

Changes that affect the size, number and orientation of farms

For a significant part of the history of mixed non-plantation agricultural operations in the US, the size of a farm was limited by the acreage that could be managed by a farmer and a set of draft animals during a year while grazing and ranching systems could be larger. Spouses and children usually helped with some farm operations, but still there were clear practical limits to farm size.

That began to change with the turn of the 20th Century and the introduction of tractors powered by internal combustion engines. With tractors farmers could use larger tillage and harvest equipment and cover more ground in the same amount of time, making it practical to purchase the land of retiring neighbors. The result was a steady increase in the average size of US farm operations.

In addition, changes in farm chemical use and seed technology enabled production to continue the trend of increasing faster than changes in demand, resulting in low crop prices. The solution to the financial pinch was to restructure the farm production system so that fixed costs could be spread out over more units of production.

The mantra of this way of thinking was to teach young farmers that they had to “get big or get out.” Many got out, seeking better wages in other economic sectors, while some got bigger and bigger.

At the same time, we saw young people who were disillusioned with the urban rat race try their hand at farming. They were influenced by the environmental movement and couldn’t afford to buy large tracts of land, so they sought ways to make a living on small acreages.

Along with some of those who had chosen to remain on the farm but not get big, they explored various ways of simultaneously achieving economic and ecological sustainability. While some failed in this endeavor, many succeeded as they focused on the local food movement among consumers.

Each found a niche where their skills and resources could be combined to provide a product consumers were looking for at a price that allowed them to earn a living. In many cases this involves some form of direct sales in the form of farmers’ markets, selling shares in a consumer supported agriculture program (CSA), or through a carefully designed website. In each case they seek to find a way to appeal to both the ethics and the tastebuds of potential customers.

The agricultural products are as varied as the land they farm. It may be Texas Longhorn Beef in Ohio; heritage-breed pork in Michigan; antibiotic-free, minimally pasteurized milk in Indianapolis and Austin; or orchard fruit from a ranch in California.

As we pointed out in last week’s column, these and other changes are coming about, not as the result of government regulation, but as the result of changes in consumer preferences.

Can every farmer take this approach? No, but it is not an either-or situation. Large-scale traditional agriculture will continue, but so will the growth of agricultural enterprises that produce to specific consumer specs.

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