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Feeding the Future: What Will It Take?

Breakout Session Summary
Wednesday, November 3, 2010 | 10:15-11:15 a.m.

Speakers

- » **Jason Clay**, Senior Vice President, Market Transformation, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)
- » **Josh Viertel**, President, Slow Food USA
- » **Kai Robertson**, Director, Food, Beverage, and Agriculture Practice, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » At our current rate of consumption, we will not be able to meet the food needs of a growing population and sustain the planet.
- » Understanding crop genetics may offer a pathway to identifying opportunities to improve efficiency in crop production while minimizing environmental impacts.
- » Companies have a key role to play in educating consumers about nutrition, water, and other issues important to sustainable food production.

Memorable Quotes

"There was more food produced in 2008 than in any other year in history. There were also more obese people than ever in 2008, companies made more profit, and more people than ever died of starvation in 2008."—Josh Viertel, Slow Food USA

"If we don't get food right, we can turn off the lights and go home from an environmental point of view."—Jason Clay, WWF

"We need to stop romanticizing the idea that farms of less than 5 acres are viable."—Jason Clay, WWF

Overview

By 2050, it is estimated that the global population will reach 9 billion and 70 percent of these people will live in cities. To feed this growing population, we will need to produce as much food in the next 40 years as we have in the last 8,000 years.

Clay kicked off the session by stressing the urgency of the challenge of feeding the growing population while minimizing environmental impacts. "The future is going to be different than the past," said Clay. "Whatever we think is sustainable today, the numbers are going to make that unsustainable in the future." If people begin to eat more animal protein, it is likely that we will need to produce three times as many calories as we do today. In particular, water is one of the key areas of concern, as agriculture represents 70 percent of water use and many countries are already experiencing water scarcity.

Clay noted that global warming will exacerbate these challenges, cutting world farm output by as much as 18 percent by 2020. WWF has outlined strategies, using nine food wedges, to produce enough food on the same or less land, with less water. Waste is one of the key wedges and Clay noted that one out of three calories on this planet is wasted. This means that by 2050, if we eliminated waste we would need to produce half the amount of food.



Anyone who consumes food should be concerned about the state of food and agriculture, said Viertel. Slow Food's mission is to build a story around food that is grounded in values. He urged participants to think about a story about food that can be good for the planet and good for the people who grow it. If we are going to feed the growing population without destabilizing resources, Viertel argued that local empowerment—combined with land reform and agricultural extension in the form of farmer training on soil conservation and other issues—is critical to transforming the way we produce food. He explained that the current finance model has left many farmers in places like Punjab in debt and more vulnerable to global market shifts and price changes, sometimes with serious consequences.

Viertel and Clay shared different views on the role of industrial agriculture and genetic engineering in providing solutions to the challenges of feeding the future. While organic may be useful for some food crops, Clay cautioned about encouraging all companies to adopt organic practices since there are no standards on toxins and water use in the definition of "organic."

On the topic of genetics, Viertel stated that the last 60 years of our experiment with genetically engineered crops has proven to be a failure. He recommended companies and investors focus on low-cost basic solutions, like composting. Clay disputed the failure of genetic engineering and said that the key is getting smarter about the way we produce food; genetic engineering could provide a lot of answers about what should be produced, as well as how to improve efficiencies and reduce environmental impacts. Building on some work by candymaker Mars Inc. to map the cocoa genome, WWF will be mapping the genome of the 10 most important food crops over the next three to five years to identify opportunities for improving efficiency in food production.

During the Q&A, Bob Langert, McDonald's Vice President, CSR, asked for suggestions as to what a company like his, which serves about 60 million customers a day, can do to make its supply chain more sustainable. Both speakers agreed that the scale and reach of a company like McDonald's means that small changes can have a massive impact not only on its own producers, but also in raising the bar for the entire industry. As an example, Viertel lauded McDonald's recent efforts to improve working conditions of farmers in Florida by engaging the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Both Clay and Viertel agreed that education and engagement with consumers is an important area where companies like Starbucks and McDonald's can have huge impacts in changing the way we eat and produce food. Clay added that portion size is a key avenue for changing the way we eat, and he believes there is a business case for giving people the option of buying less and providing more nutritional value. Instead of super-size, he asked, "Why not make a smaller 'planet-size'?"

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