

The New York Times

Search All NYTimes.com

Go

## Room for Debate

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE AUTOS

« Room for Debate Home

Facebook

Twitter

### Food for the Wealthy, Not for the Poor

*Bjorn Lomborg, the author of "The Skeptical Environmentalist," is the director of Copenhagen Consensus Center and an adjunct professor at Copenhagen Business School. He is on Facebook.*

Updated September 11, 2012, 9:55 AM

The Stanford study showed what most academics already knew: there are few if any health benefits of organic foods. In reaction, many critics of the study emphasized their lower pesticide content, and general environmental benefits.

Genetically enhanced crops offer the potential to boost yields, reduce pesticide use and better ability to handle adverse conditions like saline soil and droughts.

But these points conceal much larger drawbacks. Avoiding well-regulated pesticides can do some good -- based on my calculations using U.S. Food and Drug Administration estimates, it might avoid up to 20 cancer deaths per year in the United States. But organic food also costs **10 percent to 174 percent** more for fruits, vegetables and meat. As I point out in my book, "The Skeptical Environmentalist," a decrease of just 10 percent in fruit and vegetable consumption in the U.S. because of higher prices would cause an increase in cancer of about 4.6 percent of the total number of cancers, or some 26,000 additional cancer deaths annually.

The Stanford study emphasizes the importance of eating fruits and vegetables "however they are grown," but the scale is missing. Eating more fruits and vegetables is incredibly more important than avoiding already well-regulated pesticides. In fact, it can be argued that if the higher costs mean you reduce your intake of fruits and vegetables by just one-thousandth of an ounce a day (equivalent of half a grain of rice), your total risk of cancer goes up, not down. Based on my calculations using World Cancer Research Fund data: omit buying just one apple every 20 years because you have gone organic, and you're worse off.

Organic advocates often claim that its methods lead to less nitrogen pollution, but calculated per good produced, that pollution is **similar to or higher than** conventional methods. And most important, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that **shifting U.S. agricultural production to organic** would require an area greater than the state of California to be converted from pristine land into agriculture.

Finally, organic entails a huge price tag. For the U.S. alone, estimates (measured by lost gross domestic product based on my calculations) suggest a cost of at least \$100 billion annually.

Most of the world's inhabitants need cheaper food, so we should focus on higher yields, and better access to fertilizer and pesticides. Well-regulated use of genetically enhanced crops offers the potential to boost yields, reduce pesticide use, and better ability to handle adverse conditions like saline soil and droughts.

The evidence is clear: organic products are neither healthier nor better for the environment.

*Join Room for Debate on Facebook and follow updates on [twitter.com/roomfordebate](https://twitter.com/roomfordebate).*

Topics: farmers, food

24 Comments