Greener p

How family farmers are planting for a sustainable future

Megan Sweas

Russ Kremer had a near-death experience in 1989. On his central Missouri farm, he was bitten by a hog and contracted a form of strep resistant to at least five antibiotics. His hogs' feed included antibiotics to protect them—but not humans—from disease.

Doctors cured him, but Kremer decided to start his farm operation anew, raising hogs naturally. "I quit cold turkey," he says. "I've basically been a crusader or an evangelist for raising hogs this way. I did it because it was the right thing to do."

Although there was little demand for natural meat then, today small farmers across the country are finding economic opportunity in the natural, organic, and locally grown food markets. Like Kremer, though, their motivation goes beyond the bottom line to values shared by both family farmers and urban eaters.

There are 2.1 million farms in the United States, but this number is deceptive, as it includes extremely small, virtually non-operating farms, says Frederick Kirschenmann, an organic farmer and professor of religion and philosophy who works at Iowa State University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that only 10 percent of all farms produce about 75 percent of total farm sales. "We've been operating under the principal that fewer farmers are better. Fewer farmers managing more production makes the system more efficient," Kirschenmann says, and that means lower prices.

But having fewer farmers hurts rural communities, which maintain values such as family, health, justice, and stewardship. "If we are not careful, we'll have the continued loss of rural communities done in the name of efficient production," says Robert Gronski, policy coordinator with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC).

Beyond a "heartfelt reaction to the loss of the family farm," Gronski says, rural and urban Catholics alike are concerned about the health value and safety of their food, treatment and well-being of those who produce it, and especially the environmental impact of their diet. Aligning their concerns and values with their food choices has led many Catholics to support small family farmers.

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Catholics from Iowa to Washington, D.C. are demanding farm policy that would create a more equitable system for small farmers. This system may be hard to change, and it will likely remain difficult for small farmers who grow commodity crops such as wheat, corn, and soybeans to compete with their larger counterparts, but demand for biodiesel is benefiting all farmers—large and small. Hope also lies in consumers' demand for safe, healthy food grown with sustainable practices. In this area, Kremer says, "there have never been more opportunities for a farmer to start a successful enterprise."

Kremer is no longer a lone crusader. He is president of the Ozark Mountain Pork Cooperative, made up of 52 farmers raising hogs naturally.

Each farmer invests in the processing facility and marketing structure and gets one vote in the cooperative's decisions. It allows the farmers to employ efficiencies of larger hog farms while maintaining their independence and identity as a "small farmer." "This gives them some market security," says Kremer, also president of the Missouri Farmers Union.

The cooperative is more than smart business. For Kremer, the decisions to farm naturally and operate as a cooperative came from his values as a Catholic. "There are colder, more rigid business structures that can somewhat come to the same goal," Kremer says. "A co-op is about loyalty and trust. You find people that have the same mind-set as you do."

Market research also convinced the cooperative's members that consumers share this perspective. "I think that's our last hurrah: One of the last abilities of a small family farmer to survive is to build these relationships with the consumer," Kremer says. "We depend on what we call committed consumers and committed advocates, and there is no better affinity group to work with than the faith community."

Holy ground

Every year around Earth Day, Gary Guthrie hosts a garden blessing on his Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Nevada, Iowa. He reads from the Bible and leads a dozen or so participants in an activity, such as planting a seed or feeding his sheep. "Over the years now a sense of community has really been developing," Guthrie says.

His 2.5 acre organic vegetable garden—he is famous for carrots—feeds 56 families who buy shares in his farm and receive boxes of vegetables from the harvest. The CSA model "allows me to integrate agriculture, community development, and my spirituality in one job," says Guthrie, who joined the movement in 1997 when it still was young. Today there are more than 1,000 CSA farms nationwide.

Many consumers concerned with the environment seek out local sources of food through CSA operations, farm stands, co-ops, and farmers' markets. Locally grown food travels much less than the typical 1,500 miles before it's sold, and consumers also can find out how local farmers care for the ground.

The current agricultural industry is not sustainable, says Kirschenmann. He worries about monoculture (dependence on one crop), which requires a stable climate, and the overuse of water and energy resources. "If we don't care for creation, our capacity to maintain productivity, despite our technology, will simply be impossible," Kirschenmann says. "It comes down to whether we are motivated by our faith to take care of creation."

Family farmers, he says, have this motivation as well as the knowledge and ability to farm sustainably.

For Guthrie farming is about relationships—with his community, land, and God. He and his spiritual director meet out on stumps in the middle of the garden. "A garden isn't just a place to work; it's a place of beauty, a place to contemplate," says Guthrie, a Catholic spiritual director himself.

He learned how to treat the land from Latin American farmers, having spent six years there. As an act of solidarity with world farmers, Guthrie farms only with his hands and a rototiller. He uses natural compost and fertilizer and has a five-year rotation of crops. He has found that his land retains more water and has become more productive over the years. "There are still some of us here that know how to farm in a sustainable way" if the land does wear out, he says.

With a 12-person wait-list, Guthrie is optimistic about the future of CSA farms. "We need more farmers doing this. I think the potential is unlimited. I can't grow bigger and I can't meet the demand," he says.

Size matters

Guthrie farms on a small piece of his parents' 160-acre farm, and with his simple methods, his start-up costs were minimal. Conventional farming, though, is expensive—one reason

Photo provided by Russ Kremer

Photo provided by Gary Guthrie

Above: John Stegeman, (with his son Chris) is a diversified farmer and member of the Ozark Mountain Pork Cooperative. The farm, located in Loose Creek, Missouri, has been in the Stegeman family for more than 100 years. Right: Gary Guthrie's organic carrots are known for being more flavorful than the average supermarket variety.

Aaron Dirksen, 33, is unique as a young farmer.

"If I graduated high school today and was wanting to start farming, it would be a lot tougher than when I graduated 15 years ago," says Dirksen, who farms a rotation of corn, soybeans, and wheat on 3,000 acres near Portland, Indiana with his younger brother. Their father helped them and his three other brothers get started. "I didn't really get into farming to get rich; it was because I liked farming."

Russ Kremer and Ken Gallaway, a Texas corn, wheat, and cotton farmer, estimate it would take half a million dollars to start a viable farm operation.

High prices for soybeans and corn have meant high prices for buying and leasing land. Ethanol production, which the USDA says tripled from 2000 to 2006, drives demand. Developers also pay top dollar for land due to urban sprawl.

Equipment has become more expensive, as has fuel for running it. Large farms can negotiate prices down for supplies by buying in bulk, while smaller farmers pay standard prices. To get discounts, Dirksen and his brothers combine their orders for seed and fertilizers.

Because there is money in it, Dirksen observes, farming has gotten more competitive than collaborative. "It's becoming more of a cut-throat business," he says. He has seen some farmers go behind neighbors' backs to outbid them on land they were leasing. He would only expand if he could do so in an honest way.

"There are other farmers trying to make a living off farming," says Dirksen. And 100 farmers make for a stronger rural community than 10, he says.

The Community Supported Agriculture model "allows me to **integrate agriculture, community development, and my spirituality** in one job."

The 2007 USDA Family Farm Report, however, concluded that "for the most part, large-scale farms are more viable businesses than small family farms." The report showed that the number of large farms (with more than $250,000 in annual sales) grew steadily between the 1982 and 2002 agricultural censuses, as did their share of production. The most rapid growth was for farms with sales of at least $1 million, which now account for 48 percent of production.

A farmer with 40,000 acres can

City slickers get a taste of the farm

When Curt Ellis set out to learn about agriculture firsthand for his documentary *King Corn* (ITVS), he didn't find what he expected. "From an urban or suburban perspective," says the Portland, Oregon resident, "you imagine family farms and red barns."

This image is what he advocates for through his documentary and presentations. For *King Corn* he and friend Ian Cheney farmed one acre of corn and followed the corn through the food chain. They discovered that in corn, "we've wound up mass-producing a crop that has no nutritional value," Ellis says, pointing to high-fructose corn syrup and corn-fed meat. At 28, he is especially worried about obesity and diabetes in his fellow young Americans.

Photo courtesy of City of Chicago

Farmers' markets give city-dwellers access to fresh, local produce.

Ellis wants U.S. farm policy to encourage production of "a carrot that's going to look like a carrot, not a corn cob that's going to be eaten looking like a Pepsi." Consumers of all religions, says Ellis, who attends a Mennonite church, need to see that the food system stands in contrast to their values.

Jeanne Brophy, a Catholic living in San Francisco, lives her values by buying local foods. For the past few years, she has participated in the 30-day Eat Local Challenge (*eatlocalchallenge.com*), eating only foods from within 150 to 200 miles of her home.

"What it was for me was an awareness tool. By the end of it I had changed some habits," Brophy says. She now goes to the farmers' market every week and estimates that 80 percent of her diet is local foods.

Similar to the practice of Lent, she says, "it's not so much about what you're giving up; it's about what you're gaining." Brophy's local diet has allowed her to become a steward of the earth, to appreciate the act of eating and the food, and to foster community. At farmers' markets, for instance, "people are friendly and you actually talk to your fellow human beings," she says. "I think that's what God intended."

Finding community—"where we're not shoved up next to our neighbor, where it means something to have a neighbor"—is what led Bill and Michelle Worley to move their six children from Minneapolis to rural Wisconsin in 2006, Bill Worley says.

The Worleys are part of a growing movement of "hobby farmers." They bought their 22-acre farm in Elroy, Wisconsin for less than a house in the city and rent out 12 acres to a neighbor. A vegetable garden and farm animals provide food for their table but don't earn them significant money. Bill is a sales representative, and Michelle home-schools their five youngest children, ages 1 to 9.

The Worleys wanted a farm close to a church that offered adoration and Latin Mass, but their decision to move to the country came down to family values. Farm life offers a place "where our kids could grow up and learn the value of work and still be able to go outside and play, and we wouldn't have to worry about them," Bill says. "Besides a lot of work, it's part of our lifestyle."

It's a lifestyle that city folk and country folk alike want to see fostered for generations to come.

—Megan Sweas

Photo provided by Alicia Dirksen

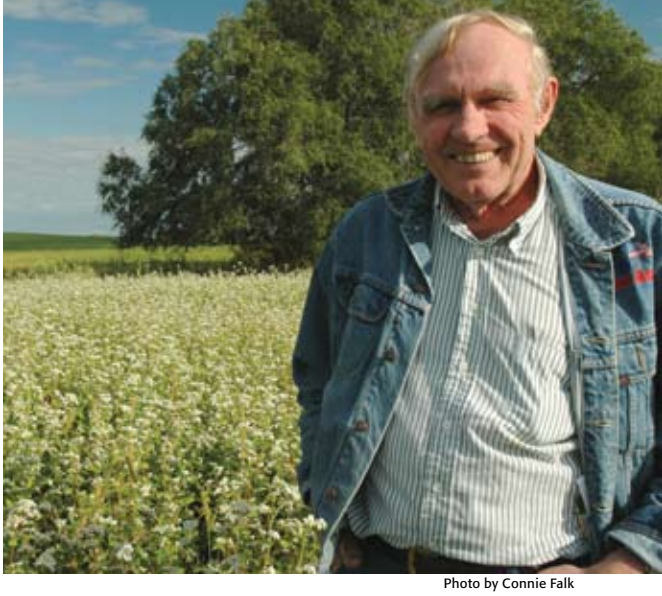

Photo by Connie Falk

Left: Aaron and Alicia Dirksen hope to pass along their Portland, Indiana farm to their children. Above: Fred Kirschenmann says many family farmers are motivated to protect creation.

make just $10 an acre and do well, explains Gallaway, a former accountant, but with just 625 acres, he could not survive at such a low level of profits. Buying or leasing more land may seem to be the solution for family farms—and indeed, most large farms are operated by families—but expanding has its downsides.

On large farms, farmers become managers, have extra costs, including employees, and lose the connection to the land. Gallaway wouldn't mind a few more acres but also likes being able to do everything himself.

A neighbor in North Dakota who operates a 45,000-acre farm 100 miles from his farmstead admits to Kirschenmann that he doesn't know his land well, which is a requirement for sustainable agriculture.

Dirksen finds that small farms are also good for family. His wife, Alicia, a stay-at-home mom, helps him and brings their three children out to see him while he works. He cares for the land because he hopes to pass it on to his son. "I'm fortunate to have this situation," he says. "It's just a pretty good life."

Dirksen's brother, in contrast, recently had to quit his independent hog operation and now raises hogs on contract for a corporation.

Not all subsidies are bad

The uncertainty of farm business often keeps the next generation from farming, Gallaway says. At age 41, he left a stable accounting career and high salary to take over his parents' Orton, Texas farm in 1996.

Gallaway finds farming to be a spiritual job and likes being close to nature and being his own boss. "There's a sense of accomplishment each time I harvest, knowing that I'm providing food and fiber to people," he says.

But farming is difficult. "When you farm, you get paid once a year and you don't know what [you've earned] until the end of the year," he says.

Both Dirksen and Gallaway receive commodity subsidy payments, which protect farmers from that uncertainty. At approximately $30,000, Gallaway's subsidy is about 15 percent of what he grows—about $200,000. Costs run about $150,000. Although rising prices for crops have kept up with farmers' rising costs, Dirksen and Gallaway would worry if prices drop or the ethanol boom busts.

The Family Farm Report explains that because commodity payments are based on production, large family farms (8 percent of total farms) received 59 percent of the payments in 2004. Most farms—61 percent in 2004—do no receive any government payments.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recommends that "limited government resources should be targeted to small and moderate-size farms, especially minority-owned farms and farmers of limited means, to help them through difficult times caused by changes in global agricultural markets or weather patterns that destroy crops."

The bishops also lobby for rewarding sustainable farming rather than production. Under the Conservation Reserve Program, Gallaway receives a small payment for not farming 30 acres. Of conservation payments, 80 percent went to small family farms (90 percent of total farms). This is just a small fraction of government farm payments, however, with commodity-related subsidies making up 83 percent of all payments.

The USDA has advocated cutting commodity subsidies to farmers that

earn more than $200,000 (after costs). The current limit is $2.5 million. Neither the current Senate nor House versions of the Farm Bill come close to the recommendations.

At the time of publication, the House and Senate had extended the expiration of the 2002 Farm Bill to April 18 to give them more time to reconcile their versions of the bill. The Bush administration has threatened to veto both versions because they are too expensive, introduce new taxes, and do not reform the subsidies.

"I am very disturbed that Congress believes that there are that many farmers out there making over $200,000. I've never met one," says Gallaway. He lobbied for just Farm Bill reform through Oxfam International. Oxfam sent him to Mali in West Africa, where he saw how the United States' subsidized surplus undermines prices in the developing world. "It is especially hard to see [farmers there] who are just trying to provide basic needs for their families and not asking for a handout when you consider that our farm policies are creating a disadvantage," he says.

What the farm bill needs, Gallaway says, are limits on production, and he'll continue to take every opportunity he has to advocate for a more just system. "I'm not opposed to subsidies in themselves," Gallaway says, "but we need to target where they go, so that they go to those who really need them, not just extra profit for the big guys."

¡Sí, se puede!

After 22 years as an immigrant farmworker, Miguel Contreras bought a 70-acre apple farm in Yakima, Washington in 2004 with the help of government loans. He had been tending the land for five years under an elderly farmer who wanted to retire and had nobody to whom he could leave his land.

Contreras "knew nothing about financing, his English was limited, but the farmer said that [Contreras] loved the land, and he wanted to sell it to him," says Luz Bazán Gutierrez, director of the Center for Latino Farmers in Yakima. The landowner brought Contreras to the center, which helps farmworkers navigate the system and understand the market on their way to becoming farm owners.

"It's going to take a coalition of **all different kinds of small farmers to come together** and save the family farm."

Like Contreras, the vast majority of immigrants in Yakima came from Michoacán, an agrarian state in Mexico, looking for economic opportunities. "They got into what they love to do," Gutierrez says. "They are no different from any other farmer—black, white, or Hispanic. They love to farm, and when it's your own land, you do it with joy."

The USDA has programs that provide loans for beginning and minority farmers, but for immigrant farmers money isn't the only challenge. "The language barrier is number one," Gutierrez says, followed by "the understanding of how the programs work." USDA offices often don't have a staff person that speaks Spanish, she says.

The Center for Latino Farmers prepares loans, leads financial training sessions, and provides follow-up. Contreras still uses the center's resources, attends trainings, and has applied for equipment loans since buying his farm. Since 2002, the center has helped immigrant farmers obtain 106 loans worth about $7.2 million.

"Everybody wants to own their land," says Gutierrez, a fifth-generation Mexican Texan who remembers her own farmer father's pride in owning land.

"It's going to take a coalition of all different kinds of small farmers to come together to save the family farm," she says. Up 50 percent from 1997 to 2002, Latino farmers are the fastest growing population of small farmers.

Competitive marketplace

Americans can buy a wide variety of cheap products at local supermarkets. "We have to give some credit to the big guys" for this affordable abundance, says Robert Gronski of NCRLC, but Catholics also have to consider the others costs of their food choices.

For as many positive examples as he knows, Gronksi also knows farmers who worry about surviving one more year. Without family farms, "there is something we'll be left without," Gronski says. "Catholic social teaching asks us to think about community as well as market."

Kirschenmann finds hope in demand. "There's a growing number of consumers in the marketplace who are no longer satisfied with the easy, convenient, and cheap," he says. "They want a quality product, a superior tasting product; they want good health and nutrition; they want a good food story that comes with it. They prefer to know that their food came from a real farm family." **USC**

On the Web

For information about the farm industry and supporting small family farms, visit *uscatholic.org*.