Finding a fresh and healthy 'new normal' in food policy

By CINDY WOLFF

Wandering the aisles of local farmers markets offers a wonderful reminder of this area’s agricultural abundance. Healthful, top quality vegetables, fruits and nuts are served up alongside fresh eggs and locally raised meats.

Living here in the heart of the Sacramento Valley is living in food-lover’s heaven — about as great as it gets.

Sad to say, though, a Saturday morning spent downtown at the market doesn’t offer an accurate overall picture of local eating habits and health and is even less representative of the country’s nutritional norms.

Despite quality food produced here in abundance, the truth is that many Americans are malnourished — either hungry, from lack, or ill from diet-related illnesses such as diabetes. Both could easily be prevented, here and elsewhere, if we insisted on policies that place nutrition and human health at the top of our food priorities.

The interactive “Food Index” of 125 countries published on Oxfam’s website illustrates the situation with national comparisons between categories.

The U.S. ranks in the top tier for Affordability, behind a handful of European nations and just ahead of Kuwait. We rate even higher when it comes to Food Quality.

But in the Enough to Eat category, America is in the bottom third of the rankings assigned to developed nations — far behind Russia and Mexico, for example, trailing many countries in South America and the Middle East, and behind much of Europe. About 15 percent of U.S. households are “food insecure, according to a 2010 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a nearly 30 percent increase since 2006.

Equally disturbing is the fact the U.S. is racing to the top when it comes to rates of the diet-related illnesses behind only a handful of countries including Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan, according to

Oxfam’s Obesity and Diabetes Index. Where do we go from here? What can we do, locally and nationally, about these distressing trends? Here are some starter suggestions:

1. Support local farmers. By buying health-giving local food whenever possible you help bolster the area economy and provide decent jobs, so local families can buy good food.

2. Join with the Center for Nutrition and Activity Promotion (CNAP) and other community outreach organizations to make sure that everyone in our community who is eligible for CalFresh (once known as food stamps) benefits, applies for help with their food budget. People are often shocked to learn that fully half of Californians eligible for supplemental food assistance don’t receive CalFresh, and the numbers for older adults are even higher. Here in Butte County, for example, some 90 percent of seniors who are eligible for CalFresh don’t even apply. Who do you know who may need extra food support? Do what you can to encourage them to get it. CalFresh has the added benefit of benefiting our farming community by increasing food sales. Check eligibility by using the CalFresh screening tool at http://www.csuchico.edu/cnap/calfresh.

3. Also emphasize nutrition education, because we simply need to get away from cheap, sugary, high-calorie foods. These are not bargain foods when you consider the poor nutrition they provide. At CNAP, for example, we offer free classes demonstrating how to get the most nutritional “bang” for your buck by shopping and cooking carefully.

HEALTHY: Local food

Include physical activity in your family’s health plan, and make it fun. Chico Area Recreation and Park District, for example, offers Let’s Play Outside! family “play days” every month. Also insist that political leaders prioritize parks, playgrounds and bike paths, so community infrastructures support exercise.

5. Consider supporting a national Food and Health Policy to set healthful eating goals rather than the Farm Bill, an idea recently suggested by the columnist Mark Bittman of the New York Times. As Bittman puts it, “It doesn’t make sense to tell people to eat vegetables and then produce junk; that leads only to bad health in the face of evident abundance. What’s so great about that?”

Cindy Wolff is a fifth-generation Chico resident. Her father operated Butte Feed and Warehouse at the corner of First and Ivy streets, which stood next to “the teacher’s college.” That college is now Chico State University, where Wolff has served as executive director of the award-winning Center for Nutrition and Activity Promotion since 2006 and its foundational program, OPT for Healthy Living (formerly OPT for Fit Kids) since its inception in 2001. She holds a B.S. in dietetics from UC Davis and a Ph.D. in nutrition science from Colorado State University.