



## FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

### **New Documentary 'King Corn' is a Lot More than Filler Fare**

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OAKLAND, Calif. - Corn isn't just for dinner anymore. In fact, it's for just about everything but dinner.

That's what Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis, former college friends and co-producers of the documentary "King Corn," discovered when they spent a year tracing what happened to the corn they planted on their own green acre in Iowa after it was harvested.

Director Aaron Woolf documented Cheney and Ellis' journey into the dark heart of modern farming.

Corn - overwhelmingly genetically modified - is in just about every processed item, from hamburgers to aspirin, from soft drinks to baby formula.

U.S. consumers take in so much of the grain they are literally full of it, according to the film, which will be shown at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Oakland Museum of California.

Admission is free for the screening and for the panel discussion with small-farm advocates and environmental experts that will follow. Corn, according to the documentary, is why our kids are fat and our food is cheap and our life expectancy getting shorter for the first time in American history.

But the problem, the film says, isn't with corn itself, although much of what is grown, including the Cheney and Ellis seed, is so inedible it must be "processed into food" first.

"We're growing crap - the poorest quality crap the world has ever seen," Iowa farmer Don Clikeman says in the film.

The problem is what to do with the massive amounts of excess corn produced because of a government-designed and subsidized system.

The answer, according to the film: Put it in everything from vegetable oil, vegetable broth, cereal, cold cuts, ice cream, ketchup, toothpaste, disposable diapers and vitamins.

Use of high fructose corn syrup has increased 1,000 percent since 1973, when U.S. agriculture policy switched from keeping prices steady by limiting surpluses to intentional hyper over-production, the film says.



Cheap corn also is food for livestock - wreaking havoc on the cows and the cattle industry - and food for automobiles, in the form of ethanol. Grain-eating cattle are bad for beef eaters because the diet makes for unhealthy cows and meat high in saturated fat.

It's "fat disguised as meat," Loren Covdain, a Colorado State University researcher, says in the film.

It seems that corn is used for nearly anything but corn on the cob.

What a quaint idea - about as quaint as the nostalgic notion of family farmers tilling their patch of earth. Just 1 percent of the U.S. population is farm folk compared with 39 percent a century ago, according to figures the filmmakers cited from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Corn fueled the Aztec Empire, the Mayans ("the corn people") and the Inca. But modern farmers are like chemists and modern farms have been super-sized - growing just one or two genetically modified crops that would lose money without government subsidies, the filmmakers say.

Since the 1900s, the average farm size grew from 146 to 441 acres, while the number of farms shrunk from 5.7 million to just 2.1 million, according to the film. Meanwhile, the number of commodities produced on farms went from five to just one.

In 2007, 92.9 million acres of farmland were devoted to growing corn, the film says, and just 2 million was planted with vegetables.

Corn pays, partly because taxpayers have provided more than \$50 billion in subsidies to corn farmers over the past decade, according to USDA figures.

And it's likely to continue with the mandate to produce more corn-derived ethanol, which has boosted food prices, experts say.

Still, Americans will spend less of their incomes on food than will people of any other nation, the film says.

So, what happened to the duo's corn? You'll have to see the film to find out.