

An Iowa view from the North Dakota Plains

As I write this I am watching the sun rise on my farm in North Dakota – a site that never fails to stir the deepest emotions in my soul.

It's not that I am romantic about nature. I've been farming too long for that. In fact, nature has not been kind to us so far this year. We had our last spring rain April 1. The next rain came June 28—too late to do much good for any of the cool-season, small grain crops. But it came just in time for the warm season buckwheat, so we have some of the nicest buckwheat I have ever seen. And thanks to the Conservation Reserve Program, we will have enough hay for wintering our cattle.

During July it rained every week so the pastures were lush and green, and the cattle seemed grateful. Yet it was hard to put up hay or harvest the little crop that was there when it rained almost every day. Seems we got our August harvest weather last May and our spring rains in August. My neighbor tells me that the Lord has been good to him, but he doesn't think He knows much about farming!

Farming, especially on the Great Plains, has a way of shaping one's perceptions. It is a good idea to plan ahead and consider all contingencies. If you plan your farm (or your life) based on best-case scenarios—hoping it will rain at just the right time to get that bumper crop of that one, best-paying cash crop you planted—then you are likely to be caught short. On the other hand, if you plan for the fact that Murphy's Law is alive and well—everything that can go wrong, will go wrong—and so you build in a lot of contingencies, you are more likely to survive the bad times. When you build diversity into the system, if everything goes wrong for wheat it might not be so bad for buckwheat. My father always said the reason he wanted cattle on his farm is that “they didn't get hailed out.”

So farmers out here on the Plains are not romantic about nature. Many appreciate nature and respect her. A few here, as elsewhere, have tried to control nature, but most simply recognize that one needs to adapt to nature if one is going to survive in the long term. It's not going to be easy to balance the budget this year with about a third of a normal crop (assuming the rain quits long enough to get it into the bin) especially since one of our tractors chose this year to call it quits and had to be replaced. But those nice fields of organic buckwheat will sure help make up some of the difference.

Farming on the Plains teaches one the need for frugality, adaptation and diversity. As I contemplate my responsibilities at the Leopold Center from this perspective, it strikes me that the same principles apply. Facing a budget crisis is a lot like farming on the Plains. While the Center has always been pretty frugal, we now need to redouble our efforts in that regard.

We also are learning to adapt. Given the enormous tasks ahead of us, helping to reshape agriculture to meet

the challenges of the 21st century in the face of drastic budget reductions means that we must partner with everyone who shares our vision for the future. Farmers on the Plains have always helped each other out in times of crisis. When a neighbor becomes ill and can't plant or harvest a crop, we all get together, go to his place with our own equipment and take care of it for him.

We are in the process of doing the same thing at the Leopold Center. It has been a heart-warming experience. Many Iowans have been telling us that even if we don't have any money to commit to vital research, they want us here to work with them to solve problems together.

And we need to diversify our funding base. Depending entirely on state appropriations was probably a little like planting just one cash crop. So, in cooperation with the College of Agriculture at Iowa State University, we are launching a fundraising drive for the Center. This, too, has been a rich experience. Many people, from small farmers (who certainly don't have money to spare) to CEOs of major corporations, have stepped up to the plate and made significant donations—even before we started the fundraising campaign.

We will begin a fundraising effort to diversify the Center's “cropping system.” Of course, we hope that the state legislature will not raid the Groundwater Protection Fund again next year and that our funding stream will be restored. And if so, we will put the funds we raise into an endowment to secure the Center's future. If the legislature takes our funding away again, hopefully we will have raised enough to continue our work.

Stephen Kirschman

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