Twitter Thread by Tamar Haspel



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Let’s talk about ORGANIC.

Robert Paarlberg’s new book on the food system is out today, and here’s an excerpt.

He’s not a fan of organic, and he makes some good points but misses others.

Here we go.

Organic's biggest shortcoming is that you need more land to grow the same amount of food.

The yield penalty happens in almost every crop, in almost every study.

The gap could narrow with more research/varieties, but it won’t go away.

This has big, bad climate implications.

The second issue I have with organic, which Paarlberg shares, is that its basic criterion is naturalness.

Natural doesn’t mean safe, or even safer. A farming standard based on it forces farmers to sometimes use more dangerous, less effective tools.
https://t.co/Kh8TCgPEBp

On human health, there’s scant evidence that pesticide residues on conventional produce are harmful to consumers (though it’s possible farmworkers could be at risk).

What I don’t want is for folks who can’t afford organic to worry about feeding their kids conventional produce.

On the plus side, Paarlberg acknowledges that the organic standard has some real advantages for animal welfare.

This is why I buy organic animal products.

Many in the organic world would like more regs ensuring animals have decent lives.

> The rules for organic farming do deliver some clear benefit in the livestock sector. Producers of organic meat, milk, and eggs are required to provide their animals with more space to move around, an important plus for animal welfare. Also, animal products cannot be labeled organic if the animals were fed or treated with antibiotics, which is good for slowing the emergence of resistant bacterial strains dangerous to human health. Yet even for livestock the organic rule malfunctions, since the animals can only be given feeds grown organically, and organic corn and soy have lower yields per acre, so more land must be planted and plowed.

Now, what Paarlberg misses. First, there are some environmental advantages. I wrote this a while back, and have since seen some evidence that organic systems may sequester carbon deeper in the soil, where it's less likely to be re-released. https://t.co/s1VfzlOmgK

He also misses organic's success for farmers.

It enables growers to find like-minded consumers willing to pay a premium, and organic farmers are more profitable. This is good for a couple of reasons.

First, as a farmer, but also as a human, I'm in favor of farmers making a living.

If they all could, maybe we wouldn't have to subsidize them to the tune of $20 billion a year.

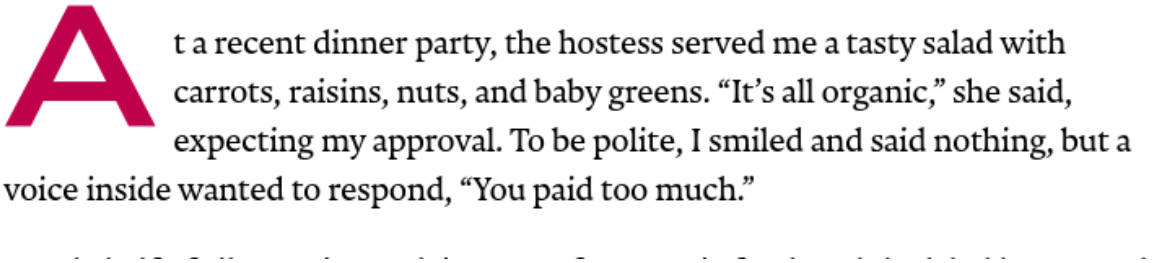
But profitable farmers also have the cushion to experiment with new ways to farm better.

The last thing Paarlberg misses is an opportunity.

There has been, in the conventional ag community, a tendency toward sneering superciliousness about organic. Some call to boycott it!

Why? Because SCIENCE!

And I have to say that Paarlberg kicks off his piece with some smugness that I find off-putting.



Why does ORGANIC vs. CONVENTIONAL have to be war?

Because organic is a small slice of ag, I'll trade off its yield penalty for farmer livelihoods & the benefits from the experimentation I’ve seen on farms.

No, we can’t turn all acres organic, but I don’t think that’s a risk.

Bottom line:

ORGANIC: Some enviro benefits; better conditions for animals; farmers make a living

CONVENTIONAL: Better yields; unconstrained by “naturalness,” so can sometimes use safer/better practices; more affordable

I want a food supply with both.

Thanks for listening.