KING CORN (2007)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The movie opens with Ian and Curtis saying that we are the first generation of people that will likely have a shorter life span than our parents, largely because of the food we eat. A scientist then states that a disproportionately large amount of the carbon in our bodies comes from corn. Both of these are probably little known facts. Whose fault is that?

2. Since the 1920s, U.S. agricultural policy has involved government subsidization for farmers. Prior to 1973, the government regulated agricultural production by keeping supply and demand in balance, which sometimes meant paying farmers to take some farm land out of production. This stabilized agricultural prices, kept them high, and allowed smaller farms to survive. Was this a good policy (as opposed to no policy of restriction or subsidization at all)?

3. In 1973 Nixon’s agricultural secretary, Earl L. Butz reoriented the U.S. farm program by not restricting what a farm can produce. Butz states in an interview with the film makers that under the old farm program, “We paid farmers not to produce, one of the stupidest things we ever did, I think.” According to Butz, the increased agricultural production in this country has driven food prices down now so that we only pay about 17% of our incomes on food. Previous generations paid twice that amount. Butz acknowledged that this has led to large scale farming where smaller farms can’t compete, and while he was Secretary of Agriculture he routinely told farmers “get big or get out.” Did Butz make the right decision?

4. Even under Butz’ restructured farm program, the U.S. government still subsidizes farmers. At the time of the movie, the government was paying farmers $28 per acre of corn. According to the film, if you grow corn without payment from the government, you’ll lose money. Is anything wrong with this policy, and what would happen if it was discontinued?

5. According to the film, the government subsidy system essentially rewards overproduction of corn. One person stated, “We subsidize the happy meals, but not the healthy meals.” Is this an accurate assessment of the results of the government subsidy system?

6. Corn yield has increased by selecting types of corn plants that grow closer to each other so there are more corn plants per acre. This has increased the yield from 40 bushels per acre in the past to 200 bushels of corn per acre now. The trade off is that it has more starch and less protein. Is the trade off worth it?

7. Most farmers use genetically modified seeds to make crops like corn resistant to the herbicide weed killers (e.g., Liberty-ready, Roundup-ready). The result is that an entire field can efficiently be sprayed with herbicides without killing the crops. This keeps the yield per acre high and thus lowers the cost we pay for food. What if anything is bad about this?

8. The corn that Ian and Curtis grew was essentially inedible in its unprocessed form. As one person in the film said, “It’s a raw material like feed stock for all these other processes” -- specifically, ethanol for fuel, feed for animals, and high fructose corn syrup for food. Is anything particularly bad about this?

9. Corn grain isn’t a healthy food for cows, and too much of it will produce acidosis, which will kill them. Large cattle feedlots are unsanitary and expose the cows to diseases. Antibiotics are put into corn feed to help combat both acidosis and disease from confinement; about 70% of the antibiotics in this country go to that purpose. All of this is driven by economics: corn is cheap food, and confinement allows cows to put on weight quickly. Is the tradeoff worth it?

10. According to one expert in the film, the muscle in factory farmed cows looks more like fat tissue than muscle tissue. Steak from grain-fed cows has about 5 times the saturated fat as grass fed cows. Again, this is driven by economics: steak with less saturated fat would mean spending more money on how cows are raised. Is the tradeoff worth it?

11. The corn sweetener industry emerged as an outlet for the excess corn that was produced after farming was deregulated. About 70% of high fructose corn syrup goes into beverage sweeteners. One problem this creates is obesity: one expert stated that drinking calories doesn’t produce the digestive “stop signals” that eating calories does. Another problem with sweet beverages is that it contributes to type 2 diabetes. Can we really blame corn sweetener or Earl Butz for this?

12. Near the end of the film the narrator states, “We spend less of our income on food than any generation in history, and fewer of us are needed to produce that food than ever before. But we also might be the first generation to live in a time when abundance brings too much.” Is the narrator right?