Can we save 'agriculture of the middle'?

I first ran across these words by Wendell Berry when I read his book, *What Are People For?* in 1990. As a farmer who managed a 3,500-acre grain and livestock farm in North Dakota, I couldn't deny the impeccable logic of his thesis. But neither could I escape the demands of the industrial farming culture, of which I was a part. That culture imposed on me the singular requirement of producing more commodities cheaper than anyone else— regardless of the cost. I felt caught between my long-term goal of maintaining the productivity of my farm by ensuring the ecological health of my land and the social health of my community, and the short-term requirements to produce as much as possible. Almost every farmer I know feels caught in the same dilemma.

Ecologists and farmers alike have understood for some time that natural ecosystems can be managed well only by having people live in those ecosystems long enough and intimately enough to learn *how* to manage them well. We must, as author Barry Lopez reminds us, live in our neighborhoods long enough to know the "local flora and fauna as pieces of an inscrutable mystery, increasingly deep, a unity of organisms."

This is the strongest — and perhaps the only — argument for maintaining our independent family farm system of agriculture in which land is passed from generation to generation. As I have come to know such landed farm families in Iowa and listened to them describe their farms, I have been struck by the fact that they always talk about their farms as members of the family. That is as it should be. That is what it *must* be if we are going to *remain* productive.

We have now reached a point where that kind of agriculture is about to disappear. Since about 1960 the demands of our industrial farming culture have required farmers in Iowa to spend all of their gross income (including government subsidies) to pay the bills associated with producing that income. The result has been that farmers' net income has remained flat, leaving no money to pay for living expenses, let alone investment in land care or community well-being. Meanwhile, farmers are under enormous pressure annually to add more units of production (more animals and/or more acres) just to generate the additional income to pay last year's bills. Little attention has been paid to motivating farmers to use their land well, or even allowing them time to get to know it well.

> *. . . if agriculture is to remain productive it must preserve the land, and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used* ***well****. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well. Nothing that has happened in the agricultural revolution of the last fifty years has disproved or invalidated these requirements, though everything that has happened has ignored or defied them.* —Wendell Berry

At the same time, corporations that purchase farm commodities want to reduce transaction costs and, therefore, tend to give preferential contracts to the largest producers, placing smaller farms at a competitive disadvantage. Very small farms have gravitated toward various direct marketing schemes to survive, selling produce direct to customers through farmers markets, community-supported agriculture and other direct market arrangements.

Farms in the middle — those between the direct markets and the markets available through vertically integrated, multi-national firms — are most at risk.

This is not strictly a farm-scale issue, although it is highly scale-related. There are very large, multi-family units that still retain some of the principles in Berry's premise of a farm that can use the land well. But increasingly it is precisely the farms that fit Berry's description that we are losing.

A study prepared by Mike Duffy at the Leopold Center shows that the greatest percentage loss of Iowa farm operators (in acres and total sales) between 1987 and 1997 was among farms of 100 to 900 acres. Meanwhile, the total percentage of sales for farms *under* 100 acres and *over* 1,000 acres increased between 40 and 55 percent. Clearly we are losing these "middle" operations, which make up more than 80 percent of Iowa's farms.

As farms consolidate, land continues to be farmed, likely with less labor, and this transformation has been welcomed by many in the agricultural economy. Indeed, some see it as a necessary "correction" in the market. But Berry reminds us that we stand to lose something much more important—the capacity of the land to *remain* productive.

At the Leopold Center we believe that the loss of "agriculture in the middle" is not inevitable. We see new opportunities — in alternative production systems and new market resources — that can create a comparative advantage for these farms.

At this year's Practical Farmers of Iowa conference, SYSCO Corporation chairman and CEO Rick Schnieders told the audience that "markets for sustainably produced products are there — what is needed are supply chains to deliver those products to the consumer." Building those supply chains is an opportunity for economic development in Iowa's rural communities.

What the Leopold Center has been doing for "farmers in the middle"? See list, page 5.

DIRECTOR

(continued on page 5)

A 1939 Leopold family photo shows (back row) Aldo and his wife Estella, and son Luna; and (in front) their other children Nina, Estella and Starker. Photos courtesy Aldo Leopold Foundation.

'As we transformed the land, the land transformed us'

LAND ETHIC *(continued from page 4)*

planted a mosaic of conifers, hardwoods and prairie to restore health and beauty to the community.

In winter we banded resident birds. We recorded daily, weekend, seasonal events on the land – tracks of animals in the snow, arrival of migratory geese, courtship of woodcock. Here in reality Father's statement rang true – "keeping records enhances the pleasure of the search, and the chance of finding order and meaning in these events."

Here in the sand counties, my father initiated a different relationship with the land, at once more personal and more universal. From his own direct participation he was to come to a deeper appreciation of the ecological, ethical and aesthetic understanding of land. He gained a new sense of belonging to something greater than himself, continuity with all life through time.

What happened involved the senses, the memory, the history of family. It came from working on the land in all weather, suffering from catastrophes, enjoying its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the very investment of labor and feelings.

Family weekends at our Sand County Farm turned out to be a place where my father put these two concepts into practice – the relationship of our family members to each other and their relationship to this piece of land. These two interests became more of a way of life than simply interests. New values were developing somewhere within us.

As we transformed the land, it transformed us … As the land was restored, it was grounded in caring relationships among our family members – of living in webs of relationships.

My father's writing and the very way he led his life makes me realize that today we need a new ethic of connection, built not only on caring for people or caring for places, but on both, and the intricate and beautiful ways that love for places and love for humans nurture each other and sustain us all.

'The loss is not inevitable'

DIRECTOR *(continued from page 3)*

Alternative production systems that are *more* productive but less costly to the farmer and to the environment must be researched and developed. New supply chains can be built that enable farmers to produce more value and retain more of that value on the farm and in their rural communities.

We also know that additional new public policies could be crafted to help farmers move toward these new systems and encourage them to use the land well. Our goal at the Leopold Center is to bring people, organizations and industries in Iowa together to achieve these goals.

How the Leopold Center has helped 'agriculture of the middle'

In crops

- Helped farmers evaluate switchgrass on CRP land for use as a new energy source (co-firing) as part of the Chariton Valley Biomass power project
- Evaluated delivery and distribution uniformity of anhydrous ammonia manifold outlet ports and recommended performance improvements
- Researched bio-control methods for white mold in soybean
- Supported soybean cyst nematode surveys in several Iowa counties
- Worked with agencies and farm groups evaluating use of buffer strips to preserve water quality
- Explored the differences between various kinds of soil phosphorus (P) tests.
- Supported the development and maintenance of new and existing food supply chains, opening new markets for Iowa farmers
- Explored composted swine manure/weed/corn/soybean interactions; compost tends to increase competitive effects of common waterhemp, especially when weed emergence coincides with crop emergence
- Assessed farmer risks/gains for adding zinc fertilizer as yield insurance; showed that it is effective only if tests say soil is lacking zinc

In livestock

- Established management strategies for farmers who are trying to graze beef cows for niche markets; including guidelines on stockpiled grazing to help reduce winter feed costs, improve cattle condition scores, and decrease soil compaction
- Funded first extensive studies showing effectiveness of low-cost hooped hog houses for use by Iowa producers
- Evaluated uniformity of solid manure spreader rates to determine how to improve spreader patterns
- Opened value-added marketing grid opportunities for southern Iowa beef producers through support of the Chariton Valley Beef Initiative
- Funded on-farm research carried out by several Iowa producer groups
- Supported local food projects that encourage institutions and restaurants to purchase locally grown and processed fruits, vegetables and meat