

Farmer – Environmentalist Solidarity: Resisting the Agribusiness Agenda

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Food is our most intimate relationship. When you put food in your mouth, you are participating in the most fundamental of ecological relationships. The molecules from the air, soil and water that were assembled by plants, then possibly transformed by animals, now become your body and the energy that propels you through the day. With the exception of the few of us who hunt, fish and collect food from the wild, we get our food from agricultural sources. Thus, we are implicated in agriculture whether we farm or not. How our food and fibre is produced has a profound impact on the land, air and water – as the Green Paper we will discuss later makes very clear.

So let's take a moment and make this personal. Think about the last meal you ate at home. Think of how it is nourishing and fueling your body. Think about where the plants were grown, where the animals lived. Think about the relationships you are involved in as you take your daily bread. Relationships with the land, with farmers, with farm labourers, food industry workers, truck drivers, retailers, multi-national grain companies, pesticide manufacturers, corporate PR firms, federal bureaucrats, oil companies, the American military ...

Agribusiness is big -- and it knows for sure that food is fundamental. We can't live without it. So in the world of global "get even bigger or die" competition among multi-national corporations, it is imperative for agri-business to increase its profitability through systematically taking control of as many parts of the food system as possible. People will pay. People that can't pay don't really count: feeding the hungry is not the task of the food industry.

The point here is that food not only embeds us in ecological relationships, but also in economic – and power -- relationships. The agribusiness sector is dominated by fewer and fewer ever-larger corporations. There is an excellent website called "The Market Share Matrix" that shows the four biggest companies in each sector and the percent market share they control in each country. In Canada

- Grain handling is dominated by Agricore United, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, Pioneer Grain and Cargill with 64% of the market.
- Beef slaughtering is dominated by Cargill, Tyson, XL Foods and Ecolait Foods with 88.2% of the market. The first two control 73.2%.
- Food retailing is dominated by Loblaws, Sobyas, Metro/ A&P and Canada Safeway at 78%.
- Pork processing is dominated by Maple Leaf, Olymel, Groupe Brochu and Quality Meat Packers at 76.2%.

So I'm not telling you all this just to get you really depressed. We need to understand what we are dealing with so we can figure out what to do about it.

Part of our resistance has to be an aggregate of conscious individual actions that strengthen our ecologically sound and socially just food systems, their infrastructure and institutions. This means buying local from independent family farmers, supporting safe and healthy working conditions and fair incomes for farmers and farm workers, supporting independent local food processors, shopping at the farmers market, eating out at restaurants that serve grass-fed meat, and so on. It means learning about where our food comes from and how it is produced, and making conscious choices according to our values. The Domestic Fair Trade Working Group has published an excellent document outlining principles for domestic fair trade, to help you assess your choices. We can be part of a cultural shift towards truly valuing food instead of simply shopping for the cheapest bargain.

But we need to fly with both wings. The other wing of resistance is collective action. We need to understand where the political and economic forces of agri-business (and their allies in the pharmaceutical industry and the oil and gas sector) are bearing down, why they have targeted certain parts of the food system, and what is at stake. As environmentalists, as farmers and as people who eat, we need to recognize our common interests -- and we need to intervene effectively.

In the past decade the international Food Sovereignty movement has emerged. Food Sovereignty is a term first used by the Via Campesina, the international peasant and small farmers movement. In Canada the Union Paysanne and the National Farmers Union are members.

Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to:

- define their own food and agriculture;
- to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives;
- to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant;
- to restrict the dumping of products in their markets;
- and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources.

Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.

Food sovereignty began as a farmers' concept but I maintain that if we do not pursue food sovereignty as environmentalists, our efforts to protect ecological values will fail. Food sovereignty means that people, not corporations are in charge of how we grow our food, where our seed comes from, how our animals are raised, the terms of trade among communities, the value we place on agriculture and agricultural land.

Food sovereignty unites the farmer struggle with the environmentalist struggle. Farmers are under siege in Canada. Between 1996 and 2001 we lost nearly 11 per cent of our farms and 124,000 people left their farms - nearly 15 per cent of our farm population.

The 2006 statistics have not yet been released, but they are not likely to be any better. In 2004 net farm income, not including labour, was negative \$10,000. In 2003, it was - \$13,000. The average age of farmers in Canada is going up. In 1996 it was 47, in 2001 it was 49. The trend indicates that young people are not going into farming, and older farmers are unable to retire. Farms are getting fewer and farther between.

The shift in farm population statistics indicates a troubling structural change – we may be witnessing the last generation of family farmers as the older generation dies and are replaced by farms owned by corporations and run by hired managers. The link between families, communities and the land is weakening.

As environmentalists this must concern us. A corporation's only loyalty is to its bottom line. Its responsibility is to return dividends to its shareholders. Its purpose is to grow and control as much economic space as possible. An agricultural landscape dominated by corporate agribusiness would be converted to the most profitable or most strategic use. Monoculture cash crops and factory farm livestock for export markets would prevail, and chemical inputs and capital equipment would replace farmer knowledge and labour. The country-side would largely be emptied, with the remaining local population as a low-waged labour force housed in company towns rather than inter-generational communities with their own histories and cultures.

Farm families are on the front-lines of the struggle against agri-business. By occupying the land and asserting their right to exist, they provide the citizen base required to reclaim agriculture from the agri-business sector. More and more farmers are converting to organic, for both economic and philosophical reasons. Many farmers are creating ecological reserves, formally and informally. There is a strong move towards grass-fed beef and pastured poultry and pork, which provides habitat for other species. There is much potential to build a more ecologically sound food and agriculture system if farmers and urban people work together towards food sovereignty.

Some of the most pressing threats to food sovereignty in Canada right now are the agribusiness sector's aggressive push to gain control over seed, livestock production, and Canadian wheat marketing.

Seed are required to grow crops, so who controls access to seed is a pivotal issue. From time immemorial farmers have been the keepers of the seed. They saved seed from each harvest to plant the next season. In the past 50 years seed development has shifted from farmers, to the public sector, to the private sector. Increasingly, farmers are purchasing seeds, but so far have maintained the ability to save seed if they wish – unless they use patented GMO seed. However the agribusiness sector is pursuing several ways to compel farmers to buy new seed from them every year.

In Canada the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is proposing a new seed variety registration system that would essentially privatize the seed registration process and allow seed companies to arbitrarily de-register their older seed varieties, that would restrict farmer's ability to get unbiased information about seed variety performance, and that would prevent farmers from saving seed by making it illegal to sell crops from de-registered varieties.

Another way agri-business is seeking to control seed is through genetically modifying crops so that when their seed matures it becomes sterile. The seed can be used as a commodity – ground for flour or crushed for oil but if you plant it, it will not grow. This has been dubbed "Terminator Technology". This technology is so offensive that the UN Convention on Biodiversity has instituted a de facto moratorium on the testing and commercialization of terminator technology. At the CBD meeting in Brazil last March the Canadian delegation was poised to move to end the moratorium. Citizens within Canada and around the world organized and put pressure on Canada to change its position. Over 400 Canadian organizations joined in this campaign. Working with our allies, primarily peasant farmers from Brazil and other developing countries, we were successful.

The Ban Terminator campaign is now working on getting Canada to officially ban the commercialization and testing of terminator technology, and the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network is developing a strategy to oppose the new seed variety registration regulation.

Contamination of seed, fields and crops by GMOs is a serious threat for organic farmers. Organic agriculture is one of the most robust forms of resistance to the agribusiness agenda. It is a success story with increasing numbers of farmers, more certified acres, and a customer base that is growing by around 20% per year. Cross-pollination of GMO and non-GMO varieties of a crop is unavoidable, so biotech companies would like the organic sector to accept a percentage of GMO contamination, in order to allow what they call "co-existence". However due to both organic customers' rejection of GMOs and the fact that living organisms reproduce, inevitably increasing contamination levels, organic farmers reject the concept of co-existence and contamination thresholds as unworkable. Instead they are resisting commercialization of new GMO crops, such as alfalfa.

In Saskatchewan organic farmers have dealt with the loss of canola as a certified organic crop due to widespread contamination of seed, and high potential for contamination of crop after seeding due to the high concentration of GMO canola crops in surrounding farms. In 2002 organic farmers were faced with the threat of GMO wheat being introduced, which would contaminate organic wheat. We decided to embark on a class action suit to sue Monsanto and Bayer and make the companies liable for the losses due to contamination. That legal action is still in progress, and you can read all about it in our Organic Agriculture Protection Fund pamphlets (www.saskorganic.com/oapf).

Agribusiness is also taking control of livestock production away from independent farmers.

The industrialization of hog production has nearly eliminated the independent family farm hog producer on the prairies. This process has been supported by federal and provincial governments in order to re-orient the hog sector from supplying the Canadian domestic market to becoming a major exporter. Hog production has risen dramatically, the price of hogs has dropped, and between 1988 and 2002 the number of farmers has gone down by 66 percent – over twenty thousand farmers are no longer raise pigs.

One of the key structural changes occurred when provincial governments unilaterally ended their single desk selling agencies that gave all hog farmers equal access to the market, and instead allowed packers to contract directly with producers. This made it possible for hog mega-barns to expand, and they squeezed the smaller producers out of the market.

Hog production is now dominated by a few very large companies that run vertically integrated operations – they own hog barns, they own feed mills, and they own slaughterhouses and rendering plants. They concentrate thousands of animals under one roof, and import feed from wherever it is cheapest, often shipping it in from the USA. The resulting manure is more than the surrounding land and its crops can absorb, so excess manure becomes a pollution problem as it contaminates the soil and water.

There are a number of people at this conference who have had first-hand experience dealing with intensive hog operations who can tell you more about the environmental, social, economic and health problems caused by these barns.

The cattle system has similar problems. There are still a lot of small cow-calf operations where the animals are bred and raised on pasture. But the calves are sold to feedlots where they are concentrated by the thousands, fed a diet of grain imported from far away, and they produce mountains of manure which creates a pollution problem.

The latest development in cattle is the ethanol industry. Ethanol is often touted as a green fuel, but it is far from environmentally friendly. In Canada plans are to produce ethanol primarily from wheat or corn. The fermentation process requires huge amounts of water. The byproduct is a wet mash that is expensive to dry out and ship, so the idea is to set up giant cattle feedlots with as many as 120,000 animals in conjunction with the ethanol plants. Again, the cattle will require a lot of water and will produce more manure than can be used by nearby crops. The ethics of using food crops to fuel cars is another matter

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With poultry the big issue is disease. We've all heard about the avian flu situation, and have perhaps been alarmed at the possibility of a deadly human pandemic. The evidence on avian flu shows that the highly pathogenic form does not arise in small outdoor flocks or in wild birds – it is a creature of the factory farm. Thousands of virtually identical birds confined in close quarters and under stress is the perfect vessel for bringing about viral mutations. The factory poultry industry, particularly in Thailand and China where it has grown exponentially, with its practices of spreading manure and even selling poultry litter as fish food, seems to be the primary vector for the spread of the disease.

However we are seeing governments and industry respond to the disease by attacking small scale outdoor chicken producers instead. The effect is to further consolidate the corporate control of poultry production by forcing smaller producers and subsistence farmers out of production. Here in Quebec the province passed a regulation last year that prevents farmers from raising poultry outdoors even though there is no threat of avian flu from wild birds in Canada. If you'd like more information about this, please see our Avian Flu fact sheet (www.beyondfactoryfarming.org/english/overview/avian_flu.shtml)

The third major area of control that corporate agribusiness is after is the farmers' collective marketing tools. Supply management in dairy and poultry have been under attack at the WTO. But right now the attack by our own federal government on the Canadian Wheat Board is astounding.

The Canadian Wheat Board was set up in 1947 as the sole marketing agency for wheat, durum and barley grown in western Canada. It provides thousands of individual farmers with the market power to extract a good price from international buyers. The National Farmers Union has calculated that the CWB returns \$800 million a year to the farm economy – or over \$2 million a day. Remember that four companies control 64% of the Canadian grain market – without the wheat board those companies will be able to play individual farmers off against each other, forcing grain prices down and raising the companies' profits.

The CWB was established by an Act of Parliament, and under the legislation it cannot be significantly altered without a farmer vote. Yet the current government is adamant that it does not need farmer's approval to remove the CWB's monopoly. The government is set to make changes through regulatory means, without going to Parliament or to the farmers for a vote. The latest development is that Minister Strahl has arbitrarily removed 16,000 farmers from the voters list for the upcoming election of CWB directors. This is unprecedented and alarming interference.

I see this attack on the Canadian Wheat Board as the most pressing matter regarding food sovereignty, and agriculture and the environment today. Without the wheat board we will lose more farmers faster, as grain prices will fall significantly. It is also highly offensive that the current government believes it has a mandate to dismantle the Wheat Board in defiance of the legislation. They seem to believe they are above the law.

The National Farmers Union is one of many farm organizations opposing these unilateral changes to the Canadian Wheat Board. I brought their campaign material with me. Please write letters, take copies with you, and go to their website at www.nfu.ca for more background information.

I hope these examples show how the struggles of independent family farm survival are intricately linked with the key environmental issues in agriculture and food. World-wide, rural to urban migration has shifted power balances to the cities. In order to protect the land from the impacts of corporate agri-business, non-farmers and city people must participate with independent family farmers in the movement to achieve food sovereignty.