

WEA BRIEFING P A P E R S



WILD FARM ALLIANCE

This Wild Farm Alliance Briefing Paper is part of a series that explores many of the issues that define and distinguish the concept of farming with the wild.

Each paper focuses on a particular issue set in the context of reconnecting food systems with ecosystems. We are striving to bridge the gap between stewardship farming and wildlands conservation. To obtain other papers in this series, or to learn more about our programs, contact the Wild Farm Alliance.

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Local Control in the Global Arena: Restructuring Ecological Food Systems for the Protection of Natural and Human Communities

Although it is estimated that agriculture currently produces more than enough food to provide a healthy diet for every person on the planet, worldwide the unequal distribution of land and food leads to hunger and malnutrition in poverty-stricken areas. Meanwhile corporate consolidation drives profits in an increasingly industrialized global economy. Industrial farming practices and global food distribution contaminate surrounding farmland and wildlands with pesticide and fertilizer runoff, animal waste, and genetic pollution, while overusing our natural resources. To what extent does this global food industry benefit our local communities and day-to-day lives? Some claim that we could not produce enough to feed ourselves without industrial agriculture and cheap imports, but this is contradicted by research conducted by the Institute for Food and Development Policy, which shows that output per acre on small, carefully managed farms can be up to 1,000% higher than on large industrial farms. To counteract the compounding negative effects of large-scale farming, it is becoming increasingly clear that we as consumers must act now to help restructure food systems on a local level for the protection of our natural and human communities.

Within our collective memory exists an agriculture bordered by streams and woods healthy enough for fish and other wildlife, farm communities that actually lived off the land, and consumers who bought local food. In 1910, 40% of Americans farmed, yet today that number is less than 2%. The low value of raw agricultural products, trade liberalization, and the increasing value of land next to developed areas are displacing rural communities and paving the way for industrialization and urbanization of once-productive farmlands and wildlands. A similar pattern has occurred throughout the world as corporate, industrialized agriculture displaces small, diverse family farmers, forcing people to move into crowded cities and farther away from their food supply. In the last 50 years, city populations in developing countries have doubled, and they are predicted to triple by 2030.

Concentration of Power

An overwhelming trend in global food distribution concentrates power and money into fewer and fewer hands. It is estimated that the largest 6% of farms control almost 60% of the market for agricultural products. Fewer than ten mega companies sell 90% of the world's pesticides. And these same companies control the majority of the world's seed industry. Four corporations control 80% of the U.S. beef market. From seed to market, industrial agribusiness has taken over.

We need all people to look at farming with new eyes, to see the potential of the farm as natural habitat, and to refuse to accept the inevitability of farms becoming rural factories to serve the global economy. We must teach that the land is one organism.

—Dana Jackson,

The Farm As Natural Habitat

World Trade Organization

The World Trade Organization (WTO) benefits industrial agriculture. For instance, the WTO's 2000 Agreement on Agriculture prohibits domestic subsidies to farmers and removes tariffs that protected local food markets. The actual enforcement depends on the clout of the country; in the US powerful commodity groups ensure subsidies still exist. Poor countries with little clout and debts to the World Bank feel pressured to join the WTO, where members must oblige global demands for exports. Small to mid-size family-owned farms cannot afford to compete with super-sized corporately-owned farm export enterprises. People then become dependent on jobs to earn enough money to buy their food in the cash economy instead of growing it themselves. As a result, industrial agriculture continues to transform every inch of farmland across the globe.

Consumer Dollars Go to Middlemen

These days up to 91% of the money that American consumers spend on food goes to agricultural suppliers, middlemen, and marketers. This leaves the farmer with only a 9% return, an amount usually not high enough to pay for production costs, much less habitat restoration, conservation, or other necessary on-farm improvements. The current system treats natural foods and fiber as low-value commodities, stripping them of their intrinsic value as the foodstuffs that sustain us.

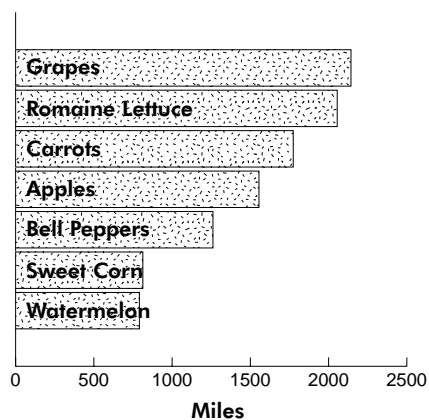
Low Prices Equal Loss of Cultural Knowledge

Consistently lowered prices over the years from increasing global marketing and overproduction has created an imbalance in market demand that pushes many farmers into bankruptcy. In the U.S. today, small farmers commonly spend more money than they make each year, and often farmers cannot get out of debt without losing their land. Those who have protected their land through the generations and saved wild and natural areas find themselves economically strapped. Many have to sell off portions of their property for development and intensive factory farming. The burden can become so great that caretakers of the land have high rates of depression and suicide and, like our native and endangered wildlife species, have begun to decline at an alarming rate. In agriculture, we are in danger of losing what local seed stocks and cultural knowledge we have left. Without the active conservation of habitat and care of the land that those living in connection to it provide, natural resources have little chance of being protected.

Food Miles

In the last 40 years, the international trade of food has grown fourfold. Industry increasingly imports and exports food by boat, trucks, trains, and planes all over the world before it reaches our plates. Many non-native, invasive organisms that displace beneficial species and cause pest outbreaks tag along in this global trade. Even freshly picked fruits and vegetables may travel in shipping containers for 2 to 3 weeks before being marketed to consumers. This time that produce spends in transit has forced growers to abandon diverse and local crop varieties in favor of the few that pick and ship well. Transportation contributes to the burning of fossil fuels, global warming, and increased potential for oil spills or other environmental disasters. On the whole, 15–20% of U.S. energy consumption goes into the food system. In these times of increasing fossil fuel costs, world unrest, terrorism, and armed conflict, food security is more important than ever. A Leopold Center study estimated the average plate of food consumed in the American Midwest has

How Far Does Your Produce Travel?



The average distance food travels by truck from the state where it is grown to the Chicago Terminal Market is 1,500 miles (after Pirog et al., 2001).

traveled 1,500 miles, but by purchasing only 10% of fruits and vegetables from local farmers, we could save 300,000 gallons of fuel and keep 8 million pounds of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

Small Family Farms Protect Our Resources

Small-scale family farmers and resident farm operators intimately understand on-farm microclimates; site-specific characteristics of the soils, fields, and crop varieties; and many ecological interactions, which makes them well suited as conservationists and caretakers of the land. On average, small U.S. farms maintain nearly double the land in “soil improving uses,” such as cover crops and green manures, than their larger neighbors. Small farms dedicate an average of 17% of their property to woodlands, whereas large farms conserve only about 5% percent. Many traditional farmers in the third world manage complex farming systems that allow them to sustainably produce a diverse set of crops without the use of mechanization or agrichemicals. If our society and food system can support small-scale and independent farms that conserve wildlands, produce crops sustainably, and maintain economic viability, farmers, consumers, conservationists, and biodiversity will all benefit. Ultimately we need to demand “full-cost pricing.” We have to stop subsidizing chemically dependant industrial agriculture and instead support ecologically sustainable farming with our food dollars. *Otherwise the price of unsustainable subsidized food will always appear cheaper than locally and sustainably grown produce.*

Local Choices

Increasingly, consumers have begun to understand the influence they have over farming practices that shape nature on a daily basis. By purchasing directly from farmers, urban people are reconnecting with their food, building personal relationships with farmers, and understanding conservation-minded agricultural food systems. Compared with shopping at a supermarket, buying food directly redistributes more than 40% of the revenue back into the local economy for further community investing. Farmers who sell direct take home 80 to 90 cents for each dollar a consumer spends, in contrast to the few paltry cents on the dollar if the food travels through the chain of distribution. This money can help farmers to stay viable and farm as if nature mattered.

Farmers can encourage direct relationships with customers by hosting festivals, giving tours, offering educational programs, and adding unique or value-added products to their marketing schemes. Consumers can take advantage of high-quality, fresh food by supporting local U-pick operations and independent farm stands, farmers’ markets, and Community Supported Agriculture ventures. By buying food in stores that carry local and ecolabel goods, and by purchasing ecolabel products through websites, consumers can also sustain biodiversity-friendly farms.

People in cities and suburbs around the world grow food for their families, friends, and neighbors in backyard vegetable patches and centrally located community gardens. Additionally, urban farmers can support biodiversity by landscaping with native plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife. In developing countries, 100–200 million urban dwellers raise vegetables, fruits, flowers, and herbs for approximately 700 million people. And for urban folk, access to fresh food and the outdoors both improves the quality of life and brings food security.



Common Harvest Farm in Wisconsin provides weekly boxes of produce throughout the growing season for its Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members. The farm is permanently protected through an easement, thanks in part to the CSA. By advancing seven years of payments for their shares, ten members helped to capitalize the purchase and preserve this organic farm. Many more CSA members (like those shown here) come for tractor rides and to learn about, and work on, the farm.



Salmon-Safe certifies fish-friendly farming practices, such as riparian enhancement, water use management, erosion control, chemical use management, and animal management.

Reconnecting Our Food System to the Ecosystem

The resources provided below help individuals, food cooperatives, retail outlets, and restaurants make educated food choices that support healthy ecosystems.

In General

- ❖ **Buy Organically or Biodynamically** produced foods. To learn more or find food near you, go to www.organicconsumers.org or www.biodynamics.com.
- ❖ **Patronize Farm Stands, Co-ops, and Restaurants** that carry local food.
- ❖ **Join a Community Supported Agriculture** farm for seasonal boxes of produce. Search www.localharvest.org to find operations in your area.
- ❖ **Support Farmers' Markets** in your community. To find a market near you, visit www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets.
- ❖ **Avoid Genetically Engineered Products.** To find out why, go to www.truefoodnow.org.
- ❖ **Grow Your Own Organic Garden and Include Native Plants** that support indigenous wildlife; visit www.organicgardening.com and www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/nativeplants.cfm.
- ❖ **Support Local Food Campaigns Across the Country.** See http://www.foodroutes.org/press/mk_page3.jsp.

Notable Contacts for Biodiversity-Friendly Products and Information

- ❖ **Be a Local Hero**, in western Massachusetts, promotes locally and sustainably produced goods: www.buylocalfood.com/.
- ❖ **Buy Fresh, Buy Local** labels local food and farm products grown in Central California: www.caff.org/caff/programs/Buy_Local/buyfreshlocal.html.
- ❖ **Grass-Finished (-Fed) Beef** cattle spend their entire lives grazing on grass: www.eatwild.com.
- ❖ **Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy** posts consumer information on its fish and marine conservation page: www.iatp.org/fish.
- ❖ **Land Stewardship Project** provides a list of local growers in the Twin Cities area: www.landstewardshipproject.org/programs_mwfa.html.
- ❖ **Marine Stewardship Council** certifies wild Pacific salmon, freshwater shrimp, and lobster: www.msc.org.
- ❖ **Native Harvest** provides wildcrafted and sustainable products harvested by the Anishinaabeg tribal members on the White Earth Reservation: www.welrp.org.
- ❖ **Organic Valley** is a cooperative of organic dairy farmers that requires their cows to graze in pastures: www.organicvalley.com.
- ❖ **Peace Coffee** offers organic, shade-grown, fair-trade, and cooperatively produced coffee: www.peacecoffee.com.
- ❖ **Predator Friendly** certifies non-lethal predator control methods for livestock production. For more details: www.predatorconservation.org; for purchasing meat and wool products: www.lambandwool.com.
- ❖ **Salmon-Safe** works with West Coast farmers to restore water quality and fish habitat so that native salmon can spawn and thrive: www.salmonsafe.org.
- ❖ **The Food Alliance** certifies farmers who grow food in environmentally and socially responsible ways: www.thefoodalliance.org.

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