

Confronting CAFOs with Communities of Necessityⁱ

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Governments, federal, state, and local have failed to protect Americans from the environmental and public health threats of concentrated animal feeding operations or CAFOs. As a result, people in rural communities are beginning to join forces to defend their health and well-being against the threats posed by CAFOs. As I have written in the past, the most important reason I personally keep fighting the battles against industrial agriculture is to support the people I meet. I have believed for a long time the future leadership of rural America is emerging from among those who are taking the lead in protecting their communities against CAFOs. I am just beginning to fully appreciate the importance of the new relationships being forged among people who share this common concern for the future of their communities.

During the past year, I have met with local anti-CAFO group in Arkansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ontario Canada. Each group is different but all of have one thing in common: they are all creating new “communities of necessity.” Most of these folks didn’t form new relationships with their neighbors because they wanted to. They got together because they felt they had to—out of necessity. They knew they would have to work together if they were to have a chance to protect themselves, their families, and their communities from the threats of CAFOs.

When I was a kid growing on a small farm in southwest Missouri in the 1940s and 1950s, we still had strong communities. It would have been very difficult for anyone who built a CAFO in a rural area in those earlier times. It wasn’t socially or morally acceptable for one person in the community to benefit at the expense of others. Rural people were also very skeptical of “outsiders,” such as the corporations that are promoting CAFOs. They understood that more often than not “outside investors” were intent on taking advantage of the “local yokels.” The strong communities of earlier time were created out of necessity and over time had become an important keepers of rural social and cultural values.

Rural communities of the past were interwoven networks of people who knew each other mainly out of necessity. Most farms in those days couldn’t actually be farmed by a single farmer or farm family. Farming was, by necessity, a community affair. There were crews, some up to forty men and boys, who traveled from farm to farm to fill silos. Each farmer brought along with their share of farm equipment and labor. For my dad, it was mostly labor—as there were three growing boys in the family. In the early days, the traveling threshing crews followed a steam engine that pulled and powered the threshing machine. The haying crews tended to be smaller because there was less equipment involved, but it still took a crew to put up hay. The men and boys worked hard, but a lot of socializing also took place at these gatherings.

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The “farm wives” also renewed relationships at times of harvest. Several women and girls would gather at the host farms on harvest days to help the host wife prepare the noon meal for the harvest crews. The farm women also had their individual groups who gathered periodically to make quilts to keep their families warm in winter and to help each other can fruit and make preserves or cut meat and make sausage on butchering days. The work was often tedious and tiresome but the varied conversations helped to pass the time.

These networks of necessity were interconnected through local churches. So, everybody knew everybody in their own churches as well as most folks in the others churches nearby. The parents of kids who went to school together all knew each other. Visiting on Sunday wasn't limited to kinfolks; it included neighbors. People also visited at the country store and at the barber shop, filling station, and farmers' cooperative exchange in town.

“Giving someone a hand” wasn't limited to helping out in emergencies, but was given any time someone “needed a hand.” These communities, created out of necessity, were communities that not only helped rural people make a living but only gave them a common sense of purpose. Relationships are difficult and disagreements naturally arose. But, rural folks knew they needed to get along to get by in life. They weren't going to live anywhere else. Furthermore, this strong sense of community added a sense of meaning and quality to day-to-day rural life.

But “times changed” in Rural America. The industrialization of agriculture removed the necessity for community-based farming. Individually owned field choppers replaced the big silo crews, individual combines replaced big threshing crews, and inexpensive hay balers replaced big haying crews. Farmers were free to harvest their own crops whenever they choose, rather than wait their turn to be helped by the big crews of neighbors. Modern kitchen conveniences also eliminated the need for farm wives to share housework.

Social circles in farming communities began to narrow and narrowed further as farms grew larger and surviving farmers became fewer. New people moved into rural areas—seeking the low-paying jobs of factory farms or escaping high living costs in cities. Most people didn't bother to get to know their new neighbors because they “didn't need to.” This loss of community left rural communities vulnerable what I call the “economic colonization” of rural America.

Economic colonization is a term typically used in reference to neoliberal economic development in nations previously colonized politically. Rather than countries being colonized economically by more powerful governments, most economic colonization today is carried out by multinational corporations, which is the case in rural America. Much like colonial empires of the past, global corporations have been extending their economic power to dominate people in rural places all around the world. Rural people everywhere are losing their sovereignty, as corporations use their economic power over local economies to gain control of local governments. Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and cultures, are being exploited – not to benefit rural people but to increase the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations are purely economic entities with no capacity for caring or commitment to

the present or future of rural communities. Their only interest is in extracting the economic wealth from rural areas. This is classic economic colonialism.

Today, rural economic colonialization is defended by the argument that rural people are incapable of developing their own economies and must rely on outside investment for economic development. Local officials are told that corporate investments will bring badly needed jobs and local income and will expand local tax bases. Economically depressed rural communities are promised opportunities for better schools, better health care, expanded social services, and a greater variety of retail businesses. In cases where promises of prosperity have failed to persuade the people, corporations have resorted to economic favors for local leaders or outright “bribery.” If all else fails, they simply use interstate commerce or free trade laws to claim the economic right to force their way into communities where they are unwanted. These are the same basic strategies colonial empires have used with the indigenous peoples of their colonies throughout history. As with political and economic colonies of the past, the promises of economic development are soon replaced with the reality of economic extraction and exploitation.

Whether intentional or not, industrial agriculture has been a primary means of colonizing rural America. Rural communities have been promised economic prosperity through industrial agriculture. Instead, industrial farming operations have eroded the fertility of the soil and polluted the air and water with chemical and biological wastes—more like mining operations than traditional farming. Comprehensive corporate contractual arrangements have replaced thinking, caring family farmers with far fewer “farm workers.” Communities are supported by people, not simply production. It takes people not only to buy farm supplies and equipment at local dealers but also to shop for clothes, cars, and haircuts on Main Street, to fill desks in local schools, pews in local churches, and seats on town councils and school boards.

Most rural kids today grow up, leave, and don’t come back. Those who choose to “stay home” are labeled as *not* being among the “best or brightest.” Some are “bribed” by parents who help them get long term loans they must stay to repay. New rural residents are more likely to be immigrants desperate for work or people fleeing the cities for cheaper places to live. The sense of community is lost. When the sense of community is lost, the sense of common commitment and shared hope for the future is lost. A recent Wall Street Journal article calls “Rural America the New Inner City.”¹ The article documents that levels of unemployment, chronic illness, teen pregnancy, crime, and drug abuse in many rural areas now exceed those of inner cities.

Wendell Berry summarized the current plight of rural America in a recent letter to the book editor of the New York Times: “*The business of America has been largely and without apology the plundering of rural America, from which everything of value—minerals, timber, farm animals, farm crops, and “labor”—has been taken at the lowest possible price. As apparently none of the enlightened ones has seen in flying over or bypassing on the interstate highways, its too-large fields are toxic and eroding, its streams and rivers poisoned, its forests mangled, its towns dying or dead along with their locally owned small businesses, its children leaving after high school and not coming back. Too many of the children are not working at anything, too many are transfixed by the various screens, too many are on drugs, too many are dying.*”² The economic colonization of rural America has turned the promises of rural prosperity into the reality of rural ghettos.

To break the cycle of rural economic exploitation, rural people must again join together, *as communities of necessity* to protect themselves and their families from the ecological, social, and economic consequences of industrial agriculture. This is not a farm-versus-town or rural-versus-urban issue. This is a matter of necessity for those who care about the future of their communities. Margaret Wheatley, a leading thinker on institutional and cultural change, recently identified three major trends in American society: First, “*A growing sense of impotence and dread about the state of the nation,*” second, “*The realization that information doesn’t change minds anymore,*” and third, “*The clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action—that there is no greater power for change than a community taking its future into its own hands.*”

I agree with Wheatley. First, as I have suggested, I believe the prevailing mood in rural America today is one of “impotence and dread.” Rural people are beginning to awaken to the inevitable consequences of economic exploitation but feel powerless to stop it. Second, I agree that information no longer changes minds. We now have more than 50 years of “sound science” and the real-world experience of people in rural communities confirming the negative environmental, social, and economic impact of industrial agriculture.

Nowhere is the evidence more clear and compelling in the case of CAFOs. For example, a 2½-year study focusing on “industrial farm animal production” (meaning CAFOs) was commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trust. The 2008 report concluded: “The current industrial farm animal production (IFAP) system often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals themselves.”³ They added: “The negative effects of the IFAP system are too great and the scientific evidence is too strong to ignore. Significant changes must be implemented and must start now.” Five years later, in 2013, an assessment of the industry’s response to the Pew Report by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health concluded that few if any positive changes had been made.⁴ Meanwhile the scientific evidence supporting the initial indictment continues to grow.

The negative impacts of CAFOs on public health are perhaps the most compelling problems facing both rural and urban residents. For example, a 2013 U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention report stated: “Scientists around the world have provided strong evidence that antibiotic use in food-producing animals can harm public health. Resistant bacteria can be transmitted from food-producing animals to humans through the food supply.”⁵ The World Health Organization “strongly recommends an overall reduction in the use of all classes of medically important antibiotics in food-producing animals, including complete restriction of these antibiotics for growth promotion and disease prevention without diagnosis.”⁶

A 2016 global summit of Heads of State at the United National General Assembly, concluded: “The high levels of AMR [antimicrobial resistance] already seen in the world today are the result of overuse and misuse of antibiotics and other antimicrobials in humans, animals, and crops, as well as the spread of residues of these medicines in soil, crops and water.” “Antimicrobial resistance is a problem not just in our hospitals, but on our farms and in our food, too. Agriculture must shoulder its share of responsibility.”⁷ Similar scientific consensus exist

for a variety of other public health risks posed by pollution of air and water by CAFOs and other industrial agricultural operations.⁸

Economic colonization is the more subtle or hidden threat of CAFOs. Nevertheless, cultural anthropologists and rural sociologists have compiled more than 70-years of research documenting the adverse impacts of industrial agriculture on rural economies and the quality of life in rural communities. Walter Goldschmidt's classic 1944 research, *As You Sow*⁹ "showed that largescale, especially industrial, farm structures in one community were associated with adverse community conditions. Smaller-scale, owner-operated farms in the other community, were associated with more vibrant, diverse economies and with higher standards of living."¹⁰

A 2006 meta-study, commissioned by the State of North Dakota Attorney General's Office, summarized the research in 56 articles in peer-reviewed journals assessing the socio-economic impacts of industrial agriculture on rural communities.¹¹ The study concluded: "Based on the evidence generated by social science research, we conclude that public concern about the detrimental community impacts of industrialized farming is warranted. In brief, this conclusion rests on five decades of government and academic concern with this topic, a concern that has not abated but that has grown more intense in recent years, as the social and environmental problems associated with large animal confinement operations have become widely recognized."¹² Another 2009 meta-study concluded: "Economically speaking, studies over the past 50 years demonstrate that the encroachment of industrialized agriculture operations upon rural communities, results in lower relative incomes for certain segments of the community and greater income inequality and poverty, a less active 'Main Street,' decreased retail trade, and fewer stores in the community."¹³

Finally, a 2016 independent study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability (IPES) described the evidence condemning industrial agriculture as "overwhelming"¹⁴ – cited more than 350 studies. The 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."¹⁵

Even in the U.S., industrial agriculture has failed to provide enough nutritious food for those who need it most. In 2015, the USDA classified nearly 13% of U.S. households as "food insecure," and nearly 17% of American children lived in food insecure households.¹⁶ Food insecurity means uncertainty regarding whether enough food will be available to meet the nutritional needs of the household. In 1967, when CBS-TV aired its classic documentary, "Hunger in America," only 5% of the people in the U.S. were estimated to be hungry, which was considered a national emergency. In addition, we have an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, and other diet-related diseases that threaten the physical and economic future of the country. Sixty years of industrial agriculture has done nothing to alleviate hunger in the U.S., and contrary to popular belief, neither has it elsewhere in the world.

The IPES 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.”

Contrary to popular beliefs, the world doesn’t need industrial agriculture. The food needs of 70% to 80% of the people of the world still are being met by small family farms, most of which Americans would call “subsistence farms.”¹⁷ Not industrial agriculture. Again, global research has shown that with minimal public assistance, not industrial technologies, the world’s small family farmers would be quite capable of doubling or tripling their production, without using industrial agricultural practices—not only feeding themselves but also “feeding the world.”

The agribusiness corporations have responded to this growing body of scientific information, not with calls for change but with a multimillion dollar a year public relations campaign to “greenwash” industrial agriculture. Rather than accept the facts, they work with “agricultural scientists” to create “alternative facts.” As a result, many public officials continue to promote CAFOs, and the general public doesn’t know who to believe. However, the corporate propaganda campaign is little more than a “holding action” against growing public concerns about industrial agriculture in general and CAFOs in particular. The agricultural establishment is simultaneously using its political power to build a “legal fire wall” to preclude effective restraint or regulation of industrial agriculture. Their legislative agenda has grown progressively bolder as public awareness and public resistance to industrial agriculture has grown.

Their pro-corporate political campaign is following the legislative agenda of the *American Legislative Exchange Council* or ALEC—a politically powerful conservative “think-tank.” The ALEC statement of “agriculture principles” begins: “*The proper role of government involvement in agriculture is to limit and remove barriers for agricultural production, trade, and consumption... In developing public policy options... policymakers should recognize that the United States currently possesses the safest, highest quality, and most innovative food system in the world.*”¹⁸ The ultimate intent of the ALEC legislative agenda is clear.

During the 1990s, 13 states passed laws often called “food disparagement laws” or “veggie libel laws to make it easier for farm groups and food processors to sue anyone for libel who criticizes the safety or healthfulness of specific foods or systems of production.”¹⁹ “Ag-gag”²⁰ laws are another example of generic ALEC legislation. Eight states have enacted laws that forbid undercover filming or photography of any activity on farms without the consent of their owner. The laws are targeted specifically to whistle-blower employees who have documented animal cruelty in factory farming operations. Even if such cases don’t prevail in court, as with the Oprah Winfrey case, or are declared unconstitutional, as in the case of “ag-gag” laws, such laws still have a chilling effect of potential food critics.

The early “right to farm” laws, beginning in the 1980s, were enacted to minimize the threat of nuisance litigation and prohibitive state and local government regulation of “normal farming practices.”²¹ The early laws seemed justified and relatively benign. The ALEC agenda has turned the traditional family farmers’ “right to farm” into corporate agriculture’s “right to harm.”

Recent laws go far beyond those initial laws by prohibiting effective government regulation of any farming practice or agricultural technology the agricultural establishment deems to be a “normal farming practice”—including CAFOs, GMOs, and other controversial industrial agricultural practices. Some states have adopted “right to farm constitutional amendments,” which will be much harder to change when the public becomes aware of their abuse.²²

The most recent “right to farm” laws limit monetary awards to plaintiffs in successful nuisance suits against CAFOs. An agricultural operation can still be sued by its neighbors, if it creates a “legal nuisance.” However, if neighbors win their law suit, the economic damages awarded by the court cannot exceed the depreciation in market values of plaintiffs’ property and any medical expenses of plaintiffs that can be linked directly to the agricultural operation.^{23,24} Punitive damages may be either prohibited or limited to a percentage of economic damages. More important, once the initial nuisance suit is settled, the factory farm is treated as a “permanent nuisance,” meaning it can continue to operate as usual and cannot be sued again. CAFO operators are given more power than the government’s power of “eminent domain.”

These and other state and federal exemptions of industrial agriculture from regulation seem to be paving the way for a long run strategy of establishing “agricultural zones” where industrial agriculture can operate virtually free of government regulation or threat of private legal actions by neighbors. For example the *Indiana Land Resource Council* has proposed “Model Agricultural Zoning Ordinances,” based on how “counties in other states have developed their zoning ordinances to minimize conflicting uses and ensure that agriculture remains a strong component of the county’s economy.”²⁵ The ordinances would minimize potential conflicts by prohibiting new non-farm residences in areas zoned for agriculture.

The Iowa Right to Farm Law is even more clearly supportive of *rural economic colonization*. “It is the intent of the general assembly to provide local citizens and local governments the means by which agricultural land may be protected from nonagricultural development pressures. This may be accomplished by the creation of county land preservation and use plans and policies, adoption of an agricultural land preservation ordinance, or establishment of agricultural areas in which substantial agricultural activities are encouraged, so that land inside these areas or subject to those ordinances is conserved for the production of food, fiber, and livestock, thus assuring the preservation of agriculture as a major factor in the economy of this state.”²⁶

Current family farming communities would be turned into industrial agricultural “sacrifice zones,” saturated with agricultural chemical and biological wastes, where corporate agriculture can pollute and plunder at will. Rural areas would become increasingly toxic places to live, and eventually the remaining independent family farmers will be driven out of their homes. Organic farms and other sustainable farming operations would be driven out of business by pesticide and GMO pollen drift and polluted irrigation and drinking water. The only people left in agriculturally zoned areas would be low-paid, hired laborers who were willing to work on industrial agricultural operations only because they were desperate for jobs. The wealthy landowners and corporate investors would live elsewhere.

So where is the hope for the future of rural America? Returning to Margaret Wheatley, the hope is in the “*clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action.*”²⁷ I

think most rural people simply don't understand, or perhaps don't want to believe, what is happening to their communities. If they understood, I believe people in local communities everywhere would begin to create new "communities of necessity"—and would take action. People act whenever they feel it is necessary to defend against acts of nature—windstorms, floods, fires. People also take action whenever they feel compelled to defend deeply held social and ethical values. *Honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect!* "These five core ethical values are common to many cultures, regardless of race, age, religious affiliation, gender, or nationality," according to the Institute for Global Ethics.²⁸ The arrogance and indifference in the location, operation, and lack of regulation of concentrated animal feeding operations, violates every one of these core ethical values. Whenever people fully comprehend this blatant disregard for the values of basic human decency, rural communities will be compelled take action.

The ALEC political agenda for agriculture would not only violate of our core moral and ethical values but would violate our constitutional rights. Admittedly, the Constitution doesn't mention the right to clean air, clean water, and safe, wholesome food. However, our rights are not limited to rights specifically named or enumerated in the Constitution. The 9th Amendment states: "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people." These "other" rights, in addition to those named, are to be "retained by the people." Some of those other rights were later added to the Constitution, such as the prohibition of slavery and women's right to vote. The Supreme Court has interpreted other rights to be *implied* by enumerated rights such as the right to privacy and freedom of assembly.

Our most fundamental rights are expressed in the American Declaration Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men." All other rights are dependent on the rights to *life*, and what could be more important to the right to life than clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and safe food to eat? We have a constitutional right to be protected from the environmental and public health risks posed by CAFOs.

According to the Declaration of Independence, governments are established for the purpose of securing the God given rights of the people. Instead our government gives propriety to the economic rights of corporations over the constitutional rights of the people. Meaningful change is necessary but won't be quick or easy. The defenders of the status quo are economically and politically powerful. The personal relationships and commitments necessary for empowered local communities and community alliances are difficult to form and to sustain. We Americans have a long history of striving for self-reliance and independence, making it difficult to admit we need to rely on each other. That said, we also have a long history of coming together, even making government work, whenever it has been necessary to do so.

"We the people" we have the power to claim our rights and to change our government. The 10th Amendment states that "Powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, *or to the people.*" One person can't change the balance of power, even at the local level, but a small group of committed people can. Individual concerns can become community concerns. Communities of concern can link with other concerned communities to form "alliances" of community committed to

protecting their own communities and helping protect all other communities. As people change, communities change, and societies change. That's the way change has happened and always will happen; one person, then another... one community, then another and another... one at a time.

Our governments--federal, state, and local—have failed to use their power to protect the people from the threats of industrial agriculture. Our Declaration of Independence states “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [fails to secure the rights of the people], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

We the people, must come together as “communities of necessity” committed to claiming our constitutional rights to clean air, pure water, and safe, nutritious food. Again quoting Margaret Wheatley, “*There is no power for change greater than a community taking its future in its own hands.*”²⁹ People in rural communities must again come together, decide *who they are, what they value*, and *what kind of future they want*—then find the courage to *take their future in their own hands*.

End Notes

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