



The Land Stewardship Letter is published four times a year by the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization. The mission of the Land Stewardship Project is to foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture and to develop sustainable communities. Members of the Land Stewardship Project receive this newsletter as a benefit. Annual membership dues are \$35.

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This newsletter printed by Roscoe Printers, Wanamingo, Minn.

Commentary !?!?!?

Renewable rural development

By Kamyar Enshayan

There has been a lot of excitement lately about the growth of the corn-based ethanol industry. In fact, the USDA recently estimated that corn used for ethanol will increase 34 percent in the coming year. The reason offered is straightforward: corn, especially here in the Midwest, is a resource we have in abundance. So why import oil from far away? Plus making corn into fuel helps farmers market their crop at a better price.

I would like to put these ideas in a broader context, hoping to better understand what is happening around us here in the heartland.

Economist Ken Meter has assembled data from the USDA's Agricultural Census and the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis for many counties around the nation to characterize the nature of commodity agriculture. For the eight-county area around Black Hawk County, Iowa, where I live, we have about 8,500 farmers who mostly raise corn and soybeans, along with some livestock. On average, from 1999 to 2003, these farms sold \$1.08 billion worth of crops annually. But they spent \$1.14 billion every year to produce those crops. That's a loss of \$62 million, every year. Most other

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Illustration by Sean Sheerin

Iowa counties are doing worse, even as we are inundated with images of bin-busting harvests.

During the same period, our eight-county area farms received \$173 million per year in federal government crop subsidies for corn and soybeans. By every measure rural communities are declining. These subsidies have not helped, because they are not community-building tools—they are commodity-exporting subsidies for two specific crops. Ethanol fits well into this picture.

Commodity agriculture is acre-based. It requires land, grain elevators, fuel and chemicals. A convenience store and a bar are all that's left in many rural towns. But a human community requires churches, schools, health clinics and civic organizations, and "modern agriculture" has no place for them. Most of the subsidies end up in more seeds, chemicals and machinery from the same companies that these farms sell their crops to. So we have a sort of company town with its token currency. And not surprisingly, these companies shape the federal farm policies that bring them the wealth. This is not something farmers alone can change. They are simply trying to make a living in an unfair system they have little control over.

In addition to this economy of loss, we are seeing soil loss and degradation as a result of harsh farming practices encouraged by federal crop subsidies. We are seeing corn fertilizer and corn pesticides in our drinking water.

4-headed beast

In May, Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack signed into law a bill that is being touted as the most aggressive package of pro-ethanol legislation in the country. This measure creates a four-headed monster, a quadruple gravy train of ethanol subsidies. First, you have the huge federal corn subsidies that mask an economy of loss I described above. Then you have the federal ethanol subsidies to makers of ethanol. The third head of the monster is all the tax dollars the Iowa Department of Economic Development is handing out to build the ethanol plants. The fourth head is the one that makes ethanol blend cheaper at the gas station via subsidies to ethanol retailers.

It would be very interesting to add up the total annual subsidies our state and federal governments provide to make corn ethanol cheap, and then to think



What's on your mind?

Got an opinion? Comments? Criticisms? We like to print letters, commentaries, essays, poems, photos and illustrations related to issues we cover. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

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how better we could have spent it towards revitalizing our rural communities. The idea that farms will be able to provide an endless supply of energy for a wasteful culture that demands more and more makes no sense. There is nothing "renewable" about it. It will take us back to more of what we have already seen—soil degradation, pesticides and nitrate in our drinking water. Live Green. Go Yellow. And erode brown.

Just like in coal mining company towns, questioning policy is not cool, and after a while people begin to internalize it and believe it. Corn and ethanol are sacred in the Midwest, and few lawmakers would want to appear unsupportive.

An economy of gain

It is possible to tame the monster. Look at what we have going for us: skilled farmers, the best soils in the world, community-minded people, sunshine and excellent rainfall. How can we guard these assets and build on them?

First, we already know how to farm without damaging the soil or polluting our waters. Farmers are out there doing it every day, and land grant research is putting real numbers on the viability and benefits of these innovative sustainable practices. There is solid data here to create good public policy for the nation and for our state.

Another much needed strategy is to expand local/regional markets for local

farm products. Farmers I know do not want favors, just fair markets. In my eight-county area, while farmers lose \$62 million annually, consumers spend \$500 million on food every year. Local food systems would reconnect our plates to their fields, our grocery expenditures to their livelihood.

Now imagine if only \$1 million per year of that \$173 million crop subsidy for our eight-county area were invested in strengthening the local food economy of our region. We would see more truck farms, more orchards, more canneries and creameries, more bakeries, more processing facilities, all meeting primarily local/regional food needs.

We need to be smarter, see a broader picture, and not fall for the pie-in-the-sky biofuels "magic bullet," ignoring all that we already know. We have lots of work to do to accomplish this. □

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...That's the 2006 ranking of Minneapolis, Minn., in the "local food and agriculture" category among the nation's 50 most populous cities. The ranking was made by SustainLane (www.sustainlane.com), which annually ranks U.S. cities based on sustainability factors such as air and water quality, public transit and energy use.

SustainLane formulates its rankings using a combination of surveys, interviews and statistics. Minneapolis was ranked number two in the "local food and agriculture" category because of the high number of farmers' markets and community gardens present in the city. The city's farmers' markets were also lauded for accepting Women, Infants and Children (WIC) vouchers, enabling more residents to purchase fresh, local food.

Boston was SustainLane's number one "local food and agriculture" city; Philadelphia was ranked number three.