

Farm Policy at a Crossroads; A Time to Chooseⁱ

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We are in the midst of an epic battle that ultimately will determine the future of farming and food production in America. Ultimately, it is a battle for the hearts and minds of the American people. Public trust in American agriculture has been seriously eroded by growing numbers of controversies. The agricultural establishmentⁱⁱⁱ has responded with a barrage of public relations and political strategies designed to defend the corporate, industrial agriculture status quo. It remains to be seen whether public trust will be restored or public concerns will grow into a demand for fundamental change in the American food system. The ultimate outcome of this battle is up to us – the American people.

A 2015 *Fortune Magazine* Special Report: “The war on big food” begins, “Major packaged-food companies lost \$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives.”¹ The *Fortune* article describes how a wide range of consumer concerns is eroding the market domination of the large corporate food companies. The report names artificial colors and flavors, pesticides, preservatives, high-fructose corn syrup, growth hormones, antibiotics, gluten, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). All of these concerns are related directly to our industrial system of food production in the U.S., including our chemically-dependent, profit-driven industrial agricultural system.

A recent exposé in *The Chicago Tribune*² is but the latest in a continuing barrage of negative publicity, reflecting growing public concerns about the meat, milk, and eggs produced in concentrated animal feeding operations or CAFOs.^{3,4} Nine states have banned use of gestation crates⁵, which confine breeding hogs in spaces so small they can’t turn around. A new California law requires all eggs sold in the state to be laid by chickens that at least have enough room to spread their wings.⁶ McDonalds has been joined by a growing list of food retailers demanding pork produced without gestation crates and eggs laid by “cage-free” chickens.^{7,8} “Concern has risen globally about the use of antibiotics in animals grown for meat,”⁹ quoting from a UN press release announcing the rare gathering of world leaders to address the critical issue of antibiotic resistance – commonly associated with MRSA. All these concerns are linked directly to the industrial system of livestock production – commonly called “factory farms.”

In an attempt to stem the tide of growing public concern, the industrial “agricultural establishment” has mounted a nationwide propaganda campaign designed to – in their words – “increase confidence and trust in today’s agriculture.”¹⁰ The board members of one front group, the *U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance*, include the American Farm Bureau Federation, John

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ⁱⁱⁱ The “agricultural establishment” includes agribusiness corporations, the major commodity associations, the American Farm Bureau Federation, USDA, and most state departments of agriculture and Land Grant Universities.

Deere, as well as major agricultural commodity organizations. Board members Monsanto and DuPont have each pledged \$500,000 per year to the campaign. A recent study by Friends of the Earth documents similar “front groups” that have been spending more than \$25 million per year to polish the tarnished public image of industrial agriculture.¹¹ This doesn’t include the campaigns of individual industrial agricultural apologists that are carried out through public schools, 4-H and FFA, and local civic clubs, as well in state and local mass media.

However, the agricultural establishment seems to consider their PR campaign as little more than a “holding action” against growing public concerns. They are using their political power to establish legislative protections that would prevent effective regulation of industrial agriculture. Strengthening state “right to farm laws” is the most important current legislative initiative. All 50 states already have some form of right to farm law. The early laws, beginning in the 1980s, were enacted to minimize the threat to nuisance litigation and prohibitive state and local government regulation of “normal farming practices.”¹² However, the intent of current political initiatives seems to be allow the agricultural establishment to define “industrial farming practices” as a legally protected economic right. *Industrial agriculture advocates know it is vulnerable to growing public concerns and are doing everything in their power to protect it.*

The agricultural establishment has essentially abandoned their earlier strategy for demanding that regulation of industrial agriculture be based on “sound science.” They seem to understand that the scientific evidence supporting the growing public concerns is now clear, compelling, even “overwhelming.” I personally think it has become misleading to cite a few specific studies when there is so much scientific information documenting the environmental, social, economic, and public health problems associated with industrial agriculture. I have started relying on meta-studies, where scientists or teams of scientists review dozens or hundreds of credible studies and draw logical, generalizable conclusions.

For example, a 2016 independent study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability (IPES) described the evidence as “overwhelming,”¹³ after reviewing more than 350 studies documenting the failures of industrial agriculture and supporting fundamental change. The IPES members are from highly respected academic institutions and international organizations around the world. Their study concluded: “Today's food and farming systems have succeeded in supplying large volumes of foods to global markets, but are generating negative outcomes on multiple fronts: widespread degradation of land, water and ecosystems; high GHG emissions; biodiversity losses; persistent hunger and micro-nutrient deficiencies alongside the rapid rise of obesity and diet-related diseases; and livelihood stresses for farmers around the world.”¹⁴

The report concludes: “What is required is a fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods. Data shows that these systems can compete with industrial agriculture in terms of total outputs, performing particularly strongly under environmental stress, and delivering production increases in the places where additional food is desperately needed. Diversified agroecological systems can also pave the way for diverse diets and improved health.”

Olivier De Schutter, leader of the independent panel observed, “It is not a lack of evidence holding back the agroecological alternative. It is the mismatch between its huge potential to improve outcomes across food systems, and its much smaller potential to generate profits for agribusiness firms. The way food systems are currently structured allows value to accrue to a limited number of actors, reinforcing their economic and political power, and thus their ability to influence the governance of food systems. Simply tweaking industrial agriculture will not provide long-term solutions to the multiple problems it generates. We must change the way we set political priorities,”¹⁵ *If we are to reshape the future of food and farming, we must reset the political priorities and fundamentally reform farm policy.*

Contrary to popular opinion, the current industrial agricultural system is not a natural consequence of free markets, but instead is the consequence of a premeditated shift in agricultural policies during the 1970s. Historically, the fundamental purpose of agricultural policy has been to provide domestic food security. No nation, at least until now, has been willing to trust its food security to the global marketplace. U.S. farm policies from the 1930s through the 1960s were premised on the proposition that food security could best be assured by keeping independent family farmers on the land. Family farmers had been the cultural foundation of American society and were committed to maintaining the productivity of their land, not only for the benefit of their families and communities but also for the food security of their nation.

U.S. farm policy was fundamentally changed during the early 1970s – the Nixon-Butz era. The policy objectives shifted from supporting family farms to promoting the industrialization of agriculture. Contrary to popular opinion, industrialization is not defined by the shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing economy, which is simply a symptom of industrialization. The basic strategies of industrialization are specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Specialization increases productivity and economic efficiency – a.k.a, division of labor. Specialized functions must be standardized to create a complete and coherent product process – a.k.a, an assembly line. Standardization allows the production to be routinized and mechanized, further increasing efficiency and simplifying management. This allows management control to be consolidated into larger, often corporate, economic entities – a.k.a, economies of scale.

The chemical and mechanical technologies developed for the war effort during World War II allowed agricultural production to be standardized, routinized, and mechanized. Fields and feedlots could be transformed into biological assembly lines and farms into factories without roofs. Small, diversified, independent family farms could be consolidated into large, specialized, corporately controlled “factory farms.” Food security would then be ensured not by family farms but by reducing the cost of food production and making good food affordable for all – a.k.a the cheap food policy. Temporary food assistance programs would fill in any remaining gaps.

The farm policies of the Nixon-Butz era were designed specifically to support, subsidize, and promote specialization, standardization, and consolidation of agricultural production into ever-larger farming operations. Every major farm policy since the 1970s – price supports, farm credit, crop insurance, disaster payments, farm tax credits and depreciation allowances, etc. – in one way or another has supported the industrial paradigm. Soil and water conservation and more recent organic and sustainable farming programs, adopted under public duress, are under

constant threat, with funds often diverted to subsidize industrial farming practices. “Plant fencerow to fencerow” and “Get big or get out” remain the watchwords of U.S. farm policy.

While these *get big or get out, cheap food* policies have succeeded in increasing agricultural productivity and economic efficiency, they have failed in their only legitimate public purpose: Industrial agriculture has failed to provide “domestic food security.” In spite of reducing the percentage of the average American’s disposable income spent for food, they have failed to provide everyone with enough good food to support healthy, active lifestyles. The necessary shift in federal farm policy must be supported by public acceptance of the fact that the current industrial agricultural system isn’t working and isn’t going to work in the future.

A far larger percentage of people in the U.S. are “food insecure” today than during the 1960s. Nearly 15% of Americans are classified as food-insecure and more than 20% of our children live in food insecure homes.¹⁶ The “temporary” food assistance programs of the 1960s have been extended and expanded but have failed to fill the gaps left by the industrial food system. In addition, the diets of many Americans are high in calories but lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and various diet-related cancers, are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in the U.S. by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains in public health over the past several decades.¹⁷ While the percentage of America’s total economic output required for food dropped by one-half, the percentage going to health care more than doubled.¹⁸ Industrial agriculture isn’t working and isn’t going to work in the future. It is not sustainable.

Industrial agriculture has failed to meet even the first requisite for agricultural sustainability: It has failed to meet the basic food needs of the present. There is virtually no possibility that it can meet even the most basic food needs of generations of the future, as it systematically pollutes the environment, threatens public health, and depletes and degrades the natural and human resources that must support long-run agricultural productivity. It is not sustainable. *Change is not just an option; it is an absolute necessity.*

The problems in U.S. agriculture are systemic or ingrained in the industrial system of production and cannot be effectively addressed without fundamentally changing the agricultural system. This will require a fundamental shift in agricultural and food policies, beginning with farm policies. Again from the IPES report, “The key is to establish political priorities, namely, to support the emergence of alternative systems which are based around fundamentally different logics... Incremental change must not be allowed to divert political attention and political capital away from the more fundamental shift that is urgently needed, and can now be delivered, through a paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems.”¹⁹

“Diversified agroecology” is the IPES’s terminology for one of several different farming systems or systemic approaches to sustainable agriculture. “Permaculture” and “nature farming” are other popular international approaches to sustainable farming. In the U.S., organic, holistic, ecological, biodynamic, innovative, and practical farming are more popular terms. The current “local food movement” is an attempt to create a new sustainable food system – “from farm to fork.” A sustainable agriculture, regardless of name, must be able to meet the basic food needs of all in the present without while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future.

All of these sustainable alternatives have the potential to continue growing without government support and in spite of industry attempts to block or coopt the sustainable agriculture movement. Communities can work through their local governments to develop sustainable local food systems and grow local food systems into regional food networks. However, a fundamental change in federal farm policy could have a dramatic effect on the future of farming and food production in the U.S. – as it did in the 1970s, but in a fundamentally different direction.

The necessary changes in agricultural policies must be deep, fundamental, and systemic. Problems arising from systems, as with industrial agriculture, are sometimes called “wicked problems.” Wicked problems arise due to the complexity, interconnectivity, and dynamic nature of the systems within which such problems arise. Such problems are impossible to solve partially or sequentially because of the inability to collect and analyze enough information to draw irrefutable conclusions. Different scientists draw different conclusions from different subsets or series of data. It is virtually impossible to isolate specific causes and effects. Apparent *causes* actually may be the *effects* of other causes somewhere in the system. Effort to solve one aspect of wicked problems may reveal or create other problems.

Wicked problems can be solved only by choosing different systems, which Wendell Berry refers to as *Solving for Pattern*. He writes, “A good solution is good because it is in harmony with those larger patterns – and this harmony will, I think, be found to have a nature of analogy. A good solution acts within the larger pattern the way a healthy organ acts within the body.”²⁰ The pattern of industrial agriculture is the pattern of a large, complex machine or mechanism with interchangeable parts. The natural ecosystems and social cultures within which farms function are living systems, not machines – organisms, not mechanisms. Organisms are unique wholes composed of unique organs or parts, with emergent properties that are not present in their parts – the most important being “life.” A healthy farm is an organism – a living systems made up of soil, plants, animal, and people that constitute an integral whole.

The failures of industrial agriculture are an inevitable consequence of the inherent disharmony between industrial agricultural systems and the social and ecological environment within which agriculture must function. The internal mechanistic agricultural paradigm is in conflict with the external organismic social and ecological context. The only way to solve the wicked problems of short-run domestic food security and long-run global food sustainability is to shift away from the mechanistic paradigm of industrial agriculture to a living systems paradigm of sustainable agriculture. Agriculture must function as a “healthy organ within the body.”

Growing public support for a new “pattern” for U.S. farm and food policy is apparent in the local food movement. Organic foods sales grew at the rate of 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years through the 1990s and early 2000s before stabilizing at around 10% per year, with total sales of \$43.3 billion in sales in 2015.²¹ However, as organic producers attempted to accommodate the industrial food system, organics evolved into what some now call “industrial organics.” With the industrialization of at least “mainstream” organics, local foods then emerged to become the fastest growing sector of the American food system. Consumers turned to local farmers to insure the ecological and social integrity of their foods.

Local foods sales jumping from \$5 billion in 2008 to at least \$12 billion in 2014 and could hit \$20 billion by 2019.²² According to USDA, farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to nearly 8,476 between 1994 and 2015 – more than a four-fold increase.²³ The USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture placed the number of farmers selling through CSAs at more than 12,000 and the total number of farmers selling directly to consumers or local retailers at nearly 50,000.²⁴ A more recent development in local foods has been the formation of multiple-farm networks of local farmers. The networks may be called alliances, cooperative, collaboratives, or food hubs. *Grown Locally*,²⁵ *Idaho's Bounty*,²⁶ *Viroqua Food Coop*,²⁷ *Good Natured Family Farms*²⁸, and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*,²⁹ are examples of successful food networks. The *National Good Food Network* lists more than 300 “food hubs.”³⁰

The local food movement is so diverse and dispersed that it is virtually impossible to accurately estimate its size or importance. Some food hubs are attempting to “scale-up” – to increase in volume and impact – by adopting industrial strategies, while others are striving to create and maintain the personal relationships essential for sustainable local food networks. If the local food movement is to succeed, it must reject the industrial paradigm and grow without compromising the healthy relationships that characterize dynamic, healthy, living organisms.

Organic and local foods both tend to be viewed as driven elitist movements, driven by those who can afford the higher costs of foods that are not only fresh, flavorful, and nutritious, but also produced with ecological and social integrity. However, if agriculture is to be sustainable, it must meet the basic food needs of all, not just those who can afford to pay the full ecological, social, and economic costs of authentically “good food.” Critics of industrial agriculture thus far have focused primarily on the negative ecological and social impacts of industrial agriculture. However, the greatest failure of the industrial food system is its inherent inability to meet the needs of “all” in the present. Persistent hunger and malnutrition could well be the public issues that brings widespread public attention to the need for a sustainable food system. But, it will take the commitment of those in the sustainable food movement to address *the first requisite of sustainability: to meet the basic food needs of all, in the present as well as the future.*

Effective governance will be absolutely necessary to ensure short-run domestic food security as well as long-run global food sustainability. There are good reasons why no responsible government has trusted national food security to markets – competitive or otherwise. Economic value is determined by scarcity, not necessity. Most hungry people are hungry because they are poor, and poor people lack the means of creating scarcity by competing in markets. For example, Americans in general can and do pay farmers more to produce crops for ethanol for automobiles and for food they waste, than hungry people can afford to pay farmers to produce foods they need to keep them healthy. Food is routinely exported to higher valued markets in other countries while the people at home go hungry.

Farm and food policy has been a priority of every civilized nation in human history – when policies have failed, the nations have failed. The phrase, “bread and circuses,” was the means by which Roman governments kept the populace happy by distributing free food and staging huge spectacles. When the Roman Empire eventually failed to provide food for its people, the mighty empire crumbled. The English Poor Laws of the early 1600s were a futile attempt to provide food for the hungry after “the enclosures,” which deprived the less fortunate access to food from

the commons. Adam Smith wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*, “No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.”³¹ U.S. farm policies originated during the 1930s, during the Great Depression, when people were standing in “soup lines” for food. Food assistance programs of the 1960s were a response to growing concerns about “Hunger in America,”³² which was far less than now.

The stated commitment of sustainable agriculture simply extends the historic commitment to provide food security across generations – to meet the basic foods of all, present and future. The new pattern for sustainable farm and food policies is already emerging from the global movement called *food sovereignty*. The term was coined in 1996 by Via Campesina, which is an alliance of 148 international organizations.³³ Food sovereignty is defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”³⁴

Food sovereignty is grounded in the proposition that food is a basic human right – not something to be left to the indifference of markets or the vagaries of charity. A commitment to food sovereignty is not socialist or communist. It is a reaffirmation of a God-given, self-evident, unalienable right that is stated in the American Declaration of Independence: the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nothing is more fundamental to the right to life than the right to clean air and water and safe, healthful food. The rights of liberty include the right to choose culturally appropriate foods and the right to define our own food systems. Ecologically sound and sustainable farming methods simply extends those basic human rights to those of future generations. The Declaration of Independence also states that “to ensure these rights, governments are instituted among men.” I fail to see how anything could be more fundamentally American than government policies designed to ensure the right of all people to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced by ecologically and socially sustainable methods.

Farm policies to support agricultural sustainability fit logically within public policies to ensure food sovereignty. Once the paradigm of farm policy shifts from agricultural industrialization to agricultural sustainability, specific farm policies will emerge to reflect the new “pattern.” I have made some general proposals that include basing subsidies on whole-farm income rather than production of specific commodities.³⁵ First, I would completely eliminate all farm programs that are linked to specific commodities. This would remove current incentives to specialize in specific crops or commodities. Subsidized whole-farm revenue insurance could be provided to reduce economic risks for diversified family farms. Lower premiums for more diversified farming operations would reflect their lower risks. Government support for diversified farms would discourage specialization and industrialization.

All farm subsidies would be contingent on adoption of a sustainable farming system appropriate for the individual farm. In sustainable farming, “one system does not fit all.” Farms would be multifunctional – meaning designed to perform specific economic, social, and ecological functions. Profitability would be a means, not the sole end or purpose. Farm workers would receive a living wage. Animals would have a special status as “workers” with appropriate standards for humane treatment. Farms would not be able to *externalize* social or ecological costs by imposing them on their communities or society. Farms choosing not to participate in farm programs would be regulated the same as any other industrial operation, including environmental and worker safety regulations.

Government payments would be linked to family participation in farming and family size, not farm size, – on people not production. This would allow more people to engage in sustainable agriculture, particularly in ways that create a sense of connectedness between the families and their farms and communities. Farm programs would be designed to sustain farms through periods of economic adversity rather than create dependencies on government payments. Subsidies would be linked to net farm income, increasing when necessary to support families during years of negative net farm income and decreasing as farm income increases. Income-linked subsidies would facilitate the transition from industrial to sustainable farming and would be phased out automatically as net farm income approaches median non-farm incomes for non-farm families.

To encourage the growth of sustainable local food systems, Community Food Utilities (CFU) could be established to ensure enough good food for everyone in the community – as a “basic human right.”³⁶ Public utilities are commonly used to provide water, sewer, electricity, natural gas, communication systems, and other “essentials.” What could be more essential than enough good food? Public utilities may be operated by public agencies, such as most water/sewer systems, or by private companies, as with most energy companies. Public utilities are legal means of removing the provision of public services from the competitive economic pressures faced by private businesses, which could make good food accessible to “everyone.”

Public utilities also may function as cooperatives, such as those funded by the Rural Electrification Administration – the REA Cooperatives. The CFUs could be jointly funded locally and through a new federal program similar to the REA. The CFU would carry out this mission of eliminating local hunger by means that ensure safe, nutritious, healthful food and simultaneously enhance the ecological, social, and economic integrity of the local food system. Successful community-based food systems, that eliminate local hunger, could well provide the political leverage needed to shift farm and food policy in a fundamentally different direction.

I realize the shift in farm policy that I am proposing will not be easy. I do not underestimate the economic and political powers that are committed to defending the status quo. That’s the reason I began by saying that we are in a battle for the hearts and minds of the American people. We must win the hearts and minds of the American people, if farming and food systems of the future are to meet the basic food needs of the people rather than continue to enhance the economic bottom lines of those who support the agricultural establishment.

The failure of industrial agriculture is systemic and farm policies of the future must support a fundamentally different system of agriculture – a sustainable agriculture that meets the basic food needs of all. Farm policies of the past succeeded in creating an industrial agriculture. There is every reason to believe that farm policies of the future can create a new sustainable agriculture. Growing public concerns create an opportunity for fundamental change in farm policies. We are at a crossroads in U.S. farm policy. We are at a time in history when we must choose. The future of our country and of humanity may well depend on our choice.

End Notes:

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