

Why Sustainable Family Farms are Critical to the Future of the Worldⁱ

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I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this particular conference at this particular point in time – a time that our new President Barak Obama described in his inaugural address as a time of “gathering clouds and raging storms.” At such times, he said, America has carried on not because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because “We the People have remained faithful to the ideas of our forebearers, and true to our founding documents.” As he suggested, “the time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history.” Not return to our darker history of racial annihilation, slavery, and global imperialism, but to our better history of compassion, equality, and mutual respect. We must find the courage “to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve an [equal] chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

Family farms have always been an important part of our “better history.” Historically, farmers were held in high esteem in the United States and around the world. Thomas Jefferson believed strongly that the yeoman farmer best exemplified the kind of independence and virtue that should be supported by the new democratic republic. He believed financiers, bankers, and industrialists could not be trusted and should not be encouraged by government. In light of our current economic situation, “Jeffersonian Democracy” still makes a lot of sense.

Adam Smith, in writing the *Wealth of Nations*, noted that no endeavor requires a greater variety of knowledge and experience than does farming, other than possibly the fine arts or liberal professions. He observed that farmers ranked among the highest social classes in China and India, and suggested it would be the same everywhere if the “corporate spirit” did not prevent it. Smith also suggested a role for government in ensuring that “they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of people, should have a share of the produce of their own labor as to themselves be tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.”¹

The farmers respected and revered over the years by Jefferson, Smith, and others were a particular kind of farmer. Smith’s agrarian farmer was an independent entrepreneur who possessed the extraordinary “judgment and discretion” needed to cope with the vagaries of nature. Jefferson’s yeoman farmer was hard working and honest, with a sense of spiritual connectedness to the land. In later times, these same basic virtues were used to describe the “family farmer.”

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To some, the “family farmer” is a nostalgic myth – an ideal that never existed in reality. They don’t believe farm families have ever been uniquely virtuous or otherwise special. According to the USDA., any farm that is owned by a family, even a large family corporation, is a family farm – which includes more than 98% of all farms in the U.S. Many of these so called family farms are actually agribusinesses, meaning they are operated primarily, if not solely, to maximize the economic bottom line. Many so called independent family farms actually operate under comprehensive contracts with large agribusiness corporations that dictate virtually all aspects of the operation. In the world of agribusiness, the “family farm” of Jefferson and Smith is considered economically obsolete.

However, the family farm is making a comeback – both the ideal and the reality. A growing number of discriminating consumers are rejecting foods produced by corporate agribusinesses. They are buying foods that are produced naturally, organically, and increasingly, buying their foods locally, from real family farmers. The local food phenomenon is not just about a search for freshness and flavor; it’s about eating food that has ecological, social, and economic integrity. More people are becoming concerned not only about issues of food safety and nutrition but also about the consequences of today’s industrial food system on the natural environment and human society. They are willing to provide economic viability to local family farmers who produce foods with integrity. Integrity requires discretion, judgment, honesty, and virtue.

The *natural food* movement of the 1960s wasn’t just about avoiding foods produced with chemical pesticides and fertilizers. It was a rejection of industrialization of the American economy and society, including foods produced with industrial technologies. These “back to the earth” people embraced original organic farming methods because the original organic farming movement was as much a philosophy and way of life as a way of producing food. Organic farmers were committed to the historical organic principle of *permanence*. Furthermore, they understood that the fundamental purpose for a permanent agriculture is to ensure the permanence of society and humanity. Organic farming was a patriotic duty and a sacred trust. Organic farming required integrity.

Organic farmers also understood that permanence depends on a strong sense of connectedness: to the land – which is the source of all human sustenance – and to other people – which is necessary for human well-being. Organic consumers were seeking ways to reconnect with each other and with the earth, as well as seeking good food. Organic foods eventually became the fastest growing segment of the retail food market not only because people were seeking better food but also because people were seeking a better, more connected, way of life.

The growing popularity of *local foods* today is a continuation of the earlier natural and organic food movements. The emerging popularity of organics led to efforts to make organic foods more accessible and affordable to more people – an obviously worthy objective. In the early 1990s, organic foods were produced under a number of mostly regional certification schemes, which made it difficult for organics to access to national and international markets. Uniform national and international standards for organic foods seemed a logical solution, which eventually materialized in the USDA national organic certification program of 2002. However, uniform standards made organic production both possible and profitable for large, specialized, agribusiness operations that could supply national and international markets. These industrial

operations found ways to meet the USDA specifications regarding inputs and practices without adopting the philosophical organic commitment to *permanence*. To corporate agriculture, organic production was just another way to make money, not a different way of life. The local foods movement is in large part a rebuke of the “industrialization of organics.”

Local food advocates are sometimes called locavores, meaning people who have a strong preference for foods grown locally, eaten in season, either raw or minimally processed without unnecessary additives. The “locavores” are people who have turned to their local farmers as a means of ensuring the ecological and social integrity of their food. They don’t trust the food corporations or the government to ensure the integrity of their foods, not even organic foods. So, they seek out local farmers: real people who they can get to know well enough to trust.

To locavores, it matters whether their food comes from a family agribusiness or a real family farm. Perhaps they can’t define what they mean by a real family farm but they know one when they see one. The definition that perhaps best describes the kind of family farm they are looking for is a farm for which the farm and the family are inseparable. The farm would be fundamentally different if it was farmed by a different family and the family would be fundamentally different if they lived and worked on a different farm. The farm is not just a means of making a living but also a means of achieving a desirable quality of life – economically, socially, and spiritually. The farm is a reflection of the economic, social and spiritual values of the family in the community and in society. This definition also seems consistent with the Adam Smith’s agrarian farmer and Thomas Jefferson yeoman farmer – as an ideal upon which to build a better society, regardless of whether it is yet a reality.

When farms and farm families are inseparable, farming becomes an intensely personal matter. Such farmers have a personal incentive to live and work in harmony with the nature of their particular farm – its soil, topography, climate... They develop the judgment and discretion needed to cope with the vagaries of nature, thus becoming independent entrepreneurs. Such farmers also have personal incentives to work hard and be honest in their dealing with other. They have strong sense of personal and spiritual connectedness with the land. They feel responsible for passing the farm on to the next generation as healthy and productive as when it was passed to them. They have the same commitment to *permanence* as those early pioneers of organic farming and those who started the natural foods movement. Such farmers have the human capacity for ecological and social integrity that corporate agribusinesses lack. They are real people that locavores can get to know personally and learn to trust.

Obviously, a farmer doesn’t have to be a member of a family in order to farm with ecological, social, and economic integrity. They can be a single individual or a member of a group of people who are unrelated in any aspect other than their commitment to their farm. They don’t even have to own the land to farm. Their sense of personal connectedness with the land and with people is the essential ingredient in ensuring the integrity of the farming operation. When consumers develop a personal *and* economic relationship with such a farmer they become a part of and help ensure the integrity of the ecological, social, and economic whole.

Such descriptions of family farms are labeled as idealistic by those who see agribusiness as the future of farming. However, it doesn’t really matter how accurately such descriptions

characterize any particular farm or group of farms, or even whether such farms actually exist. What is important is that the *ideal* of such farms exists, and this ideal is being actively pursued and supported by hundreds of thousands of farmers and millions of consumers all across the continent and around the globe – and their numbers are growing. The continuing betterment of nations and of human society is built on such ideals – ideals that have the capacity to motivate people to more ethical and virtuous actions. The *sustainable* family farm is such an ideal.

Undergirding the nostalgia and idealism of family farming is the stark realities of agricultural sustainability. Humanity is still as dependent upon the land for their health and very survival as in the days of hunting and gathering. To support anything approaching the numbers of people on earth today, humanity is also dependent on farmers. Our dependencies are less direct and more complex than in earlier times, but no less critical or essential. The cold, stark reality is that today's industrial agriculture quite simply is not sustainable. It is fundamentally incapable of meeting the needs of the present without compromising opportunities for the future.

American agriculture today is utterly dependent on fossil energy for its productivity and economic viability. Fossil energy, by its very nature, is an exhaustible, nonrenewable resource and thus a fossil energy dependent agriculture is not sustainable. Furthermore, today's agriculture is inherently extractive and exploitative. There are strong economic incentives to extract the natural productivity from the land – soil, air, water, – but no economic incentives to renew or regenerate the land for the benefit of those of future generations. There are strong economic incentives to exploit the vulnerable – farm workers, farmers, consumers – but no economic incentives to maintain the civility and productivity of human society. Agribusiness is driven by economic incentives.

The basic problem is that economic value is inherently individualistic and thus is short-run in nature. It's simply not possible for anyone to realize anything of economic value after he or she is dead. Since life is inherently uncertain, the economy places a premium on the present relative to the future. This is the reason people willingly pay "interest" so they can have something today rather than save the money needed to buy it later. At historical interest rates, a dollar ten years from now is worth only fifty cents today, and anything 70-years in the future is worth less than a penny on the dollar. An agriculture driven by economic incentives is simply not sustainable.

Questions of sustainability seemed a bit esoteric and theoretical until people began to awaken to the ecological, social, and economic challenges confronting today's society. High gasoline prices have periodically awakened the public to our continuing dependence on fossil energy. Even the major oil companies now admit that we are at or near a peak in global oil production. Roughly one-half of the earth's initial oil endowment is still in the ground, but the remaining reserves will be more difficult and costly to retrieve and thus will be more scarce and expensive. Fossil energy from other sources is expected to follow a similar pattern, peaking and dissipating over the next few decades. Global climate change is an inevitable consequence of fossil energy use. Greenhouse gasses are released into the atmosphere anytime energy is released from a biological source, including the fossil energy in oil, natural gas, and coal. So, we can't use the earth's remaining stocks of fossil energy without exacerbating the challenges of global warming.

The social and economic challenges of today are no less daunting as the ecological challenges. At no time since the “gilded age” of the early 1900s has the gap between the wealthy and the rest of American society been so great. The income of the top one-percent amounts to more than the total income of the bottom one-half of Americans today. In the words of Alan Greenspan, former Federal Reserve Chairman, “The income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population has become so wide, and is growing so fast, that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism itself.”² The gap between people in the rich and poor nations of the world is growing even faster. Over the past 40 years, the income share of the poorest 20% of people in the world *decreased* by almost 50%, while the incomes of the richest 20% *increased* by 40%.³

The current global financial crisis is a direct reflection of a thirty-year flight from economic reality. In reality, all economic value must be derived either from nature or society. The economy produces nothing; it simply facilitates the extraction of value from natural and human resources. As an economy continues to extract and exploit, its natural and human resources continue to lose their ability to yield things of real economic value. During the 1970s, we in the United States began to address the environmental and social problems that had arisen from decades of economic extraction and exploitation. However, we soon discovered that protecting the environment and the civil rights of people had economic costs. Rather than bear those costs, we retreated from reality during the 1980s and have been in a state of denial ever since.

Admittedly, some of the economic growth of the 1990s was real, primarily that associated with new electronic technologies. However, much of the so called boom was supported by “irrational exuberance” – a term used by Alan Greenspan to describe purely speculative increases in prices of corporate stocks. Eventually, the Wall Street bubble burst. Much of the highly touted “new economy” turned out to be little more than an illusion. However, those in positions of economic and political influence were still not willing to face economic reality. They found ways to create a new financial “house of cards” to replace the old Wall Street bubble. We now know that virtually all of the economic growth since 2000 was fueled by unethical financial practices that promoted irresponsible borrowing and spending. The house of cards has collapsed but no one knows how much of what’s left of the economy is real and how much is illusion. Odds are a lot more illusion will have to be revealed before Americans are willing to face the economic reality that our current economy is simply not sustainable.

So what does all this have to do with sustainable family farms? First, industrial agriculture is a significant part of our current problems. Food production in the U.S. today accounts for at least 17% of all fossil energy use, requiring about ten kcals of fossil energy for each kcal of food energy produced with farming accounting for about one-third of the total.⁴ In addition, agriculture accounts for more than 20% of the total greenhouse gas emissions, even more than the transportation sector.⁵ Organic and sustainable farming, using existing methods, could cut fossil energy use by one-third to one-half. With future research and development the cuts could be far larger. Sustainable, grass-based livestock production could cut greenhouse gas emissions by up to 80%.⁶ In the longer run, if natural productivity was restored to organic soils, agriculture could be turned into a net “sink” for greenhouse gasses, at least for a number of decades.⁷ Industrial agriculture is a big part of the ecological problem and sustainable agriculture could be a big part of the ecological solution.

A truly sustainable agriculture – the ideal – would rely solely on renewable solar energy. It would also capture and sequester as much carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen from the air as was released by the use of agricultural products. It may take a while to transform the ideal into reality, but sustainable family farms will be absolutely essential to provide long run food security for people of local communities, of nations, and the of world.

Perhaps more important, family farming – both the ideal and the reality – could be a big part of the solution to our current national and global social, economic, and ecological problems. The root cause of the challenges confronting us today is the loss of our sense of interconnectedness with each other and with the earth. The specialization, standardization, and consolidated control of industrialization have caused us to focus narrowly on our specific tasks and functions. We have lost our sense of the economic, social, and ecological wholes to which our tasks contribute. In the process, we have also lost our sense of interdependence with each other and with the earth. As an act of faith, we have accepted the modern economic dogma that the pursuit of our narrow individual self-interests would somehow serve the greater common good. We have lost our sense of ethical and moral responsibility as caretakers of society and of the earth.

Sustainable family farmers today are helping to reconnect people with each other and with the earth. That's what the natural and organic food movements were about in the past and is what the local food movement is about today. On real family farms, the farm and the family are inseparable wholes, and the local food movement allows their local customers to become parts of those same wholes. The sustainable family farm is not just a means of making a living but also a means of achieving a desirable quality of life, for consumers as well as farmers – economically, socially, and spiritually. Over time, the family farm will become a reflection of the economic, social and spiritual values of the community and society as a whole.

Sustainable family farms – the ideal – can serve as a metaphor for the rest of the economy and society. Ultimately, people must return to their common sense of interconnectedness with each other and with the earth, not just in eating but in all aspects of their lives. We are not simply physical beings, although we certainly must have some basic amounts of food, clothing, and shelter to survive. We are also social beings; we need other people not only to thrive but also to survive. We also need an ethical and moral sense of purpose to make our lives worth living. Sustainable farming is about the pursuit of happiness, not just wealth. In Adam Smith's agrarian farmer and Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer and in today's family farmer, we find the metaphor for the future sustainability of human life on earth.

With an understanding and acceptance of today's ecological, social, and economic realities, how should we then work and live? First, nothing is more important than pursuing what we feel is our unique purpose. If we fulfill our purpose in life, we will have contributed as much as we possibly could have to make this a better world. If we feel we were meant to be a farmer, we should strive to become a sustainable family farmer – the ideal – regardless of whether we have a family. We can live the reality of family farming – in our relations with our farm, our family, our customers, and our neighbors – while we pursue the ideal. If we don't feel "called" to be a farmer, we can become a part of our "local food community," thus promoting both the reality and the ideal of sustainable family farming. Nothing is more effective in bringing about change

than real world examples of better ways of working and living. And regardless of our profession, we can attempt to reflect the principles of sustainability in all aspects of our lives.

Finally, we can join with like-minded people to change the culture of our communities, our nation, and the world by participating in the processes of democracy. One reason Smith and Jefferson believed that family farming was worthy of government support was that in their times farmers made up a large segment of the population. However, they also wanted government to support the *ideal* of family farming as a model of virtue, judgment, discretion, and moral responsibility to be emulated by the rest of society. The need for such a model is even more desperate today. Returning to President Obama's inaugural address, "Our challenges may be new. The instruments [and technologies] with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old. These things are true." These are the "ideals" of family farming; these are the ideals that must lead America back to its "better history."

We each have the ability and the responsibility to do whatever we can to help create a better, more sustainable agriculture and a more sustainable economy and society. Our success does not depend on the skill or vision of those in high offices, but on We the People. We each have a unique purpose in life and no one is any more or less important than anyone else in meeting the challenges before us. We must each do whatever we can do at the local, state, national, and international levels to help reshape the agricultural and food policies that will affect not only our future well-being but also will affect the future of humanity. We must trust that if we each do whatever we can do, together we will do enough.

In restoring the sustainability of our food system, we can help restore grassroots democracy. We can join or form a local food policy council or we can join one of several state, regional, and national groups advocating for more sustainable agricultural policies. The new public policies we advocate for sustainable family farms can serve as models for the general economic and social policies needed to create a more sustainable national and global society. In these times, times that President Obama compared with the time of President Washington at Valley Forge, when he asked that these words of Thomas Paine be read to the troops: "in the depths of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy current, and endure what storms may come."

We should never doubt whether we can do enough to bring about the needed change. All any of us needs to do to make the world better, in fact, all we really can do to make the world better, is to do our part – to fulfill our unique purpose in our little piece of the world. We know we are capable of doing what we are meant to do – life otherwise wouldn't make sense. Anything more is impossible. Anything less is inexcusable.

End Notes

¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, (1776, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991) p. 83.

² Alan Greenspan, as quoted in “Rich- Poor Gap Gaining Attention,” *Christian Science Monitor*, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0614/p01s03-usec.html> , June 14, 2005.

³ Patrick Murphy, *Plan C: Community Survival Strategies for Peak Oil and Climate Change* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2008) p. 24.

⁴ David and Marcia Pimentel, *Food, Energy, and Society* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado), 1996.

⁵ Wikipedia, “greenhouse gas”, and “Climate Change and Agriculture,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenhouse_gas and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change_and_agriculture .

⁶ David Tisch, in an interview with Bruce Gellerman, host of radio program, “Living on Earth, February 8, 2008, Tisch is a Professor in the College of Agriculture and Technology, State University of New York, Cobleskill, NY, <http://www.loe.org/shows/shows.htm?programID=08-P13-00006#feature4>

⁷ Laura Sayre, “The New Farm Field Trials,” Rodale Institute, October, 2003. http://www.newfarm.org/depts/NFfield_trials/1003/carbonsequest.shtml