

Failing our Farmers **Guest Editorial**

By Wendell Berry

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(Port Royal KY) I belong to a small agricultural community in Henry County, Kentucky. My wife and I have a son and daughter, both of whom are farmers. Like all farmers, they are struggling hard and worrying a lot. And I have five grandchildren. If they should wish to do so, I hope they will be able to farm in Henry County, where our family has lived and farmed for 200 years.

I owe a considerable amount of my agricultural education to my father and my brother. My father was involved from the beginning with the Burly Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. My brother continues to be involved with that organization— which, the stigma against tobacco notwithstanding, is an example of a national farm program that has worked for nearly 60 years, to the benefit of small producers, by combining price supports with production control.

For the past 35 years I have been concerned with the issues of farming and rural decline. Some of my concern has had to do with my failure to understand this nation's farm policy. I'm not referring to any one administration's farm program, but to farm policy as demonstrated by the past 40 or 50 years of accelerating damage.

We have lost farmers in staggering numbers, mainly because of economic adversity. For generations we have given nothing to farm-raised children but reasons to leave home. Our farm communities have disintegrated everywhere. Ninety percent of our cropland is losing topsoil to erosion faster than the replacement rate. Our failed small farms have been replaced by chemical-dependent monocultures and animal factories, which have become major sources of pollution. Our dependence on immigrant labor and imported food is increasing. Our farm policy, like our emergency policy, is simply to use up all we have.

A policy that destroys farmers and farmland cannot be acceptable in agricultural terms. It also directly contradicts our goal of national defense. A country that is heedlessly destroying its capacity to feed itself cannot be defended.

And a destructive agricultural economy is profoundly un-democratic. Thomas Jefferson thought that the "small landholders" were "the most precious part of a state," and he thought governments should give priority to their survival. But increasingly since World War II, our Government's manifest policy has been to get rid of them. And the Democratic Party, the 'party of Jefferson,' traditionally a friend to farmers, has become just as complicit in this policy as the other party.

In the 1950's, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson said to the farmers, "Get big or get out." Twenty years later, Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was telling them, "Adapt or die" — and he meant that they must adapt to the economics of agribusiness, in which the ruin of farmers and farmland has always been implicit. Those are two of the most ignorant, undemocratic and heartless things ever said to the free citizens of a democracy. And they were said virtually without dissent from anybody in Government.

But if that economic Darwinism is acceptable in agriculture, why is it not acceptable also in public health, or in the courts, or in national defense? And why do we bail out failing corporations

and foreign governments? Why should the Government not just fold its hands and allow the strong to survive and the weak to perish?

I am proudly an American democrat. I am also a believer in the gospel of neighborly love. And I don't think that "Get big or get out" and "Adapt or die" are appropriate Government policies.

I cannot see why a healthful, dependable, ecologically sound farm-and-farmer-conserving agricultural economy is not a primary goal of this country. I know that I am not alone, and that farmers are not alone, in wishing to see such a policy. A rapidly increasing number of urban consumers also wish to see it.

Any politicians who now think that only farmers care about farming or have an interest in it are wrong. They will have to think again.

Wendell Berry is a farmer and writer whose latest book of essays is "Another Turn of the Crank."