

Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sustainability

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should safeguard the global commons and respect the right of local communities to protect and sustainably develop their natural resources.

Introduction

Safeguarding the global commons and the vast natural resources that exist on earth should be part of any agricultural and food policy. Sustainable agriculture and food production, however, is not the norm. There is much work left to be done to ensure that future generations are able to enjoy our natural resources.

Environmental Protection

The shift away from family farming and into industrial corporate farming over the past decades has had significant impacts on the environment. Some of the impacts of heavy industrialization in agriculture include:

- Soil and water contamination because of increased dependence on pesticides and chemicals
- Soil erosion from monocropping
- A loss of biodiversity

(Agribusiness Accountability Initiative,
www.agribusinessaccountability.org)

The trend towards massive industrialization, which threatens clean water and soil, also threatens the sustainability of the global commons – a necessary component to achieving the common good. **The agricultural industry accounts for more pollution than nearly any other industry.**

Agricultural pollution is also non-point source, which means that unlike the pollution from smoke stacks, agricultural pollution does not come from a single geographical point. Non-point source pollution is much more difficult to contain. Although there are many sustainable and environmentally sound ways of producing agricultural goods, much of U.S. farm policy has

encouraged the industrialization of farming, which perpetuates greater pollution of the global commons.

Community Participation

Additionally, the corporate nature of agriculture means that decisions about the use and development of natural resources are being decided by CEOs and stockholders, not the people whose communities are directly affected by corporate agriculture.

A clear example of the devastating effects of corporate control can be seen in India where communities are struggling against Coca-Cola around access to clean water. Throughout India, communities claim that Coca-Cola has contributed to water shortages, polluted groundwater and soil around its bottling facilities, and has distributed its toxic waste as “fertilizer” to farmers.

Many of the people affected by Coca-Cola’s practices are also the most marginalized in Indian society – indigenous peoples, lower castes, low income people, and agricultural day-laborers. This example, although from a different industry, illustrates the problems with corporate control over local natural resources (www.IndiaResource.org).

Beginnings of Sustainability

With significant pressure from civil society, the U.S. government has begun to promote basic levels of sustainability. A recent victory for promoting sustainable agriculture was the addition of the Conservation Security Program (CSP) to the 2002 Farm Bill. The CSP is a “voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments and technical assistance [for farmers who are]

maintaining and enhancing natural resources” (National Resources Conservation Service).

The prospect for continued improvement in agricultural sustainability, however, is bleak. The current movement towards **international “free trade” encourages:**

- Limited government involvement in agriculture
- Increased agricultural production for export
- A movement towards agricultural industrialization

If **sustainability** is thought of as finding ways to meet people’s current needs without jeopardizing the needs of future generations, the current trend towards agricultural industrialization and consolidation appears incompatible with sustainability. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the current global economic system is going to create the space for increased sustainable practices in the near future.

Reflection Questions

1. What does sustainability mean to you?
2. Why is sustainability important for you? For your family? For the world?
3. What do you think are the obstacles to creating a sustainable agricultural system?
4. What would you do to ensure that agricultural practices are sustainable?
5. What is the Conservation Security Program? What are its benefits?

Sources:

- India Resource Center (www.IndiaResource.org).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture (www.usda.gov).
- National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (www.sustainableagriculture.net).
- Environmental Working Group (www.ewg.org).
- Environmental Defense (www.environmentaldefense.org).
- Agribusiness Accountability Initiative (www.agribusinessaccountability.org).
- National Family Farm Coalition (www.nffc.net).

Conservation Security Program

A Step in the Right Direction

The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is an innovative federal program that provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers nationwide to help them implement sound conservation practices that improve soil, water, and ecosystem health. Assistance applies to the full spectrum of working agricultural lands, from cropland to pasture to rangeland. Highlights of the program include:

The program rewards innovative and proactive stewardship practices. In comparison with its sister program, the Conservation Reserve Program, which provides financial incentives to take farmland out of production, the CSP rewards farming practices that implement conservation measures while simultaneously maintaining the land’s productivity. Farmers are thus encouraged to work the land in a way that benefits both the health of the ecosystem and the health of their business.

The program has generated an immense amount of positive feedback. During a public comment period prior to the inking of the first CSP contracts in 2004, over 14,000 farmers, ranchers, and technical assistance providers nationwide voiced their strong support for the CSP. In the program’s first year, contracts were signed with 2,188 farmers that implemented conservation practices on over 1.8 million acres.

Conservation payments are commensurate with accepted free trade regulations. At a time when U.S. agricultural policy is coming under international fire for its violation of doctrines of global free trade, conservation-oriented payments represent a sanctioned form of agricultural subsidies. Payments such as those of the CSP are aimed at conservation rather than production and do not distort trade. They are classified as “green box” subsidies by the WTO and are allowed without limits.

Source: Taken from the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture (www.sustainableagriculture.net)