

Is The Picture of Farming Changing?

Among all the projections offered as this New Year debuts is the hope for healthier food for healthier lives for all of us. This ideal has been part of the American dream since colonial times but the rise in healthcare costs related to the diseases made worse by our propensity to eat badly has concentrated attention on the way our food is produced. The focus is on farming.

We acknowledge that knowing what is good healthy food is no guarantee that we will grab an apple rather than a box of doughnuts. It may be encouraging to consider how many decades it took before work places were no longer blue with cigarette smoke.

Experts from agricultural colleges as well as other scientists are calling for a change from the way we currently farm, returning to an earlier model in order to address soil erosion, extreme weather, and less than adequate rainfall. There is a movement underway both here and in Europe to replace soil-depleting annual grain crops grown in monocultures with perennial crops grown in poly-cultures. Perennials don't need to be planted every year so their long roots are capable of holding water, keeping soil in place and storing away carbon. The poly-cultural model is less likely to be a host to pests or vulnerable to weather extremes than a monoculture.

A diverse farm requires more skill and more labor. Farming is hard work but generation after generation people have chosen to farm, hoping to make a good living. Unfortunately the policies put in place decades ago have not been re-thought so the huge agribusinesses are still favored, despite the need for change.

An approach to making a family farm economically viable, productive, and environmentally sustainable is outlined in an article in the bulletin of the Union of Concerned Scientists. Industrial agriculture's solutions to problems have been more chemicals, a simplistic short term fix but a long-term failure as both the erosion of the soil and the loss of farming knowledge result.

Several practices are suggested by the authors of the article. "Take a landscape approach" is the first. Farmers are finding that the uncultivated areas around their fields, once known as hedgerows and teeming with bugs, bees, birds, and other wildlife, are a valuable source of pollination and pest control. The second practice is growing and rotating more different crops. The wider variety avoids depletion of the same elements in the soil year after year and saves a lot of money on chemical inputs. The use of cover crops, especially nitrogen-fixing legumes, further reinforces the structure and vitality of the soil itself as well as making the farm less vulnerable to drought.

Another important practice is the reintegration of livestock and crops, which has been done in several places in Virginia, such as Polyface Farm that has attracted wide attention. The picture of those crowded CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations) has challenged our thinking. We have read for decades of the horrors and have either adopted more vegan recipes or we have refused to think about it! Most of us I suspect have made an effort to replace meat-loaded meals with more vegetables and fruits, but old habits die hard.

CAFOs produce huge amounts of manure leading to appalling pollution accidents. On a farm where the animals are integrated into a single farm or even into a neighborhood of farms the manure becomes an asset, not a problem. A peer-reviewed report from USDA, Iowa State University, and the University of Minnesota examined the effects of crop diversity and the bringing of animals into the mix and "found compelling evidence that these practices do pay dividends." Whether we are able to revitalize the good earth and protect our rural counties may depend on our ability to see our surroundings as a resource to be guarded for future generations

rather than just an empty space to be paved over and developed for the enhancement of the ubiquitous bottom line. For more information: www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture.

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