



## ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS ARE NOT AT CROSS PURPOSES TO FARM JUSTICE / FOOD SECURITY

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### Abstract

Hunger in America is unimaginable. There appears to be food everywhere, just buy it. Unfortunately, many sections of our country have subsets of the population without the means to buy, store and prepare nutritious food. From Appalachian hollers to inner city neglected areas to homeless and disenfranchised individuals (not all-American soldiers who come back from frontlines are living the American Dream). Especially after COVID and the looming worries of recession, many households are moving in together to afford the necessities of life. Many mortgaged homes and rental units are looking at eviction notices and people are complaining that food (one of the most basic necessities) is too high while farmers are not doing enough to produce more, cheaper food. Food security and farm justice are not opposed to each other, but it must come in a sustainable fashion not compromising the environment. The current big farm/industrial farm model is unsustainable. Slash and burn, moving to new untouched acreage and over-producing the land no long can be the normal way of farming. Many farmers agree but the support from officials, consumers and even academia is often not there to help many farmers make the transition to more environmentally friendly practices. Issues facing farmers and consumers include hunger, wasting hunger, just pay, under production to preserve the farm, natural cycle of regeneration, how food security works, and marketing. Other considerations which diminish farmers' income include transportation, storage, labor, bio-security control and legal restrictions and regulations. Farmer markets should help drive agricultural production, food hubs and food deserts to provide food locally, economically, at a reasonable price for the support of the farmer and good of the community.

### Introduction

Life in American has been relatively prosperous. We are a consumer-based economy with incentive to buy value but pay cheaply. Doesn't everyone have a big screen TV? Now people buy even bigger ones to the envy of their friends! Yet not everyone is prosperous. Hunger is a problem in America, especially after the financial impact of Covid 19 became apparent with the disruption in many supply chains. Cheap fast food is no longer cheap. Different foods and commodities became unavailable at times. More people were not able to pay their rent or mortgage and were given reprieves through federal mandates preventing eviction of non-paying tenants. Yay, yay

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people were not evicted but the landlord did not receive his money and what he contributed to the economy was lost. Maintenance supplies and contractors were not used, further reducing economic recovery. In the midst of this the food supply chain became disrupted. You can live without many things but never without food. The farmer who could not pay their bills affected the food security of the nation rather than just a landlord and tenant situation of one on one with maintenance affected, with farmers it is a one on many over a period of time possibly into years of lost food production. If the farmland was lost to the farmer, then the farm itself might be turned into non-agricultural land such as homes, businesses and even parking lots. The transition into non-agricultural lands would also impact the environment as a cascading effect. Bees, birds and squirrels, (insect, fowl and mammals) would be impacted as their ecosystems were changed. The natural cycle of nature would be disrupted with the artificial landscape of man. The stream that meandered through the environment would be straightened or eliminated as it interfered with community/city design plans. The natural environment which existed in harmony with the agricultural land would face restriction or elimination, once gone most likely never to return as nature intended.

In such a time the loss would be immeasurable. The food, the beauty of nature, the habitat of non-human species, all these things would be lost for future generations. Instead, support of farmers and farmworkers to have a sustainable economic livelihood can ensure that local communities can gift their future descendants with little slices of nature while promoting food security within a reasonable distance of their neighborhoods. Farmers would be able to produce food and fiber while contributing to the well-being of our fellow creatures as fence rows, woods, buffer areas and riparian habitats exist alongside agricultural lands. Farmers have never been about making it big or becoming rich, they only desire to work and live comfortably, provide for their families and workers and be able to sustain their farming lifestyle. Farming is a noble profession, neither lowly nor undesirable, and in consideration that farmers and farmworkers ensure that mankind is able to exist by providing nutritious healthy food at a reasonable price. When did our world become so upside down that it is considered ok to pay a hundred dollars or more for a pair of shoes with someone's name on them, but it is outrageous to pay three dollars a pound for a fresh, juicy, vibrant, nutritious tomato which nourishes a person's body and soul. How dare that arrogant farmer price the sweat of their brow and calluses on the hands or their farm laborers at such an exorbitant price. In reality, Americans have one of the cheapest food sources relative to their income and what the farmer needs to pay and endure to have that beautiful product. How dare that farmer offer up less than perfection in the produce he markets. The not perfect shape and the less than optimum color and freshness still takes the same care and consideration as well as resources as that perfect produce. The ground beef comes from the same farm that filet mignon is produced on, the animal must be fed, watered, cared for, and processed that same way with many of the same costs to the farmer. If a farmer could only get filet mignon from every cut of beef, he would but that is just a small part of the total animal product, and the rest of the animal must be sold well to have a working ROI (return on investment) for the farm to continue. In spite of this, the farmer leaves some land untouched as he knows his neighbors, the songbird, the majestic raptors of the air, the cute bunny in the undergrowth, the vocal bob white and lovely pheasant rely on his willingness to leave some land undeveloped to preserve the natural environment. Most business minded people would not hesitate to use all the resources they have at hand, yet the farmer looks beyond the dollar signs and sees the beauty in our world, often stopping their tractor to take the time to move the grouse's nest or allow rabbits to escape certain death under the wheels of the

farm implement and return to their homes in the wild. Where else does nature have a reprieve or do our fellow creatures have hope of benevolence than at the hands of the farmer who treasures nature.

The environment around us, whether man-made or natural is a background to our daily lives. The farmer looks beyond the built environment and takes into account that the natural environment was there before man came on the scene and is just as deserving to be allowed to flourish as cities and neighborhoods. Farmers and their workers are keepers of our historical heritage providing sustenance so essential (food, fiber, plants and animals can be available) as well as the not so essential items such as the latest PlayStation or big screen TV and yes even the name brand sneakers. Do they, or their families deserve less than anyone else for their contributions to the life and well-being of their neighbors and communities? Do their families deserve less than comfort, health and homes? Farm justice is past due to be explained to the non-farmer. Officials, local and regional need to understand that being a farmer is being a steward and protector of our natural environment allowing biodiversity to flourish locally for the health of our planet and preservation of our natural environment and must maintain and pass regulation which is beneficial to the farming community while supporting local sustainable production and markets.

The same person who buys sustainably grown coffee in South America to provide social justice to oppressed people may also condemn the local farmer for pricing their products higher than industrial farms. The higher price is the price to produce food and fiber while preserving nature and doing their part to prevent loss of nature and possible future extinction of species. The migratory insects and fowl may visit his non-chemically saturated buffer areas to replenish their strength for their annual and semi-annual trips. The local honey comes at a cost of non-insecticidal spray-maintained plants which may or may not be ravaged by non-beneficial insects. The costs to their production bottom line may mean less yield to allow beneficial insects to exist while not spraying to kill non-beneficial insects. The beautiful butterflies so loved by young and old come at a price, that price is some loss of yield production by farmers. The caterpillar which damages plants, fruits and vegetables must survive on the farmer's product until it transforms into the butterfly and lays more eggs to make more caterpillars which also feed the vocal songbirds. The farmer has no choice but to have a higher price to offset the environmental costs of non-spraying and inclusion of buffer areas with host crops to preserve the local biodiversity of their areas and maintain habitats that do nothing for their bottom line and cash flow.

Many people only want beautiful fruit. The damaged fruit by insects, bruising, under or over colored, a little too immature or overripe is devalued but the expense is the same as the perfect fruit of vegetable. Consumers have a picture-perfect image of what fruits and vegetable should be, but it is unrealistic, and criticism of farmers and their products is often unjust as the effects of weather, sun and environmental factors are often something that the farmer has no control over but work around to provide nutritious and healthy products for an unappreciative consumer. The farmer is aware that they do not work in a vacuum; that lynchpin species must exist for a healthy biome which supports both beneficial and non-beneficial species which must exist to promote the sustainability of the existing ecological niches. No matter what image the public has of fruits and vegetables, most are not "perfect specimens" but have some usually small blemish or defect

separating them from perfection. These imperfects are the basis of the food consumed around the world ranging from slightly immature to overripe, color off, or taste not quite optimal but it meets and often exceeds the minimum requirement for life and health. It is a wonder that farmers produce so much beneficial, nutritious and good tasting food for the prices they received. Can we the consumers do as well for as little pay and respect?

### **Background Information**

This is an opinion article based on working with agricultural producers, reading relevant information from United Nations FAO, articles on hunger in America, Rural Poverty, Mental Stress and Issues of Undervalued small, limited resource minority farmers, female farmers, young and elderly farmers, limited professional education farmers, sustenance farmers and people who just are trying to have enough to eat on shrinking financial resources. Current information from major sites such as NOAA, USGS, HBCUs research and documentation, actual doers of sustainable practices as well as pioneer researchers from both new and historical documentation has shaped my opinion and this resulting article. Before a problem can be solved, an acknowledgement that there is a problem is essential. Time is not standing still, land degradation, desertification, loss of coastland, extinction of many existing species seriously affecting their specific ecological niche with some of them being lynchpin species, all these and many more factors are sounding warning calls that humans need to stop, take a breath and look at the issues and problems then work together to solve problems. There are many paths to solutions and there is not just one solution; this article is to encourage people to take the first step on “a” or “several” path(s) to a solution.

As a qualitative article, pointing out that for farm justice and food security there are more issues at work and environmental concerns are one of the major issues in my opinion. The “goal” or “objective” is to highlight that farm justice and food security is not an “over there” issue or concern but global issues affecting the entire human population. Just because we have food today does not mean we will have it tomorrow, no matter where on earth you are. America is not immune to the ills of humanity; issues such as hunger, wasting hunger, cold, illness, hopelessness and despair when there is too much month left at the end of the paychecks or welfare check. A feeling of working what seems like day and night and still not making ends meet. A single parent family wondering what kind of future can my family face if we can’t even see hope for existing or “sustaining” beyond current expenditures and income. The American dream for many is “Can I hold on until better times or is this the best I can hope for.” Food is essential for life, farms are essential for food, hope is essential for mankind but we do not live in a void. Our world is more than humans and our concern should be for a renewing and sustaining future. We have to be concerned about life and living and not just the next new fad, being “comfortable at 68 to 72 degrees” when some people are facing ambient temperatures above 100 degrees. An animal does not foul its nest. Humans should not foul their nest and our nest is our world. Our nest gives us comfort, hope and encouragement of a brighter future. We need to realize we have fouled our nest and we need to clean up the problems we have made. As commented this is an opinion article, we are driving on a curvy mountain road with bad brakes and we should become aware of the dangers ahead and slow our speed now or even stop and back up before we continue on to a sadder state.

The references are the main author's life experiences and exposures to the agricultural community, information on other countries, other people and other issues with local (over there) solutions that can work here, as well. Listening to the problems, reading about solutions seeing what others are doing to provide part of a solution to a problem and owning a part of what "I" can contribute to the solution and doing it. We don't know everything, we haven't experienced everything; let's listen to those who have and grow from their wisdom. It is time to learn from those who have been made wise by their experiences and successful solutions. Many of today's agricultural and environmental problems are new and unfolding. We are on a slippery slope of threshold events, it is time to get off that slope and help others to get off and find solutions before we all crash at the bottom of the slope with no way back up to the top where there may be safety. It is time to wake up while the fire is burning not when the fire has burned the house down and us with it.

The issues are so many and varied, solutions are big and small, responses are what people can do individually and collectively as a group. The idea is recognizing problems while finding feasible solutions or parts of solutions that "I" or "WE" can do rather than just sitting back and waiting for the other "GUY" to do something. The focus is to not get bogged down in specific data, graphs, or specific values. It is recognizable that there are problems and after that recognition, we have a choice to stand still and do nothing or take action for our future. One step towards a solution is still a step in the right direction.

Reasons behind writing an article such as this is to be an eye opener to help others see that there are problems and people are already working on solutions. This wake-up call is an invitation to come along and share the burden and also share the solution for the future based on the solution a reader can contribute to.

## **Conclusion**

Rural America which supported families in the past no longer provide a living due to financial concerns such as utilities, additives such as fertilizers and pesticides, labor cost and even price of packaging, transportation, and costs of rules, regulations and taxes. The rural farmer is cast as a villain for wanting to be paid for his work involved in food production but current pricing of \$10 to \$15 dollars for farm work is laughed at while working at a low-end job in retail or food service is filled with individuals claiming it is not fair to be paid less than \$15 an hour. The rural farm is expecting more production out of less land but often must sacrifice the environment to break even and many rural farmers are not willing to do that. Working a job off the farm or working for lower income or using free family labor are often ways that farm families are making ends meet. Highest priority for a family should be food with a relevant portion of family income going towards food along with secure and stable home environment (roof over their heads and food on the table) with enough left to pay society requirements (taxes, utilities and health/doctor needs). A lack of care for the environment with an all in on farm production resulted in scenarios such as the Dust Bowl of the 1930's which took many decades of work and oversight to reverse. Yet, the lessons from the Dust Bowl are staring us in the face again as desertification of the west is creeping ever so

steadily towards the east. Unsustainable practices such as over usage of the land, lack of concern over ecological habitats, and environmental issues such as spraying chemicals and products which break local organisms' supporting lynchpin niches, all upset the delicate balance of nature. Bees, which pollinate most of the vegetables and fruits which feed us, have for several years now been victims of colony collapse, diseases and predators and chemical poisoning, yet farmers are urged to use chemicals which add to the problem instead of sustainable practices which build and benefit the environment. Runoff from fields which are heavily laden with fertilizer and sprays affect the surrounding local land and streams making it difficult for nature to rebound and interfering with the natural order of land regeneration. Natural growth abounds with biodiversity which contains species that benefit each other. There is always some production loss as all the species within the ecological habitat experience some birth and death. Farms and agricultural production must fit within this cycle of life instead of overshadowing it and crushing it in the name of more production with higher yields and profit.

### References

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