

Reinventing the Food Chain¹

John Ikerd²

The American food system of the 21st century will be different. This is perhaps the only thing we can say with any degree of confidence about our future food system. American agriculture of the future will be very different from agriculture of the present as well as different from agriculture of the past. Changes in the rest of the food system may be at least as great as in agricultural production. In addition, the least accurate prediction concerning how the future will be different would be some simple extrapolation from the past, through the present, and into the future. All trends eventually change direction – the world works in cycles. Everything that goes up comes down and everything that goes around comes back around. Admittedly, the past and the present always contain the seeds of the future. However, we humans lack the ability to foretell the future with accuracy – although our human imagination and curiosity continually tempts us to try.

In his book, “The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio,” economist Steven C. Blank envisions the *end of the American agriculture* – a vision of the future grudgingly shared by a growing number of people in the conventional agricultural establishment. Agriculture in America is destined to end, he argues, but this should be no cause for alarm. He contends that the end of American agricultural production is the result of a natural process that is making us all better off. He foresees a time in the not too distant future when the U.S. will import nearly all of its foodstuffs from other countries. Costs of land and labor in the U.S. will be too high for American farmers to be competitive in a global food economy. He argues that creeping globalization of the food system is not some corporate conspiracy but is simply the result of the struggles of farmers and agribusiness, in America and around the world, logically pursuing their individual economic self-interests. This pursuit of individual economic self-interest ultimately will best serve the long run interests of society as a whole, he claims.

Blank's fundamental arguments are based on the basic premise that economic considerations ultimately will prevail over all others. First American farmers will be forced to abandon production of basic agricultural commodities – corn, soybeans, hogs, cattle, cotton, rice, etc. – in favor of high-investment, high-risk crops – such as wine grapes, berries, organic vegetables, etc. High-risk, high-return enterprises will be the last agricultural alternatives offering farmers any hope of realizing profits from employing high cost land and labor. However, increasing affluence will allow increasing numbers of people to escape from the cities in search of a quieter, safer, healthier lifestyle in the countryside. As land prices continue to rise, agribusiness eventually will abandon America completely because they will be able to employ their management and capital more profitably in other countries.

¹ Prepared for presentation at, “Re-inventing Farming in 2003,” sponsored by the Fruit Growers League of Jackson County, Medford, OR. February 6, 2003.

² John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA.
web site: <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/>

Although, Blank doesn't make a major issue of it, he assumes that corporate agribusiness will replace family farms because corporations are “more efficient” producers than are families. And family corporations will be replaced by public, stockholder corporations, because economies of size in high-tech agricultural production exceed a size of operation affordable even to most wealthy families. As American agriculture comes increasingly under the control of corporate agribusiness – through ownership, contracting, or various types of strategic alliances – it will respond even more efficiently to competitive global markets.

Once corporate ownership becomes separated from management, through public stock offerings, a corporation becomes incapable of pursuing any objectives other than maximum profit and growth – its stockholders will accept nothing less. Corporations are not human; they have no heart or soul. Thus, corporations have no sentimental attachment to any particular parcel of land, community, geographic region, or nation. Most who own stocks through institutions, in pension funds and mutual funds, don't even know which companies' shares they own. If economic costs of production are less in some country other than in the US, as they almost certainly will be, then that's where America's food will be produced. Agricultural technology, capital, and management can be shifted easily from America to other countries around the globe – as we have seen in the production of other industrial goods.

However, Blank claims we should not be concerned because Americans still will be well fed. This is all a quite logical result of the working of a free market economy, he says. It simply will be more efficient in the future to produce America's food elsewhere on the globe. In fact, America's transition out of agriculture will be a sign of national economic progress. Agriculture is any nation's first step toward economic development – abandoning hunting and gathering for a more efficient means of providing food and fiber. However, agriculture requires only low-skilled, manual labor and few management skills, and thus, farming is not capable of sustaining economic progress over time. Manufacturing represents a natural evolution from unskilled labor to skilled labor, to mechanization, and management of large, complex industrial systems of production. Over the past two centuries, industrialization has been the mark of economic progress as nations move from agriculture to manufacturing.

However, as we enter the 21st century, America is moving beyond industrialization – to a new post-industrial era of economic development. We already have seen the foundation of the US economy shift from manufacturing to the service sector of the economy. Some service jobs tend to be low-skill and low paying, such as fast foods and electronic data entry. However, many service positions are high-skill office work, requiring high levels of education and training – such as finance, brokerage, marketing, communications, education, research, systems design, and all sorts of consulting. Such jobs are more productive and command higher salaries than manufacturing jobs.

In the 21st century, America will become part of the “new economy” – new information systems will allow corporations in the “more advanced” nations to create, manage, and control the agricultural, manufacturing, and service sectors of the economics of other nations. Those who create, manage, and control things inevitably reap greater economic benefits than those who actually produce, manufacture, and do things. Agriculture and manufacturing are but stepping

stones to higher levels of economic development. Blank contends that it's simply time for America to abandon agriculture and move ahead to its next stage of economic development.

Globalization facilitates greater specialization among different national economies. In a *seamless*, global economy, some nations can specialize in agriculture, others in manufacturing, others in services, and others in providing *homes* for corporations that create, manage, and control the economic enterprises of other nations. Current World Trade negotiations are being carried out for the expressed purpose of creating a single global economy within which all nations are free to pursue their economic competitive advantages. Anything that restricts trade is seen as an obstacle to global economic progress – an obstacle that must be removed for the sake of greater economic efficiency.

In summary, Blank believes that the open spaces of rural America will be transformed from farms into living space for a growing and increasingly affluent population fleeing the problems of urbanization. Cornfields are unable to compete with condominiums for farmland. The Rogue River Valley can't compete with Silicone Valley for farm workers. Farming is a low-skilled, “primary” industry that has no place in an advanced, “high-tech” economy. Rural ways of life will give way to urban ways of life, as farms become residential ranchettes. Virtual communities of people, interconnected by the Internet, will replace real communities of people who meet fact-to-face in church or at the grocery store. Agriculture will no longer be a significant factor in the future rural economy. Most people in rural communities will be employed elsewhere -- perhaps by companies thousands of miles away.

Americans will be well fed, but our food will come from other countries where it can be produced cheaper. People of all nations will benefit as they are allowed to pursue their economic competitive advantages in a global economy. Today's agricultural producers will find future employment, but not as farmers, or at least as farmers in America. Blank claims the only forms of truly sustainable agriculture in America will be those compatible with urban life – mainly golf courses, ornamental nurseries, and turf farms. The American farm will be a thing of the past.

Blank's conclusions regarding the future of agriculture, the food system, and the global economy, are all quite reasonable and logical within the context of contemporary economic thinking. If the usual assumptions of economic theory were an accurate reflection of today's reality, then Blank's predictions for the future would be quite reasonable. In fact, if the world, at some point in the future, completely abandons its common sense for some pseudo-economic logic, then Blank's predictions might actually come to pass. Admittedly, economics has become the dominant *religion* of our American society, and it is being rapidly spread around the world. But, people have not yet abandoned their common sense – at least not completely. There is still hope that newly enlightened thinking will prevail over the dogma of economics, that the twenty-first century will not bring the *end of the American farm*, but instead, instead will bring the emergence of a *new American farm*.

The conventional economic wisdom in America today seems to be that only *the markets* are capable of ensuring that the right things are done, and are done efficiently. Supply and demand are seen as the only true arbiters of value. If something is profitable, it should be done, if it is unprofitable, it shouldn't. Anything that interferes with the markets, the government, public

attitudes, or cultural values, for example, by definition creates economic inefficiency and is bad for society. Few people are aware of the origin of these *beliefs*, and even fewer seem willing to challenge them. In fact, the few who dare to question the sanctity of the markets are quickly attacked by people in powerful places with obvious self-interest in perpetuating *the myth of the markets* -- including an army of economists.

The current belief in the sanctity of markets can be traced back to statements by the British Economist, Adam Smith, in his book, The Wealth of Nations, published in 1776. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages" (p. 7). Later, in reference to trade, Smith states, "he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (p. 199). These statements provided the foundation for contemporary economic *wisdom* -- that pursuit of short run self-interests is transformed into achievement of the public good, as if by an *invisible hand*.

From Adam Smith's observations of more than 200 years ago, neo-classical economists developed the fundamental assumptions that underlie "free market" economic thinking even today. Although contemporary economists try desperately to rationalize arguments to the contrary, these conditions must hold before the *invisible hand* of competitive capitalism can transform the pursuit of individual short-run self-interest into the greater long-run good of society in general.

First, markets must be economically competitive – meaning numbers of buyers and sellers so large that no single buyer or seller can have any noticeable effect on the overall market. In such markets, no one has the power to retain profits by exploiting anyone else. It must be easy for new sellers to enter enterprises that are profitable and easy for sellers to get out of unprofitable enterprises, so that producers are able to respond to market signals of consumers' wants and needs. Consumers must have clear and accurate information concerning whether the things they buy to will actually meet their wants and needs. And finally, consumers must be *sovereigns* – their tastes and preferences must reflect their basic values – their tastes and preferences untainted by persuasive influences.

None of these assumptions holds in today's society. Today agricultural markets are dominated by the large agribusiness corporations, certainly at every level other than farming, and increasingly even at the farm level. In addition, it is not easy to get into or out of any aspect of agriculture, and it is becoming increasingly harder to even to get into or out of farming. Consumers don't get accurate, unbiased information concerning the products they buy, but instead get disinformation by design, disguised as advertising. Finally, consumers are no longer sovereigns. The food industry spends billions of dollars on advertising designed specifically to bend and shape consumers tastes and preferences to accommodate mass production and mass distribution, which enable corporate control of agriculture. There is no logical reason to believe that the corporate agriculture of today is evolving to meet the changing needs or wants of consumers.

Instead, corporate agriculture today is designed specifically to generate profits and growth for corporate investors. In fact, we no longer have a competitive, capitalistic agricultural economy. Capitalism requires that individuals make individual decisions in a competitive market environment. As corporations extend their control horizontally “within” the same functional levels, such as marketing, storage, transportation, processing, or retailing, they increase their ability to protect profits from competitors. As corporations extend their control vertically, “across” functional levels, including additional different stages of production and marketing, they gain control over decisions concerning how much of what is produced, when it is produced, how it is produced and for whom. Those decisions are made to maximize their short-run profits and growth, not to meet the long-run needs of society. The economic motives driving corporations to become larger and more global today are not to reduce costs, but rather, to increase market power, to extract profits from their customers and suppliers, and political power to extract subsidies from taxpayers.

Just as independent family farmers have been replaced by large, contract production units, independent food processors and wholesalers have been displaced by giant food processing and distribution firms. These large food processing and distribution operations more recently have combined, through various types of alliances and joint ventures, into five or six even-larger “global food chain clusters.” These global food chains increasingly control all aspects of food production from “dirt to the dinner plate,” as some claim. The most rapid consolidation today is taking place in the retail food sector. Wal-Mart may be the only American food retailer with enough economic and political power to survive the current round of corporate consolidation in food retailing. As the four or five surviving global food retailers link up with existing “global food chain clusters,” they increasingly will control all phases of the global food system from “conception to consumption,” including agricultural production³.

In essence, as agriculture has moved from competitive capitalism to corporatism, it has changed from a market economy to a “central planned” economy. Central planning didn't work for the Communists, and it won't work for true Capitalists. The problem wasn't that the Communists were not smart enough or that their computers weren't large enough. Central planning is a fundamentally *wrong-headed* approach to managing an economy – for corporations as well as governments. The corporate system of food production will prove to be fundamentally incapable of effectively meeting the real needs of people.

Steven Blank's vision of the future would place global food production under the control of a handful of multinational corporations that would decide how much of what kind of food is produced where, and who gets to consume it. Americans would be at least as dependent on the rest of the world for food as we are today for oil. Perhaps we could keep the food imports flowing, as we maintain the inflow of oil today. But, how large a military force would it take? What new “Organization of Food Exporting Countries” might be formed to control the market? How many “small wars” would we have to fight to keep a “renegade country” from reducing our

³ For summaries of global food consolidation studies, see articles by Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan, in *Small Farm Today Magazine*, April 1999 and July 2001, also available on the Internet at <http://nfu.org/images/heffernan.pdf> and <http://nfu.org/images/heffernan1999.pdf>

supply of food? How many people would we eventually have to kill? Would “cheap food” be worth the cost we might ultimately be forced to pay?

Thankfully, as society becomes more enlightened, we are beginning to understand the true costs of cheap food. We are beginning to realize that the industrialization of agriculture, while enhancing economic efficiency and reducing food costs, has brought with it unanticipated ecological and social costs. The industrialization of agriculture, characterized by specialization, standardization, and centralization of control, has put farmers in direct conflict with their ecological, social, and economic environment. Cheap food most certainly has not benefited most farmers economically. As farms have become more specialized and more mechanized, they have become larger in size, and thus, fewer in number. The struggle for ever-greater economic efficiency has forced many farmers, ranchers, foresters, and fruit growers to fail so that a few might survive – by buying their failed neighbor's land and growing larger. Does it really make sense to displace farmers of other countries as we have displaced ours – in our continuing pursuit of even cheaper food?

Also, we are beginning to realize that we are destroying our natural environment in the process of trying to produce cheap food. We are mining the soil through erosion and depletion of its natural productivity in the process of maximizing production and minimizing dollar and cent costs of production. We are polluting our streams and groundwater with residues from the pesticides and commercial fertilizers necessary for large-scale, specialized industrial crop production and with wastes from giant confinement animal feeding factories. We are destroying the genetic diversity, both below and above the soil, which is necessary to support nature's means of capturing and transforming solar energy into energy for human uses. Does it really make sense to export our ecologically destructive farming methods to other nations – in our continuing quest for cheap food?

The independent food processor, distributor, or retailer today is under the same economic pressures as the family farmer. They are fighting for their very economic survival. They can't afford to be too concerned about the well-being of their employees, their suppliers, or their customers; they have to look out for themselves. If their labor costs are too high, because of generous salaries and benefits, they can't compete. If they pay too much to farmers or other suppliers of raw materials, their profit margins will disappear. If they don't take advantage of the natural human frailties of their customers, their competitors will. If a store or processing plant isn't profitable in one community, they have to move to another, regardless of the impact on the community. The independent food marketer, like the family farmer, is in a life and death struggle. They can't afford to be too concerned about people; they have to think about survival of the business.

We are just beginning to realize that we are destroying the social fabric of our society in the process of trying to make our food system more efficient. We are destroying opportunities for people to lead productive, successful lives. We are turning thinking people, innovative, creative people into order takers. Farmers are being displaced by contract tractor drivers and hog house janitors just as independent entrepreneurs in food processing and retailing are being displaced by corporate franchise operators. There can be dignity in all work, but all people should have opportunities to express their full human potential. Consolidation of decision-making

concentrates opportunities among the privileged few while leaving the many without hope for a rewarding future. Industrial specialization also tends to separate people within families, within communities, and within nations. We are just beginning to realize that industrialization destroys the human relationships needed to support a civilized society. Does it make sense to destroy the social and cultural fabric of other countries as well – in our quest for cheaper food?

The outdated economics that supports agricultural industrialization for the sake of economic efficiency is fundamentally incapable of dealing effectively with either the environmental or the social challenges confronting agriculture today. In economics, the environment and society are external or outside of the decision making process – something that may impact or be impacted by decisions but not part of the process. In reality, the economy, environment, and society all are parts of the same inseparable whole. Society needs a more enlightened system of decision-making – one capable of integrating economic, ecological, and social decisions.

It's true, people will pursue their self-interest, – it is an inherent aspect of being human, as conventional economics assumes. But, people, by nature, do not pursue *only* their narrow, individual self-interest. It is within the fundamental nature of people also to care about other people and to accept the responsibilities of humanity as the caretakers of the earth. People are perfectly capable of rising above the *economics of greed* to an *economics of enlightenment*. An *invisible hand* can still translate pursuit of self-interests into the greatest good for society, but only if each person pursues a *more enlightened* self-interest – self-interest that values relationships and stewardship as important dimensions of our quality of life.

The sustainable agriculture movement in America exemplifies the pursuit of a more enlightened self-interest. People may disagree on the specific words, but there is a growing consensus that a sustainable agriculture is an agriculture that is capable of meeting the needs of the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for the future. The concept of sustainability applies the Golden Rule across generations. *We should do for those of future generations, as we would have them do for us, if we were of their generation and they were of ours.* We must find ways to meet our needs, all of us who are here today, without diminishing the ability of those of future generations to meet their needs as well.

A sustainable agriculture must have three fundamental characteristics. It must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. Any system of farming that lacks any one of the three quite simply is not sustainable. This is not a matter for debate; it is just plain common sense. A sustainable agriculture must protect and maintain the productivity of its natural resource base. If the land loses its ability to produce, the farm is not sustainable. A sustainable agriculture must provide for the food and fiber needs of people, but it also must provide people with opportunities to lead successful lives. Agriculture must do its part to sustain society or society will not sustain that type of agriculture. Finally, a sustainable agriculture must make sufficient profits for farms to remain economically solvent. If the farmer goes broke, the farm is not sustainable.

No one of the three dimensions is any more or less important to sustainability than the others. The ecological, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability are like the three dimensions of a box. A box that is lacking in height, width, or length quite simply is not a box. A farm that

lacks economic viability, ecological integrity, or social responsibility is quite simply not sustainable.

Sustainable farming is thinking farming. It requires an ability to translate observation into information, information into knowledge, knowledge into understanding, and understanding into wisdom. Certainly, sustainable farming involves hard work, but farming sustainably is not the “first stage of development beyond hunting and gathering.” It is the next stage, beyond “industrialization.” Sustainable agriculture is very much in harmony with a post-industrial paradigm for future human progress – the next step forward in the ongoing process of human development. Sustainable farmers are thinking workers – or working thinkers. Contrary to Blank's suggestion that America must abandon agriculture as it moves beyond industrialization, perhaps America simply needs to embrace this new kind of agriculture that brings with it a new vision for the American economy and society.

Thankfully, a new breed of American farmer has emerged to lead the way in transforming the philosophy of sustainability into a practical, tangible reality. Literally thousands of these new farmers, scattered across the continent and around the world, are creating new and better ways to farm. They may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, practical, innovative, or nothing at all; but they are all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are on the frontier of a new and different kind of agriculture, an agriculture capable of meeting the needs of the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future – a sustainable agriculture. These farmers face struggles and hardships and there are failures along the way. Life is rarely easy on any new frontier. But, a growing number are finding ways to succeed. And, while there are no “blueprints” for the *New American Farm*⁴, some basic characteristics are emerging.

First, these farmers see themselves as stewards of the earth. They are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They have a deep sense of respect for things of the earth. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farming operations tend to be more diversified than conventional farms – because nature is diverse. Diversity may mean a variety of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or managed livestock grazing systems, depending on the type of farm. By managing diversity, these new farmers are able to reduce their dependence on pesticides, fertilizers, and other commercial inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, because they farm in harmony with nature.

Second, these new farmers build relationships. They tend to have more direct contact with their customers than do conventional farmers. Most either market their products direct to customers or market through agents who represent them with their customers. They realize that as consumers each of us value things differently because we have different needs and different tastes and preferences. They produce the things that their customers value most. They have a

⁴ For 50 real life examples, see “The New American Farmer – Profiles in Agricultural Innovation,” the SARE Program, USDA, Washington DC. (\$10 US – call: 802-656-0484 or e-mail: sanpubs@uvm.edu , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer>)

strong sense of respect for people. They are not trying to take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create long-term relationships. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. – and, they receive premium prices by producing foods their customers value. Their farms are more profitable as well as more ecologically sound and socially responsible.

These new farmers challenge the stereotype of the farmer as a fiercely independent competitor. They freely share information and encouragement. They form partnerships and cooperatives to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do together the things that they can't do as well alone. They are not trying to drive each other out of business, so the survivors can farm more land; they are trying to help each other succeed. They refuse to exploit each other for short run gain; they are trying to build long term relationships. They buy locally and market locally because they value community. They bring people together in positive, productive relationships that contribute to their economic, ecological, and societal well-being. They value people, for personal as well as economic reasons, and want to build and maintain good human relationships.

Third, to these new farmers, farming is as much a way of life as a way to make a living. They are “quality of life” farmers. To them, the farm is a good place to live – a healthy environment, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to become a part of a caring community. Many of these farms create economic benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to any reported net farm income. Their “quality of life” objectives are at least as important as the economic objectives in carrying out their farming operations. Their farming operations reflect the things they like to do, the things they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as much as the things that might yield profits. They are connected spiritually through a strong sense of purpose and meaning for their lives. However, for many, their products are better and their costs are less because by following their passion they end up doing what they do best. Most new American farmers are able to earn a decent income, but more important, they have a higher quality of life because they are living a life that they love.

The emergence of this new American farm is cause for optimism but gives no assurance of success. These new farmers are fighting against tremendous odds in the economic arena. These new farmers may seem insignificant as players in the corporate scramble for control of the global food market. They are fighting against tremendous odds in the policy arena. But these new sustainable farmers can succeed, primarily because they are building new personal connections and relationships as they go about their work of building a more sustainable agriculture. And, the guiding principles for successful sustainable production are the same for farmers, ranchers, foresters, or fruit growers.

Independent food processors, distributors, and marketers also face the same kinds of challenges, and thus, have the same kinds of opportunities as independent family farmers. Independent food marketers cannot expect to compete with the giant “global food chain clusters” and are too small to form their own strategic alliances to compete in the global arena, although they might become franchise operators or contract suppliers. And, in situations of such unequal bargaining power, the contractor will make all of the major product and management decisions, will take all of the manageable risks, and thus, will make all of the profits. The corporate franchisee or contract

supplier becomes little more than a low-paid caretaker or landlord, whose business exists only “at the pleasure of” the contractor. If there is to be a future for independent food processors, distributors, or marketers, it will be outside of the global food chain.

Perhaps a fundamentally new and different type of American food business is already emerging. If not, such an opportunity most certainly exists. The new American food business almost certainly must succeed by following the same general principles as the new American farm. They will market in the niches – meeting the needs of consumers that are not being met by the industrial, mass production, mass distribution food system of today. They must recognize that consumers have unique tastes and preferences. Many consumers today don't trust the current food system. They are concerned about food safety and nutrition and are dissatisfied with the taste and flavor of many industrial food products. They will pay premium prices for wholesome, nutritious food that really tastes good. Many consumers are concerned about where their food comes from and how it is produced. They will pay premium prices for crops that are grown organically or for meat from animals raised under humane conditions, without chemicals, without hormones or antibiotics. Others want food that has not been irradiated and that is free of genetically modified organisms. The mass production, mass distribution food system cannot meet the unique needs of unique consumers – at least not as efficiently as can the smaller, individually owned and managed food business.

The person who manages the new American food business must recognize that successful niche marketing is not just another means of “exploiting” consumer demand for unique products. Millions of American consumers want, above all else, to do business with someone they can trust. If that trust is “exploited,” even once, the uniqueness of the product won't matter. Perhaps more than anything else that they buy, consumers want to develop trusting relations with those who produce, process, and handle their food.

Those who operate independent food businesses are in a unique position to reconnect farmers and consumers by restoring trustworthy relationships at the various levels that separate farmers from consumers. The technical means exist today to maintain product identity, all the way from the farmer, through the marketing system, and to the consumer. To date, “relationship markets” have been associated with direct sales between farmers and consumers. But, the means now exist to extend relationships of trust through more complex systems of marketing.

Millions of consumers really do care about what farmers are being forced to do the natural environment in the name of “cheap food.” The rapid growth in demand for organic foods over the past decade is evidence that consumers are willing to pay the cost of ecologically sound farming systems. Millions of consumers care about what farmers are being forced to do to their families and communities in the name of “cheap food.” The dramatic growth in farmers markets, consumer supported agriculture associations and other direct marketing methods in recent years is evidence that consumers are willing to pay the cost of socially responsible farming systems. Claims that costs will be too high quite simply are false. Farming accounts for but a penny of the dime out of each dollar of the average consumer's income that they spend on food. Given the ecological, social, and economic facts of today's food system, and an opportunity to choose the alternative, consumers would be more than willing to pay the economic costs of a sustainable agriculture.

Consumers also care about what is happening to the rest of their food system – to independent processors, distributors, and retailers. Most are simply unaware that a half-dozen multinational corporations are quickly gaining control of the global food supply. Millions of consumers would be willing to pay the cost of an independently owned and operated food system, if they realized the consequences of not doing so. As independent food businesses reconnect ecologically and socially conscious consumers and sustainable farmers, they will ensure their own economic well being as they become an integral part of a sustainable food and farming system. As those in the food business build positive relationships with both farmers and consumers, they will become part of a caring, sharing community, committed to a common cause.

Perhaps equally important, as those in the food business begin to build trusting relationships as an integral part of their business, they will become aware also that these positive relationships are an important part of their personal quality of life. And as they begin to see that protecting natural ecosystems helps make their business profitable, they will begin to understand also that an environmental ethic is an important part of their personal quality of life. They will begin to realize that a life of harmony and balance, among concerns for economic viability, ecological integrity, and social responsibility is a life of quality. They will come to realize that by reconnecting consumers and farmers, through a new chain of personal relationships, they have rediscovered the true meaning of quality of life.

It's time to reinvent the American food chain – to create a network of community food systems, linking independent, local farmers with independent, local food processors and retailers, to provide food for customers willing to pay for quality and integrity. It's time to reinvent American agriculture – to create the “new American farm.” It's time to reinvent a sustainable food chain – one that is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible, and thus contributes to a more enlightened concept of quality of life. The consequences of corporate globalization need not spell the end of the American food system. Instead, we can reinvent a new and better sustainable food system, helping lead the way to a brighter, more sustainable future for America and for the rest of the world. It will take time, but the time to begin is now.

REFERENCES

- Blank, Stephen C. The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio, Quorum Books, Westport, Connecticut.
- Smith, Adam. 1776. An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Fifth Edition, Edinburg: Adam and Charles Black, London, MCDDDLXI