

Slow Food Nation talks food policy

Panel members discuss sustainability during annual event

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Kathryn Lukas, owner of Farmhouse Culture in Tuolumne County, Calif., produces spicy sauerkraut and pickles. Lukas participated in Slow Food Nation's event in San Francisco.

SAN FRANCISCO - Urban planning, food policy, health and education came together at during a Slow Food Nation event over Labor Day weekend in San Francisco, which drew thousands to talk farming, fishing and food.

California Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura took part in a panel discussion Friday, Aug. 29, that explored ways that government can support and build a sustainable food system.

Kawamura was joined by Marion Nestle, a New York University professor and author of "What to Eat"; Andrew Kimbrell, founder and director of the Center for Food Safety; and Paula Jones, director of San Francisco Food Systems.

"If you want to look at an area of California that collapsed because it had no plan for sustainability, look no further than Orange County," Kawamura said. "In 1949, it was the No. 1 agricultural area in the country, now it's all under asphalt."

If producers can't stay in business, there is a problem. Policy, not politics need to be in place to help keep farmers on their land, Kawamura told the packed house.

Nestle said government can do better to safeguard food safety. She said suppliers are cutting corners and when they do, whole sectors can be devastated. Nestle cited as the most recent example this summer's E. coli outbreak that cost tomato, jalapeno and cilantro growers millions.

"The government got caught short," Nestle said. "We have to do something about going to other countries for our food."

Kimbrell said federal government policies have hurt small and medium-sized farmers and benefited giant agribusiness companies as well as the chemical fertilizer industry. He received applause when he said the U.S. Department of Agriculture ought to be called the U.S. department of agribusiness.

"They have taken the culture out of agriculture," Kimbrell said. "The Bush administration opposed organic standards and food labeling. He said that 90 percent of Americans want labeling for genetically modified organism, but Congress hasn't passed the legislation.

"The movement is gaining speed and voting is occurring in supermarkets and restaurants," Kimbrell said. "Nothing in nature is grown by supply and demand. We need to move to an economy that supports nature."

Jones said local governments can help by ensuring that poor people have access to fresh, local food. She said San Francisco alone has 181 food pantries.

"We serve 66,000 meals a day and that is occurring all over the nation," Jones said. "We have to implement policies that promote more local food production."

The panel also discussed the farm bill, which Kawamura said was a stepping stone to a better agriculture policy.

"The main objective was telling small farmers they are not alone," he said.

"Agriculture is at a crossroad in its use of resources," Kawamura said. "There are those who are in disagreement with some of the department's practices and I appreciate a difference of opinion."

He said his biggest fear is "an agency who has not earned the public trust. So, I will try to learn and to listen."