

The Farm as the Keystone of Sustainability

An Interview with Michael Dimock

“I see agriculture as being one place where human beings are in the most fundamental relationship to the earth because it is farmers who are bringing forth life on a daily basis. So it’s particularly sad to see that agriculture as practiced in this country is in deep trouble.

“Like any human activity, the agriculture system today is based on a set of values and principles. Until recently, the primary principles structuring the food system were moneybased; that is, people were most interested in maximum return on investment and minimum cost of food at the point of purchase.

“What this has done is externalized many of the costs associated with the production of food. In the price of food you’re not capturing the cost of environmental damage or the damage to people’s health. Low cost at the point of purchase means that chemicals have to be used in order to create cheap food. We all know that using too many chemicals degrades the land and degrades our health. Also not included is the cost of the loss of equity to farmers: food prices today are so low that very few young people are willing to farm anymore. The average age of a farmer in the United States is around 60 which means that, at the rate it’s going now, in ten years our family farms will be basically out of business.

“As a result, in the U.S. today we are already rapidly losing our food production base—particularly in the coastal zones, west and east, where land values are very high because of urbanization. Many farms in the U.S. are being lost and are ending up in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, in the parts of Europe where land is still cheap. These areas are becoming the food production zones of the world, because they can export food at very low cost. As a result, we in the U. S. face becoming dependent on other countries for our food supply, much as we are heavily dependent on other nations for our energy supply. To me, that’s dangerous.

“In addition, when we export the production of our food it’s too often to places where we have less control over how that food is created, places where there are fewer resources to deal with the issues of quality, the use of chemicals, and sustainable agriculture. I think it’s important that we as a nation stay close to our food supply, to keep our mind focused on sustainability and to insure that what we eat is healthy.

“The way we in the U.S. have thought about food production—maximum return on investment with minimum cost of food at the point of purchase—seems on the surface to be a wonderful set of principles or guiding values, values that go far back into our past. I believe that today we need a broader set of values. They would include what farmers are doing as stewards of the land. Are they being compensated—as they should be—for their work to keep the land sustainable and healthy? Are we as citizens willing to pay a little more for food so that farmers don’t need to use so many chemicals? There are indications that a large part of the population is willing to pay more for food, but we still need more people to go in that direction.

“The Europeans have a different set of values that drive their food system. A Congressman from Texas, who sits on the Agriculture Committee, shared with me that the president of France stood up at a meeting related to AG Policy and the World Trade Organization and said that the Americans had to accept that Europeans were not about to change their position on agricultural trade policy. According to the French leader, European policy stems from the fact that Europeans love what the farmers provide: high quality food and stewardship of the countryside. And therefore, Europe was not willing to sacrifice their farmers through free-trade agreements that would essentially export the rest of their production to third-world countries.

“We have to make a similar decision in the United States. We have to ask what our farmers are doing for the environment, and what they are doing to create food that’s healthy. If we can include those values in the formula for structuring our food system, then I think there’s a lot of hope. I haven’t met a farmer yet who wants to damage

the environment. But farmers are trapped between a rock and hard place. They have to produce food at a price that can get them into the marketplace.”

ORGANIC AND BIOLOGICALLY INTEGRATED FARMING

“Fifty or more years ago, farmers through-out the United States and the world were basically farming organically. In the post-war years, however, with the development and understanding of chemistry, agriculture changed completely. Chemistry became the basis for production systems which provided cheap food to the public and high profits to the farmers.

“Well, what’s happened over time is that we’ve begun to recognize the impacts of externalized costs. So about 20 years ago a small group—revolutionaries in one sense—began to move back toward organic systems. And in the last 10 years, another form of agriculture has emerged—not quite organic, but not conventional either—called biologically integrated farming, which is really a combination of the best of organic and conventional farming. This method allows silver bullets, in the form of pesticides, that farmers can use only when they need them—like taking penicillin when you have pneumonia. If chemicals have a place in the food system, that’s where the use should be, not the way pesticides are used today.

“I would say that in the next few years you’re going to see an incredible explosion of biologically integrated farming systems. In Europe, where farmers are paid subsidies to go into organic, you’ve only got 10 percent farming organically, but biologically integrated farming systems have attracted 70 percent of the growers. In the U.S. you’ll see the 2 percent of farmers in organic move to 10 percent, and then probably in 20 years everyone will be farming closer and closer to organic as our understanding of chemistry and biology increases. Biologically integrated farming systems and organic systems would then be the mainstay of all food production. That is the most hopeful thing I can imagine. Then we will see that by nurturing life through the food system and through other systems, we can build a sustainable future and continue to grow in consciousness as we learn from all the systems, and not degrade the earth.

“So the big hope is that consumers will be willing to pay what it takes to produce food that does not harm the environment and allows a farmer to make a living so that his or her offspring want to continue in that tradition. People from outside of agriculture want to get into agriculture because it looks like an exciting place to be because of its relationship to the earth and biology.

“Another hope is that consumers would have a clearer view of where their food comes from. And a large segment of consumers would be dedicated to trying to purchase what’s local. Agriculture is a sector of the economy, and if you can keep it alive in your region, you’ve diversified your economy, and we know that diversity is one of the primary engines for sustainability in the long term.

“I also think there should be trade between countries, so we can celebrate their cultures, because food is a reflection of culture. But it’s incredibly important that the proportions be at a level at which all nations of the world are producing abundant food supplies, because we never know what may happen that would disrupt those supplies.”

Michael Dimock is an agriculture consultant and CEO of Ag Innovations Network.

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