

*The Progressive Populist*, January 1-15, 2003.

## **Family Farming for a Sustainable Rural America**

By E.G. Vallianatos

Small rural towns in the United States are falling apart because agribusiness is sucking the life out of them.

Forty-nine of America's fifty poorest counties are rural. Agribusiness is using this vast impoverished rural estate – empty largely of people -- in producing wealth with its factories of wheat, corn, soybeans, cattle, poultry, and hogs, while it is colonizing and obliterating small family farmers and their communities.

California was the first victim of that aggressive policy. *The grapes of wrath* did away with small family farmers in imperial California. Agribusiness then turned to the rest of the country. It made the Great Plains of the Midwest (home of Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska) the nation's poorest region. Nebraska has six of the poorest twenty counties in the United States. Two of those six, Loop and McPherson Counties, are the poorest in the country with a per capita income of \$ 4,896 to \$ 6,940.

The proponents of industrialized agriculture, nevertheless, hide or trivialize its social and ecological sodbusting, like factory farming becoming the mad cow disease of agribusiness and the brave new rural world it is creating. The advocates of giant agriculture still say the world's population is growing and only science-based farming can feed the world.

But the supporters of industrialized farming have no monopoly on science – if by science we mean theoretical and practical knowledge and experience on what one has to do to grow food in balance with nature.

In that sense, few can compete with peasants and traditional family farmers who are working the land with the knowledge and experience gained in the course of millennia. They know how to grow food with the advantages and economy of nature. They put to work good bugs to eat the insects that cause trouble. They rotate their crops and use different crops to control and fight disease. They recycle nutrients and protect biodiversity. In fact they outproduce the industrialized farmer anywhere, any time.

There's even a new science, agroecology, which is emerging out of the fusion of traditional agriculture and ecology.

It's about time the United States abandons its mythology that peasants are backward, and that the bigger farmer the more efficient and productive. Small family farmers are by far more productive than large farmers and agribusinesses. The United

States needs also to move away from its agribusiness policy and turn its enormous resources to the rebuilding its productive family farming tradition and rural America. The two are inseparable. A national commitment to family agriculture will be a declaration of the country's agricultural, social, and environmental vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

First of all, start this transformation with the use of the \$ 20 or so billions of annual agricultural subsidies to assist exclusively the family farmers who agree to abide by the terms of a social and an ecological contract negotiated by their representatives, the civil society, and the government. Family farmers – with farms which should probably be no larger than 160 acres and which they work themselves – will agree to raise the country's food and in return the country will guarantee them a middle class income. Most of the food dollar will be going to them and not to intermediaries. The thriving but tiny number of organic farmers shows the way.

The purpose of the acreage limitation is to increase substantially the number of family farmers in the United States and settle and make rural America sustainable once again.

The social contract will define agriculture as food, culture, and environmental protection. This means that these family farmers ought to increase and protect biodiversity, cease water pollution, and produce enough food. The food they raise, however, will be food produced without violence against domesticated animals, minimum hazardous inputs and, preferably, without toxins, animal factories, or genetic manipulation.

Second, sustainable agriculture is America's best hope for national security. Good, safe food and water are life itself. They are priceless. Corporate farming has always been an extremely vulnerable and hazardous business. That is not so with millions of very small family farmers all over the country watching over their land and raising food for themselves and the rest of us. We can trust them to resettle a democratic rural America and protect our vital land, food and water.

E.G. Vallianatos is author of "Fear in the Countryside" and "Harvest of Devastation."