

Food from Our Changing World: The Globalization of Food and How Americans Feel About It

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<http://sasw.chass.ncsu.edu/global-food>

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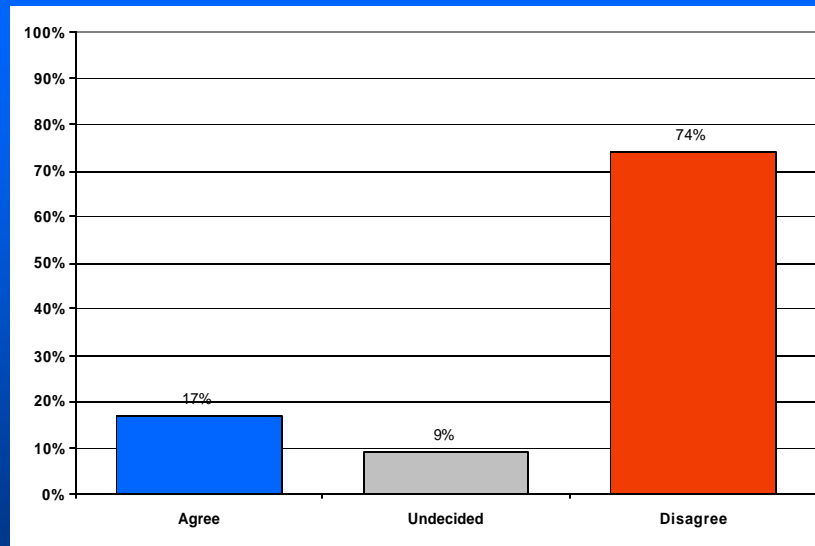
Acknowledgements

Support for the survey was provided by the land-grant universities of the contributing authors plus a grant from the Farm Foundation. To all, we are grateful. For a corresponding summary of this study, see the forthcoming issue of Southern Perspectives by the Southern Rural Development Center, <http://srdc.msstate.edu/cred/>.

If the U.S. could buy all its food from other countries cheaper than it can be produced and sold here, should we?

This national survey finds that three of four (74 percent) of the U.S. public think not. And they may wonder, why should we? Yet 17 percent (about one of six) agree that we should get our food elsewhere when cheaper, while 9 percent (nearly one of ten) were undecided.

Figure 1. If the U.S. could buy all its food from other countries cheaper than it can be produced and sold here, we should.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 3p, N = 819.

How does globalization affect us as Americans? How does globalization affect the food we eat, the communities where we live, and our quality of life? These are some of the basic issues raised in a 2001-2002 national survey of 819 U.S. adults.

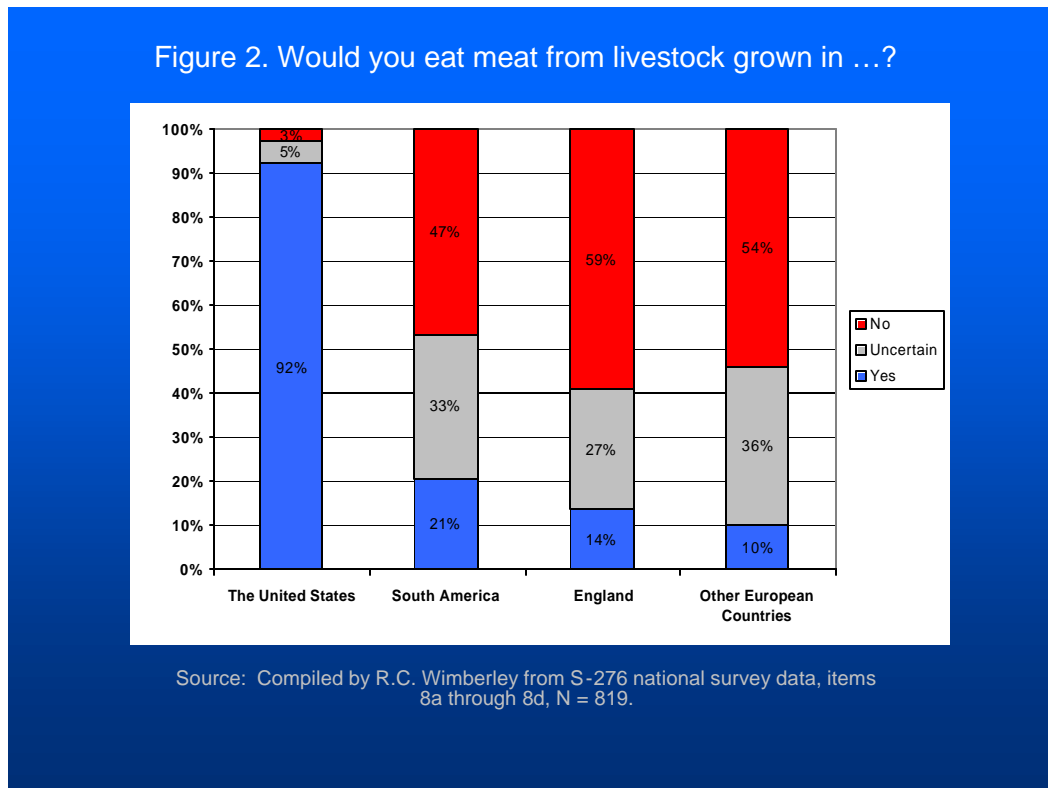
A team of scientists from 11 major U.S. universities actively contributed to this study as the third in a series of national mail surveys on food, farming, and environmental issues since 1986. The appendix to this report indicates the research techniques used to conduct the survey.

This report summarizes findings on American's views about global food sources, who they trust for knowledge of food safety, and the impact of the 9/11 attack on feelings about food security. We also look at opinions Americans hold about genetically modified and biotech foods and the need to label such foods along with perceptions of the U.S. and global environment in which our foods are produced. Further analyses are underway by the sociologists and economists on the research team.

Do We Care Where Our Food Comes from?

Do we care from where our food comes? Is food from other countries thought to be as safe or safer than that grown in the United States? For example, threats to the safety of meat grown in England and various other countries have been known for several years since their mad-cow and hoof-and-mouth disease outbreaks. So, we asked our sample members whether they would eat meat from livestock grown in such countries.

Figure 2 shows that indeed we do care about the sources of our food so far as meat is concerned. We find that Americans do trust U.S.-grown meat. However, they do not trust meat from the other countries very much. Confidence in U.S.-grown meat is high; 92 percent say they would eat meat produced in the United States. But only 21 percent say yes to eating South American meat while just 14 percent would eat meat from England and merely 10 percent would eat meat from other European countries.

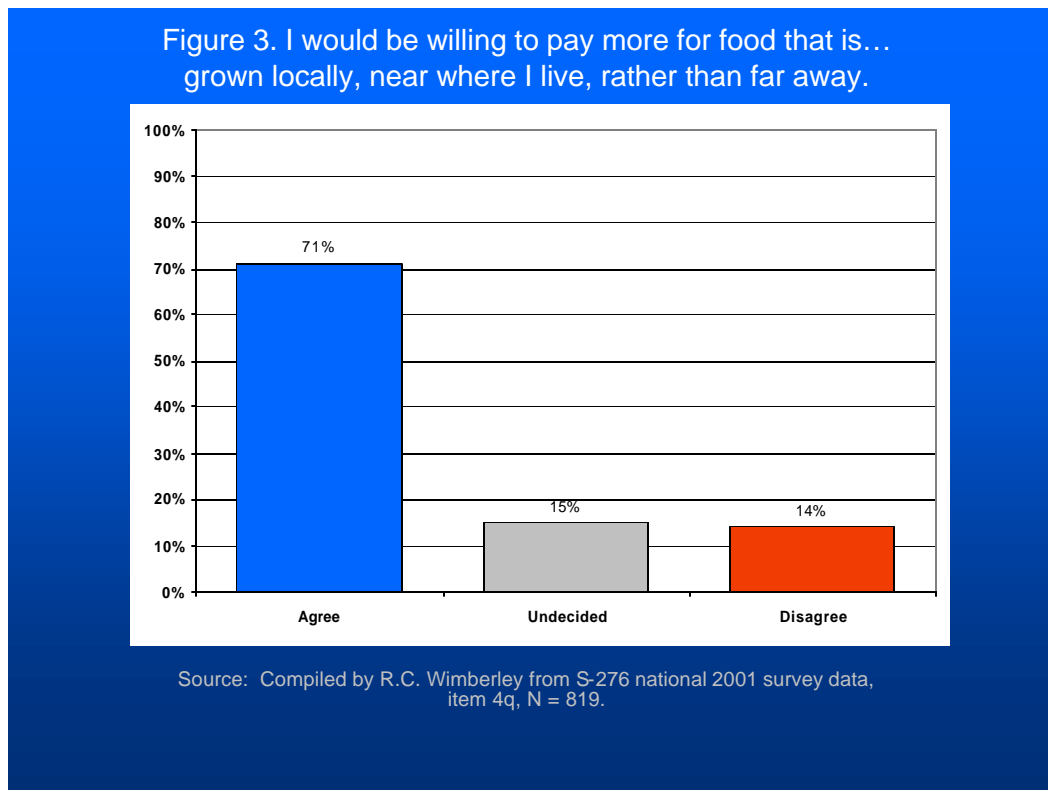


While many respondents are undecided about the safety of meat from outside the United States, only 5 percent are uncertain about U.S.-produced meats and only 3 percent—about the same percentage in the sample as there are vegetarians—report they would not eat meat from U.S. livestock. Nearly half say no to meat produced in South America while the majorities say they would reject meat from England or other European countries.

However, this is not to say that Americans are unconcerned about the safety of U.S. farming practices. A 57 percent majority say they worry about health problems due to farming methods in the United States. In comparison, 80 percent worry about health problems due to farming methods in other countries.

Given these findings, it should not be surprising that 74 percent and 76 percent of the respondents, respectively, rate “grown in the U.S.” and “processed in the U.S.” to be of some or great importance for the food they buy.

The preference for U.S. produced and processed foods holds even when the pocketbook test is posed to the sample members. Fully two-thirds (68 percent) say they would pay more for food grown in the U.S. rather than abroad. Only 13 percent would not. Not only do Americans say they would pay more for food produced and processed in their own country, they prefer food grown locally, near where they live, rather than far away. Over 70 percent express willingness to spend more for locally produced food, while 14 percent say they would not.



In fact, four of five respondents feel that food grown in the U.S. is fresher and safer (80 and 79 percent respectively) than imported food. Only about 1 or 2 percent favor the freshness and safety of imported foods; it makes no difference to the rest. Essentially one-half of the respondents (49 percent) say U.S. produced food is more nutritious and tastes better than imported food. Again, only 4 percent think imported food is superior in nutrition and taste while the remainder report no difference between domestic and imported foods on these factors. And, 51 percent perceive that food grown in the U.S. actually costs less as compared to 16 percent claiming imported food is cheaper.

Yes, Americans do care about the global origins of their food.

Who Do We Trust about Our Food?

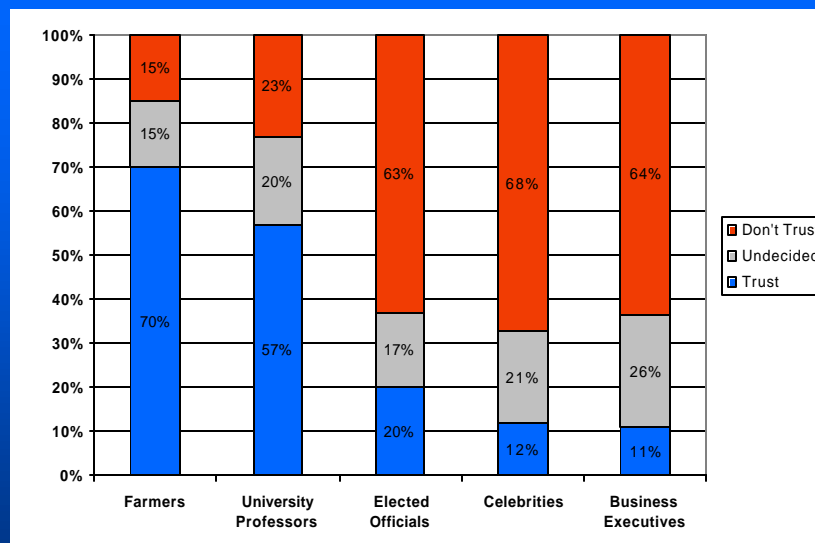
Public confidence is an important factor for a nation's food system whether the food is produced domestically or globally. (8a-m) Therefore, the sample was also asked,

“Who do you trust for knowledge about the safety of the foods you eat?” Five of the knowledge sources listed were professional roles, four were agencies, and one was foreign governments. A source was considered to be trusted if a respondent was trusted it “some” or “a lot.” If not trusted “some” or “a lot,” the source was judged as not trusted. Respondents could also mark whether they were undecided about their trust in food safety information from each source.

Among the professions, farmers fare best. They are trusted by 70 percent of the respondents. University professors rank second with 57 percent trusting them. For the others, there was more mistrust than trust about food safety. Elected officials receive 20 percent trust, celebrities get 12 percent, and business executives gain only 11 percent trust. Indeed, elected officials, celebrities, and business execs are mistrusted by about two-thirds of the respondents.

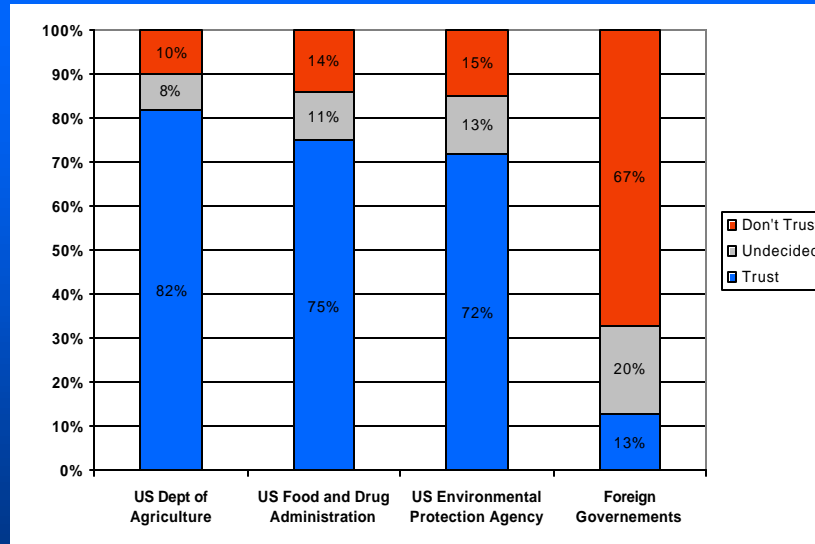
The three food-related agencies of the U.S. government—the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency—claim the trustworthiness of at least three or four respondents. USDA leads with 82 percent trust and 10 percent distrust. FDA receives 75 percent trust and is followed closely by 72 percent trusting EPA.

Figure 4. Who do you trust for knowledge about the safety of the foods you eat? (Professional Roles)



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national survey data, items 8e through 8i, N = 819.

Figure 5. Who do you trust for knowledge about the safety of the foods you eat? (Agencies & Governments)



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national survey data, items 8j through 8m, N = 819.

Foreign governments, however, get little respect in regard to their information about food safety. Only 13 percent trust them; two-thirds do not. This is in line with the mistrust of meat grown in countries outside the United States.

9/11 and Food Security

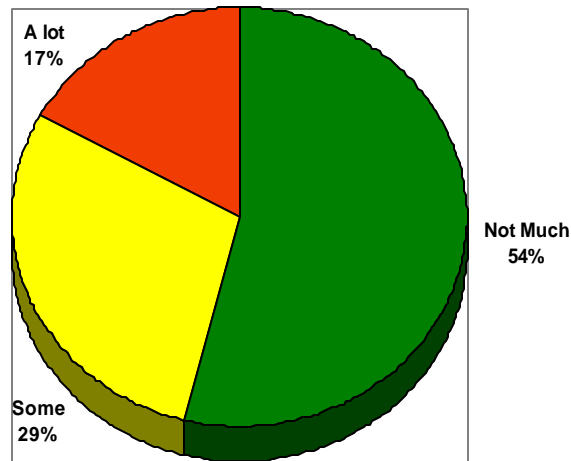
When the national survey was launched in July of 2001, food safety was an interest of the study, but it became a much larger interest after the attack on September 11. Because the attack came before the third and last mailing was made to sample members who had not responded, this provided a regrettable opportunity to see how the remaining sample members felt about food security in context of post 9/11 and the food and globalization issues of the survey.

Three new items were printed on last page of the questionnaire asking the remaining sample how they thought about the security of the U.S. food supply before September 11, after September 11, and whether our food supply was a major concern among the possible ways terrorists might attack people in the United States. A total of 196 sample members answered these questions. While we cannot assume that those who responded late in the survey data collection are as representative of the country as the total sample, their responses are revealing.

Whereas 46 percent say they had thought some (28 percent) or a lot (17 percent) about the security of our food supply prior to the 9/11 attack, 91 percent were somewhat (36 percent) or very concerned (55 percent) after the attack.

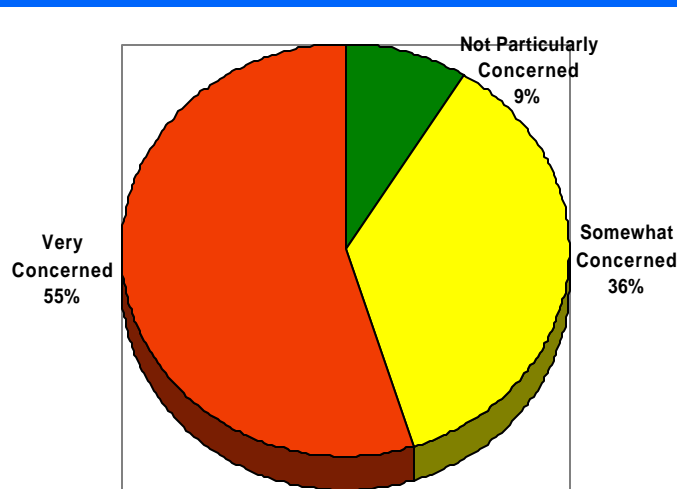
In addition, 85 percent agree that of the possible ways terrorists might attack people in the U.S., our food supply is a major concern. Merely 7 percent disagree, and 8 percent are uncertain.

Figure 6. Before the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, had you thought about food security...



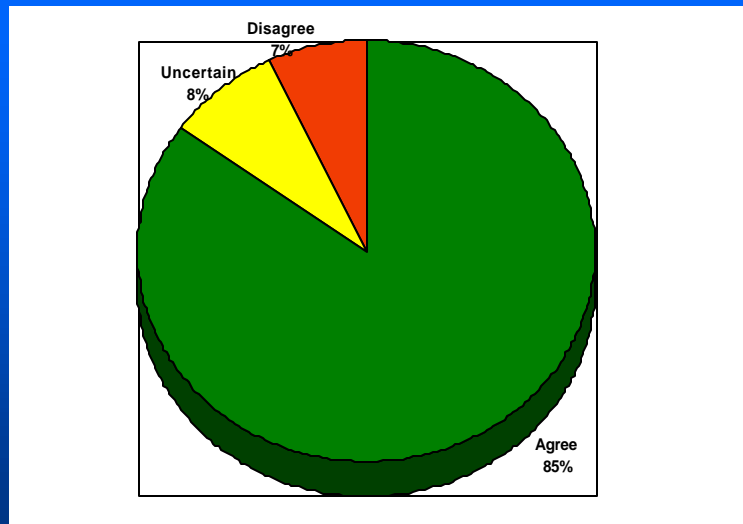
Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 11a, n = 196.

Figure 7. Now, after the terrorist attack on September 11, how concerned are you with our food supply?



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 11b, n = 196.

Figure 8. Of the possible ways that terrorists might attack people in the United States, our food supply is a major concern.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 11c, n = 196.

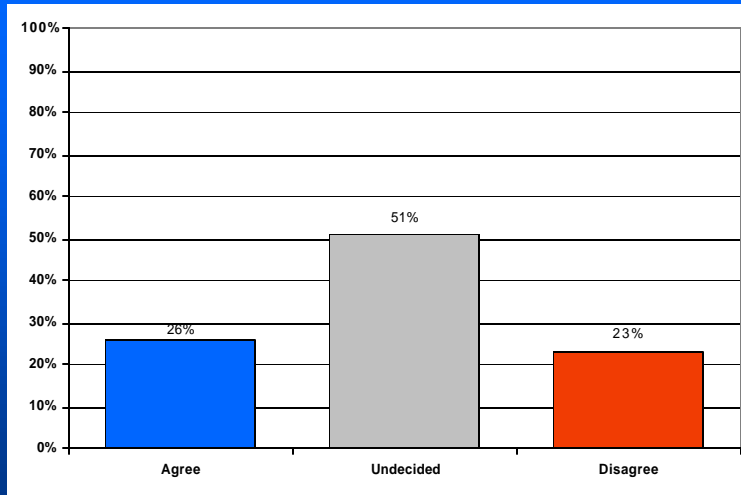
Genetic Modification, Biotechnology, and Food Labeling

The use of biotechnology and genetic modification to produce foods from plants and animals draws much attention from the public and the media in the United States as well as in European and other countries. To see how Americans perceive these production techniques as safe or threatening, we asked several questions.

Biotech. When presented with the statement, “I am willing to eat foods that have been grown with new biotechnology techniques,” half of the respondents split between agreeing (26 percent) and disagreeing (23 percent). The other half (51 percent) are undecided.

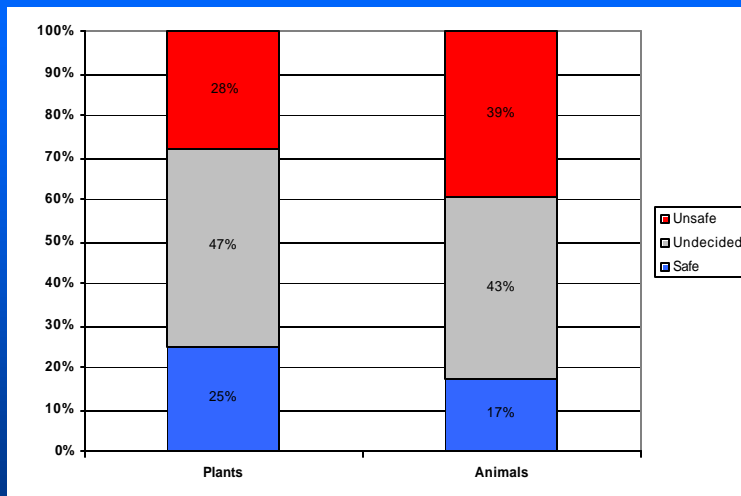
Genetic Modification (GM). Opinions are likewise split on the safety of foods from plants or animals that have been genetically modified to add desirable food traits. In regard to plants, 28 percent say that genetic modification makes them unsafe while 25 percent believe they are safe and 47 percent are undecided. For genetically modified foods from animals, there is even more skepticism and uncertainty. In the case for animals, 39 percent think such food products are unsafe as compared to 17 percent saying they are safe and 43 percent being undecided.

Figure 9. I am willing to eat foods that have been grown with new biotechnology techniques.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 6n, N = 819.

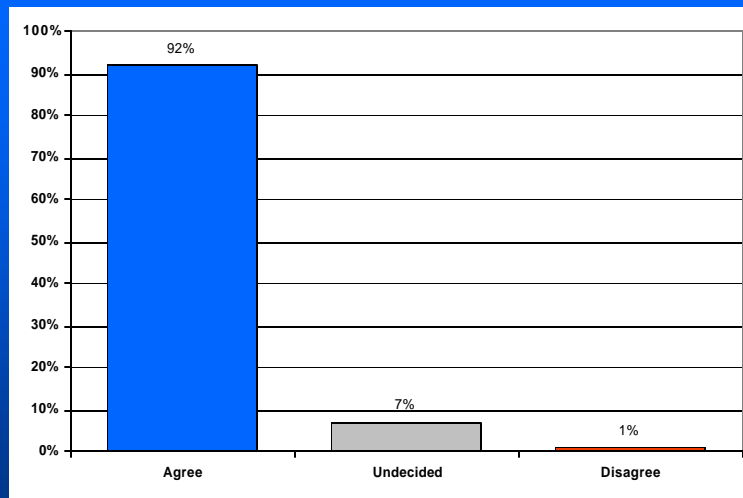
Figure 10. Safety of foods from plants and animals that are genetically modified to add desirable food traits.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national survey data, items 4i and 4j, N = 819.

Food Labeling. Given the mistrust and uncertainty about whether foods from biotech and GM plants or animals are safe to eat, it is not surprising that respondents want genetically modified foods to be labeled. In fact, nearly everyone (92 percent) wants labels on genetically modified foods. Only 1 percent does not, and there is only 7 percent indecision on GM labeling.

Figure 11. Genetically modified foods should be labeled as such.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 5e, N = 819.

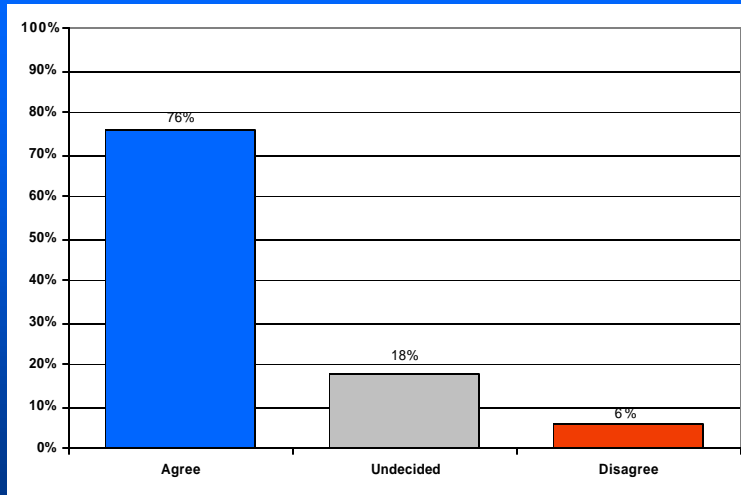
Furthermore, people want labels to assure them of the contents and nutrition of any food they buy. An overwhelming 88 percent believe that having the contents on the label of the food they buy is of some (30 percent) or great (58 percent) importance. The picture is similar for the importance of the nutritional level of foods. For this factor, 87 percent say that labels regarding nutrition levels are of some (35 percent) or great (52 percent) importance.

Does the Food Environment Matter?

Since the 1950s and even before, environmental concerns have continued to be high in public attention. Environmental matters include the quality of our air, the water we consume or use for plants and animals, and the soil which yields our foods. Therefore, many items in the national survey dealt with environmental issues surrounding food production. Here, we point out the results of several.

At the most general, global level of food production, there is a clear concern about global warming. Three-fourths (76 percent) agree that, "The U.S. should do what it takes to reduce global warming." Few (6 percent) disagree with that. Another 18 percent remain undecided.

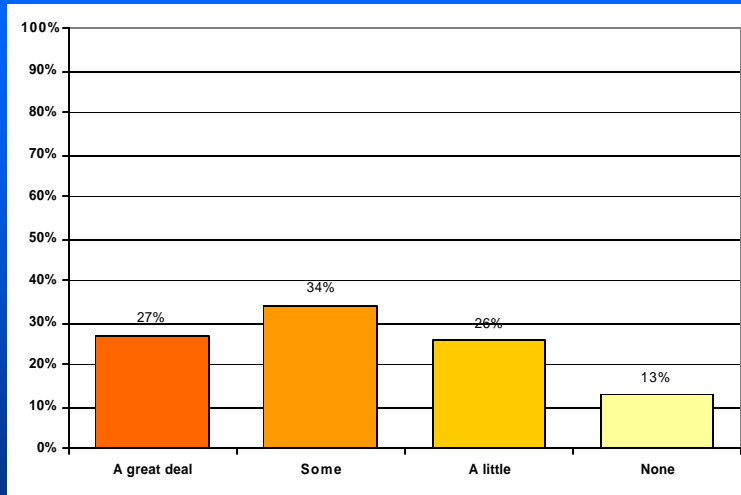
Figure 12. The U.S. should do what it takes to reduce global warming.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 7n, N = 819.

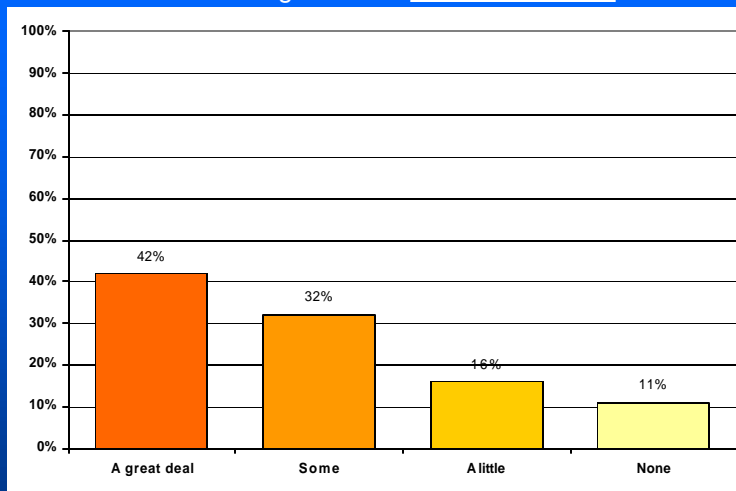
Following a pattern of greater concern about food-related threats from other countries than from their own, respondents report worrying more about environmental problems due to farming methods in other countries. A three-fourths majority (74 percent) claim to worry some or a great deal about farming's impact on the environments of other countries. Somewhat fewer, but still a 61 percent majority, worry some or a great deal about the environmental problems that are caused by U.S. farming methods. In each case, the other respondents worry little of none about farming and the environment.

Figure 13. How much do you worry about environmental problems due to farming methods in the U.S.?



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 5p, N = 819.

Figure 14. How much do you worry about environmental problems due to farming methods in other countries?



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 5q, N = 819.

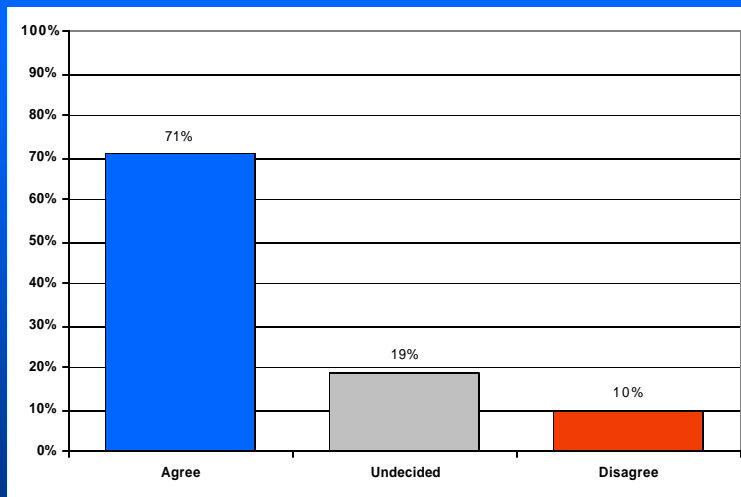
On other items, there is some indecision regarding the extent to which farmers are actually doing much harm to the environment. While 45 percent were undecided whether, “Present farming methods are polluting our water supplies,” 34 percent agree and 21 percent disagree. In a parallel fashion, 43 percent are undecided whether,

“American farmers use more chemicals than are necessary to produce food,” although another 43 percent agree that farmers do use more chemicals than necessary.

Regardless of how respondents feel farmers actually do or do not take proper care of the environment, most respondents believe that farmers should be good stewards of the environment in which food is produced. Ninety-four percent agreed that, “Land owners have responsibilities to protect soil resources for future generations,” and a 56 percent majority believe that, “Farmers who fail to adopt needed soil conservation practices should be financially penalized.”

There is substantial support for the statement that, “I would be willing to pay more for food if it meant that it could be produced in ways that protect the environment.” Seventy-one percent agree with this position. Another 60 percent agree that, “I would be willing to pay more for food produced without using chemicals.” Further, 81 percent agree that, “I would be willing to pay more for food grown on farms using good environmental practices.” While some others are undecided about taking such positions, few tend to disagree with them.

Figure 15. I would be willing to pay more for food if it meant that it could be produced in ways that protect the environment.

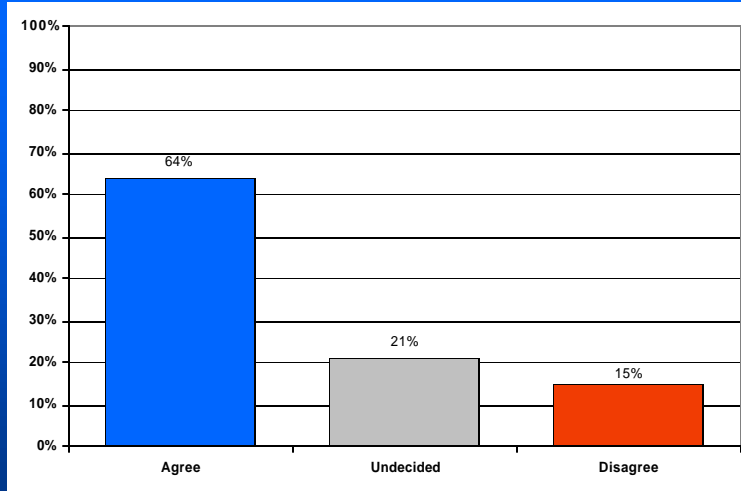


Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 6e, N = 819.

A clean agricultural environment and safe foods often involve more than soil and water pollution. Another important threat is the spread of diseases in farm animals and the costs of prevention. Hoof-and-mouth disease and mad-cow disease represent such threats, and farmers risk the loss of herds when these outbreaks occur. Our survey respondents are generally sympathetic about these threats and are willing for the government to cover the losses to farmers. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) say that, “Our government should pay U.S. farmers for farm animals that must be destroyed to prevent

the spread of diseases.” Only 15 percent disagree with such government assistance to prevent animal diseases.

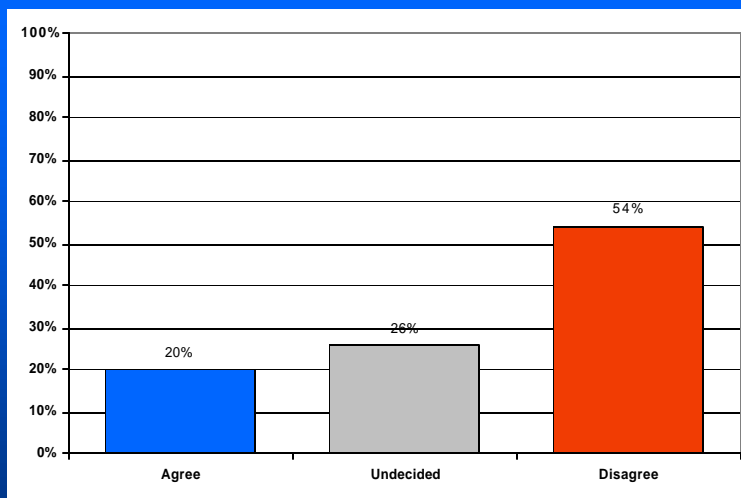
Figure 16. Our government should pay U.S. farmers for farm animals that must be destroyed to prevent the spread of diseases.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 7m, N = 819.

Still, only one in five feel that farming is a major source of pollution in our nation today while two-thirds think that most farmers take good care of the soil, and half agree that most farmers safely use pesticides and other chemicals on food crops.

Figure 17. Farming is a major source of pollution in our nation today.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 6b, N = 819.

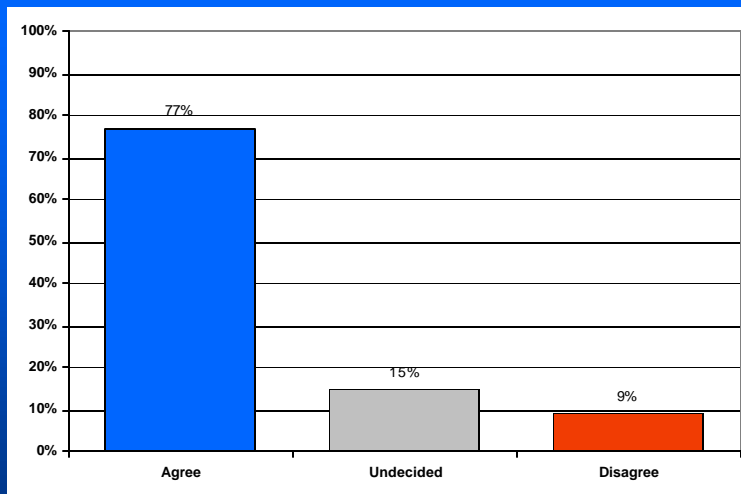
Therefore, it appears that Americans value the importance of a good farming environment and would spend more to protect it, but are either uncertain or do not perceive that farmers are doing major environmental damage.

What Kind of Farms Do Americans Want to Produce Their Food?

What type of agriculture do Americans prefer to produce their food? Judging from the evidence we have observed here, they are basically favorable toward farmers but clearly want their food to be produced under safe environmental conditions. However, their preference for the types of farms goes even further than that. Small and family owner-operated farms are strongly favored over corporate farms as the sources of our food.

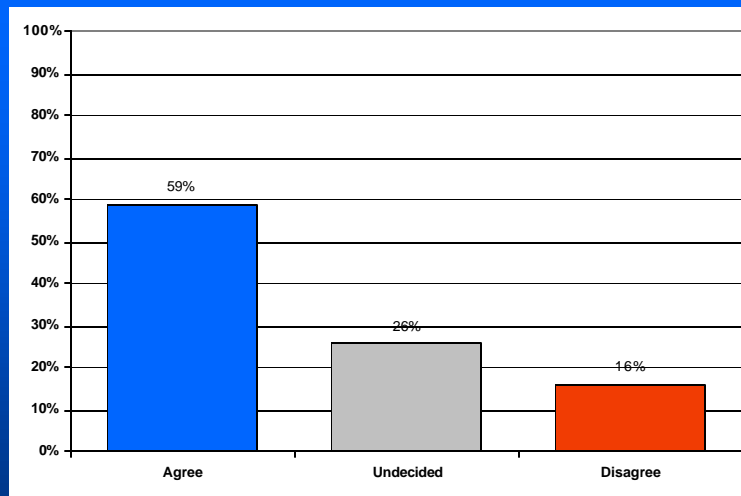
Seventy-six percent believe that government policies should focus on helping small farms, and 77 percent believe that such policies should focus on helping family, owner-operated farms. In contrast, only one-fourth (25 percent) say that corporate, non-family farms that should get government help. Nearly six of ten (59 percent) feel that family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices. Furthermore, half (53 percent) say they are willing to pay more for food that is “grown on small farms rather than large farms.”

Figure 18. Government policies should focus on helping family, owner-operated farms.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 31, N = 819.

Figure 19. Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices.



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, item 3h, N = 819.

Conclusions

Judging from the responses, a solid majority of Americans do not want to relinquish food production to the other countries of our global world even if those countries could provide food more cheaply. But, perhaps surprisingly, the other fourth either would or are uncertain about it.

Still, the overall results of the national survey leave no doubt that Americans are concerned about the global sources of their food. Unlike the USDA, EPA, and FDA, foreign governments are not trusted sources of information about food safety

And, the respondents who were contacted after the 9/11 attack were found to be twice as likely—from 46 percent to 91 percent—to be somewhat or very concerned about the security of their food supply after 9/11. Furthermore, the risk of an attack on the U.S. food supply was a major concern to them in context of food and globalization.

We find a lot of indecision about eating foods grown using by biotechnological techniques. Similarly, nearly about half of the respondents are undecided about the safety of foods from genetically modified plants and animals. In each case, those who do take a stand on biotech and genetic modification are about evenly divided pro and con with about a two-to-one majority feeling such animal products are unsafe. The unusually high amount of indecision on these issues indicates the future public acceptability of biotech and GM foods is still in question. Consumer and political opinions could swing either way with further ramifications for these kinds of foods and the technologies behind them.

There is little doubt, however, that Americans want their food produced under safe environmental conditions whether domestically or globally. In fact, they express willingness to pay more for this assurance. But farmers tend to get the benefit of public opinion and are generally not blamed for major damage to the environment. The American agrarian ethic remains firmly in place and favors small and family-type farms for an environmentally safe and local food supply even if at greater cost.

These are but a few of the findings of the 2001-2002 national survey. Much remains to be analyzed by the scientists of the research team. Here, we have merely highlighted some of the initial findings on what Americans think about the globalization of food, food security, trusted sources of food information, genetic modification and food labeling, and the U.S. and global environments in which food is produced.

Methodological Appendix: How the Study Was Done

This study is a component of the S276 multistate, land-grant-university project on “Rural Restructuring: The Consequences of Globalized Agricultural and Natural Resource Systems.” The authors of this article are the scientists of the research team who contributed to the survey. The study was conducted through North Carolina State University.

The survey sample was randomly selected from adults living across the United States. Data were collected by mail questionnaires. Although the response rate was about one of five, the 819 usable survey responses were weighted by population proportions from the 2000 census data on age, race, sex, income, education, and region of the country in order to help make the survey findings more representative of the nation as a whole.

Were the 819 respondents a truly random sample of U.S. adults, the sampling error for the findings would be a maximum of plus or minus 3.4 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent. Nonrandom error, of course, may exceed these limits for at least some of the results.

The weighted results closely coincide with census parameters for other variables and with the results from other surveys from which comparable items are available. For example, the 2000 census shows that 56 percent of the population of ages 18 and older are currently married, whereas the weighted survey data estimates that 55 percent are married. This difference of only 1 percent represents a very close fit between the sample and the population on this variable.