

Making Changes in the Heartland

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Farmers are “In” right now. With today’s trend towards local food and sustainable agriculture, farmers are making the news, appearing on lists of most influential people and changemakers. The farmers we hear most about seem to be in or near cities, often new to the field, raising vegetables, selling at farmers markets. We’ve read the articles about rooftop farmers in Brooklyn and vegetable farmers growing heirloom varieties for Berkeley restaurants. They all deserve the recognition, because farming is hard work any way you do it.



There are a lot of farmers we do not often hear about. Most farmers are not growing vegetables for direct markets, and most of the food Americans eat doesn’t come from farmers markets. Source: modernfarmer.com2014

But there are a lot of farmers we do not often hear about. Most farmers are not growing vegetables for direct markets, and most of the food Americans eat doesn’t come from farmers markets. Corn and soybean acreage is 36 times that of vegetables, while the value of the top five commodities (corn, soybeans, animal products) is 200 times that of direct sale items.

Most farmers, therefore, live far from cities, raise corn and soybeans and livestock, and sell into commodity markets, not farmers markets. And (surprise!) many of them are trying to change the system they’re in—by using fewer chemicals, or planting cover crops, or making the three-year transition to growing organically or looking for a local mar-

ket for their product. Even bigger surprise: some of these rural commodity farmers are outspoken activists, organizing against policies and practices that hurt the land and their communities.

It’s one thing to advocate for a sustainable food system from Brooklyn or Berkeley, but quite another in a place where your neighbors may think you’re crazy for not using genetically modified seed or for restoring a few acres of native prairie; where any change you make could cost your livelihood or your relationships; where the herbicide salesman is your nephew and everywhere you turn you are remind-

ed that you are “feeding the world.”

But organizing and changemaking are also more urgent in the heartland, when the farms being sold off belonged to your friends, or you have to drive another hour for groceries because all the stores downtown closed, or your kids are getting sick from pesticide drift.

To make change in the belly of the beast—in the places most of our food comes from and where agribusiness has a strong hold—takes conviction, hope and a willingness to risk being an outsider.



ORGANIC GREENHOUSE VEGETABLE PRODUCTION is regularly now practiced by certified organic farmers and market gardeners, and has potential for as a niche market or sustainable method of production..

The US has a strong history of agrarian-led advocacy. There have been movements for what we now call sustainable agriculture for centuries; most led not by people in urban centers, but by rural farmers. In the 1890s, farmers across the country realized that the struggles they faced were more a result of economic and social policies than personal failings, and built a broad coalition and a strong movement, Populism and the People’s Party, to change the system.

Nearly a century later, skyrocketing debt payments and a drop in exports led to the 1980s farm crisis. Hundreds of thousands of farms went into foreclosure; with fewer farmers, rural businesses failed, downtowns vacated and rural communities withered. Throughout the crisis, farmers fought back, protesting at state houses and in Washington, fighting through the courts and in the court of popular opinion, using tractorcades and white crosses marking the loss of farms to call the nation’s attention to the countryside. A Supreme Court decision eventually stopped the foreclosures, but the crisis in farm country did not end, it changed to a slow burn.

In the last thirty years, farms have gotten increasingly larger, equipment and inputs more expensive, and dramatic consolidation has shrunk farmers’ market options. The prices farmers receive for their goods dropped precipitously following the removal of all price stabilizations in the 1996 farm bill, and a patchwork of subsidies and insurance has not made up the difference. Throughout the 1990s, the fight became about confined animal operations, or factory farms. Citizen action in states like Minnesota and Missouri kept these states from being completely overrun by factory farms then and continues to be critical in demanding state enforcement of factory farm rules. Grassroots organizations such as Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, (Minnesota) Land Stewardship Project, and the Western Organization of Resource Councils have rallied their farmer and rural members (along with urbanites) for decades on these and other fights, and continue to do so today. Through it all, there have also been the quiet farmers—those who may not have actively protested, but instead resisted by changing their own farming or land stewardship practices and influencing their neighbors to do the same.

I’ve written an online series of profiles telling the stories of how three modern rural Midwestern farmers have carried on this legacy and are working to make change in their communities. *(You can read all three by going to <http://grassroots.whyhunger.org/> and entering “farmer” in the search box.)*

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