



FACE...

The Future of Rural America: Shaping the Vision

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THE TERM "RURAL AMERICA" USUALLY REFERS TO SMALL TOWNS OF 2,400 PEOPLE OR fewer, located in regions of farmland and rangeland. However, the term also includes forested regions, mining and fishing towns and villages. Because of the diversity of the nation's topography, climatic zones, soil and mineral deposits, as well as the many ethnic local communities, it is difficult to define this term "rural America." Nevertheless, there is a common thread that runs through any definition: most rural communities are heavily dependent on the natural resources of soil, water, minerals, forests, grasslands, and fisheries. Only recently have manufacturing industries looked upon rural communities as resources for labor and relatively inexpensive land. Given the ceaseless demands placed upon the use of soil, water, forest, grassland, mineral resources, and fisheries, coupled with expanding manufacturing industries, it is difficult to predict the future. It is within this ambiguity that two awesome questions emerge: Do we go with the flow of the present social, demographic, and industrialization trends and hope for the best? Or as a national community, do we all participate in envisioning new futures that address the need for social and economic justice and better stewardship of natural resources?

An additional question needs to be in the forefront of every conversation about the future of rural America: How can society provide food and fiber for itself in a way that does not ultimately diminish the prospects of future generations for meeting their needs? This is a most appropriate question given the reality of ever increasing losses of top soil from erosion, urban and industrial sprawl onto prime farmland, the loss of the vegetative cover of forests and grasslands, salinization, alkalization, water-logging, the over-draft of aquifers west of the Mississippi, the truncation of plant and animal species associated with monocropping, and livestock production concentrations now associated with the worldwide industrialization of agriculture. Since the western settlement of the North American continent, more than 80% of the original forests have been harvested and more than 30% of

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TO FACE

The Future of Rural America: Testing the Market

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AS AN ECONOMIST, I SEE THE DISCUSSIONS AND ARGUMENTS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF Rural America revolving around differences in values — values defined in two ways: first, market values (both monetary and nonmonetary), which we give to objects and persons; second, personal values, which guide our choices, our goals, our mores, our sense of what is right.

We all place values on things — our car, our life, our job, our business, our way of life. As part of society, we place values through that abstract idea called the market. We are willing to buy something because we place a value on it greater than or equal to the price being asked. We are willing to sell something if someone else offers to pay a price equal to or greater than the value we have given to it. If the “buy” price is less than the “sell” price, then nothing is sold or bought. Usually, this outcome is correct, because the appropriate people are already the owners since they have a higher value for that “something” than anyone else.

But what if that “something” is my ability to work or the product of my work? Should I move? Should I accept a lower income so I don’t have to move? What if things that we consider to be very valuable — the number of farmers, avoidance of pesticide, small towns with active downtowns, for example — are valued less by society? What if they are valued so low that we cannot afford to live the way we choose, even if we lower our goals? How do we cope when the thing that society values less than we do involves our dreams — things we have worked hard to attain or keep?

Do I have a right to expect society to pay me to live where I want and do what I want just because I want to do that? Does any group (say, professors or farmers) have that right? Or should we respect society’s values and do that which society values more?

This brings us to the second idea of values as those intrinsic guideposts within us that guide our decisions. We may have a hard time realizing that people can have

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the soil deposits have been drained into the sea. In the early years of this century, there were approximately 30 million farms. Today the number is a little more than one million, with 275,000 farms producing nearly 80% of the national agricultural output. Rural communities decline in population. Many of the social amenities have disappeared. Rural America is undergoing a massive transition. The outcome is uncertain.

Thinking about what ought to be is a proper agenda. The nation needs to think about whether or not it wants a truly participatory society where communities of rural people have a say about their community and its future. If the nation neglects this responsibility, then the contemporary forces of food production, processing, and marketing industries will likely determine what happens. Do the requirements of the land for the maintenance of soil fertility, water purity, biological diversity, and forest and grassland health need to be considered when envisioning the future? Ought the needs of future generations enter the process of shaping the rural sector of the society? These questions must enter into the discussion about how a society can think about feeding itself over the long haul.

If tomorrow's agriculture is to be regenerative, it will have to be an analogue of the physical and biological processes and functions of the original biotic community with which it interacts. It will need to be in harmony with the complex dynamics of nature itself. Reducing the complexities of natural systems to the simplicity of modern monocropping runs counter to the dynamics of nature. A whole new agenda of research for the emergence of a post-petroleum, regenerative agricultural system awaits articulation. And, unless for many generations yet to come the production processes contribute to the vitality of rural communities, it will be difficult to predict a bright future for the land and the people who dwell upon it so intimately. This is the lesson that the history of civilization teaches.

It is long overdue for workers in agricultural sciences, technology, industry and the economic order to address these issues and begin the research for the emergence of an environmentally and socially enhancing system of production of food and fiber. Although we have walked on the moon and have photographed the depths of the seas and distant galaxies, we have yet to design a just and sustaining, and therefore enhancing, system for the production of food and fiber for the sustenance of generations yet to be born. The ways of thinking that have brought us to this challenge are not the ones that will move us onto a sustainable path. Rural America is in a social, economic, technological, and spiritual crisis. It is important to remember that in a crisis there is opportunity for significant change. The question can rightly be asked, "What ought to be?" The need for interdisciplinary work organized to address this normative question is urgent. Farmers, foresters, rural citizens, agronomists, economists, scientists, industrialists, ecologists, social philosophers and ethicists, theologians, and public policy makers must together enter the conversation about rural America's future. The present situation makes us wonder about whether or not the fox will protect the henhouse while the folks are in town! ⊕

different values than ours. We may ask, “How can they do that?” Even people who go to the same church can have differences in values. We may have the same faith, the same God; but when we are faced with the earthly choices before us, differences show up! We respond in different ways. The list of values may be the same, but we somehow have different rankings or priorities of those values.

The question of whether farms and businesses should be allowed to grow is a good example of personal values conflicting with market values. People opposing growth contend that if farms and businesses grow (be they hog farms or large discount stores), communities will lose jobs and families, lose a critical vibrant mass, and, perhaps, disappear. Large farms and businesses are portrayed as poor stewards of the earth while smaller ones will be good stewards. Anti-growth people place a high personal value on small farms and small, vibrant communities.

Other people believe growth is needed to maintain family income at a desirable level and to retain jobs within a community. Contrary to some headlines, most of these people do not aim to be big, powerful exploiters of the environment. Some family farmers believe that growing only corn and soybeans will not provide enough income in the future. They see growth in hog production as the best way to survive, maintain family income, and be good stewards of the earth. They place a high personal value on staying on their farms and in their communities.

When we place these personal values against the values determined by the marketplace, we do not find congruence. The marketplace is favoring growth; small farms and towns are disappearing. But even the growth advocates do not see all their personal values met; they, too, do not like all the changes taking place.

The marketplace does seem impersonal and anti-human at times; but it is also the mechanism by which society as a whole expresses its values. We as consumers will pay more for higher quality, better health, and better environment, and we have been known to pay more to support our local community. But when society as a whole speaks, it generally prefers lower prices to higher prices.

However, we do not have to accept the marketplace as always having perfect information; it doesn't. We know that markets fail; our values as a society may be violated. If the failure is large enough, public regulations are developed to correct that market, such as publicly set utility rates. (But, of course, regulations can fail, too.)

In the current debate, we are called to discuss, to strive to educate, and to vote (both politically and economically) on whether the marketplace has failed rural America. As a society, we are deciding whether our values determined in the market truly reflect our personal values or whether regulations are needed. ⊕