologies can reduce reliance on fossil fuels as well as improve our ability to take carbon out of the air and literally bury it in the ground--all while increasing agricultural output.

A few of the most sensible strategies are counterintuitive. In some developing countries, including much of Sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of carbon emissions come from agriculture. For them, the wisest

approach actually may be an intensification of agricultural activity because the gains in productivity and reduced pressures on the region's forests are so promising.

Another idea is to encourage more international trade. Food and agricultural products are among the most protected in the world, thanks to an unhealthy mix of tariffs and subsidies. An open, equitable and undistorted trading system would improve the flow of goods from areas of abundance to areas of scarcity--and also, potentially, from regions that produce food with relatively low carbon emissions to areas where these emissions are higher.

Completing the currently moribund Doha round of world trade talks would represent an important first step. It would encourage more trade, remove an artificial incentive for the exploitation of natural resources and allow for more foreign investment into the agriculture of developing countries. With a set of smart supporting policies--including safeguards to make sure that self-interested protectionism doesn't masquerade as high-minded environmentalism--this would create the conditions for more productivity in poor countries and fewer greenhouse gas emissions everywhere.

We'll always have to live with unintended consequences, but some can be less intended than others.

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