

# KING CORN

BY AARON WOOLF, CURT ELLIS AND IAN CHENEY

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

Have you been wondering why Americans are so overweight? Or why certain foods are so cheap? Have you heard our average life expectancy is headed down, not up? Two college friends set out with director Aaron Woolf in search of answers to these questions and were surprised by what they discovered. You will be too as this film follows a crop of corn from seed to your dinner plate.



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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

KING CORN began with a simple idea—we wanted to find out where our food came from. The initial surprise of course was that so much of our food came from corn.

From a storytelling standpoint, I was particularly engaged with this idea. The story of corn is one that is deeply written into our national mythology. From earliest childhood we are raised with stories of Native Americans greeting pilgrims on Massachusetts shores with armfuls of corn. Hollywood reinforces our affection for the crop by depicting the heartland in countless films as an endless landscape of gentle rolling hills, planted in neat rows of tall green cornstalks.

I first found corn when, like the plant itself, I moved from where I was living in Mexico to Iowa 18 years ago, to study film. I loved the Iowa landscape and would ride my motorcycle through the fields, implausibly comforted by the notion that if I crashed, I would somehow be safe in those green rows. During those long rides, though, it never occurred to me that those plants would someday be the focus of a film that I would make, or that there was trouble growing in that rich soil.

It was through my younger cousin Curtis and his best friend Ian that I first began to hear about the tie between our agriculture and our troubled food system. They had studied the food economy and rural life in college, and we were all alarmed to discover that the American diet now threatened to make theirs into the first generation in our nation's history with a diminished life expectancy.

But none of us understood the connection well. It was the fact that corn had quietly become the base ingredient for so many of our processed, packaged and least nutritional foods that lead us to the initial question in KING CORN: what would happen if we went back to the source of those foods, then tried to trace the course corn traveled into our meals. The revelation that Ian and Curt shared a family history in Iowa set in motion the entire project and offered a level of access to the farming community that we were privileged to have.

We found solidarity in Greene, Iowa, with distant cousins and new friends who often had as many concerns as we did about the present system of food production. Our year spent growing and following corn became a shared project between us and our Iowa hosts, and among the most resonant revelations we took away was that the health of our food is profoundly connected to the health of our rural communities.

In this same spirit, I feel that the seeds of an improved food economy and food culture will come from forging reconnections everywhere—between farmers and consumers at produce markets and in CSA subscription farms; between constituents and legislators collaborating on an agricultural policy that makes us healthy; between eaters and the food we eat. I hope KING CORN can be a small part of helping these conversations and connections grow.

-- Aaron Woolf



Curt Ellis (Producer), Ian Cheney (Producer), Aaron Woolf (Producer/Director) of KING CORN.  
Photo: Sam Cullman / ITVS



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## THE FILM

In 2004, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis were best friends and new graduates from Yale who were concerned about the American obesity epidemic, and embarrassed by how little they knew about what they were eating. Inspired by the coincidental discovery that their great grandparents came from the same small county in rural Iowa, they moved to the heartland to learn where their food was coming from. With the help of friendly neighbors, genetically modified seeds, nitrogen fertilizers, powerful herbicides and government subsidies, they rented an acre of land and grew a bumper crop of corn. But as they tried to follow their pile of corn into the food system, what they found raises troubling questions about how we eat and how we farm.

KING CORN, a feature-length (83-minute) documentary directed by Curt's cousin Aaron Woolf, records the year-long journey of the two friends. As an outreach tool, the film challenges audience members to think through the consequences of U.S. agricultural policies, our own eating habits and the intersections between the two.



Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis at the acre on harvest day  
Photo: Aaron Woolf / ITVS



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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### U.S. Agriculture Policy

#### History

The first Farm Bills were passed under the New Deal, and were intended to bring agricultural supply and demand into balance by taking excess farmland out of production. These policies kept family farmers on the land, without flooding the market with cheap crops. In the 1970s, under the leadership of Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, the logic of Farm Bills shifted and began rewarding farmers for all-out production, encouraging "fencerow-to-fencerow" planting. The result was a series of record corn harvests and a market awash in cheap grain... often available below the cost of production.

#### Present

Every five to seven years, the U.S. Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill. The complex legislation affects the nation's food system in a variety of ways: environmentally, commercially, agriculturally, economically. What legislators rarely pay attention to, though, is the way the Farm Bill affects our food. In addition to determining which crops entitle farmers to subsidies and for what amounts, the Farm Bill deals with things like rural development, the school lunch program and bio-fuel development.

Recent results of U.S. agricultural policy include:

- U.S. taxpayers have provided more than \$50 billion in subsidies to corn farmers over the past decade.
- Between 2003 and 2005, 66% of crop subsidies went to 10% of farmers.
- Between 1997 and 2005, the industrial broiler chicken industry saved \$11.25 billion and the industrial hog industry saved \$8.5 billion from farm bill policies that kept corn and soybean prices below the cost of production.
- Over the past three decades, consumption of high fructose corn syrup has increased 1,000%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, the number of acres planted in corn in the U.S. increased by 39%.
- Between 1970 and 2007, Iowa's average yield of corn increased 109%, rising from 86 to 180 bushels per acre.
- In 2007, 92.9 million acres of farmland were devoted to growing corn. In contrast, 2 million acres were planted in vegetables.

Figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture "Milestones in U.S. Farming Policy"

	1900	1930	1945	1970	2000/02
Number of farms (in millions)	5.7	6.3	5.9	2.9	2.1
Avg farm size (in acres)	146	151	195	376	441
Avg. number of commodities produced per farm	5.1	4.5	4.6	2.7	1.3
Farm share of population (%)	39	25	17	5	1



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### General

- If you could ask Curt or Ian a question, what would you ask and why?
- Did anything in this film surprise you? Disturb you? Inspire you?
- Do you think you will change anything about the way you eat?

### Farming

- What role does the family farm play in America's perception of itself? What does it mean for the U.S. that the family farm is giving way to industrial or factory farming? What could reverse that trend?
- The film traces the consolidation of small family farms into large farming operations, with single farms planting a thousand or more acres. Who benefits from, or is hurt by, this consolidation of farms?
- Prior to viewing KING CORN, what image(s) came to mind when someone mentioned farms or farming? Did what you saw confirm or challenge that image? What did you learn from the film about current farming practices?
- Ian points out that in his great grandfather's day, 40-bushel-an-acre harvests were considered excellent. Today that same acre produces 180 bushels. The film suggests that this modern efficiency might be contributing to "overproduction" of food. Do you agree? Is it possible to produce too much?

### Agriculture Policy

- KING CORN presents two philosophies behind farm subsidies. In the 1930s, subsidies helped control the amount of corn produced each year, ensuring that overproduction would not drive down prices. Starting in the 1970s, subsidies encouraged farmers to produce as much as possible. According to the film, what are the pros and cons of each approach? Which approach makes the most sense to you and why?
- Are you comfortable having your tax dollars support the farming practices and resulting food culture depicted in the film? Why or why not?
- Americans now spend a smaller percentage of their income on food than ever before—less than 10% of their disposable income. What are the benefits and drawbacks of having cheap food available? Would you be willing to pay more for food that was grown or raised in more healthy ways for people and/or for the environment? Why or why not? Do you currently purchase foods that are locally produced or organic, even though they are more expensive than food produced using commercial farming methods? Why or why not?

- Curt and Ian discover that without government subsidies, the typical acre of corn in Iowa would lose money. In your view, should free market forces be applied to farming (i.e., eliminating government subsidies and letting farmers choose crops and methods that give them the best chance at making a profit)? Why or why not?

### Health Issues

- Imagine that you are part of a public health task force. How would you respond to the following facts from the film:
  - 70% of the antibiotics used in the U.S. are consumed by livestock.
  - An average steak from a feedlot-raised cow contains as much as nine grams of saturated fat. A comparable steak from grass-fed cow might have 1.3 grams of saturated fat.

What recommendations would you make to preserve or improve public health?

- The filmmakers suggest that current farm practices and policies are not producing healthy food for American consumers. If that is the case, who is responsible to change the system? Consider the responsibility of the following: consumers, farmers, policy makers or legislators, food companies, food retailers and health professionals. What might individuals in each of these groups do to ensure a healthy, adequate and dependable food supply?



Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis at the acre.  
Photo: Sam Cullman / ITVS

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Investigate the contents and status of the current Farm Bill. Communicate with your elected representatives to make sure that the legislation reflects what you see as the best approach to support and regulate a healthy and affordable food supply.
- Compare farm subsidies provided to U.S. farmers with agricultural subsidies in other nations. Use what you find to assess whether or not current trade policies governing agricultural imports and exports are fair.
- On your next trip to the grocery store, check the corn-based content of each product you put into your shopping cart. Compare your results with others in your group, family, or neighborhood and develop ways your community can have a role in the food supply.
- Convene a panel of health professionals to explain the effects of corn-based industrial foods on the body and provide nutritional advice.
- Meet with your local grocer(s) to find out where their meat and produce comes from and what kind of additives it contains. Work with them to ensure transparent labeling and suggest that they make available grass-fed beef.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.



Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis at the acre.  
Photo: Aaron Woolf / ITVS

## RESOURCES

[www.kingcorn.net](http://www.kingcorn.net) - The film's website offers additional information about the production as well as links to background information, advocacy groups and DVDs.

[www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov) - The website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture includes a wide variety of resources and information on farming and farm policy. Histories of U.S. farm policy available at: [www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FarmPolicy/historyOfFarm.htm](http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FarmPolicy/historyOfFarm.htm)

[www.farmandfoodproject.org/](http://www.farmandfoodproject.org/) - A coalition of farm groups interested in family farms, sustainable agriculture, anti-hunger efforts and related issues, the Farm and Food Project tracks farm legislation. Their website is a good source for current versions of pending bills, as well as background reading and discussion of major issues.

[www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org) - The Environmental Working Group lobbies for the protection of public health and the environment. Their website includes resources like "A Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce" and a "Farm Subsidy Database" that can be used to find out how much federal funding farmers in your area receive.

[www.iatp.org/](http://www.iatp.org/) - The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy conducts research and education to promote family farms and healthy ecosystems. Their website includes several reports on how U.S. agricultural policies contribute to hunger.

[www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/](http://www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae/) - The website of the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University offers a variety of downloadable papers related to agricultural trade, sustainability, factory farms, pesticide use and more.

[www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org) - The website of the Center for Science in the Public Interest includes information on food safety, nutrition, labeling, biotechnology and related topics.

[www.itvs.org/outreach/realdir/](http://www.itvs.org/outreach/realdir/) - The website for the film THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN offers a variety of resources related to organic and sustainable farming.

**KING CORN WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON APRIL 15, 2008 AT 10 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.**

KING CORN is a co-production of Mosaic Films, Incorporated and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved).



Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis in front of a pile of surplus corn in Iowa.  
Photo: Ian Cheney / ITVS