

Sustainable Agriculture

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In a new farm economy, cooperation upstages competition, efficiency

By Richard A. Levins

Today's farmer faces new challenges. One is globalization, and the other is a power shift away from farmers and owners to those who manage the global economy. Both can work to keep farm product prices low.

Almost 200 years ago economist David Ricardo provided an enduring story of how everyone can benefit from international trade. But today we have moved beyond international trade and into an age of pure globalization. Transnational corporations move capital across borders with ease, deciding today to make shirts in southeast Asia and tomorrow to make automobiles in Mexico. This is no longer a story about countries acting in their mutual interests. Rather, it is one of multinational corporations searching the globe for cheap labor, for cheap farm products and for the least restrictive environmental and social regulations.

In the world of most economics texts, power is shared by a competitive market and a powerful government that regulates that market. But to be truly global, a corporation must be very large. That size gives the multinational corporation the power to compromise the authority of both government and competition.

Managers of very large corporations can bring far more cash to bear on the political process than any single farmer could imagine spending. As corporations become global, we also see threats to competition. It is often said that a free market economy is driven by personal self-interest, but regulated by competition. But as corporations approach the size of countries, there are so few players in the economic system that competition cannot exercise the control it once did.

In the new economic order, farmers have increasingly depended on public subsidies. We are beginning to see that full participation in a global economy is at odds with a goal of maintaining wealth in the hands of farmers and landowners. The question is, "what do we do about it?"

Some new directions. We must all work together to think of strategies that rely on global cooperation, not competition, to be successful in the global economy. Farmers must act together, not against each other, to build economic power to make the rules of the economic game more favorable.

Is it only a dream to imagine a global farmer network that builds economic power, rather than global competition that reduces that power? Perhaps so, but I am encouraged that my recent articles on collective action, and particularly collective bargaining, have found a wide audience among farmers.

(Richard A. Levins is an agricultural economist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. He can be reached at dlevins@apex.umn.edu or (612) 625-5238).

Hog producers: Join us for a Farmer Roundtable discussion group meeting

Farmer Roundtable discussion groups (RTs) for hog producers have been held in various locations around the state during the past year. The goal of the RTs is to bring together producers who use or are interested in pasture systems, hoop structures, other types of deep-bedded systems, and direct or cooperative marketing. The producers at the meeting generate the discussion topics. This format gives the producers a chance to exchange ideas about what works and what doesn't with these systems.

Meetings have been held in Montevideo, Rochester and Redwood Falls.

Future meetings will be held as follows: Jan. 21, Waseca, Southern Research & Outreach Center; Jan. 31, Worthington, Nobles County Courthouse Farmers Room; Feb. 14, Morris, West Central Research & Outreach Center. All meetings run from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. We are also planning additional meetings for Milaca and Preston.

If you would like to attend, if possible please RSVP by phone or email. If you decide you'd like to attend at the last minute, don't hesitate to join us. Contact Wayne Martin, (612) 625-6224, or (877) 258-4647, e-mail marti067@tc.umn.edu.

Notes from previous Round Table discussions are available by visiting "Alt Swine" on the MISA website, www.misa.umn.edu.

New research shows how easily livestock and crops could be hit by 'agroterrorists'

From the Christian Science Monitor

Terrorist attacks typically are thought of as coming in the form of high explosives or poisonous chemicals aimed at persons and symbols of power--military and government facilities, economic centerpieces.

But what if the targets were ranchers or farmers? How vulnerable is the U.S. to "agroterrorism," and what's being done to prevent it? U.S. crops and livestock--a \$193 billion industry -- could easily be attacked by devastating diseases.

"Biological agents that could be used to harm crops or livestock are widely available and pose a major threat to U.S. agriculture," says Harley Moon, professor of veterinary medicine at Iowa State University and chair of the National Research Council (NRC) committee that wrote a recent report on the subject.

Compared with airliners-turned-into-bombs or weapons of mass destruction, biological attacks on crops and farms animals would be easy to carry out. Plant viruses, fungi, and bacteria are easier to obtain than, say, "weaponized" anthrax aimed at people, and they're easier to spread via winds and carrier insects. A few doses of foot-and-mouth disease could spread quickly, appearing as a natural occurrence and without the moral taint of attacking innocent civilians.

"Although an attack with such agents is highly unlikely to result in famine or malnutrition, the possible damage includes major direct and indirect costs to agricultural and national economy, adverse public-

health effects ... loss of public confidence in the food system and in public officials, and widespread public concern and confusion," the NRC report concluded recently after two years of studying the issue.

The cost to society. Germany, Japan, Britain, the United States - all experimented with biological weapons aimed at crops and livestock during the world wars of the 20th century. More recently, the former Soviet Union had a large agroterrorism program, and some fear that Russian scientists – notoriously underpaid - may be tempted to share their knowledge with terrorist organizations.

The idea was to attack an enemy's food sources in wartime, but it proved difficult on a large scale. But it's easier when the goal is to terrorize a society by creating a health scare. That was certainly the case with Britain's experience with foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), reports the NRC:

"The social and psychological effects of the FMD outbreak in Great Britain on farmers, rural communities, children, and the general public were traumatic. The stresses on individuals, families, and communities are both immediate and long-term and include the uncertainty and fear of what the future may bring, distrust of government and science, isolation ...and feelings of hopelessness."

Such weapons have never been widely used - fear of retaliation in kind, for one thing. But with stateless terrorism now a major threat to the U.S. and other countries, concern is mounting that such an attack could be aimed at disrupting economies and sowing public fear.

Not just farmers and ranchers would be affected. "A single intentional event could ripple through agriculture and cripple it, costing billions of dollars," says John Shutske, agricultural safety and health specialist with the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

There's also concern that agroterrorism could harm nature and humans as well. "The use of biological weapons against livestock populations or agricultural crops could have potentially disastrous spillover effects on wild species of plants and animals," warn Joseph Dudley and Michael Woodford, writing in last July's issue of the journal *BioScience*.

Potential responses. The Bush administration (and the Clinton administration before it) has taken several steps to counter the threat, including more money for USDA research programs under the Bioterrorism Protection Act of 2002. Adding to the importance of the issue, the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is being shifted to the new Department of Homeland Security.

For farmers, Shutske says, protecting against agroterrorism can include such simple steps as checking the background of farm workers and locking gates.

(This article first appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* on Dec. 24, 2002 and is reproduced with permission. © 2002 The Christian Science Monitor www.csmonitor.com. All rights reserved). Minnesota Organic and Grazing Conference is Jan. 24-25

There's still time for a last-minute, or at-the-door registration for the Minnesota Organic and Grazing Conferences. The conferences have been combined this year, and they will be held at the St. Cloud Civic Center Jan. 24-25. There will be learning and networking opportunities for both newcomers to organic production and grazing systems and those with more experience.

There will be some 40 topics and 75 speakers on the program. Pre-conference workshops on organics, grazing or helping producers develop business plans will be held at the Kelly Inn in St. Cloud on January 23rd.

Registration after Jan. 17 is \$125 for the full conference. More information is available by calling (651) 282-5149, e-mail Darla.Riley@state.mn.us. Or, go to www.mda.state.mn.us/esap/organic/jan02conference.pdf.

Practical Farmers of Iowa annual conference is Jan. 24-25

The 2003 Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) annual meeting is set for Friday, Jan. 24 and Saturday, Jan. 25, in Ames at the Gateway Center Hotel.

Saturday's keynoter panel features Rick Schnieders, president of SYSCO Corporation and Michael Rozyne, managing director and founder of Red Tomato. As head of the nation's largest distributor to food service operators, Schnieders is working to add sustainable products to his company's offerings. Red Tomato, based in Canton, Mass., is a non-profit marketing and distribution center of fruits and vegetables. Three tiers of one-hour-plus workshops on farm management and marketing will also be offered on Saturday.

For more information, call PFI executive director Robert Karp or Todd Kimm at (515) 232-5661.

Concentration in agriculture is topic of Feb. 4 meeting at Iowa State

An all-day session on "Concentration in Agriculture" is scheduled Feb. 4 at the Scheman Building, Iowa State University in Ames. Concentration in agriculture is not an abstract concept. It will affect what we eat, what we buy, how we do business, and how we manage our farms. Missouri-based rural sociologists Bill Heffernan and Mary Hendrickson have predicted that the global retail food system will soon be in the hands of five or six firms, with perhaps only one of them an American firm, Wal-Mart. There are implications for farmers, consumers, communities and small businesses.

By attending you can learn what remedies and coping strategies are available.

The meeting starts at 9:30 a.m. and concludes at 4:30 p.m. Speakers and topics in the morning include current levels of concentration in production, processing, and retailing, Mary Hendrickson, rural sociologist at the University of Missouri, Columbia; economic impact and impacts of continuing to proceed as we are now, Neil Harl, professor of economics and agricultural finance at Iowa State University.

Afternoon topics and speakers are anti-trust actions, Doug Ross, special counsel for agriculture, Antitrust Division, U.S. Department of Justice; alternative policy options: Federal and state, Doug O'Brien, counsel for Senate Committee on Agriculture; farmer responses: collective bargaining, new generation cooperatives, value-added agriculture Richard Levins, Extension economist, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

You can register online at www.lifelearner.iastate.edu/203/concentrate.htm.

For program content information, contact Mike Duffy, mduffy@iastate.edu. For registration information, contact Continuing Education and Communication Services, confreg@iastate.edu.

What we're about

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Also check MISA's home page at www.misa.umn.edu.

Our mission statement: **To help bring people together to influence the future of agriculture and rural communities to achieve socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable farms and communities.**

To stimulate thinking and discussion about sustainability, we try to present items that reflect different points of view. This being the case, we aren't promoting and don't necessarily agree with everything we publish.