

The Future of Farming: Milestones and Millstones

By Billie Best, November 2006

Milestones and millstones are markers for ideas good and bad. At times an event regaled as an overdue solution, like the codification of national organic standards, comes weighted with unintended consequences like the industrialization of organic farming, and organic confined animal feeding operations. In light of those recent unexpected outcomes, we may be wise to consider the potential unintended consequences of our goals for instituting a more just food system, a more sustainable agriculture, and a more robust farm economy.

The approach of the 2007 Re-Authorization of the U.S. Farm Bill has lead us to dream of new laws, policies and regulations that would favor a more diverse agriculture sector, reign in externalization of agri-business costs, and reward conservation. But as we tinker with notions of fairness and equity, subsidies and incentives, regionalism and nationalism, we should take a whole systems perspective and prepare ourselves for the worst. There was a time when government subsidies for corn and soy seemed to solve myriad problems for farmers and the nation. Little did we know the magnitude of the problems we were creating for the healthcare system, animal welfare and the environment. Decades later we have twin epidemics of diet-related and chemical pollutant diseases, routine animal torture, and a river of poison flowing into in the Caribbean—outcomes no one could have predicted when commodity subsidies were first implemented.

As we seek to restore the balance between global and local, it's important to remember that commoditization is a process that impacts all types of products, from cell phones to blue jeans to cars. Any product becomes a commodity when it is both generic and ubiquitous. It is the commoditization of unhealthy foods that has caused the healthcare crisis. But healthy foods, like organic milk, can become commodities too, resulting in price falls that spell doom for farmers and working landscapes. The antidote to commodity is community—that is the human scale, trust, loyalty and increased accountability that come with a smaller food system. The question we must answer today is how do we codify community on a large scale without losing the uniqueness, flexibility and diversity of smallness?

As sustainable agriculture policymakers, advocates and activists align themselves to get their share of the \$300 billion dollar 2007 Farm Bill, here are some of the potential millstones attached to the milestones we hope to achieve.

SUSTAINABILITY

Milestone: The sustainable communities movement, of which sustainable agriculture is a part, has been working for decades to teach the public what sustainability means, how to recognize its presence or absence, and why it's worth striving to achieve. The 2007 Farm Bill will undoubtedly have a greater emphasis and impact on sustainability. **Millstone:** As we push to embed sustainability in government regulations, the largest players will have disproportionate influence on how sustainability is defined and measured. *What does the industrialization of sustainability look like?*

CROP SUBSIDIES

Milestone: Widely accepted as “trade distorting” and known to unfairly favor the 10% of farmers who receive 72% of payments, government subsidies for corn, cotton, wheat, soybeans, and rice are on the chopping block. Subsidies encourage dependence on fossil fuel inputs, herbicides, pesticides and GM seed, as well as the proliferation of low-nutrient foods, and exports to poorer nations at a price below the cost of production, which creates unfair competition, and increased poverty and hunger in the

developing world. A reduction in subsidy payments, which comprise 25% of Farm Bill allocations, could make funds available for other crops, resource conservation and farmland protection.

Milestone: Many of the big farms and agri-businesses that depend upon commodity crop subsidies to finance their operations will look to more lucrative market opportunities, increasing competition in markets for fruits and vegetables grown mainly by smaller farms. Large farms trying to mono-crop fruits and vegetables may use more herbicides, pesticides and irrigation than they did when they grew commodity crops. Without subsidies to make them profitable, some large farms will be lost to development of suburbia and industry.

SPECIALTY CROPS

Milestone: Pressure from rising healthcare costs is mandating dietary changes that increase market opportunity for fruit and vegetable (specialty crop) growers. To encourage production of healthier foods, government subsidy payments and safety-net programs could be extended to all types of farms and crops. **Millstone:** Expanded markets and price supports for fruits and vegetables will attract increasingly large players into the system, markets will become more competitive, niche markets may be flooded with product, and smaller farms may have increased competition and become less profitable. *Encouraging large-scale production of fruits and vegetables without limiting use of pesticides and herbicides may simply shift the healthcare crisis from obesity and diabetes to cancer and Parkinson's disease.*

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Milestone: Advocates seek to increase USDA rural economic development funds allocated in the Farm Bill by emphasizing the unique interdependence of agriculture and rural communities. Rural development dollars are essential to improving the food processing infrastructure on which small farms depend. **Millstone:** Rural communities may have more land, but urban communities have more mouths to feed. Hunger and nutrition programs comprise 65% of the Farm Bill. As the urban farming movement grows, urban advocates may be able to claim a similar interdependence between agriculture and urban communities. Competition between rural and urban communities for ag-economic development dollars could divide rather than unite these two underserved groups.

CONSERVATION

Milestone: There is broad consensus among advocates and policymakers that more needs to be done to conserve the resource base essential to producing food, particularly working farms, land, prime soils and clean water. **Millstone:** Land conservation tends to increase the value of nearby housing, raising the cost of living for new farmers and farm workers. *If land conservation doesn't include conserving affordable housing, this strategy may not keep farms working.*

STATES' RIGHTS

Milestone: The USDA's centralized command and control of the food system and one-size-fits-all solutions have failed to deliver consistently higher quality, safer food and a more cost-efficient food system. In the next Farm Bill, states want more options to develop solutions that suit their unique mix of climate, soils, industry, markets and communities. In particular, state mandated labeling laws, and allowing states the right to geographic preference when using federal dollars for food procurement both have the potential to significantly increase markets for small farms. **Millstone:** A food and agriculture regulatory patchwork will impede interstate commerce and increase competition between states. Industry will move to states that create the most favorable business climate, markets will churn in a continuously shifting regulatory environment, and watchdogs will have to keep their eyes on many more agencies than the USDA.

LOCAL

Milestone: This buzzword has penetrated the policy debate as all things local have increased in importance and value. Local foods, local products for local markets, the uniqueness of place, and place-based brands will have their Farm Bill debut in 2007. **Millstone:** As the advantages of concentration and consolidation erode, agri-business will diversify and re-deploy their resources in the corporate take-over of local by buying up farmland, franchising farms, increasing contract farming, and developing new brands that give the appearance of being small and place-based.

*As we plan for the future of farming we will make some mistakes. Our capacity to correct them will be the measure of our quality of life. Agriculture is a dynamic system of natural resources, people, places and ways of production. Change is a constant for all of us. Those life-long learners with the capacity for continuous innovation will have the edge over those invested in outdated business models, fading markets, tired products and costly infrastructure. If we are to grow new farmers, the current generation must take back the power of food and demonstrate to all that farming is a good life. At the same time consumers must take responsibility for the food system they create with their purchasing power. Let's not forget what history has taught us. **You can change the world by changing what you eat.***