

The New Farm¹

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Robert Rodale was a visionary. The Rodale Press first published *The New Farm* magazine during the 1980s to “inform, encourage, equip, and inspire farmers... to take the important transition steps toward regenerative agriculture.” At the time, most of us didn't really understand what he meant by “regenerative agriculture” or why he called his magazine *The New Farm*.

Rodale understood that the modern industrial approach to farming was inherently unsustainable because it was not self-renewing or regenerative. Most of the rest of us in the sustainable agriculture movement were still trying to fix conventional farming by reducing its negative impacts on the natural environment and on rural communities. Rodale understood that sustainable farming would have to be radically different. He wanted the rest of us to understand that a sustainable farm would have to be a *new farm*.

Twenty years later, many of the rest of us were still catching up. Organic food production was growing at a rate of nearly 20% per year, doubling in size every three to four years. *Local* was becoming the *new organic*, as more people were trying to find foods grown as close to home as possible. Sustainable agriculture organizations had sprung up all around the country, with at least six North American conferences drawing more than 1,500 people, several more drawing 500-700, with too many smaller conferences to count. Some who attended these conferences were still trying to fix conventional farming but most were beginning to understand what Rodale's *new farm* was about.

Unfortunately, we don't have a good estimate of the number of new farmers in the United States. Statistics for organic farming and direct marketing give us a rough indication, at best. In 2006, the Organic Farming Research Foundation estimated the number of *certified* Organic farmers at 10,000. The North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association has estimated that 40,000 farmers sell directly to customers through farmers markets, community supported agriculture organizations (CSAs), roadside stands, and other direct marketing venues. This estimate may be bit conservative in that USDA reported more than 4,000 farmers markets in 2006. Estimates for CSAs range between 1,500 and 2,000, although no official statistics are available. In addition, thousands of other farmers, such as grass-based meat, milk, and cheese producers, farm by the basic principles of sustainability but do not produce organically or market directly to customers.

The total number of farm operators in the United States is around 2 million. About half of these are “primary occupation” farmers, in that they spend more than half of their working hours farming. Over half of these primary occupation farmers are on *small* farms, reporting less than \$100,000 in gross sales per year. Many of these small farms have survived by becoming *new farms*.

My best guess is that around 10-15 percent of all serious farmers are consciously pursuing the ecological, social, and economic principles of sustainable farming, although many don't identify themselves as such. These farms probably account for only about 5-6% of total food sales, since

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most are smaller than most conventional farms. I suspect another 10-15 percent of farmers follow sustainable principles, simply because they have never bought into the industrial farming paradigm. They don't think of themselves as new farmers but they think like new farmers. If these estimates are accurate, roughly a quarter of U.S. farmers might be called new farmers. I doubt that more than a quarter of U.S. farmers actually believe in the industrial philosophy of farming for maximum profits and growth. If so, this would leave about half of all farmers as either too busy trying to survive to think about why else they are farming, or perhaps, desperate for change but not knowing what else to do. The potential for growth in new farms is virtually unlimited.

Over the past ten years, I have had the privilege of speaking at 25-35 different venues a year, mostly conferences attended by these new, sustainable farmers. Most of what I know about new farms, I have learned from these farmers. I have written about these farmers before in *Small Farm Today* and elsewhere. But my understanding of why and how these new farmers farm continues to grow over time. There is no simple description of the new farm, because sustainable farming operations must fit the ever-changing ecological, physical, and intellectual capacity of the individual farm and farm family. Each farm is different and continually changing. However, some general characteristics have become clearer with time, making possible a better understand of how sustainable farms must be organized and managed.

First, the purpose of a new farm is to sustain a desirable quality of life for people – for farmers, farm families, rural communities, and society in general. New farmers understand that quality of life is not just about making money, it's also about the quality of relationships, including their relationship with nature. Some level of income is necessary for a good life, but beyond a fairly modest level – some studies indicate around \$10,000 – our happiness is determined much more by our relationships with other people than our income or wealth. Another essential prerequisite for happiness is a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need to know that our life matters. New farmers understand that they need to make money, but they also understand that they need to be good friends, good neighbors, and good citizens. They also understand that farmers are the caretakers of the earth and their stewardship of the earth matters for the future of humanity. New farmers understand the purpose of real farming is far more important than just production and profits.

Next, new farmers rely on principles, rather than specific goals or strategies, to guide them in their purpose. They know they must respect the basic principles of economics if they are to survive economically. But they also know they must respect the principles of nature, including human nature, if they are to survive ecologically and socially. Everything in nature is interconnected; we are all part of the same whole. Sustainable farms must be managed holistically. In holistic management, each component of the farming operation – each practice, method, or enterprise – is treated as an inseparable aspect of the farm as a whole. Each new arrangement or sequence of crops, livestock, methods, or practices – across space, over time, or among people – creates a new set of relationships among the various components and thus constitutes a new and different whole. When viewed holistically, relationships among parts are as important as the parts themselves. The new farm is more than the sum of its parts.

New farms also are managed for diversity. Nature is diverse, and the diversity of an ecologically sound farm must reflect the diversity of its *place* in nature. People are diverse, and the diversity of a

socially responsible farming operation must reflect the diversity of the people who operate the farm and the customers it serves. Diversity also creates the opportunities for economic synergy, making the whole farm more profitable than the sum of its collective enterprises. Productivity and regenerative capacity results from mutually beneficial relationships among the diverse components of holistically managed farms. Contract farmers are dependent; they cooperate out of necessity. Traditional farmers are independent; they compete rather than cooperate. New farmers are interdependent; they cooperate as a matter of choice, not necessity.

New farmers also respect the principles of human nature. People have many different religious, social, and cultural values, but we all share a common sense of the most important principles of interpersonal relationships. For example, we know we must be honest, fair, and responsible in our relations with other if we expect to sustain our relationships. In other words, we must be trustworthy. New farmers understand that markets for organic foods and locally grown foods are growing because many Americans no longer trust today's industrial food system. They don't trust the corporate food processors and retailers, they don't trust the government regulators, and they don't trust large-scale industrial farm operators. They are looking for food they can trust.

Many people who buy from local farmers also are seeking a sense of connectedness, if not a personal friendship. Trust, although necessary, isn't enough to sustain a friendship. Sometimes we all need to be treated with compassion rather than equity. We need empathy rather than brutal honesty and respect more than agreement. New farmers understand that sustainability requires relationships of kindness. They care about their customers as friends and neighbors – as caring people – not just buyers of their products. New farmers also understand that they are swimming against the mainstream of economic fundamentalism in today's agricultural economy. By trusting and caring, they know they may be labeled as naïve and idealistic. But new farmers have the courage to act on their moral convictions; they have the courage to be trusting and kind.

New farmers also respect the basic principles of economics. They understand that economic value is determined by scarcity. They know they must produce things people want, that other farmers cannot produce or cannot produce as well. They understand they must make efficient use of their scarce land, labor, time, and abilities, if they are to survive economically. And they know that the sustainability of their farming operations is ultimately up to them; they must be willing to make and to accept responsibility for their own decisions. They must respect the economic principles of value, efficiency, and sovereignty. But the principles of *new farm economics* must be internally consistent with the principles of ecology and society. I plan to write more about *new farm economics* in the next issue of *Small Farm Today*.