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Vincent Smith, right, director of agricultural policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, moderates a discussion on “Feeding the World in the 21st

Century” on Thursday hosted by AEI. Panelists, from left: Christopher Barrett, Cornell University; Ruth Vargas Hill, International Food Policy Research Institute; Philip Pardey, University of Minnesota; and Anna Nelson, Food Security Leadership Council. (Jerry Hagstrom/The Hagstrom Report)

Cornell prof: Shift ag research to fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy

By JERRY HAGSTROM

Agricultural research needs to shift to nutrient-dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy, a prominent Cornell University professor said last week at an American Enterprise Institute panel discussion titled “Feeding the World in the 21st Century.”

The current global agricultural surpluses are “of soy and corn and rice,” said Christopher Barrett, Cornell professor of applied economics and management. “It’s not of raspberries, it’s not of broccoli, it’s not of the healthier foods including animal source foods right now.”

Research on “nutrient-rich foods, productivity growth, and focus on making the markets work much better in the low-income world, above all in Africa, are ever more important, precisely” due to changes in global food availability and demand, Barrett said.

Barrett was responding to a question from *The Hagstrom Report* about whether increases in agricultural productivity are needed when there is a global surplus of commodities, GLP-1 weight-loss drugs are coming off patent and may affect food demand, and China is seen as a declining market due to its aging population and economic troubles.

Agricultural research has traditionally focused on productivity of row crops. The Green Revolution, which introduced high yielding wheat and rice, is credited with transforming agriculture, but the row crops are valued more for their calories than their nutrient density.



Christopher Barrett, professor of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University

Barrett continued, “With GLP-1 drugs coming off patent, we can expect some significant reduction in food purchasing behavior in high-income and upper-middle-income countries. Those markets are going to shrink, not grow. With China aging and China’s growth slowing, China’s no longer the robust market, quite apart from trade policy issues. The markets are increasingly in SubSaharan Africa and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean.”

In those regions, another panelist, Ruth Vargas Hill, the director of markets, trade and institutions at the International Food Policy Research Institute, said value chain issues loom very large.

Rapid urbanization in the global South also shows the importance of research and development on “transportability, the shelf life of products,” Barrett said. “So, think about the R&D in the United States over the last 50 years in agriculture. Parts of it have been for improved yields. A lot of it has been for reduced agrochemicals inputs, things like varieties that could reduce the need for pesticide application.

“But much of it has been around providing products that are high-return, that can get through the distribution channel reliably, reducing loss and waste, and providing consumers at the end of the retail chain or in restaurants with products that are really appealing to them,” Barrett said.

He continued, “Modern varieties of fruits and vegetables are bred less for yield now than they are for the value chain and the various attributes that consumers want and will pay for when they finally go to a restaurant or a grocery store, and thus what all of the middlemen are willing to pay the farmer for.”

Reacting to increases in fertilizer prices due to the war in the Middle East, Vargas Hill said “I’m actually really happy that we’re going into this year with this sort of base of stocks, because the current increases in fertilizer prices as a result of the Iran crisis is something that we are watching very carefully, and we are concerned that this is going to lead to lower rates of fertilizer application, particularly in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, which have not yet procured their fertilizer for the upcoming harvest and where fertilizer is an important part of the production function.”

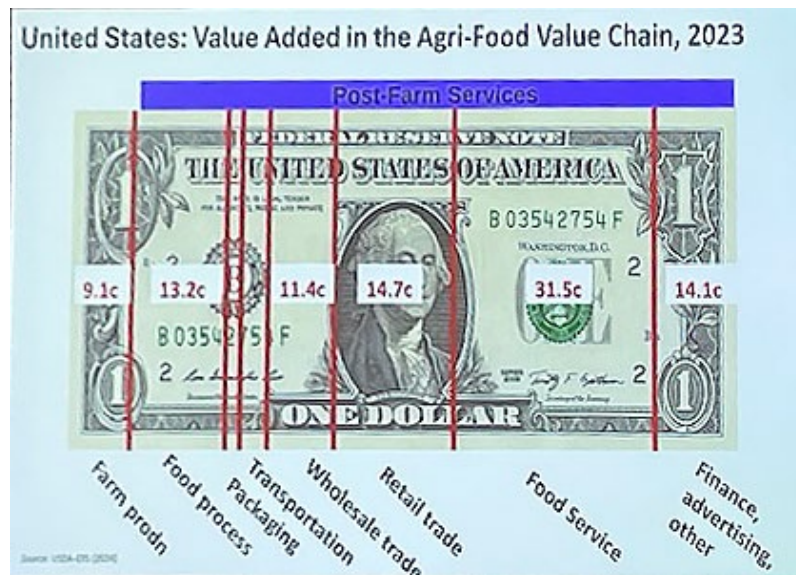
“So, that’s one risk,” Vargas Hill said. “A second risk is the fact that we are now almost certainly going to be in an El Niño year, which will jeopardize potentially — we have to again watch to see how this unfolds — but poses a risk to harvests in places like Southern Africa, Australia.

“So, I think the story here is sort of not a trend in increasing production being available, but a story of volatility.”

Moving on to agricultural productivity, Vargas Hill said that global food security improved at “unprecedented rates” between 1990 and 2019 but then plateaued and now has gone down.

“What’s really worrying,” she said, “is that we really have not seen the numbers of people living on less than \$3 a day going down in Sub-Saharan Africa, and we’re actually seeing it increase. So, we’re not seeing progress that is fast enough to keep up with the population growth that we’re seeing in that region that we know is going to keep coming.”

Barrett also noted that “more than 70% of food is consumed in the country in which the feedstock of that food was grown,” and all the panelists agreed that research is needed on how to increase food production in Sub-Saharan Africa where most of the world’s population growth is occurring.



Vargas Hill also noted that research shows welfare gains from reducing trade barriers among countries in Africa are larger than the gains from connecting Africa more to the world.

Philip Pardey, a professor of applied economics at the University of Minnesota, said that the middle income countries — China, India and Brazil — now account for half of the world’s food and ag public and private research and development investments.

“China, India, and Brazil alone in combined terms blew past the U.S. a decade and a half ago in terms of their aggregate spending, and just those three countries alone are spending the equivalent now of what all of the other high-income countries combined are spending,” Pardey said. “So, that’s a huge change in the geography of that innovation landscape.”

Anna Nelson, executive director of the Food Security Leadership Council started by Cary Fowler, U.S. special envoy for global food security in the Biden administration, said, “We should decide our North Star is sustainable productivity growth.”

“We should look at key agricultural zones where there’s the highest potential for productivity over the long term and the greatest impact on regional stability and poverty and focus in on those,” said Nelson, a former U.S. Agency for International Development official.

“And then thinking about bringing innovations to the table that can lead to that productivity growth.”

The council, Nelson said, is calling for the United States to spend an additional \$100 billion over 10 years on agricultural research and development, which would triple U.S. agricultural R&D investment.

Panelists also agreed that the issue of food and agricultural research should be debated outside the farm community.

“This needs to be a national conversation and we have to think of a national way to tackle it,” Nelson said.

“The way the IRA [Inflation Reduction Act] was a whole-of-government investment in climate, or the CHIPS Act was a whole-of-government investment in semiconductor capacity, we need the same type of thing for agricultural R&D and not treat it as a niche special interest issue.”

- [American Enterprise Institute — Feeding the World in the 21st Century \(video\)](#)
 - [— Event transcript](#)
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