

TOUCH THE SOIL Syndicate



Does Food Come From Farms?



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Does food come from farms? While the question digs a little at our intelligence, do we have an intuitive feeling about the relationship between farms and food? Most of us have intuitive feelings about the relationship between what's in our bank account and how much fun we'll have over the weekend. So can we feel that everything about us — our minds, our strength and our appearance — is linked directly to farms and the quality of food they produce?

Let's go back in time to 1935. There are 6.8 million family farms. The average value of farmland is \$31 per acre. The nation is farming 1.1 billion acres. There are 127 million Americans with one farmer for every 19 people and roughly 8.3 acres of farmland per person.

1935 also happens to be the peak year for family farm numbers. Here is our first chance to test our intuition. Do we feel more farms and farmers are better than less farms and farmers? Yes, financial theory suggests the fewer the farms and acres it takes to feed us, the better. But let's separate ourselves from theory and go with our feelings. Perhaps a better approach than theory.

Moving forward in time, 1954 was the peak year for land being farmed. That year the nation farmed 1.2 billion acres and the average value of farmland was \$82 per acre. There were 163 million Americans and one farm for every 34 people. Farm numbers dropped to 4.8 million farms. A lot happened between 1935 and 1954. America lost 2 million farms — 288 farms a day.

Let's fast-forward to 2006. There are 2.1 million farms and the average value of farmland is \$1,900 per acre. The nation is farming only 932 million acres. Most food is not grown close to home and knowledge of where food is grown is spotty at best. There were 300 million Americans with one farm for every 144 people and roughly 3.1 acres of farmland per person. Since its



Photo 1 - Touch the Soil

Working into the evening, a wheat farmer and his employees keep their focus on harvest. American wheat farmers, over the last seven years, have been unable to produce enough wheat to meet domestic consumption plus exports. As a result, domestic wheat stocks (wheat carried over from one year to the next) have dropped over 50 percent since 2001. As soon as one gets off the freeway and drives into the hinterlands of rural America, a positive connection begins to form between food and farms.



Photo 2 - Touch the Soil

Steve Elliott of Lifeline Produce near Missoula, Mont., cuts salad greens for that day's orders. A brief visit to a sustainable and chemical-free farm like Lifeline Produce, begins the reconnect process in our minds that food and health are intricately linked to farms and farmers.

peak in 1935, America has only 31 percent of its farms left — an average loss of 182 farms per day over 71 years.

In 2006, America farmed 274 million acres less than it did in 1954 — an average decrease of 14,430 acres per day over 52 years. How do we feel about this decrease in America's agricultural potential? How do people in foreign nations, relying on food imports from America to feed themselves, feel? The USDA reports over the last 3 years America imports nearly as much food as it exports.

According to the Economic Research Service (ERS), a division of the USDA, in 1935 the nation spent an average of \$136 per person on food. In 1954, the nation spent an average of \$379 per person on food. In 2006, the nation spent an average of \$3,608 per person on food. For 2007, the ERS predicts an increase in food prices from 3.5 to 4.5 percent within which dairy products are estimated increase 6 to 7 percent. This is substantially more than the 2.4 percent increase in food prices experienced in 2005 and 2006. The ERS explains high oil prices are contributing to higher food prices.

Loss of farmland and farms are not popularly identified as contributors to increased food prices. But how much of an agricultural resource can be lost before it impacts prices? America is on the road to discovery. The growth of ethanol is placing more demands on remaining farmland. In 2007, over 14 million acres of other food crops were dropped in favor of increasing corn acres, much of it for ethanol. The Renewable Fuels Association predicts ethanol production will double from 2006 through 2009, a feat that requires an additional 12 million acres with water. And yet America cannot produce enough wheat for human consumption. Even with a 68 percent increase in farm-gate prices for wheat over the last two years, American wheat production fell short of meeting consumption plus exports in six out of the last eight years. This contributed to a 50 percent drop in wheat stocks which are supposed to underpin food security in terms of price and availability.

Can America increase its inventory of farmland? With encouragement from environmental groups, the USDA is paying to keep 34 million acres of highly erodible land out of production in its CRP programs. National easements protect another 34 million acres, some of which is farmland. Further expansion of farmland risks destroying remaining natural habitat, already trimmed too far. Water is another limiting factor. Many of America's largest underground aquifers and rivers are stressed from unsustainable withdrawals and agricultural production is experiencing curtailment from declining fresh water resources.

Checking our feelings again, how would we feel if America magically got its 4.7 million farmers and 274 million acres of farmland back and urbanization had taken place on non-agricultural lands? Would it be a boost to food and energy security?

Even though nostalgia feels good, we can't go back. But it's not like we don't have choices. America's explosion of farmers' markets — increasing from 1,755 markets in 1994 to 4,385 markets in 2006 — provides opportunity to express our intuitions about food and farms. We can support farmers directly, as if it mattered.

There is a growing urban agriculture movement. The American Community Gardening Association is facilitating connections between food, gardens and people. Kitchen Gardeners



Photo 3 - Touch the Soil

In a matter of minutes, a fire can consume hundreds of acres of wheat. The farmer above, with a disk attached to his tractor, works feverishly just a few feet ahead of the flames to create a fire break. With America farming 274 million acres less than 52 years ago, the buffer between the natural perils farmers face and food availability and prices to the consumer is getting almost non-existent.

International is facilitating community food in our own yards. Innovative entrepreneurs, like SPIN farming, are showing a new generation farmers how to put together business and production enterprises on less than an acre right in the city. Large population centers are forming food policy councils — grass roots organizations that look to bring food security to their regions.

Hundreds of organic farms are graduating apprentices that go out and help stop the erosion of farming. To stay on the land, sustainable farmers are organizing cooperatives like Organic Valley Family of Farms — now over 1,100 organic farmers strong. There is a new breed of agronomists teaching farmers how to farm in biologically responsible ways that save money and enhance the chances of staying on the land. Taking the bull by the horns are activist organizations like the American Farmland Trust working for programs at all levels across the nation to save farmland.

So it's probably time to cultivate an intuitive relationship between farms and food and if you listen closely, the farmer in the field and within you is calling. It will not only feel good, but provide a positive boost for our minds, our strength and our appearance. ■

Sources: All statistics are from departments of the USDA including the Economic Research Service, the Agricultural Marketing Service and the World Food Outlook Board. More in-depth information will be published in the Nov/Dec 2007 issue of Touch the Soil.

Web Resources:

Farmers market data base: www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets
American Community Gardening Assoc.: www.communitygarden.org
SPIN Farming: www.spinfarming.com
Kitchen Gardeners International: www.kitchengardeners.org
Organic Valley Family of Farms: www.organicvalley.coop
Biological Farming: www.mycorrhizae.com
Food Policy Councils: www.statefoodpolicy.org
American Farmland Trust: www.farmland.org