

Farming On A Scale That Fits

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Industrialization has lured many a farmer to expand his acreage and multiply his machines. Emerging technology enabled a person to farm more acres and produce more crops with fewer people. As the farms grew larger, the amount of time each farmer spent on each acre of land necessarily declined. Gradually, the steward and his land drifted farther apart. Nurture fell prey to efficiency.

This drive for industrial bigness has made the American farmer the most productive in the world in terms of output per farmer. However, so fuel-hungry is our technology that this growth made the same farmer the least efficient in terms of energy used per amount of energy produced in crop biomass. Soil and land-use efficiency have likewise suffered. Ecologically, there is a point beyond which a farm can outgrow the nurturing capacity of the farmer.

This point holds true sociologically as well. A safeguard of democracy is land ownership by as many people as possible. As the number of people who own farmland declines, plutocracy displaces democracy. Furthermore, such a demographic shift leads to cultural, social and economic weakening of rural communities.

In pursuit of ecological, social, economic and cultural sustainability, we must return to farming on a scale that fits the needs of the land, the people and rural communities.

Current Status of American Agriculture

1. Is heavily industrialized:

Characterized by a focus on the systematic integration of people, materials, equipment and energy by means of a persistent emphasis on mechanization.

2. Is high gross productivity per farmer in terms of the commercial output per farmer.

3. Is energy-intensive/fossil fuel dependent:

On average (1979) our food system burns 6.4 calories for each calorie which reaches the consumer's plate. For processed vegetables, that energy consumption ratio bloats to 16:1 or worse. (Empty Breadbasket 41)

4. Is techno-intensive:

Farming has grown heavily dependent on off-farm technology. Industrialization has taken its lead from technological possibilities more than it has from eco-biological realities.

5. Has fewer farmers on bigger farms:

Techno-advances allow a farmer to "farm" more ground and, often, require more ground to effectively pay for the technology. Unfortunately, this has created a people displacement on farm land and in rural communities with adverse social and economic impacts.

6. Has persistent problems with the resource base:

Concomitant with the application of industrial technologies, we have suffered problems with both the resource base and more. We have ongoing problems with diminished quality and quantity of soil, water, biodiversity and interspecies balance. These problems have combined with short-sighted plant breeding programs to produce declining nutritional values in much of our food supply (Agricultural Production and Nutrition Conference Proceedings, Tufts University 1997).

While the paradigm of large-scale, industrialized agriculture has accomplished much, it has unfortunately created more problems than it has solved because neither the scale nor the paradigm fit the ecological, social and economic realities of rural America, nor any rural area for that matter.

Farming On A Smaller Scale, A Scale That Fits would:

1. Replace the industrial paradigm with the ecological paradigm.
2. Establish a higher eyes-to-acres ratio by putting more stewards on the land.
3. Recognize that smaller-scale agriculture is often more productive and

efficient per acre.

4. Adapt farming to a more human scale.
5. Capitalize on the reality that smaller scale enhances diversity, thrift and care.
6. Ensure that the scale of farming will always benefit the farmer more than the input and manufacturing sectors.
7. Ensure that farming on a smaller scale promotes a more just and democratic society.
8. Capitalize on the advantage that smaller scale farming affords for greater opportunity to connect with consumers.

Recently, I attended the National Small Farm Conference in Nashville, TN. One speaker, a Washington, DC insider, reported that one of his superiors, speaking under the condition of anonymity, claimed that "we've hit the wall as far as farm size expansion goes. We're now creating more problems than solutions."

For the ecological, social, and economic vitality and security of both American agriculture and the nation itself, we need to reconsider our scale of farming. **We need to farm on a scale that fits!**

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