

## Farmers are *not* ‘insignificant’!

Chuck Suchy, who lives with his wife Linda on a small farm near Mandan, N.D., introduces us to the ordinary life and chores of a Midwest farmer in “Summer Hands.” His music celebrates farming and rural life, and has brought this farmer-songwriter quite a following. He has performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and his songs are featured on radio stations as far away as New Zealand.

Suchy’s music is a poignant reminder that farmers are not the “statistically insignificant” minority that led the U.S. Census Bureau to no longer count the number of Americans who live on farms. Neither can farmers be dismissed as a “contracted workforce” nor “the decline of small farms on the plains” touted as a “sign of success”—a characterization recently suggested by the director of a center for agricultural and rural development.

### **Let’s not overlook farmers**

The tendency to discount farmers and their contributions goes back to the early 1900s. Farmers became expendable once we decided, as a matter of public policy, to reduce the number of people engaged in farming in order to “free people” to work in industry and service professions to improve our quality of life. That policy may have made sense during the first half of the 20th century. Today it only perpetuates the myth that if two or three farmers could produce all of the bulk commodities we need for food and fiber, it would be a sign of incredible “progress.”

Our continuing, simple-minded policy of reducing the labor force required to produce bulk commodities only makes sense if that is the sole objective of agriculture. If so, the United States needs to get out of the farming business altogether. Countries with cheaper land and labor costs can produce our bulk commodities more cheaply than we can.

Over a decade ago, economists



*Summer hands get their start in the spring*

*When the farm comes to life with the work that it brings.*

*Summer hands have more work than they need*

*I hope they know of all the people they feed.*

— Lyrics to “Summer Hands”

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and the media were touting the “Popper thesis,” which suggested that we return the Northern Plains to a “buffalo commons.” John Gardner, former director of the Carrington Research and Extension Center in North Dakota, and his wife Julie took exception. In a letter to the editor of the *Fargo Forum*, the Gardners reminded us of more complex issues.

“Despite all the pressure to conform to this presumably progressive thinking,” they wrote, “we’d like to suggest that perhaps there is an economic bias against the people who care for the land and produce the agricultural wealth ... The ‘family farm’ may prove more valuable than serving as a romantic image of yesteryear. It’s beginning to appear that centralization, either by government or economic might, is not the best strategy to deal with either the natural world or our social and economic structures.”

### **Their creative potential**

In February, we had the privilege of hosting an innovative Japanese farmer, Takao Furuno. Over the past 15 years he has developed a small,



**Japanese farmer Takao Furuno in a field of high-yielding rice**

incredibly productive farming operation in Japan. By **integrating** rice, ducks, fish, vegetables, fruit and wheat into his system, he **produces more gross income** from his six-acre-acre farm than a conventional 600-acre rice farm in Texas!

Furuno achieves this extraordinary productivity without external inputs. His rice yields are 20 to 50 percent higher than the rice yields of conventional rice farms. It is the intimacy with which he understands the ecosystem where he farms, the imagination he applies to the scale at which he farms, and the love he has for all organisms on his farm that enables him to achieve such unusual productivity. Large-scale, centralized systems, using unskilled labor, simply cannot produce the kind of care, resilience and efficiency that this Japanese farm exhibits.

### **Other benefits follow**

This does not mean that all farms – even in Japan – must be six acres in size to achieve unusual productivity. It does mean that farm size should be appropriate to the design of the farm, and that getting bigger does not necessarily make a farm more profitable. Getting smarter may be more important. It also demonstrates that small productive farms can support more people on the land and can therefore help to reduce the pressure of urban sprawl and help to support more vibrant rural communities—and take better care of the land.

We need to move beyond the

**DIRECTOR**

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## *Successful farm transfers involve more than identifying a successor*

### **FARM SUCCESSION**

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to describe the gradual passage of the farm decision making to the next generation. The ladder's rungs are passing on the skills regarding technical, strategic planning, supervisory/managerial, financial, and finally, what Errington describes as "control of the purse strings." French and Canadian successors move up this ladder fairly rapidly, while British and American successors only gradually assume control of the farm.

A successful transfer involves more than simply identifying a successor. As the Laval study notes, "The process is fraught with pitfalls as young farmers seek to take their place in running the farm while owners gradually yield responsibility." Several studies have shown that there are a number of the eventual farmers who will be clearly unprepared to make decisions. Both parties must act to help integrate the young farmers as quickly as possible.

One of the issues facing farmers in developing a succession plan is how to treat all the children fairly. It is important to remember that the sibling who stays with the farm contributes sweat equity. Such an investment has to be recognized in an equitable estate plan.

Some have argued that they are not surprised at the low percentage of farms with succession plans because of the poor farm economy. However, in another study conducted during the same time period, more than 85 percent of the farmers said that if they had it to do over they would still choose farming as a career.

Farmers have worked hard to build their businesses. It is a shame to see these enterprises broken up and sold in pieces. Too many Iowa farmers shut off the combine in the fall and say they are going to retire, and then think they can have a feasible plan in place by the next planting season. It just doesn't work that way.

*For a more detailed summary and interpretation of the survey, see the Beginning Farmer Center's web site at: [www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc/pubs.html](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/bfc/pubs.html).*

*Good farming has long been a demanding craft whose reward is knowing the meaning of a changing wind, the requirements of a calf's health, or the potential of a piece of land.*

— Jedediah Purdy

*"The New Culture of Rural America" 2000*

## *Value beyond monetary measure*

### **DIRECTOR**

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point of calculating all value in terms of a money-based economy. Clean water, clean air, healthy soil, resilient landscapes, and habitat for pollinators are valuable resources that can be provided by agriculture and rural communities. Unfortunately, we still are compelled to do otherwise. Robert Costanza and his colleagues at the University of Maryland calculated that the value of free ecosystem services on the planet amounted to a conservative \$33 trillion annually—considerably more than the total gross domestic product of the global economy.

But perhaps David Ehrenfeld's comment on our need to quantify the value of these resources in such terms is the most telling. "I am afraid that I do not see much hope for a civilization so stupid that it demands a quantitative estimate of the value of its own umbilical cord," he writes.

Chuck Suchy's simple but powerful songs help us recognize the value of all the services that farmers can provide. When allowed to operate in appropriate economic climates, they provide services beyond monetary measure—care of the land, good citizenship in a local community, imaginative production systems in a local place that exceed the predictions of the most seasoned economists, and the security of knowing that nearby farms supply all the safe, nutritious and good-tasting food that we need.

These are a farmer's priceless assets, but only if we foster the kind of social and economic system that keeps farmers on the land.



*"Few things in life are inevitable. The agriculture we have depends on the choices we make today. We have at least three choices, each with dramatically different effects on Iowa agriculture."*

*"We think the current approach of putting all our resources into producing cheap, bulk commodities while keeping alive the fiction of supporting 'family' farms is the worst of the three options. It is cruel and it gives farmers false hope. It leads them to believe that if they just hang in there a little longer, things will get better."*

*"[Another] approach would be to decide that we want more than just cheap, bulk commodities from agriculture. Instead of expecting only food, feed and fiber from farming, we could broaden our expectations. Farming could be called upon to help create energy, medicines and industrial products. Most importantly, farming could be thought of as providing a service, not just a product."*

— Comments from a new Leopold Center paper, "Iowa Agriculture: Beyond 2002," written by Associate Director Mike Duffy and Director Fred Kirschenmann. Portions were published Feb. 9 as a guest editorial in the newspaper, *Iowa Farmer Today*. It is posted on the web, <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubinfo/papersspeeches/iowaag.html>, or can be requested by calling the Leopold Center at (515) 294-3711.