

“It’s the Food System, Stupid”

Transformation requires innovative thinking, not biased AI queries

David I Gustafson, Ph.D., St. Louis, MO
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Way back in 1992, James Carville helped steer Bill Clinton’s successful presidential campaign by coining a simple statement: “[It’s the economy, stupid.](#)” The phrase has since been borrowed by many others, replacing “economy” with whatever is top of mind for a new generation of voters. I recalled Carville’s pithy statement as I considered the [White House’s MAHA report on children’s health](#), reissued late last week after [numerous AI-sourced errors](#) were found in the May 22 release.

It’s now clear that construction of the report was mostly accomplished by asking for an AI-based tool to quickly pull together text, graphics, and citations using a small number of biased prompts, one of which must have been a query attempting to link pesticides with children’s health. Just as feared by many in the agricultural community, the report indeed places an entirely disproportionate focus on crop protection chemicals (aka, pesticides) as somehow being a primary culprit in the health challenges confronting our children.

With respect, I must forcefully disagree. And it’s not only because I spent much of the first 30 years of my scientific career studying the environmental behavior of pesticides. It’s because I’ve now spent the past 15 years studying the food system, and thereby gaining an increasing appreciation for the radical transformation now urgently required.

A few weeks ago, I was invited by a colleague from Oxford, [John Ingram](#), to the 10-year anniversary celebration of an innovative interdisciplinary food systems initiative in London, [IFSTAL](#) (Interdisciplinary Food Systems Teaching & Learning). IFSTAL is designed to offer graduate students in-depth knowledge of the food system components and dynamics, helping them place their disciplinary studies in a broader context and equipping them to help deliver food system change. Over the past 10 years, IFSTAL has engaged over 4000 Masters and Ph.D. students from across its seven partner institutions in the London area.

As part of attending the celebration, I participated in a multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary workshop where a number of us collectively identified new ways that IFSTAL could even better equip students to interact with food system players (primarily within the private sector) to successfully drive transformation. As one example, we imagined a future food system analogy to the US Land Grant University Extension Agent role, which has been of such historical significance in helping US farmers become the most productive on earth.

A key reason that US farmers have been so productive and are able to provide safe, affordable food for the entire world has been through the carefully regulated use of crop protection tools, including herbicides. Two of these products, atrazine and glyphosate, were obviously flagged by whoever on the MAHA team was posing the AI queries. This resulted in the inclusion of highly biased claims and incomplete reviews of the immense body of knowledge on these two products: most of it generated through years of carefully-regulated safety studies and assessments that have been performed over the decades that each of these products have been marketed worldwide.

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As indicated in the figure below, the MAHA report has a myopic focus on herbicides, and completely ignores the overall complexity of the food system. The left-side portion of this figure is taken from a multi-author report that arose from a workshop that I helped organize in 2018, in close collaboration with the Aspen Global Change Institute and the Keystone Policy Center. We gathered a group of around thirty scientists having the broad array of interdisciplinary training that any serious study of the food system requires.

Food System Complexity



Myopic MAHA Focus on Herbicides



Drawn by Livvy Gustafson

[Stratton et al 2021 Environ. Res. Lett. 16 055010](#)

The published report highlights opportunities to mitigate tradeoffs as fruit and vegetable (F&V) production systems are expanded globally to meet the higher F&V dietary intakes that improved children’s health requires. It won’t be easy!

During my recent trip to London, I also met the lead author of a [major new report from the UK Preparedness Commission](#): “Just in Case – narrowing the UK civil food resilience gap.” Unlike the MAHA report, this thorough report was carefully compiled by **named authors** over more than two years through interviews with experts throughout the food system, not only from the UK but also from ten other countries, including the US.

The primary focus of this report was not on children’s health but on national preparedness in case of war or other system-wide shock. However, its 380 pages of text include 882 references and a number of highly relevant observations about the food system that would have made it worthy of citation by the MAHA team. Alas, it was apparently too new (published in February 2025) for the White House’s AI-bots to detect it.

If the MAHA team is truly serious about taking on the emergency that US children’s health represents, I recommend a radically more inclusive approach that is not based on a small number of ghost authors posing biased questions to AI tools, but instead inviting participation from a range of food system experts – not only from the US, but also including friendly allies with much to offer, such as the many talented London-based youth who recently matriculated from IFSTAL.