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Food for thought from 'Spud Island'

By Jim Meek

Russian President Vladimir Putin stands accused of blocking Ukrainian agricultural exports. World wheat prices soared 60 per cent between February and June. Activists sound warnings about food insecurity in parts of Asia and Africa. And back on the ranch, we Canadians fret about inflation in the grocery aisles.

Sounds as if food could well be named the 'Newsmaker of 2022'.

Of course, the headlines are getting conflated in the usual perplexing way. Our impulse is to blame Putin for everything, from the devastating drought in Somalia, to the pending famine in Afghanistan, to the cost of bread at a Halifax artisanal bakery (whatever that is).

Fortunately, smart people like Northwestern University economist Nancy Qian can set us right. Qian has pointed out that curtailed Ukrainian wheat exports do not account for food insecurity in Asia or Africa, where not grains but cereals (rice and maize) are food staples. (Ukraine, once known as the breadbasket of Europe, can lay no legitimate claim to being the corn-u-copia of Africa.)

Closer to home, historian Joshua MacFadyen - the Canada Research Chair in Geospatial Humanities at the University of Prince Edward Island – offers us a long-term view of food matters. (About 12,000 years long, in fact, about the length of time humans have been in the planting and harvesting business.)

Yes, food inflation's been tough on Canadians this year. But if you flash back to 1960, food gobbled up about [17 per cent of the family budget](#). By 2019, that number had fallen to under 10 per cent. MacFadyen gently suggests in an interview that our food costs could well rise as the world adapts to climate change.

After all, the world must figure out how products can best be grown, shipped, marketed, prepared, and consumed – even as we “stay warm and fed in a world with much less fossil fuel.” And it all may come at a cost.

MacFadyen, 42, resists simple solutions, and doesn't see his job as telling policy makers how to manage the delicate interplay between food and climate. What he can do is help create the knowledge base upon which the right decisions can be based.

To this end, MacFadyen and his colleagues take a deep dive into data bases, including the Canadian Census of Agricultural Data, to map past land use activities and understand their impacts. He is interested in the complex interplay of energy, agronomy, and climate in the food system. Reduce the amount of energy we use to put food energy on the table, and you go a long way toward addressing climate change. (This [link](#) will take you to a site that more fully describes his work.)

MacFadyen's own story is entwined with the history of farming on PEI. He grew up on a beef farm so remote Google maps still hasn't surveyed the road where he lived. Around 1999, when the beef industry was rocked by market disruptions – including an outbreak of so-called 'mad cow disease' – MacFadyen decided to pick a career in which he got to think about agriculture instead of running a family farm.

In addition, as the 21st Century dawned, the industrialized potato industry was clearly the leading sector in PEI agriculture. Not that the potato business is a slam dunk. Yes, efficiencies result from Big Agra, from mass production and mechanization. It puts a lot of food on a lot of tables. At the same time, a single crop agricultural economy is vulnerable when things go awry. Case in point: Last year, PEI potato exports to the sector's major US market were banned after potato wart was found in two fields.

Here's the other thing about agriculture on the island. Cud chewers (cattle and sheep) dominated farm production in PEI in the first half of the 20th century. Once these grazing animals made way for vast potato fields, farmers stopped putting new organic material (manure) into the soils. (Potato production depends on chemical fertilizers which boost production while making no contribution to soil health over time.)

To be clear, MacFadyen's not pronouncing death to potato farms. Instead, he's asking us to take a long view. In that context, 'Spud Island' might not be the right moniker for MacFadyen's native province. Heck, the Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang dates the terms 'Spud Islander' to 1957 – barely a minute ago to a scholar interested in 12 millennia of agricultural history.

MacFadyen notes the term Spud Island was only popularized by Stompin' Tom Connors, who released his red-mud classic *Bud the Spud* in 1969. As an historian, he also knows that PEI could just as easily be nicknamed 'Cud Island' – after those ruminant animals that once dominated PEI agriculture.

Now, that's something to chew on.

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