

Sustainable Agriculture

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Family farm legislation: who are we protecting?

By Richard A. Levins

We've had programs to protect family farms for decades, and there are dozens of conflicting efforts to define them. But we have yet to agree on exactly what a family farm is.

We count "farms" and put policies in place to protect "family farms" without being able to say this farm is a family farm, but that one is not. It is little wonder that our programs have performed so poorly.

In 1999, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recorded slightly fewer than 2.2 million farms in the United States. Certainly the number of family farms is much smaller, but beyond that, we can't be precise for a very simple reason: we don't know exactly what to count.

A "farm," according to USDA, is "any establishment from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were sold or would normally be sold during the year." A person selling a single beef animal for slaughter in a year when prices were high would qualify; otherwise, it would take two such animals to make the grade. Or, if that person put all the land into the USDA-paid Conservation Reserve Program, thereby agreeing to produce no farm products, the land is still counted as a farm.

Are all of these farms family farms? Most observers would say "no" for a variety of reasons. For example, a family farm is often thought to be a place that can provide a significant part of the family's income. This is obviously impossible with annual sales of \$1,000. Most economists agree that a farm would have to sell at least \$100,000 in a year to provide an average, full-time living for a single family. If so, fewer than 350,000 USDA farms would be family farms.

Farm income is not the only challenge in defining a family farm. For example, shouldn't the family farmer manage the farm in addition to providing most of its labor supply? Here, the definition of a farmer takes an unexpected twist. In Minnesota, the corporate farming law says farming "does not include the production of poultry or poultry products." But in 1995, USDA reported 12,479 farms in the United States that produced broilers under contract with large processing companies. The Minnesota law excludes these operations because the people working on them do not make most of the important management decisions; they are more akin to farm employees than to farm managers. A 1997 USDA study found almost one-third of all U. S. farm products, not just poultry, were grown under contract, and that number has grown.

Ownership, too, plays a role. We often assume that a family farm is owned by its operator. This makes sense, but another USDA statistic comes into play: only 28.6 percent of farmers in 1998 owned all of the land they farmed. The others rented some or all of their land. Are two-thirds of what the USDA considers farmers not family farmers simply because of their ownership status? Nationally, non-farmers own over 40 percent of all farmland; in parts of the Midwest, it's closer to 65 percent.

How big is a family farm? Can contract poultry production be part of a family farm operation? Is a family farmer an owner and an operator, or can he or she rent land? How much of the labor on a family farm must be supplied by the family, and how much can be hired labor? As basic as these questions seem, we have often sidestepped them in farm policy. Either we have assumed that all farms are family farms, or that any program that helps all farms will help family farms.

In federal legislation, a threatened species such as the snail darter has a significant advantage over family farms. We know exactly what a snail darter is. Because of this advantage, we don't talk about protecting generic fish in federal legislation. We talk about protecting a particular kind of fish, and then back it up with legislation powerful enough to delay a federal dam project that compromised the snail darter's habitat.

But family farms are treated as undifferentiated fish, not as a unique species. If snail darters were farmers, we would either assume that all fish were snail darters, or that any program that helped fish would help snail darters. Of course, this would be laughable, yet this is how we have approached protecting family farms.

A first and basic step for farm policy must be a public discussion where we clearly define the type of farm to be given special protection. Questions of size, ownership, and management must be answered so we can say, "this farm is to be protected by federal policy" and "that farm is not to be protected by federal policy." A special follow-up study should determine how many of our nation's farms meet the definition.

Then we'd be ready to take effective, well-targeted action. New programs could be designed to protect the type of farm we had designated most important. What these programs contain would take considerable thought. But such thought must be guided by a clear, well-accepted definition of what we are trying to protect.--Richard A. Levins is a professor and Extension agricultural economist at the University of Minnesota and a senior fellow with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. He has recently authored the book "Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm" (University of Nebraska Press). Contact him at (612) 625-5238, dlevins@apex.umn.edu.

New Minnesota representative on the NCRSARE administrative council

Dan French, a seasonal grass dairy farmer from Dodge Center, is Minnesota's newest representative to the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (NCRSARE) administrative Council. Dan has farmed in southeast Minnesota since 1974 and has been practicing seasonal grass-based dairy farming since 1993. In 1998, he and several other southeast Minnesota farmers formed the Pastureland Dairy Cooperative and they have been marketing dairy products under the Pastureland label.

SARE is a USDA program that provides funds to four U.S. regions for sustainable agriculture research, demonstration, and education grant programs. Administrative councils in each region issue calls for proposals and select proposals for funding. Council membership consists of farmers, researchers, extension personnel, government agency personnel, and agribusiness representatives. Dan replaces Bill Wilcke, a University of Minnesota faculty member, as the Minnesota representative on the council. Bill served on the council as an Extension and research member.

French is one of two Minnesota representatives on the NCRSARE administrative council. Carolyn Lane, who works in purchasing and producer relations for Northland Organics in St. Paul, Minn., is currently serving as an at-large agribusiness representative. The next meeting of the NCRSARE Administrative Council is June 18-20, 2001 in Decorah, Iowa. New, continuing, and retiring council members attend the

June meeting. The agenda includes making decisions about producer grant proposals submitted this past spring and developing the call for research and education preproposals that will be due this fall.

For more information about the SARE program, see the website at www.sare.org/ncrsare or contact Bill Wilcke at wilck001@umn.edu or (612) 625-8205.

Here's a new brochure on low-cost conservation practices

"You don't need a large cash investment to go a long way in soil and water conservation," according to a new 12-page brochure from the University of Minnesota Extension Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The brochure highlights low-cost conservation practices that are made even more affordable through government incentive and cost-share payment programs. Incentive payments are provided to the agricultural producer to implement a management plan.

With cost-share payments, the government provides up to 75 percent of the cost of implementing a conservation practice. Often, the producer's cost-share consists of his or her own time and energy needed to implement the practice.

Topics covered include manure management, field practices and pasture management. There's also a section on water, wind, trees and wildlife. Les Everett, water quality coordinator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service, wrote the brochure. Copies are available through local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices. You can also request one from the Extension Service Water Resources Center by calling (612) 624-9282. And, it's on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/water; click on "EQIP-Education."

"Grazing Systems Planning Guide" available from U of M

Doing a better job of managing pastures is one way to make livestock production more profitable. Managing the animals as well as the forage plants is a key to success, according to Kevin Blanchet, educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

"A well-managed rotational grazing system can reduce or eliminate the need for supplemental feed, nitrogen fertilizer, and weed and brush killers," says Blanchet. "Improved pasture condition and higher forage yields can also lead to more animal production per acre."

Blanchet recommends designing a grazing plan as the first step in improving pasture management. A typical plan would include the goals of the farming operation, a summary of sensitive areas, a livestock summary with forage requirements, and plans for fencing, livestock watering, forages and grazing system management.

"Continuous grazing of a pasture results in both overgrazing and undergrazing of forages," says Blanchet. "A rotational system provides a 'rest' opportunity for forage plants so they can regrow more quickly. Rotational grazing also provides an opportunity to move livestock based on forage growth, promote better pasture forage utilization and extend the grazing season."

Blanchet is one of three authors of a new University of Minnesota Extension publication entitled "Grazing Systems Planning Guide" (BU-07606). The 45-page publication has a section on making an inventory of

grazing goals, land and soils, livestock, forages, water sources and fences. Another section covers grazing plan development, including design and layout of paddocks, fences and water systems and heavy use area planning. A section on pasture management covers forages and livestock, soil fertility, brush and weed control and sacrificial paddocks.

The publication concludes with a section on pasture record keeping and monitoring, a grazing plan example, a list of references, and a set of appendices providing a variety of grazing-related information.

The "Grazing Systems Planning Guide," BU-07606, is on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/livestocksystems//components/DI7606.pdf. Printed copies are available for purchase through county offices of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, or by calling (612) 624-4900 or (800) 876-8636.

The Minnesota Project endorses Conservation Security Act of 2001

The Minnesota Project has endorsed the Conservation Security Act of 2001 as it is reintroduced into Congress. The legislation, introduced in the Senate by Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Gordon Smith (R-OR), and in the House by John Thune (R-SD) and Marcy Kaptur (D-OH), will provide financial incentives to help farmers find viable solutions to environmental concerns.

The Conservation Security Act of 2001 rewards producers who implement resource-conserving conservation practices on working lands, says Loni Kemp, senior policy analyst with the Minnesota Project, and co-chair of the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. For more information, contact her at (507) 743-8300, lkemp@umn.edu.

Kansas State develops Food*A*Syst program materials

Kansas State University has just finished developing some Food*A*Syst program materials. Food*A*Syst is a guide to help producers assess food safety risks, and take corrective and preventative actions to lower the risks of contamination in the food they produce. Each section is a stand-alone and contains risk assessment checklists, descriptions of the risks, and other resources.

There is a section on meats, produce, storage and handling associated with farmer's markets, waste handling and other topics. Bookmark this link:
www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/fntr2/samplers/FOODASYS.htm.

A consumer's companion piece is also under way, and will address what the consumer needs to do after purchase to minimize food safety risks. For more information, contact Jana Beckman, coordinator, Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops, (785) 532-1440, jabeckma@oznet.ksu.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.