

# Al Gore is wrong about ag

Greg Henderson, Editor, Associate Publisher | Updated: October 17, 2011

Al Gore is wrong. Maybe not about everything, but he's wrong about industrial agriculture.

"Industrial agriculture is part of the problem," Gore said in an interview with FearLess Revolution founder Alex Bogusky. "The shift toward a more meat-intensive diet," the clearing of forest areas in many parts of the world in order to raise more cattle and the reliance on synthetic nitrogen for fertilizer are also problems, he said.

Since leaving office more than a decade ago, the former U.S. vice president has channeled his efforts toward combating global warming. A 2006 documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, about Gore's campaign to educate citizens about global warming, won two Academy Awards — one for Best Documentary Feature.

The following year, Gore received the Nobel Peace Prize for "informing the world of the dangers posed by climate change."

That means Gore has the type of high-profile voice that makes good copy. When he speaks about climate change people tend to listen, and his quotes are likely to make headlines across the nation.

But when such comments are either wrong, or at least debatable, Gore loses credibility with the people he is trying to reach.

Much of Gore's criticism of modern agriculture revolves around synthetic nitrogen. He said, "The reliance on synthetic nitrogen fertilizer is a Faustian bargain, kind of like steroids."

Rather than utilizing synthetic fertilizer, Gore advocates organic farming and relying on "more productive, safer methods that put carbon back in the soil" to produce "safer and better food."

Specifically, this is where Gore wanders down a path toward an inconvenient truth for the environmental movement — organic farming can't feed the world, and synthetic fertilizer increases food production and lowers greenhouse-gas emissions.

Organic farming has become a trendy phenomenon across America, and the market for food produced by organic farmers is growing rapidly. The criticism here is not against organic farmers or the food they produce, but rather with the idea that such methods of production can ever advance beyond the novelty phase. That's because organic food production requires more intensive labor, increasing the cost of production and requiring a premium at retail.

A recent USDA report estimates that 50 million Americans are food insecure, meaning they don't have enough to eat, mainly because they can't afford it. Increasing organic production at higher costs will certainly not help feed those 50 million Americans, nor help us feed others who are hungry around the world.

Gore's biggest gaffe, however, was his criticism of synthetic fertilizer.

It's likely Vaclav Smil would be one of the first to argue with Gore. Smil is one of today's most influential energy and environmental scientists, a Czech-born professor of Environment and Environmental Geography at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

Smil explains that if synthetic nitrogen didn't exist we'd have to use animal manure to fertilize the crops we need to survive. And he has calculated that to produce that much animal manure the United States alone would need an additional 1 billion head of livestock to produce the manure and 2 billion acres of forage crops to feed the livestock.

Smil has authored a book, *Enriching the Earth: Fritz Haber, Carl Bosch, and the Transformation of World Food Production*, in which he argues the industrial synthesis of ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen has been of greater fundamental importance to the modern world than the invention of the airplane, nuclear energy, space flight or television. He further argues that the expansion of the world's population from 1.6 billion people in 1900 to today's 6 billion would not have been possible without the synthesis of ammonia.

Unfortunately, our world already has an abundance of hungry people. To feed a growing population in the future agriculture will need to utilize available technology, continue to improve that technology and strive for increased production and greater food affordability.