

People-Friendly Farming for a Crowded Worldⁱ

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We are still as dependent upon the land for our physical survival today as we were when all people were still hunters and gathers. Our dependence is less direct and our connections more complex, but human life, as is all life, is still critically connected to life in the soil and to the farmers who help nurture life from the soil. Yet, despite the importance of land to us individually, to our communities, our nation, and the world, the health and productivity of America's farmland is being placed in peril. The land is at risk from soil erosion, agrochemical contamination, salinization, over-application of animal wastes, and a host of other threats posed by the industrialization of American agriculture. But, it is also imperiled by poorly planned development, especially in urban influenced areas. A complex set of economic and political forces is driving the conversion of some of our best farmlands into urban residential and commercial developments.

In 1997, USDA's Economic Research Service developed a set of codes to classify each of the nation's 3,141 counties and county equivalents into groups representing various degrees of urban influence.¹ American Farmland Trust, a national organization dedicated to farmland preservation, found that in 1997, farms in the 1,210 most urban-influenced counties produced 63 percent of dairy products, 86 percent of fruits and 86 percent of vegetables in the U.S.² According to USDA's National Resources Inventory, between 1992 and 1997 more than 11 million acres of rural land were converted to residential and commercial use—and more than half of the land converted was agricultural land. On average, more than 1 million acres of farmland were developed each year during this period. This rate was 51 percent higher than the rate reported in the previous decade, and there is every reason to believe that the rate of conversion has accelerated since 1997.ⁱⁱⁱ

The current threats to farmland stem ultimately from the failure of farming to evolve in ways that accommodate our increasingly crowded nation. The currently dominant industrial approach to agriculture, with its ever-greater specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control, was driven by a perceived need to produce more food and fiber for a growing American population, with fewer farmers and at a lower cost. Today, the trend toward large-scale, specialized, corporately controlled agriculture is heralded by the agricultural establishment as the only means by which American producers can meet the growing demands of today's consumers while remaining competitive in an increasingly global marketplace.^{iv}

Farmers are told that consumers demand consistent quality, low priced foods, and a vertically integrated, industrial agriculture in the only means by which this demand can be met. The new high-tech, biotech, vertically integrated global food chains require large-scale, specialized, standardized, systems of agricultural production. Its advocates believe this approach to farming is dictated by the impersonal forces of free-market economics, and thus, is inevitable, because it will be enforced through the discipline of farmers' economic bottom lines. If farmers expect to survive, they are told, they have no other viable choice.

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ⁱⁱⁱ I am not aware of a similar study of farmland conversion between 1997 and 2002 to confirm this assertion.

^{iv} The agricultural establishment includes agribusiness, the USDA, agricultural universities, commodity groups, and several major farm organizations.

However, residents of rural communities are voicing increasing concerns about current trends in American agriculture. They are concerned about the pollution of groundwater and streams with pesticides and fertilizers from specialized cropping systems and with manure runoff and spills from large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs). Many know that agriculture has become the number one non-point source of stream pollution in the US,³ and a growing “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico is attributed largely to agricultural pollution sources.⁴ The agricultural establishment typically denies blame for these problems, but no one can reasonably deny the reality of growing public concerns regarding the ecological impacts of agricultural industrialization.

The industrialization of agriculture also has decimated America’s rural farming communities. As farms became larger, farm families became fewer, and fewer farm families meant not only fewer dollars spent on clothes, hardware, and haircuts in town, but also, fewer children in schools, fewer families in church, fewer people to volunteer for fire departments, for town council, and for other public services. Larger farms also typically by-passed their local communities when buying machinery, fuel, and production inputs and when selling their products. They could get a “better deal” by going straight to the manufacturer or processor. As a result, many of the most economically depressed areas in the U.S. today are agriculturally dependent counties.⁵ The agricultural establishment may argue that the abandonment of rural America is inevitable, but no one can reasonably deny that the demise of small and mid-sized family farms is destroying many rural communities.

More recently, concerns have focused on the *economic* future of industrial agriculture, on whether American commodity producers can compete in a global economy. Quoting from a recent USDA report, “A decade ago, a scenario in which the value of U.S. agricultural imports would someday exceed that of U.S. exports seemed farfetched.⁶ Today, the improbable has become probable. Since 1996, the agricultural trade surplus has shrunk from \$27.3 billion to \$10.5 billion. Although U.S. agricultural exports continue to rise, imports are increasing nearly twice as fast.” These rising imports are not for coffee, bananas, or exotic foods that can’t be produced in the U.S. Instead, Americans increasingly are eating imported basic foods, particularly vegetables and fruits. The USDA analysts went on to concede that if current trends continued, the current trade surplus would become trade deficit by the end of the decade.

The inability of American farmers to compete in world commodity markets should come as no surprise. Costs of farmland and farm labor in other major exporting countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and China, are a fraction of land and labor costs in the U.S. And increasingly, multinational agribusinesses are investing their capital and applying their technologies in those places where their production costs are lowest, which increasingly is some place other than the U.S. Increasing environmental restrictions on large-scale, industrial agriculture in the U.S. is often cited as an additional reason for agribusiness corporations to locate their production operations elsewhere. And, rural residents are becoming more, rather than less, concerned about protecting their environment from agriculture.

University of California economist, Steven Blank outlined the economic logic of this loss of competitiveness in his recent book, [The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio](#).⁷ The recent WTO agreement to liberalize world trade in agricultural products even further (July 2004) adds even more credibility to his prediction that America eventually will be forced to abandon production of agricultural commodities in favor of higher valued uses of land and labor.⁸ Realistically, America is not going to completely abandon agriculture, but at some time in the

future, we could easily become as dependent of the rest of the world for our food as we are today for our oil. For many of us, at least, this is cause for concern.

Most economists, including Blank, see nothing to be concerned about in current trends in American agriculture. To economists it is a just a matter of corporations minimizing their costs of production. American consumers will benefit from lower cost food and workers in other countries benefit from new employment opportunities. Displaced American farmers will have to find other employment, doing something in which they can compete in a global labor market. They claim that American farmers have been able to compete in the past only because of protectionist farm subsidies and removing these subsidies will result in a more efficient allocation of land, labor, and capital. Higher profits for corporate investors will more than offset losses in U.S. farm income, they say, leaving the American economy stronger than before.

However, it seems to me there is something very wrong with the current corporatization of American agriculture. The end of American agriculture may make economic sense, but it just doesn't make common sense. How can American agriculture meet the growing food and fiber needs of a growing nation if it is no longer exists? However, economists don't deal with issues of national food security; they just assume that free markets will continue to work freely. Economists don't consider the social and psychological consequences of rural families being forced to leave the farms or communities to which they have committed their lives. Economics treats such things as *external* costs, which if considered at all, must be weighed against economic benefits. Perhaps even more important, economics doesn't deal with ethical issues, such as respect for people and respect for the land. Economics remains silent on whether it's morally right or good for some people to benefit at the expense of others, including others of future generations, but speaks loudly through economic incentives to do so.

To most economists, if the economy is bigger the economy is better, regardless of the consequences for society or the natural environment. But, I simply don't believe that a bigger economy necessarily results in a better society or that a more economically efficiently agriculture is necessarily a better agriculture. I don't believe the demise of family farms, the degradation of the rural environment, and the decay of rural communities can be so easily justified as simply declaring them the inevitable consequences of a free market economy, which we must blindly trust because, as if by divine decree, it somehow makes us all better off.

But, why would anyone pay any attention to me? The agricultural establishment – the recognized experts on agriculture and economics – tell farmers if they are willing to adopt the new technologies, to take their place in the corporate global food chain and continue to work hard, they will succeed. Those of us who are concerned about the corporatization of American agriculture are simply out of touch with reality, they say. We are labeled as twenty-first century Luddites, who are oppose all technological progress, or at least are naively nostalgic for a return to farming of the past. So, why should anyone listen to me?

First, I am an economist, and have been one for more than thirty-five years. I have been a professor of agricultural economics at the major state agricultural universities in North Carolina, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Missouri. I grew up as a farmer – on a small dairy farm in Southwest Missouri. I was member of the Future Farmers of American, and I believed in the future of farming. I also have been a businessman. My younger brother and I operated a small restaurant during my last year in high school and I worked in management for three years for a major meat packing company – Wilson Foods – after graduating from college. Perhaps most important, I spent three-fourths of my life and half of my professional career believing, teaching, and preaching the very things that the agricultural establishment is extolling today. I know

where these folks “are coming from” because I have “been there.” I used to tell farmers that they were going to have to either “get bigger or get out.” I believed the family farm was of the past, not of the future. I was an unabashed advocate of farming for the *economic bottom-line* – period.

However, during the *farm financial crisis* of the 1980s, I began to feel that something was terribly wrong in American agriculture. I began to question whether there was really a future in farming. Many farmers had borrowed heavily at record high interest rates to expand production to meet the booming export demand of the 1970s, only to see exports dry up, commodity prices plummet, and record farm profits turn into disastrous farm losses. The agricultural establishment at the time chastised these farmers as poor managers who should have known better than to borrow so much, or at least should have know how to survive the inevitable hard times of farming. However, I discovered that the farmers who were in the biggest financial difficulty were those who had been doing the things that the agricultural establishment – including me, and my economic colleagues – had been telling them they should do. It would have been easier to deny it, and many did, but I came to realize that I had been much more a part of the farm problem than a part of the solution.

I had an opportunity, during these hard times, to sit across the table from several farm families in trouble and try to help them find some way out – short of suicide. I was working in Georgia at the time, a state with many delinquent federal FmHA farm loans. Farmers who wanted to borrow a little had been “encouraged” to borrow a lot – the conventional wisdom being that small farms couldn’t survive. In talking with these farmers, these real people, I began to understand that a family farm is much more than a business. The true family farm is a part of the family and the family is a part of the farm; the two are inseparable. Losing a family farm is like losing a member of the family, or losing one’s self; perhaps, that’s why the thoughts of so many farmers turned to suicide at the prospect of losing their farm.

Equally important, I learned that most true family farmers were not in severe financial difficulty, even though all were feeling a financial squeeze at that time. Many family farmers had not followed the advice of us so-called experts. They were not overly specialized; they had maintained some diversity of enterprises, and some enterprises were still profitable. They had minimized their dependence on costly chemical inputs and farm equipment, so their cost-price squeeze wasn’t quite so tight. They had not bought land to expand their operations, so their debts were more manageable. The farmers we economists had branded as laggards – resisters of new technologies and new ideas – were at least coping with one of the most severe economic farm crises of the century.

I began to realize that I too needed to confront some cold-hard realities. I eventually concluded that we economists, and other agriculturalists, were the ones who were out of touch with reality. We had been trying to transform farming into something that it was not and could not be. We had treated the farm as if it were simply a factory without a roof and fields and feedlots as if they were biological assembly lines. We had encouraged farmers to specialize, standardize, and consolidate, as if farming were a manufacturing process, simply transforming inputs into outputs.

Luckily, at about this time, something called sustainable agriculture was making its way onto the national agricultural scene. The more I learned about sustainable agriculture, the more I realized that it might answer my growing questions concerning why the agriculture I had been promoting wasn’t working. But more important, in sustainable agriculture, I felt I might find a reason to believe again in the future of farming.

I returned to Missouri, my home state, to work with farmers interested in this new kind of farming. My first understanding of sustainable agriculture was that of a *balanced* approach to farming. Missouri had a highly successful extension program back in the 1950s that focused on balancing farm profitability, soil conservation, and family living; it had been called the Balanced Farming program. The program had been driven by the need to increase farm income, but without degrading the land or the quality of family life. Sustainable agriculture, on the other hand, was being driven more by the environmental concerns being raised by a profit-driven, industrialization of agriculture. But, the needs for farm income and for a desirable quality of farm and rural life were still there.

People were beginning to understand that an agriculture that degraded the land and polluted the natural environment simply could not sustain its productivity over time. People were also beginning to understand that an agriculture that couldn't meet the needs of society – not just as consumers, but as farmers, rural residents, and people in general – would not be supported by society, and thus, was not sustainable. And, everyone still understood that agriculture had to be profitable, at least periodically, if farmers were to survive financially. So, farming sustainably was about finding balance and harmony among the ecological, economic, and social aspects of farming. Certainly, it was about meeting the needs of the present while leaving opportunities for the future, but to me, it was just a *common sense* way to farm.

I eventually came to understand that over past several decades, American farmers have been following two separate paths. On one path, as the national "Agriculture of the Middle" project describes it, giant corporate agribusinesses have established contractual arrangements with large, specialized producers to produce bulk commodities for both domestic and global markets.⁹ This is the path of agricultural industrialization. On the second path, small-scale, diversified farms have thrived by successfully adapting to marketing food products directly to customers. This is the path of agricultural sustainability. The traditional full-time family farm has been left with little choice other than to choose one of these two paths – or the path out of farming. The first path may continue to be the choice of the larger farming operations that produce most of the basic agricultural commodities in the U.S. for some time to come. However, I firmly believe the second path provides more opportunities for more people – for more farmers, for more discriminating food consumers, and for more people who choose to live in rural areas. The second path recognizes that the sustainability of farming in America is not just about farming for the economic bottom line; it is about farming for the environmental, societal, and economic bottom line. The second path also is the best hope, if not the only hope, for protecting farmland in urbanizing areas from being irretrievably converted to residential and commercial uses.

The current threats to America's farmers and farmland stem from the failure of farming to evolve effectively to accommodate the needs of an increasingly crowded nation. The industrial farming methods of first path farmers were adopted to meet the food and fiber needs of a growing population of consumers. However, the industrialization of agriculture now threatens the ecological health of the land, the economic health of rural communities, and the quality of life of an increasing number of people who choose to live on the fringes of urban areas.

As population pressures push urban development into traditional farming areas, conflicts inevitably arise between industrial farmers and their new neighbors. From the perspective of the farmers, rapidly rising costs of land and labor in the urban fringe make it increasingly difficult for them to compete in global agricultural markets. No accommodation seems possible, between increasing economic pressures to industrialize agriculture and the pressures of

growing health and environmental concerns of an increasingly crowded nation— other than the continued conversion of irreplaceable farmland to irretrievable non-farm uses. Frustrated by their inability to compete and their neighbors' complaints, and tempted by high prices of land for development, farmers eventually sell out and move on. The land is lost to farming, perhaps forever. However, such conflicts do not arise from people living too close to farms, but from living too close to farms that are not *people-friendly*.

The key to accommodating the needs of both farmers and rural residents is the more people-friendly, second-path way of farming. Sustainable farming is rooted in an abiding respect for the land and a respect for people – for farm families, their neighbors, and their customers. Sustainable farmers depend upon healthy, productive soil, rather than the commercial inputs, which threaten the natural environment. Sustainable farmers are committed to conserving and protecting the regenerative capacity of land, not just for benefits of the present, but also for benefit of the future. Sustainable farmers value their neighbors, not just as customers or potential cooperators, but also, as members of common communities of interests and of place. Sustainable farmers thrive from their love of the land and love of people, and the people around them thrive from their relationships with this truly people-friendly way of farming.

I call these people-friendly farmers the New American Farmers. Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of speaking at 35-40 different venues a year, and most of those were conferences attended by what I call *sustainable* farmers. These conferences range in size from a few dozen people to a few thousand, but there are at least six conferences in North America that average over 1200 attendees a year. The larger of these conferences tend to draw a very high proportion of farmers. Many of these conferences draw 400-500 people and the number with 100 or more are too numerous to count.

These new farmers may label their products as organic, natural, biodynamic, holistic, ecological, or simply rely on being *local* as a market advantage. Producers of meat, milk, and eggs may further distinguish their products as humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, free-range, or grass-fed. But, these new farmers are set apart from commodity producers is their philosophy of farming and their philosophy of life. They are farming not just for profits; they are farming for better overall quality of life – and many are finding it. They face many frustrations, and some failures, along the way, because no one really knows how to do what they are doing. But, more and more of these new farmers are finding ways to succeed. I never pass up an opportunity to visit with farmers wherever I go. Once more, I have hope for the future of farming in America because of what I see in these new American farmers.

In corporate business management circles, these new farmers would be called triple bottom line managers. Perhaps, sustainable farming would be more acceptable to first-path farmers, if we called it farming for the triple bottom line. The triple bottom line first came to widespread attention in the late 1990s and has since gained in popularity among businesses of all types.¹⁰ Managing for a triple bottom line simply suggests managing for balance among the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of business performance, rather than maximizing profits or growth. Triple bottom line managers recognize that businesses lacking social and ecological integrity are not economically viable over the long run; their costs eventually increase and customer loyalty declines. So they focus on conserving non-renewable resources and protecting the environment, and on being a good neighbor and good corporate citizen, as means of maintaining long run profitability.

In many situations, they find that by paying more attention to social and ecological performance, they can actually improve economic performance, even in the short run. They may find ways to

transform wastes into economic inputs and to increase production while using fewer costly, non-renewable resources.¹¹ They may also find ways to reduce labor costs and create new markets by developing and maintaining better relationships with their workers, their customers, and others in the communities in which they operate.¹² In general, they improve their efficiency in converting ecological and social resources into economic advantages.

However, triple bottom line management has its legitimate skeptics. Businesses have always claimed to be good neighbors and good corporate citizens, but such claims have rarely been allowed to take precedent over maximizing corporate profits.¹³ Even Monsanto and DuPont, for example, have “sustainable agriculture” programs. In such cases, the triple bottom line becomes little more than a public relations strategy. On the other hand, Ray Anderson, of Interface Inc., a large carpet manufacturer, is a well-known exception to this strategy of deception. Anderson travels the country proclaiming the benefits of triple bottom line management and provides his corporate financial records as compelling evidence that even a large publicly owned corporation can be profitable as well as socially and ecologically responsible.¹⁴ In the food business, Paul Dolan, former CEO of Fetzer, the sixth largest winery in the U.S., is a prime example of a triple bottom line manager.¹⁵ New Season Markets in Portland, OR, a locally owned, five-store modern supermarket chain managed by Brian Rother, provides another example of a food business managed for the triple-bottom-line.¹⁶

So, the people-friendly approach to management has been a successful strategy for some of the most successful large businesses in the U.S. However, the true triple bottom line manager, large or small, must be willing to give as high a priority to being a good neighbor and being a good steward of nature as on being a profitable business. At times, this means that profits will be less than if the manager had been willing to pollute a little more or exploit a little more to cut costs or increase sales. The true triple bottom line manager must realize that his or her advantage and uniqueness is in the integrity of the business – in its commitment to good citizenship and stewardship – not in short run economic efficiency. If that integrity is ever compromised for the sake of efficiency, the uniqueness is lost and the market advantage is gone. True triple bottom line management requires a faith that valuing *right relationships*, among people and with nature, is the *right strategy* to succeed in business.

Nowhere are the opportunities for sustainable, triple bottom management more apparent or more promising than in farming on the urban fringes of America. As with most opportunities, however, there are great challenges to be overcome. But, those challenges can be met through a commitment to mutual respect. Changes in agriculture are raising new questions regarding the rights of people in agricultural communities, particularly urbanizing agricultural communities. Historically, farmers have defended their “right to farm,” whenever residential development has brought in urban neighbors with no appreciation for the normal sights, sounds, and smells of farming. More recently, rural residents have claimed their “right of self-defense” against growing threats to their health, safety, and welfare brought on by new industrial farming methods, particularly large-scale confinement animal feeding operations, or CAFOs.

Rural residents have argued with increasing success that industrial agriculture is not farming, at least not the type farming protected by right to farm laws. Instead, they claim that CAFOs represent the unwelcome intrusion of a dangerous, obnoxious industry into their communities. The agricultural establishment has responded with widespread efforts to restrict or deny the rights of rural communities to impose any higher standards for protection of public health and the environment than that required by state law. A few states in the Midwest already have such restrictions and similar laws are under consideration in several others. The fundamental

question seems to be whether local communities have the right to exceed state standards in protecting their health and environment. The answer boils down to a matter of rights.

Questions of public rights can be addressed most clearly by relating them to personal rights. After all, government – whether local, state, or national – is simply the means by which we formalize our relationships, whenever the numbers of people involved are too large to resolve matters personally. Similar questions of rights and responsibilities arise anytime people relate to each other – whether within nations, communities, or families. It's just easier to see the logical answers to such questions in personal relationships among family members.

The federal government obviously has the right to set minimum standards of acceptable conduct, as required to protect our constitutional rights. All rights not granted to the federal government by the Constitution are reserved for the states. State laws cannot conflict with federal laws, but obviously, state laws may go beyond the federal minimums, when needed to protect and promote the well-being of residents of a particular state. People within families and communities have a responsibility to conform to both state and federal standards of conduct; otherwise, they are breaking the law. The question is, "Do people within communities have the right to exceed the minimum federal and state standards, if they choose to do so?"

The answer seems obvious when we ask the question in relation to standards of behavior among people within families. For example, it is generally conceded that parents do not have the right to physically abuse or willfully endanger the health or life of their children, although some may disagree with specific child welfare laws. But surely, no one would argue that parents do not have the right to treat their children better than the law requires. Surely, no one would suggest that parents must consult a team of pediatric experts before they can give their children better healthcare, nutrition, and clothing, or a better social and physical environment than is required by law. So, families obviously have a right to set their own standards of health, safety, and welfare, as long as they exceed minimum legal standards.

People in communities have the same basic rights as people in families. The only difference is that community standards have to be defined and enforced by laws rather than social norms and values. There are simply too many people involved to resolve all matters personally. So, people in communities, acting together through local governments, have the same basic rights as people in families to set higher-than-minimum standards of conduct for all people in their community.

But, what about situations where community standards have already been set, as in the right to farm? In such cases, changes in community standards likely would represent a "taking" of existing rights, as is argued by the agricultural establishment. Such arguments are valid in those instances where farming practices are no more intrusive on their neighbors than when right to farm laws were initially accepted by the community. Communities still have the right to set higher standards, but they don't have the right to force previously conforming farmers to change.

Again, the family metaphor is relevant, as a "grandfather clause" is said to apply to conforming farmers. In families, grandfathers aren't necessarily required to change their ways, even if the rest of the family chooses some higher standard of conduct. But, the rest of the family certainly doesn't have to limit itself to grandfather's level of behavior. Equally important, if grandfather violates his earlier standards of conduct, the family has no obligation to accept his *new* behavior. For example, if grandfather starts mistreating the grandkids, he will quickly lose his honored status, even if he is doing nothing that violates state or federal laws.

Therefore, farmers who are no more intrusive on their communities and their environment than when they were granted a “right to farm” still have that right; they have been “grandfathered in” to farming. However, this right to farm does not extend to industrial agricultural operations, such as CAFOs. Industrial agriculture is fundamentally different from the family farms to which the right to farm was meant to apply. Arguments may persist regarding whether or not the health and environmental risks of industrial agriculture have been scientifically proven. But, a growing body of scientific evidence leaves no doubt as to whether or not rural residents have legitimate reasons for concern. Nothing has to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt to rise to the level of a legitimate concern.¹⁷

This leaves only the argument that state and local health and environmental regulations cannot be allowed to interfere with interstate or intrastate commerce – that economic efficiency trumps public safety, health, and well-being. Again, the family analogy shows the inherent foolishness of this argument. Families have no responsibility to accept minimum state or federal standards, even when higher family standards clearly interfere with their participation in the marketplace. Families have no obligation to buy materials that they consider pornographic, for example, even if such materials are legally for sale. Families have no obligation to sell their property to someone they consider to be unethical, even if that person is the highest bidder. Families have every right to reject any legal economic opportunity that they view as a threat to their health or well-being. And, they don’t have to consult an expert or provide scientific proof of harm. Communities – counties, townships, and states – are made up of people and must be afforded rights as people.

Current rules against interference in commerce were designed to prevent the political and economically powerful within a community from exploiting other community members by excluding outside competition. Today, these same rules are being used to force local people to allow their communities to be exploited by economic development that benefits a few investors at the expense of the community as a whole. Congress has the constitutional authority to regulate interstate commerce, thus Congress has the ability to allow communities to protect themselves from economic exploitation.

Conventional wisdom may continue to support farming for the economic bottom line; but our common sense tells us that triple bottom line farms must be the farms of the future, particularly in the urban fringe. The conventional wisdom may be that our food security lies in factor farms producing commodities for export markets, but our common sense tells that food security comes from local farmers producing food for their neighbors and for their fellow Americans. The conventional wisdom may continue to be that farmers must maximize production to feed a hungry world. But our common sense tells us that hunger in the world today is not due to a lack of food, but to a lack of concern among those who *have* for those who *have not*. The conventional wisdom may continue to be that farmers must invest in technologies today to feed twice as many people fifty years from now. But our common sense tells an agriculture that is dependent on non-renewable resources eventually will run out, and asks, how then will we feed two or three times as many people as today? The conventional wisdom says a sustainable agriculture would take too much land and no land will be left for wild places. But, our common sense tells us that industrialization, not sustainable farming, is the greatest threat to wild places, that sustainability won’t require more land, just more imaginative, creative, trustworthy, caring farmers. Our common sense tells us that an agriculture that puts a priority on people and on nature is more likely to take care of people and nature, than is an agriculture that puts its priority on profits.

Sustainable farming does not threaten the health and productivity of the land or the health and environment of its neighbors. Instead, sustainable farming depends on the natural productivity of the land and the support of the community for its productivity and profitability. Sustainable agriculture is a land-friendly, people-friendly approach to farming. Sustainable farming provides a means by which the rights of residents can be respected by farmers and the rights of farmers are respected by the community. With sustainable agriculture, farms and residential developments can coexist, and even thrive, while sharing the same spaces for farming and development.

Sustainable farms are good places to live and raise a family, both on and around. Thus, productive farmland might well take the place of green belts or golf courses in urbanizing areas, with residences clustered in the more aesthetic, less productive ridges, draws, and wooded fringes. Individual residential lots might include a share of the farmland, with the farmland held by the community in common. The former farmer-landowner could realize the full economic value from the land for development, while retaining the privilege of farming the land on behalf of his or her new community members. Residents could be afforded many of the amenities of life on a family farm, without having to learn to do the farming. Permanent land-use restrictions could be placed on such developments to prevent future reversion of the farmland to more-intensive residential development.

In other situations, high-density residences could be clustered in less-desirable farming areas, creating small but efficient urban areas surrounded of open farmland. Developers of the urban centers could be required to buy development rights from the surrounding areas, again leaving productive farmland to be farmed while creating desirable places for people to live. The potential positive solutions to farming and living in an increasingly crowded world are endless, if farmers and rural residents will simply respect each other's rights to farm and to live in peace and harmony. The key to this respect is the pursuit of sustainability in farming and living, which requires ecological integrity and social responsibility, to ensure economic viability for all concerned. Mutual respect and consideration arises from the realization that caring for neighbors and caring for the earth, as we care for ourselves, is simply a more desirable way to work and to live.

These concepts are not radical or new, they have been used in Europe for centuries, where farmland surrounds small villages where even the farmers live. These so-called "cluster housing developments" have been very popular in rural areas, particularly in the eastern United States. Surveys have shown that residents generally rate them very highly as places to live, and they have maintained their property values well.¹⁸

Interest in cluster development also is growing in the West. The Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington states, "As applied in urban areas, cluster subdivision ordinances often emphasize site design flexibility for protecting constrained areas, and important site features for allowing more creative design. Cluster provisions in rural areas may focus more on conserving resource lands, and securing larger expanses of open space consistent with rural character."¹⁹ The Center provides links to several examples of cluster developments in the state of Washington on its website. The key to success is to create farming communities that accommodate the needs of both farmers and residents for a desirable quality of life.

The path of sustainable development and sustainable living accommodates the needs of people in an increasingly crowded nation. Sustainability depends upon an abiding respect for both the

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needs of the land and the needs of people – economic, social, and ethical. Out of a mutual respect for the rights of farmers and the rights of rural residents, a new *people-friendly* paradigm will be created for farming and living in urbanizing areas. This new paradigm of necessity may well become the new paradigm of choice for people everywhere, as we create more sustainable farms and more sustainable communities to meet the needs of an increasingly crowded world.

End Notes

- ¹ USDA, Economic Research Service. 1997. "A County-Level Measure on Urban Influence." *Rural Development Perspectives*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Feb. 1997.
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