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Ensuring a Sustainable, Enduring Agriculture

James E. Horne

During the farm crisis of the 1980s we began to better understand the inherent faults of an industrialized food system. Despite large gains in productivity, efficiency, and economies of size, thousands of farms were in foreclosure. Many farmers were overly extended in debt. Others were in trouble because of a combination of factors such as drought, low crop prices, high input prices, and the lack of competition in the marketplace. The end result was the loss of thousands of farmers and a subsequent decline in many rural communities.

At the same time, a new vision of an enduring agriculture emerged. It was called sustainable agriculture. This new paradigm became attractive because it focused on solutions to the problems of the day. Sustainable agriculture offered hope to farmers that were willing to differentiate their product and add value to it, deal with ecological costs by using sustainable best management practices, and work to create equity in food system employment. Forming new links with consumers is enabling farmers to set their prices, and consumers are willing to pay to know more about their food.

Key Words: enduring agriculture, sustainable agriculture, resource scarcity, rural development, alternative food systems

In 1985, somewhat unknowingly, I became involved in an effort that would ultimately lead to the creation of a new vision for American agriculture. To be one small part of that process to create a system of agriculture that is sustainable—that will endure—has been both absorbing and rewarding. Today, it is with a high level of confidence that I believe we have almost secured the viability of a sustainable agriculture. We have done it with science, with real-world experiences, and by watching certain aspects of the industrial model crumble before our eyes.

During the last 25 years or so, many of us involved in this movement have launched numerous educational campaigns to better inform the populace about where the industrial model of agriculture will take us and why we must develop alternative food systems. Despite this, there remain many obstacles to a new paradigm. There are powerful interest groups that have a lot to lose if

we learn to farm with less dependence on purchased inputs. Keeping the tone of the conflicting paradigms positive yet on-point is quite a balancing act.

Strong evidence that the industrial model has failed may be found in the loss of farmers, the decline of rural communities, the formation of food deserts, and the loss of prime farmland. Other signs of a failed system are fewer and fewer agriculture input dealers, loss of competition in markets, volatile commodity prices, and a continued squeeze on family farmers caught in the middle. Still other indicators of decline include acute shortages of new opportunities in farming and in economic development in rural areas.

For proponents of sustainable agriculture, these failures have created a teachable moment. It is now the time to roll out the promise of a sustainable agriculture as a part of a rural development strategy. But if you roll it out without paying due respect to those that guided the development of an industrial agriculture, you will find yourself marginalized and labeled as a *complainer*.

Those of us who have fought for change, for a paradigm shift in our approach to agriculture and rural communities, have to be ready with bold solutions. Being critical of the industrial model is

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easy, but having workable solutions is another matter. Unfortunately, after World War II we focused all of our efforts on a cheap food policy for Americans instead of a holistic community-based system that would preserve diversity and make room for an entrepreneurial spirit. Our experience level with sustainable systems is not as intensive or as well researched as traditional development models. Nevertheless, the old system is not producing the results we need.

Today is filled with opportunities for rural communities that dare to be different. We know from experience that a large part of the populace is now demanding a new model for agriculture and a vote on how we produce food. A significant number of consumers have not only asked us to produce food differently but have also said that they will pay producers a profit to do so. Consumers are interested in knowing how we grow our products and whether we buy locally—they want to put a face on their food. To me this is a large step toward sustainability and enables us to say with more confidence that indeed some paradigm shift from the industrial model to a sustainable model is underway.

Any loss in momentum toward a paradigm shift is temporary. Over time as we experience scarcity of major natural resources, supply disruptions of inputs, and price volatility, we will see farmers continually changing their models because of the new risks involved. This trend of uncertainty will become more pronounced if we continue to live affluent lives and use up our finite ecological capital. Even our detractors will come to understand that sustainability is not just some ideological theory but an effective way to deal with risk and uncertainty.

Doubters will soon understand that our current industrial model for agriculture has reached its production limits given cheap fossil fuel. Until now we have always bet the farm on new technologies for yield increases. Those increases are now incremental. In the past most of our yield-increasing technology came from the land-grant system and without direct costs. Today, agribusiness is leading the way with new technologies and seed, but at a price, and in an atmosphere that is lacking in competition. While biotechnology may ratchet us up to a higher platform for yield improvement and the incorporation of various traits, we may find ourselves at the mercy of only a few companies that have significant pricing

power over us. Since most corporations have the sole purpose of maximizing shareholder value, their actions raise questions about the structure and equity of agriculture. We must keep a diligent watch on the interface between large agribusiness and the land-grant system.

Conservation, stewardship, and sustainability have to have some basis for us to adopt them as a code, moral standard, or spiritual dimension. Surely, we don't recycle paper because it is fun. No, there has to be something in it for us to cause us to sacrifice now in order that sacrifice in the future will be even less drastic or at least no worse. It seems to me that within us there is some moral or spiritual compass that compels us to do what is right. At least the idea of being entrusted with the Creation is a strong driving force.

It is my view that Americans are just now realizing that scarcity of resources could some day be for real and more than just a bump in prices at the pump or a significant change in fertilizer prices. As Americans we are quickly realizing that unless we take action soon we could be saddled with a debt for ecological services that cannot be repaid. We are a spoiled nation. The fact that we are learning some tough lessons today in banking, finance, worldwide economics, and other phenomena should provide at least a logical basis for many of us to take appropriate action to ensure that sustainability continues.

For agriculture to be sustainable, we must also ensure that all components of our life become sustainable. One is not separate from the others. From K through 12 and into graduate school we must learn that people and resources are interconnected. We can achieve much more working together, in collaboration, than by depending on competition to ensure that we achieve a least-cost solution.

People in our country, because of affluence, live as if resources are unlimited. The poorer people of the earth act as if they must grab all there is without thinking about the future. This is a sad day for our world. The role of government should be to help all of us make crucial, logical transitions that will ensure that there will be a future worth living. Farmers have to be part of this change.

Farmers of most commodity crops have never put a face on their customer. Just as wheat all looks the same, they assumed that the consumers

all looked the same. Most of us growing up in wheat country actually never gave a thought about the individual consumer. Each year rumors that the Russians were buying wheat that particular year only conjured up a stereotypical view of people wearing fur hats. As farmers we must start thinking about what our customers want and what they will pay for. The best hope for sustainability is the realization that the consumer has spoken: saying that they want quality products, grown by people they know, and grown under certain specifications. The largest surprise for many of us is that many consumers are willing to pay the farmer a premium for such food.

For too long commodity growers have blamed the consumer for their economic plight. Now they

have an opportunity to grow crops to a specification and become price setters rather than price takers. All of this does not come easy to traditional farmers, but for those that want to survive there is opportunity if they do not procrastinate. At the same time, we all must begin the process of identifying all costs of production—whether they be economic or ecological—and asking how they impact local communities.

The future is ripe for the early adopters of sustainable agriculture and those who can take advantage of the new climate in agriculture. I am hopeful that USDA and our universities will see the vital role they have to play in all of this.