

The Next Generation of Family Farming

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The news is full of stories about the demise of family farming in the United States. Indeed, the numbers are sobering—the number of farmers 75 and older has grown by 20 percent since 2002, and the number below the age of 25 has dropped 30 percent.¹ The aging farm population is due to several factors, but a major reason is a simple lack of young people replenishing the ranks.

For much of the 20th century, one could launch a successful farming operation with a little luck and a lot of sweat equity. Today, skyrocketing land values and market prices that often don't cover the cost of putting in a crop or raising livestock have combined with federal farm policies that disproportionately support larger farms to make entry into farming a daunting if not unachievable task.

And once a farmer gets established, she or he is faced with a situation where all aspects of the food chain—from processing to packaging to retailing—are dominated by a few powerful players who can basically call the shots on what prices are paid to farmers, as well as what prices are charged to consumers. Four firms now control at least 83 percent, 66 percent and 55 percent, respectively, of the nation's beef, pork and turkey processing markets, according to the University of Missouri's most recent *Concentration of Agricultural Markets* report.² Three firms control 54 percent of flour milling.³ Based on conventional economic wisdom, when four firms control more than 40 percent of a market, it's no longer



This retiring colesseed farmer has no one to pass his farm on to and is having a hard time finding a beginning farmer to buy it.

And as large-scale industrialized operations push out diversified family-sized farms, agriculture has become more alienated from its ecological roots. As a result, all those monocrops of corn and lakes of liquid manure are helping make agriculture one of the largest producers of non-point source pollution (polluted surface water runoff) in the US, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.⁴

The US Geological Survey has found that the popular corn herbicide Atrazine, which has been connected to numerous human and animal health problems (like cancer, infertility and heart and liver

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a competitive one, and farmers selling crops and livestock into such a market have little control over their own financial destiny.

Unfortunately, key government policies tend to favor those producing higher volumes of a few targeted commodity crops—mainly corn, soybeans, wheat, rice and cotton. The result of these policies has shuttered Main Streets in rural communities and created a greater reliance on food controlled by a handful of mega-firms.

problems) was present in streams in agricultural areas about 75 percent of the time, and in groundwater in agricultural areas about 40 percent of the time.⁵ Water contamination levels of nitrogen, a keystone fertilizer for corn production that causes, among other things “blue baby syndrome” in human infants as well as the Gulf of Mexico's dead zone, are going up.⁶ Seven to 20 percent of all wells in states like Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin contain levels of nitrate-nitrogen that exceed health standards.⁷



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But there are real opportunities and a great need for a new way to work with the land. It seems that all of the problems associated with industrialized agriculture—the emptying communities, pollution and concerns about food safety—have created a backlash. Consumers, environmentalists and communities are calling for a more sustainable agriculture, one that is reliant on good management and an intimate knowledge of the land. This kind of farming requires more, not fewer farmers.

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ods. Direct food sales—a direct transfer from the farmer to the consumer via such avenues as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations, farm stands, farmers' markets, the Internet, etc.—skyrocketed from \$812 million to \$1.2 billion in just 5 years—a 49 percent increase, according to the latest Census of Agriculture. The Organic Trade Association has more good news: sales of organic foods in the US more than tripled from \$8.6 billion in 2002 to \$26.7 billion in 2010.⁸ By the end of 2010, there were 6,132 farmers' markets in the US, which is around 5,000 more than there were two decades ago, according to the USDA.⁹

Another positive trend has been the explosion in the development of farming systems that are low-cost, profitable and environmentally sustainable, and that produce food products that consumers are willing to pay more to buy such as grass-fed beef; grass-fed dairy; and organic grains, fruits and vegetables. But farming methods that rely on alternative production and marketing models take a lot of management skills. Studies show that a major barrier to adopting sustainable farming methods is lack of information and firsthand

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6,132
farmers' markets
in 2010

+ 5,000

Approximately

1,000
farmers' markets
in 1988

Farmers' Markets

knowledge related to such systems. Farmers adopting alternative production methods are more likely to be successful if they are part of some sort of formal or informal network of like-minded farmers.

Farm Beginnings

That's why, when Roger and Michelle Benrud decided to launch a grass-based dairy farming enterprise, they enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course on sustainable farm management. Courses like this provide firsthand training in low-cost, sustainable methods of farming. The Benruds learned business planning and goal setting, as well as marketing methods that help farmers capture the most value for their production. Perhaps most importantly, through the class they were introduced to farmers who were already running profitable operations of their own. The opportunity to visit established farms and see firsthand farm management systems successfully put into action is priceless. And through this interaction, an informal farmer network is created.

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A lesson at Farm Beginnings in sustainable farming techniques

An Iowa State study found that **if just 25 percent** of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the state **were grown** by local farmers, the statewide economic impact would be **nearly \$140 million in output**; over \$54 million in labor income alone would be **paid to roughly 2,000 jobholders**.

After learning crucial management skills, the Benruds gradually built up a successful dairy operation. Their milk is sold through the organic market and has been sold through a specialty butter and cheese cooperative, which has racked up numerous national awards for its excellent butter. This means the Benruds receive a premium price from health-conscious consumers who also appreciate the environmental benefits of pasture-based dairying.

Sixty-six percent of graduates of sustainable farming courses in Minnesota who are farming say their annual net farm income has increased on average \$12,500 since taking the course.¹⁰ Over 20 states have initiatives that help beginning farmers get started, and many are using a community-based approach. Since the majority of the new farmers coming out of these programs are pursuing enterprises centered around local, sustainably raised foods, the economic development potential is tremendous. Counties with organic farms have stronger farm economies and contribute more to local economies, according to a University of Georgia economic analysis. An Iowa State study found that if just 25 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the state were grown by local farmers, the statewide economic impact would be nearly \$140 million in output; over \$54 million in labor income alone would be paid to roughly 2,000 jobholders.¹¹

Community Building

This movement is not just about creating the next generation of livestock producers, CSA farmers and specialty crop growers. It's also about revitalizing rural communities and creating active members of society. With the network in place and a business focused on community, it's not a far leap for these farmers to take on bigger roles in their communities by serving on boards, volunteering and getting involved with local decision-making institutions like townships.

This is developing a solid constituency of citizens who can educate lawmakers about the bright future for family farming. Graduates of these programs hosted lawmakers during the debate over the 2008 Farm Bill and talked about their own farms, and the expanding market for their regionally and sustainably produced meat, dairy and vegetable products. They shared their vision for the renewal of a family farm system of agriculture that supports vibrant rural communities and a healthy landscape. And they zeroed in on the public policy that was needed to help more people like them get started. They were living proof that there are many opportunities in agriculture that go beyond bolstering the bottom lines of the Cargills and ADMs of the world.

As a result of such efforts, when it was signed into law, the 2008 Farm Bill provided financial and administrative

support for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP). BFRDP is a precedent-setting attempt by the federal government to support community-based programs that conduct beginning farmer education, training and mentoring.

Supporting the Next Generation of Farmers

Enlightened government agriculture policy will help clear the way for revitalizing family farms, but even more exciting is that anyone who eats has a chance to play a role in reinventing our food and farming system. The benefits of buying locally grown food from your nearest farmers' market or CSA operation go far beyond simply benefiting the farmer. The health and environmental benefits that come with local, fresh, sustainable food are worthy of support in their own right, but then also consider the economic and community perks that can result. If residents of just one Iowa county,



Photo courtesy Zane Williams Photography

The outdoor market in Madison, WI is the largest outdoor farmers' market in the US, and is a signature weekly event for Wisconsin's capitol.

With an ever-expanding community of family farms, we have a chance to reinvent the agriculture industry, revitalize rural communities and improve the land through an expanded transition to more sustainable farming practices.

Black Hawk, spent \$10 of their weekly grocery bill on locally grown food, that would amount to \$2 million every month invested in local people, local farms and independent local businesses, according to the University of Northern Iowa Local Food Project. Try replacing or augmenting your produce from the big chain grocery store with a CSA membership next summer. Make an effort to replace your meat with locally grown grass-fed varieties at least once a week.

Buying local, sustainable food shows government decision-makers and the business community that there is a demand for these kinds of products. But it also provides a critical morale boost to the hardworking farmers themselves. Whenever we make a food-buying choice, we are sending a tremendously powerful message back to rural America about what sort of farming is valued.

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Brian DeVore is a staff member of the Minnesota-based Land Stewardship Project (www.landstewardshipproject.org), which, among things, coordinates the Farm Beginnings program. Since 1997, Farm Beginnings has trained hundreds of farmers in sustainable management techniques. Farm Beginnings-licensed courses are now being taught in six states.

