Field of corporate dreams: Farming without the farmer

by Debra Bendis in the June 19, 2002 issue

In 1977 Wendell Berry warned that the rise of corporate farming and the disappearance of the family farm were destroying local communities and economies. These developments also caused soil erosion, and reduced the quality of the food we eat. Those who gathered at Georgetown College in Berry's home state of Kentucky to mark the 25th anniversary of his book *The Unsettling of America* saw no sign that these trends have changed. But Berry's students and admirers remain committed to envisioning a different future and devising some alternatives.

One alternative on display at the April conference on "The Future of Agrarianism" was the caterer. Conference planner Norman Wirzba decided to serve only food produced in the Lexington region. When participants took a lunch break, they found tables laden with bowls of freshly picked strawberries, platters of sliced cheese and thick slabs of whole grain breads. Jars of jams and honey were all labeled "Kentucky." The barbecued beef was free of chemicals or hormones.

Many of these "direct market" farms are thriving businesses, especially on the West Coast. But they will never be able to compete with large operations. Most of these alternative-style farmers, who sell their products via the Internet, or at farmers' markets or through "community-supported agriculture," are retired or work part time. They account for only 9 percent of the country's annual agricultural output, noted Fred Kirschenmann, a North Dakotan farmer and director of the Aldo Leopold Center at Iowa State University.

The largest chunk of agricultural output—61 percent—comes from America's "corporate" farms, operations that usually produce a single commodity under contract with a consolidated firm. If current trends of consolidation continue, said Kirschenmann, and all the farms in Iowa become 225,000–acre farms, there will be only 140 farms in the entire state.

Nationwide, there are 163,000 corporate operations, and 63 percent of these are under contract to a consolidated firm. The farmer who signs on with Cargill or Tyson agrees to produce a commodity that meets the firm's specifications. In the world of "monoculture" farming, the farmer relinquishes his expertise in land use and animal husbandry—such skills and virtues are no longer required. Instead, he or she follows the dictates of the corporation, which wants a uniform product and mass production. Low cost and speed are the farmer's priorities.

What kind of beef do we eat when a mass-produced animal is on the menu? Michael Pollen tracked one calf through its short life on a Kansas ranch of 37,000 animals, then told the story of his "Power Steer" in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Pollen paid $917 for an 80-pound calf and the food and supplements that fattened it for 14-16 months, or until it reached a 1,250-pound "meat market" size. He visited the calf regularly and watched it ingest synthetic growth hormones, antibiotics (blended into the corn silage) and protein supplements (from animal carcasses). The only way to create the rich corn-fed red meat that Americans want at the low price they demand is to treat the animals as a crop, push them through an intense six-month feeding frenzy and douse them with medicines and supplements.

Americans like the rich taste of power steers. They like their beef marbled. But marbling indicates the presence of extra omega 6 or "bad" fats, fats that are significantly less in grass-fed cows. We've taken an animal that is a ruminant or grazer and acidified its intestinal system by forcing it to eat corn. The increased acidity encourages the development of strains of E. coli, including those that can kill humans. Cows suffer under the forced diet, and sicken from bloat, liver disease or feedlot polio. Pollen quotes a veterinarian who says it's a good thing cows eat for only six months on the feedlot, because a sustained feedlot diet would eventually "blow out their livers."

Many of the 350 farmers, environmentalists and students who gathered in Georgetown know the downside of monocultural agriculture firsthand. Some are direct- market farmers. Others represent the remaining small- to mid-size farms. These family farmers have seen their vocation drop dramatically in the last 50 years. The six and a half million small- to mid-sized farms of 1935 decreased to 575,000 by 1998. They have no illusions about their future on the farm, or about the viability of a career in farming for young adults.

Wes Jackson, president of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, insists that we must reform agriculture instead of intensifying current agricultural practices. We need agricultural systems that are more ecologically stable, instead of a system that allows topsoil to blow and wash away, then tries to replace it with vast amounts of chemical additives.

The Land Institute has bred perennial varieties of wheat, rye, sorghum and sunflowers that require minimal tilling and few chemicals because deep “prairie” roots absorb and hold nitrogen instead of letting it run off the land. But chemical companies and national policy discourage change. We continue to pour on the nitrogen, even as scientists report the existence of 50 “dead zones” where nitrogen has flowed from fields to water, and resulted in an excess of plant growth, a depletion of oxygen and the extinction of life.

“Farming has become mining,” said Berry at Georgetown. “We strip the land, taking and not renewing.” A true agrarianism, he added, would entail a sense of “frugality and renewal within limits.”

Indian physicist and ecologist Vandana Shiva, author of *Stolen Harvest*: *The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*, broadened the conversation to include concerns in the Third World, where peasants may lose an essential food source when global corporations “improve” food production by raising one crop and eliminating others. Corporate farming has had a disastrous impact in India, said Shiva, where it interferes with local economies and triggers ecological crises. A heavy marketing of a pesticide like Roundup, for example, has destroyed what Monsanto calls “weeds” but what local people call food.

“In Indian agriculture,” said Shiva, “women use up to 150 different species of plants weeds) as medicine, food or fodder. For the poorest, this biodiversity is the most important resource for survival. When global corporations intervene, they destroy the economies of the poorest, especially women.”

There are signs of hope. In the U.S., some urbanites and suburbanites are migrating to the country, seeking to work and live on the land. Others want to buy food directly from a farmer, and are seeking out these relationships by finding markets and farm co-ops. Environmentalist groups and farmers are becoming allies in their concern for tainted and dwindling water supplies, chemical poisoning, urban encroachment and other issues. And although it is a dark hope, the natural disasters

of mad cow disease, E.coli and chemical poisoning are alerting Americans and others to the precariousness of the food supply. In Great Britain, the beef disasters have generated “Greenstuff” organic meats.

It is indeed a dark kind of hope—that disaster will stimulate change. There will be more minor disasters in the future, said Kirschenmann, because the agricultural economy is “brittle,” overly controlled and vulnerable. Ninety percent of commercially produced turkeys in this country, for example, come from only three flocks. When humans discourage biodiversity, they undermine natural immunity and leave the animal population open to new and fast-spreading diseases. Relying on antibiotics is ultimately an ineffective and dangerous response to this situation.

Despite the conference name, most of those present at “The Future of Agrarianism” doubt that Americans will rally to save the family farm. There is little evidence of organized interest in the issues of land use and food production, and the voting public seems content to let farm subsidies artificially support the corn industry and postpone transformation.

The beef tastes good, so why switch to grass-fed beef? If we did we might have to curb our appetites. There is a limited amount of grazable land, after all, so the animals would be growing at a slower pace. Less beef might mean an increase in cost. An increase, that is, until one tallies the current costs of stripping soil, pouring on chemicals and ingesting hormones, antibiotics and fat, and the effects of irradiation. But those costs haven’t been counted. Berry’s predictions (voiced in this case in his 1990 book *What Are People For*?) have been realized:

> If agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land, and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well. Nothing that has happened in the agricultural revolution of the last 50 years has disproved or invalidated these requirements, though everything that has happened has ignored or defied them.