

Is the Next Global Food Crisis Now in the Making?

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(July 17) -- Recent weeks have produced a series of grim and related headlines: Russia has declared a [state of emergency because of drought](#) in 12 regions, while in major wheat exporter [Ukraine](#), severe flooding may depress crop yields. Dry conditions threaten [Vietnamese rice production](#). The USDA has projected a disappointingly low [Midwest harvest](#), and China has raised questions on the demand side by [doubling its imports](#) from Canada.



Hoang Dinh Nam, AFP / Getty Images

A farmer pulls off dying rice plants from a rice field in Ben Tre, Vietnam, earlier this month. Dry conditions are threatening Vietnamese rice production this year.

Fortunately, this run of unfavorable farming news follows strong harvests that for now should keep grain prices in check, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. But to see the effects of a bad year for food -- and what the world could be in for if the present trend persists -- one only has to look to [2008](#).

Two years ago, a confluence of environmental causes compounded by rising fuel costs and a global credit crunch caused food prices to skyrocket an average of 43 percent worldwide, leading to starvation and [riots](#) from Mexico to Bangladesh.

Some are worried that was just a warning.

In a new book, "[Empires of Food](#)," journalist Andrew Rimas and Leeds University agricultural researcher Evan Fraser examine civilizations from Mesopotamia to Rome to Great Britain. They argue that every empire was made possible by agriculture, and that when those agricultural systems failed, the empires they supported failed with them.

Fraser and Rimas worry that the food system in place today is built around nitrogen-based fertilizers that require petroleum to create, as well as good weather that's graced the world since the dust bowl. If fuel prices go up again, or if the weather gets worse, they say, we could see our food empire unravel as well.

"Even leaving climate change aside, we know that we have enjoyed good weather relative to the historic average," Fraser told AOL News. "To a certain extent it's cyclical, and that would lead us to expect crummy growing seasons in the decades ahead."

Those who share Fraser and Rimas' worries over the millions of expanding appetites being produced by a developing world are offering a modern version of [Thomas Malthus'](#) 1798 argument that population growth will inexorably outstrip agricultural production. Malthus' predictions were attacked almost as soon as they were written, but despite that criticism, his theories continued to find supporters and influence public policy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Since World War II, developments in chemical agriculture have brought more nourishment out of the ground than Malthus could ever imagined. Still, his ideas won't seem to go away.

It's easy to see why. The essential problem is that as the world population keeps expanding, it becomes difficult to imagine a system that already seems stretched managing to feed millions more. Even while [some argue](#) that world birth rates are beginning to decline to the rate of replacement, by U.N. estimates the global population is still going to rise from about 6.5 billion to 9 billion by 2050. And those 2.5 billion extra people will need to eat.

The language of hunger permeates governmental, nongovernmental and corporate rhetoric. The solutions proposed are different: Some advocate genetically modified crops and refinements in modern industrial agriculture, others emphasize local production and diversified farms less vulnerable to pests and drought. But most concerned with food production seem to agree that trouble looms.

"Global food supplies must increase by an estimated 50 percent to meet expected demand in the next 20 years," reads the Global Food Security page on the [State Department website](#).

For the Western world, food security has not been a significant concern since the Great Depression. Countries like the United States have a substantial buffer of wealth to insulate them from the vicissitudes of weather, and the average customer is unlikely to see even catastrophic agricultural events represented by much more than a lack of tomatoes on Big Macs or a [limit on rice purchases](#) at Sam's Club.

The Malthusians haven't been right -- yet. But if Fraser and Rimas' historical assessment is correct, the kind of deep food security to which most Americans and Europeans have become accustomed is shakier than people may think.

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