



# FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

## **My Interview with Michael Pollan and an AMAZING Grassroots Activist Named David**

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As an Iowan, David Murphy doesn't take campaign promises lightly. Iowa alone may be responsible for Barack Obama's ultimate ascendancy to the White House by giving him a big win in their caucuses, and now Dave wants to see those promises carried out. In many ways, he's still looking for "change he can believe in." He's tired of seeing his state overrun and polluted by factory hog farms, and he's sick of his state's soil misused to grow monoculture crops - the raw materials of processed foods - which degrade the health of the soil and force Iowans who want to eat real food to import it even though they live in one of the top agricultural states.

What makes David unique from so many other Americans who believed in Obama's message of change is that he started a grassroots petition that made it all the way to the New York Times, and now Obama's transition team is taking notice. He's managed to get sign-ons from ALL (literally) of the top names in sustainable food, including NYT bestselling author and columnist Michael Pollan (who is so popular that he can even count Barack Obama among his fans!).

First, **sign the petition** and then read the interviews below - including statements from Eric Schlosser and Marion Nestle!

### **David's Activist Roots**

David's story started over 2 years ago when his sister discovered plans for a 4800 head hog confinement facility a half a mile from her Iowa farm. This would have been more than just a stinky nuisance, as her children suffered from severe asthma when they were small and the hog CAFO's emissions would aggravate their conditions. Within two months, Dave quit his job in Washington DC and moved home to Iowa to - successfully - fight the hog CAFO.

What may have been the end of the fight for David turned into the beginning. A few months after returning to Iowa, he met a farmer named **Paul Willis** at a hearing on one of the state's largest polluters before the Dept of Natural Resources and it was - as they say - the start of a beautiful friendship. Willis is nationally recognized for raising hogs sustainably. Soon after meeting him, Dave visited him and his wife on their farm.

### **The Iowa Caucuses**

Prior to the Iowa Caucuses, David organized an event called the Iowa Farmers Union Food and Family Farm Presidential Summit, an event where Obama, Dodd, Edwards, Biden, Clinton all spoke!! Dur-



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ing this time, David was in touch with each campaign and he got a chance to know Obama's staff fairly well. He had to be neutral in order to organize the event, but Obama gave a speech so inspiring later that evening at the Jefferson Jackson dinner that it melted away Dave's neutrality.

According to David, Obama's team was the most organized and the most willing to listen to the concerns of grassroots activists about family farms, sustainability, and rural issues. After the Summit, he kept in touch with Obama's team, sometimes advising them on ag policy and identifying potential caucus supporters. Five days before the caucus, he put together a rural conference call for the Obama team to talk to the sustainable ag and environmental community across the state.

### **Change We Can Believe In**

I asked David about promises made during the campaign that he felt should be honored now. He replied:

Obama asked us to become agents of change in this campaign by volunteering heavily, and I believed his message. I believe he *wants* to do the right thing, but I understand the political obstacles that are in the way. When you campaign on change, it's important that you appoint people who have dedicated their lives to change from their very lives' work.

David told me that he does not want to criticize any of the candidates who have been mentioned for top posts at the USDA, but it concerns him that Obama has pledged to keep lobbyists out of his campaign and his administration yet many of the candidates being floated in the news are people who have relied on campaign contributions from the very companies they would now be expected to regulate.

Obama should reserve cabinet and under secretary level positions for those who spent a lifetime advocating for sustainability and standing up for family farmers and for the environment. Something that is consistent with the Rural Agenda that he created during his time in Iowa.

### **The Petition**

According to David, Paul Willis had wanted to get a call together with the Obama team to ensure that the dialogue that started between the grassroots and the campaign continued and expanded during the transition period. Through Paul, **Michael Pollan** and **Alice Waters** got involved.

Around this time, David wrote the letter that ultimately became the text of the petition (read it [here](#)). He and Paul worked with a small group to reach out to the sustainable ag community to find out who their "dream picks" would be for top USDA appointments. They compiled the list with the help of about 20 sustainable ag advocates and finally whittled it down to six people who they felt would excel at the job and survive the Senate confirmation process.

Step one was getting the initial 90 sign-ons from all of the sustainable ag superstars they could think of: Michael Pollan, Alice Waters, Marion Nestle, Wendell Berry, and Eric Schlosser, to name a few. I asked several of the original signers why they signed on and here are the responses I received:



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**Eric Schlosser**, author of *Fast Food Nation*

The policies of the USDA have a huge impact on the environment, animal welfare, rural life, and the public health. For too long, the agency has been controlled by a handful of large agribusiness firms. Now, more than ever, we need a USDA that will serve the interests of ordinary Americans.

**Marion Nestle**, author of *Food Politics*

I signed on because it's time for a change at USDA, an agency that has long been linked all too strongly to industrial agriculture at the expense of more sustainable approaches. The country badly needs more consumer-friendly approaches to areas under the purview of USDA: food assistance, food security, organic standards, meat and poultry safety, sustainable production. Someone should be heading the agency who is interesting in pursuing more just and sustainable goals.

**Angie Tagtow**, Environmental Nutrition Consultant

As a basic human need, all eaters need regular access to healthy and fresh food. Food that is grown in ways that conserves and renews natural resources, advances social justice and animal welfare, and builds community wealth. Our current food system is monopolized by a few and does not deliver a food supply that meets the food and nutrition needs of all eaters now or in the future. Our food system, thus food policy, is directly linked to the rising rates of chronic disease. To rebuild a sustainable and resilient food system in the US we must have agriculture and food policy that supports these goals.

Bottom line - no soil, no farms...no farms, no food...no food, no communities...a secretary of agriculture must recognize that current policies and practices deteriorates the world's ability to feed itself. A revolution within USDA is needed to better align what is grown in the US to Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Not only will it strengthen our health, but also significantly impact economic development.

**Samuel Fromartz**, author of *Organic, Inc.*

What this petition aims to do is get change on the front burner at the USDA. The department has for too long has marginalized sustainable initiatives, such as research into organic agriculture, in favor of support for status quo agribusiness. The names of those put forward as agriculture secretary represent some of the most forward thinking leaders in creating a sustainable food supply.

## **Success!**

David told me that he'd reached his dream when Wendell Berry himself signed onto the petition. (I'm jealous of David, who got to speak with Wendell Berry over this... Reading Wendell Berry's writing makes my brain have an orgasm... I highly recommend it.) Every thing else, David says, is gravy. And it's a LOT of gravy.

Perhaps the biggest success was the **New York Times op-ed by Nicholas Kristof** last week. Kristof reminds readers that 2% of Americans farm but 100% of us eat - we need a Secretary of Ag who can be



a Secretary of Food as well.

In addition to the exposure in the Times, the petition and its many signatures has made it to Obama's senior advisors. Now, Michael Pollan is calling for 100,000 signatures (as of yesterday we were approaching 50,000) to make sure that the transition team hears our message loud and clear. Obama may be on our side in spirit, but by delivering the grassroots support, we can cover his ass politically if he picks a progressive as Ag Secretary.

David believes that democracy should be represented in our food choices by means of creating a sustainable and healthy food system. Go help him at [Food Democracy Now!](#) and help create Sustainable Change at the USDA.

**UPDATE:** I didn't know if it was kosher to say or not, but I've been told I can spill the beans: The group who drew up the petition had a call with the Obama folks in the last week or so. Rumor has it that the petition has reached the desks of David Axelrod and Jim Messina. Oh, and several of the folks named in the petition have gone to DC to apply for the job.

### **Michael Pollan Speaks Out About the Petition**

I'm sure Michael Pollan needs no introduction, but he's the bestselling author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *The Botany of Desire*, and *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. As noted before, Pollan's involvement with the petition started through Paul Willis, who he had known for many years.

We chatted briefly and informally about the role the petition is playing in Obama's selection process for top USDA offices. He feels it is significant that this petition originated in Iowa, combating the notion that the sustainable food movement is "just a bunch of foodies on the coasts."

He made a point that I hadn't considered before, saying that "as soon as you criticize a mode of agriculture, agribusiness attacks you as 'anti-farmer.'" Advocates of harmful agricultural practices use cries of "anti-farmer!" to marginalize sustainable food and agriculture, thus preying upon ignorance among the 98% of Americans who aren't farmers. In this case, calling Paul or Dave anti-farmer for their advocacy of sustainable techniques just wouldn't be credible.

About the potential for our petition's success, Pollan said, "I don't know if we'll see a reform Secretary of Agriculture but it appears they are having second thoughts about nominating a business as usual character." He added, "When was the last time the appointment of the ag secretary has been news? I think it's caught them by surprise."

Most reassuringly, he reminded me that our movement is in its infancy ("It's sort of where the environmental movement was around Earth Day in 1970"). Part of our problem is that we don't have a big cadre of experienced policy makers within our movement yet. On the flipside, as a new movement, the sustainable food movement has not been successfully infiltrated or marginalized by big business yet.

About the movement to draft Pollan himself as secretary of agriculture, he said "I have no interest in that



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job but maybe the campaign will do some good... the two petitions are making the same point, basically, one a little more whimsically than the other.”

Last, I had to ask, was he surprised to learn that Obama read him? “I was, actually,” he said. But then, as he reminded me, it’s been eight years since we’ve had a president who reads *anything*. Hmm, good point.

**UPDATE:** A thank-you from David in the [comments](#):

Thank you and everybody at D Kos! Just wanted to thank you for putting this out there. These issues are of vital importance to the future of our food supply, our environment, economic and social justice, sustainable rural development, independent family farms, animal welfare and the health of our children.

We at Food Democracy Now! very much appreciate all the support we have received in the last few days and welcome the opportunity to put these issues forward on the national stage.

We are also thankful for the support of the Daily Kos community and recognize you as leaders who have been at the vanguard of not only demanding, but also acquiring progressive change for our nation.

Thank you all for who signed this petition in support of Sustainable Change.

So far 50,000 Americans for a Sustainable USDA!