

Think About Earth Day April 22nd, Not Jellybeans

In case it has escaped your attention, April is National Pecan Month, Tackle Your Clutter Month, Anxiety Month, Soft Pretzel Month, Welding Month, Soyfoods Month, and Uh-Huh Month.

Similarly, every day and week of the year has been designated for someone's pet interest – some serious and some not. There is one coming up – April 22nd – that I fear more people will recognize as National Jelly Bean Day instead of Earth Day.

I remember the first Earth Day in 1970, which really was a big deal. An estimated 20 million people nationwide attended festivities that developed into the largest grassroots environmental movement in U.S. history. Concern developed by these events also precipitated national legislation like the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts.

By the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day in 1990, more than 200 million people in 141 countries participated in Earth Day celebrations. This year is the 35th anniversary.

The week following Earth day (April 24 – May 1 this year) is Soil and Water Stewardship Week - one of the world's largest conservation-related observances. Since 1955, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has sponsored the national Soil and Water Stewardship Week program. Don't be distracted by the fact that it's also National Karaoke Week and National TV Turnoff Week.

A little history won't hurt you here. The great Dust Bowl of the 1930s prompted Congress to establish a then-new agency, the Soil Conservation Service. Now called the Natural Resources Conservation Service (a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), it has been a world leader in developing soil conservation techniques for over 70 years.

In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt sent a "model" state law to every state's governor, encouraging them to create local, special-purpose units of government to administer the soil and water conservation efforts locally. These "soil

conservation districts" are local agencies managed by a group of 5 locally elected residents who serve as volunteer supervisors.

When the NACD (the national counterpart of local soil and water conservation districts) assumed sponsorship of the Soil and Water Stewardship Observance in 1955, church leaders were encouraged to devote one Sunday sermon to the topic of soil conservation. The theme has not changed since then – it is based on the belief that people have a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth and all its resources.

In 1955, about a third of the nation's 165 million people lived in rural areas, most of them farmers. Today, the population of the U.S. is about 293 million people, and only about 20 percent of us live in rural areas –very few of whom are directly involved in farming. Soil and water conservation is understandably not a daily part of our lives.

So hardly any of us farm, but all of us eat. More and more, the foods you find in grocery stores are not locally produced. A recent study by Iowa State University found that the average grape had traveled 2,143 miles to reach a Chicago grocery store. The average for asparagus was 1,674 miles, for apples, 1,555 miles, and for sweet corn, 813 miles.

In a market economy, the byproduct of seeking out the lowest cost food suppliers is usually the encouragement of poor production practices. Unfortunately, it is cheaper to exploit the land than to protect it. The average consumer usually isn't provided the knowledge to distinguish between a product grown with good soil conservation techniques and one grown on an eroding field that is being ruined in the process.

This is one of those issues whereby I was arguably happier when I didn't know as much about it. It seems like every week or two you read about some multinational corporation that is exploiting foreign workers during the creation of name brand products we use every day. It's probably safe to say that resource conservation is not high on their list either.

Thus the increased interest in Fair Trade Certified food products. Although primarily targeted at ensuring fair wages and working conditions worldwide, part

of the criteria is requiring environmentally sustainable production practices as well.

In case you're reading this and thinking you are not directly affected, consider that the state of Iowa has 211 bodies of water on its Impaired Waters List, including the Coralville Reservoir, Lake MacBride and portions of the Iowa River in Johnson County. We have some work to do.

On Earth Day (April 22nd), take a few minutes to think about some of these things. And – what the heck – have a few jellybeans.

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