

Letter From the Chair



Two Contrasting Visions of Agriculture

During June, two events markedly contrasted two different visions of agriculture: precision agriculture and regenerative agriculture. The dedication of the Grand Farm Innovation Shop and the Midwest Ag Summit Panel presented the precision agriculture side of the contrast, while the Barnes County Historical Society and Dakota Resource Council's sponsorship of John Ikerd's presentation, "50 Years That Changed It All: Food, Farming, and Community," presented the regenerative agriculture side of the contrast. Not only did they present different visions of agriculture, but they also represent distinctly different philosophical approaches to agriculture.

Precision agriculture mainly focuses on maximizing efficiency and productivity through the adoption of advanced technologies. This approach is congruent with monocropping, where the same crop is planted continually over large areas. It is based on the collection of detailed data on soil conditions, plant health, and microclimatic variables, using that data for the precise application of water, fertilizers, and pesticides to increase productivity in these monocultures. Precision agriculture's technological and data-centric nature makes it particularly appropriate for use in large-scale, single-crop farming environments requiring efficiencies of scale (Mager, 2024).

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The precision agriculture viewpoint is based on economic determinism that sees the concentration of farms into fewer hands, the ever-increasing size of farms, and the disappearance of middle-sized farms as a necessary and desirable consequence of an inevitable and inexorable drive toward the adoption of ever more technology in agriculture. This drive has desirable outcomes for increased production but undesirable social and environmental outcomes. These assumptions of economic and technological determinism have been embedded in agricultural policy since the 1960s (Hamilton, 2014). They also imply that farmers must adopt these technologies or be squeezed out (i.e., technological treadmill, Cochrane, 1980). This policy only accelerates the industrialization of agriculture, with undesirable impacts on rural communities, the environment, and rural residents (Lobao and Stofferahn, 2008).

All that technological adoption, and the resultant industrialization of agriculture, has done is to squeeze the middle category while concentrating agricultural resources in an expanding large-scale industrialized agriculture sector and subsidizing socially and environmentally undesirable and unsustainable farm production. This is the model of agriculture promoted by agricultural technologists as well as by agricultural economists. The late Hiram Drache, a history professor at Concordia College, advocated large-scale corporate-style farming businesses (Pates, 2020). Notably, his former student is Ron D. Offutt Jr., head of RD Offutt Farms of Fargo, a so-called family farm corporation. Taken to its logical conclusion, this form of agriculture would result in one corporate farm per county, utilizing labor-displacing technology, employing hired labor, and being managed from corporate headquarters.

The sign listing all the contributors to Grand Farm tells you all you need to know about the promoters of industrialized agriculture. It is unsurprising that major cooperatives, major agribusiness corporations, and the state's "largest family farm organization" are among them. Increasingly, we find that, because of isomorphic pressures, cooperatives begin to resemble corporations in the similarity of their business practices and interests (Stofferahn and Ley, 2022). Similarly, isomorphic pressures have resulted in both North Dakota farm organizations resembling each other regarding the broad outlines of their federal agriculture policy interests (Knutson, 2022). Notably, both of North Dakota's major farm

organizations supported the animal agriculture exemptions to the corporate farming law passed in the last legislative session. That the two major farm organizations begin to resemble each other in their policies is unsurprising as their membership base increasingly represents the operators of large-scale industrialized farms.

In contrast to Grand Farm's vision of the future of agriculture was that of regenerative agriculture presented by John Ikerd on June 13 at the 150th Anniversary Celebration of Barnes County. As a faculty member at three land-grant universities, he taught from the dominant agricultural paradigm that advocates the industrialization of agriculture. He saw the consequences of that paradigm for rural communities and farmers during the farm crisis of the 1980s, as prices collapsed and farmers lost their farms, and sometimes their lives, as lenders foreclosed on farmers with overextended credit.

His perspective derives from having lived through the evolution of agriculture from small, independent family farms, local food systems, and vibrant rural communities to corporately controlled agriculture, a global food system, and economically and socially desolate rural communities. This experience resulted in him becoming not only a fierce critic of industrialized agriculture but also a persistent advocate of regenerative agriculture, local/regional food systems, and the social and economic revival of rural communities (Ikerd, 2024).

Regenerative agriculture does not have a single, precise definition, but in the United States, it is usually defined as an integrated set of land management practices that utilize plant photosynthesis to sequester carbon, restore soil health, increase crop resilience, and restore the nutrient density of foods. Lists of practices typically include reduced reliance on tillage and the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and increased adoption of cover crops, the rotation of diverse crops, and management-intensive grazing. Regenerative agriculture concerns transcend the farm itself; it must meet the needs of consumers, farmers, and civil society, and it must be socially responsible, economically viable, and ecologically regenerative (Ikerd, 2021).

In his presentation, he discussed communities of place, interests, practices, circumstance, and action. He argued that farming communities in the 1940s-1950s had all these kinds of characteristics of
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community, and he maintained that local food systems could have many of the same characteristics as the farming communities of the past, thereby offering a reasonable place to begin the renewal of rural communities. Communities formed around interest in local foods can expand to include communities committed to other social amenities that provide for a desirable quality of life. Despite where they begin, he saw the best hope for the future of rural America as depending on the willingness and ability of people to come together to rebuild and renew their communities (Ikerd, 2024).

Unfortunately, federal agricultural policy disproportionately serves industrial agriculture over regenerative agriculture. To learn more about how to change current production-oriented agricultural policy into an agricultural policy that advances regenerative agriculture, Sharna, Bryant, and Lee (2022) interviewed 113 farmers and ranchers across the country. Their report was grounded in the lived experiences of these regenerative farmers, and it summarizes what they learned from those interviews. Their report provides on-farm and food system-wide policy recommendations to incentivize regenerative agriculture on the land and throughout the supply chain. In short, their report recommends that federal policy must invest in regenerative agriculture, diversify food systems infrastructure, support farmers and ranchers, and fund regenerative research and extension.

Dakota Resource Council, together with its national allies in the National Family Farm Coalition and allies in North Dakota, is working on policies that promote regenerative agriculture. It's evident in its pursuit of a federal farm bill that promotes the interests of family farm agriculture, state legislation that promotes soil health, and opposition to the animal agriculture exemptions to the corporate farming law. It's also evident in its organizing efforts with citizens concerned about the concentrated animal feeding operations coming to their communities. **(References available upon request)**



Agriculture

New USDA Rule Could Level the Playing Field for Independent Farmers

WORC and DRC recently hosted a webinar to highlight the USDA's proposed rule titled "Fair and Competitive Livestock and Poultry Markets." This rule aims to clarify the meaning of "proof of harm to competition." Currently, individual farmers and ranchers must prove that an anti-competitive practice harmed the entire industry, not just their own operations, to hold meat packers accountable under the Packers and Stockyards Act (PSA). If enacted, the new rule would ensure fair treatment for independent cattle producers affected by multinational meatpacking corporations.

Courts have ruled that the standard for proving harm to the entire industry does not cover practices such as:

- Offering preferential deals to some producers for the same quality of product
- Preventing producers from being present at the weighing of their livestock
- Arbitrarily terminating contracts for poultry growers
- Depressing prices for cash and contract deals through alternative marketing agreements

DRC and its allies consider these practices clear violations of the PSA.

The proposed rule would allow individual farmers and ranchers to file complaints about unfair practices without needing to demonstrate industry-wide harm. It also provides a framework to help market participants identify unfair practices by regulated entities, particularly packers.

Under the rule, practices would be deemed "unfair" and a violation of the PSA if they:

1. Cause or are likely to cause injury to one or more producers
2. Restrict producers' choices or deny them the full value of their goods
3. Offer benefits that do not outweigh the negative effects of the practice

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