

## **Building a Just and Humane Food System Through Collaborative Efforts**

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### **The Broader Context of Agricultural Health and Safety**

Twelve years after the publication of *Agriculture At Risk*, agriculture remains "among the nation's most hazardous occupations". While death rates in other hazardous industries such as mining continue to decrease, "death rates in agriculture remain constantly high" (*Agriculture At Risk*, p. 1). Certainly agriculture, like many other industries, carries some inherent risks. However, this trend reveals that the current health and safety crisis in agriculture is less due to the inherent nature of the occupation than it is a result of policy decisions that have consistently exempted agriculture from the advancements in occupational safety and health achieved in other industries.

At the same time, agricultural communities in the U.S. are in economic turmoil. U.S. agriculture has been in a long and steady trend of consolidation and mechanization, resulting in increasingly larger and fewer farms. This has affected both the owners of farms (farmers) and agricultural employees (farmworkers). For example, the number of farms has been decreasing by one percent every year since 1987, while the number of hired farmworkers has decreased steadily in the past fifty years, from 9.9 million annually in 1950, to 2.9 million in 1997 (USDA, 1998).

While huge profits continue to be made in the agricultural sector - the food sector is second only to the pharmaceutical industry in terms of return on investment (Hefferman, p. 28) - less and less of these profits are returning to those who work the land. According to *Time To Act* (p. 9), "from 1910 to 1990 the share of the agricultural economy received by farmers dropped from 21 percent to 5 percent." Farmworkers are likewise losing economic ground. The USDOL National Agricultural Workers Survey data show that between 1990 and 1998 farmworkers' wages decreased relative to the overall economy, from 52 cents to 48 cents for every dollar paid to workers in non-farm sectors (Levine, p. 15).

The economic hardships suffered by small farmers and even more so by farmworkers, and the poor health and safety record in the agricultural sector, are not merely coincidental. They are in fact two symptoms of the same underlying politico-economic trend of consolidation. Although it is useful and necessary to address specific health concerns in agriculture and the specific remedies for those concerns (such as improved government programs), it is becoming increasingly apparent that in order to significantly improve the health and safety of those who work in agriculture it will be necessary to take a more holistic approach that takes into account this broader context.

The direct relationship between health and economic status is well established. Recent findings have increased our understanding of this link: research conducted this past year by the Harvard University School of Public Health revealed that not only are mortality rates linked to socioeconomic status, but even more strongly to income distribution. In other words, those states

with a wider gap between Society's upper and lower tiers have higher rates of mortality, while those states with more economic equity between upper and lower classes have comparatively lower rates of mortality. These statistics hold true regardless of race, and the researchers believe that "unequal income distribution may shorten lives because it degrades civic cohesion" (Doyle, p. 22).

The National Commission on Small Farms reached a similar conclusion in relation to agricultural communities in particular, when they cited a similar study:

As farm size and absentee ownership increase, social conditions in the local community deteriorate.... Communities that are surrounded by farms that are larger than can be operated by a family unit have a bi-modal income distribution, with a few wealthy elites, a majority of poor laborers, and virtually no middle class. The absence of a middle class at the community level has a serious negative effect on both the quality and quantity of social and commercial service..." (Time to Act, p. 20)

Thus health and safety issues cannot be separated from the larger political and economic context. Inadequate levels of health and safety for both farmworkers and farmers is but one symptom in an overall agricultural economy in which small producers (the "family farmers") are being squeezed out of the market, and farmworkers' wages and conditions are stagnant or declining.

This trend continues under government agricultural policies that promote large scale production. Agriculture At Risk correctly pointed out a government bias toward high yields, which not only increase certain environmental risks (such as nitrate contamination), but also serve to keep prices low (Agriculture At Risk, 1988). While some agricultural economists argue that this is in fact beneficial to the farming sector in that it increases exports, in reality there is no direct correlation between lower prices and increased exports (Guebert, 2000). Such policies inevitably lead to a further erosion of the family farm; as higher and higher yields are encouraged, prices plummet, and small farms can no longer make ends meet on a decreasing profit margin, while at the same time large scale operations prosper (Lilliston and Ritchie, 2000). Rather than aid the family farmer, the current trend of globalization, coupled with the continued emphasis on high cost farming methods such as biotechnology, are only accelerating this consolidation (Barboza, 1999).

At the same time, as the rate of contract production increases, more and more farmers find themselves virtual employees of large agricultural corporations. These farmers increasingly find themselves in a position similar to the one that farmworkers have long been in, with an "imbalance of risk in their contracts, fear of reprisal for attempts at organizing or challenging the contracts, and a general feeling of servitude because of the heavy debt incurred..." (Time To Act, p. 56). Or as former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman stated, "There's a fear this will turn into 14th century feudalism. Those farmers will become serfs. We're not there yet, but it may be coming." (Barboza, 2000)

Unfortunately, the precarious economic status of the nation's farmers often leads to a vicious cycle, in which certain policies are supported for the sake of short term economic relief, which serve in the long run to further the disappearance of the family farm. Thus the "double standard"

separating "agriculture and general industry", such as the repeated exemptions of agriculture from health and safety regulations, is sometimes supported by farm groups themselves, which deter governmental agencies from becoming involved (Agriculture At Risk, 1988).

This can be seen in the recent development of OSHA ergonomic standards, from which only a handful of industries are to be exempted, including agriculture. Some will inevitably argue that agriculture is unique and that such regulations are simply not applicable to agriculture. Similar arguments have been made over the years as justifications for agricultural exemptions from a variety of government regulation. Upon passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, the farm sector argued that unionization simply did not apply to the "family farm". This argument was specious at best, in that even back then a large percentage of agricultural workers consisted of wage laborers, and a family exemption already existed in the language of the NLRA. The main point here is that such exemptions ultimately harm all those involved in agriculture, from farmworkers to farmers, as a culture of tolerance for inferior conditions is created. This can be contrasted with other industries, such as mining, in which the very same arguments regarding inherent risks were made in the past, but which have since seen the benefits of improved health and safety from increased regulation.

A more complex and troubling example can be seen in the current call by the agricultural sector for a new and expanded agricultural guestworker program, the justification for which is the supposed existence of a "labor shortage". Repeated government reports have failed to find evidence for such a shortage (GAO, 1997; CRS, 1999). But more importantly, the premise of this argument, even if factually accurate, is disputed by many economists, who point out that in fact "there is no such thing as a labor shortage, only a wrong price." (French, p. 6) In other words, the market forces to which other industries are subject, which would naturally (albeit slowly) increase wages and working conditions on farms, are circumvented by policies such as the H-2A program, in which the labor pool is artificially increased while at the same time wages are kept at a pre-determined level. In discussing the farm economy, Alan Greenspan states matter-of-factly that "the one tried-and-true formula for maintaining profitability...[is]...reducing the costs of production to the bare bone." (Greenspan, p. 20) This often translates into keeping labor costs to a minimum, a process facilitated by indirect subsidies such as the H-2A program. In other words, "large farms that depend on hired farmworkers receive exemptions from federal labor laws allowing them the advantage of low-wage labor costs....The benefits received by large farm operators come at the expense of the farmworker and small farmer who cannot compete with large farms because they have access to cheap labor" (Time To Act, p. 8, p. 109).

It is important to keep in mind that before the advent of labor laws, workers in many industries besides agriculture worked under programs similar to H-2A, such as the Contract Labor Law of 1864 (Zinn, p. 234). But as labor protections, including many health and safety protections, were enacted, agriculture was routinely exempted (total exemption from the NLRA, and reduced protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act and OSHA regulations). Thus we see that this "double standard" has much less to do with any unique nature of agriculture than it has to do with the tolerance of society at large for reduced protections for farmers and farmworkers alike.

This legal disparity between agriculture and other industries not only harms both farmworkers and farmers in the short term by continuing to promote tolerance for low health and safety

standards; it furthermore accelerates the process of consolidation in the agricultural sector. Legal exemptions such as those mentioned above serve as an effective subsidy that inevitably benefits large scale agriculture over small scale agriculture. This in turn only furthers the economic precariousness of the nation's small farmers, who then feel pressed to advocate for more exemptions. Thus the cycle is self-reinforcing.

## **Solutions and Strategies**

The response to this impasse by many of the nation's farmworkers has been unionization. Increasingly the nation's farmers, mainly those involved in contract production, have also sought to organize in order to improve their economic lot. There is in fact a long history in the United States of alliances between small scale family farmers and the labor movement (Zinn, p.279). Such grassroots organizing efforts will surely be a key component in reversing the current downward economic spiral of both small farmers and farmworkers, and the poor health and safety record that goes along with that. Indeed, Agriculture At Risk points out that one of the main obstacles to improvements in agricultural health and safety has been the relative lack of "broad-based organizations or unions to represent farm families and workers" (Agriculture At Risk, p. 4). The USDA Small Farms Commission also recognized the urgent need for more legal protections for both farmers and farmworkers to be able to organize and bargain collectively without fear of discrimination or reprisal (Time To Act, 1998).

There is a growing consciousness amongst organizations and individuals involved in reforming the current U.S. food system of the ties that bind family farmers, farmworkers, and the communities that support them. Farmworker organizations are increasingly recognizing that workers and small-scale farmers are more alike than they are different relative to their position in the agricultural economy. Likewise, small farmers are increasingly recognizing the essential link between the future viability of the small family farm with just and humane working conditions for farmworkers. This position was succinctly summed up by the Small Farms Commission when it stated that "ultimately, small farmers will earn fair incomes only if farmworkers on large farms are paid fair incomes" (Time To Act, p. 109).

Alliances between farmworker and farmer unions are not the only forum in which these two groups can collaborate to improve health and safety. Increasing numbers of farmers, workers, and the public are becoming interested in creating alternative models of the food system, mainly through the creation of labels certifying specific production practices. Such labels have mainly involved ecological standards, and the most successful and well-known program to date is that of organic agriculture.

In general the agricultural sector is characterized not only by increasing consolidation but also by an increase in the average age of farmers, as fewer and fewer young people want to remain in agriculture. In contrast, organic farms are proliferating. The organic industry has been growing at a rate of at least 20% annually for nine years in a row (OTA, 1999). In addition, organic farms tend to be small farms, on average half the size of conventional farms, and are often run by young people from non-agricultural backgrounds (USDA AMS, 1995; Flaherty, 2000). Organic agriculture represents a tremendous potential for improvements in health and safety for both

farmers and workers, both directly through the use of less toxic farm inputs, and indirectly by boosting the economic status of the farmer. Despite this, research into organic methods represents less than one tenth of one percent of the USDA research budget (OTA, 1999).

Organic certification programs can thus be seen as a rare agricultural success story made possible by the wedding of interests of small scale farmers and the public. This relies on the willingness on the part of the consumer to pay a premium for a product grown under strictly prescribed conditions. In the case of organic food, this entails farming practices that promote ecological health rather than ecological deterioration. In addition, there is a general feeling on the part of many people (as expressed personally to the author by countless individuals) that by purchasing organic produce they are also supporting the health and well-being of both farmers and farmworkers.

The model of organic agriculture can and should be used more effectively to actively promote the improvement in health and safety conditions of those who work in agriculture. This could be accomplished through the implementation of standards addressing such issues, which would then be independently verified and communicated to the consumer through the use of a food label. Already there are strong indications of an increasing interest in such a food label. This is evident in the growing popularity of both fair trade products (mainly coffee), as well as certified sweatshop-free products (mainly clothing). Fair trade programs are those in which the purchaser is assured that the producer, usually a small scale farmer or a cooperative of small scale farmers, is receiving his/her fair share of the "food dollar", rather than most of the profit going to distributors or contractors. Sweatshop-free products are those in which fair working conditions are verified for wage laborers. While both these programs have mainly focused on imported products, chiefly from poor nations, the two concepts can be combined and focused inward on domestically produced agricultural products. Such standards would be based fundamentally on the two complementary principles of economic equity for the farmer, and socially just working conditions for the farmworker, resulting in a win/win scenario for workers and farmers, who would both benefit from such a program.

Internationally, a commitment has been made by the organic agriculture community to incorporating such social justice criteria into existing organic standards. This principle has been repeatedly reaffirmed by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), which has stated that such criteria would aim to:

-- Allow everyone involved in organic production and processing a quality of life which meets their basic needs and allows an adequate return and satisfaction from their work, including a safe working environment (*italics added*)

-- Progress toward an entire production, processing and distribution chain which is both socially just and ecologically responsible (IFOAM 1998)

Although most nations have yet to fully develop these criteria, many are actively working toward it. Certain nations, such as Bolivia and Mexico, have made more progress and already have such criteria in place.

Unfortunately, in the United States, this is not the case. With the advent of the National Organic Program, the USDA has explicitly stated that it does not consider such criteria to be appropriate for the organic certification program (USDA NOP, 2000). One day, this could very well create a trade conflict related to international equivalency of the organic label, as the majority of the world moves forward on this issue without us.

However, the lack of inclusion of such criteria in the domestic organic label does not preclude the creation of an independent label verifying such standards. In fact, some small programs that already exist around the country have begun exploring this possibility. Currently a coalition of organizations representing farmworkers, small scale farmers, and consumers has begun drafting guidelines for such standards and circulating them for wider comment.

The details of these guidelines are too numerous to enter into here, but the fundamental principles upon which they are based are:

- Consistency with existing relevant documents, such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; UN Charter of Rights for Children; International Labor Organization Convention (ILO) #87, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, and ILO Convention #98, Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining.
- Democratic and equal involvement of both workers and farmers in the implementation of the program.
- A commitment to continual improvement, particularly relevant in issues of health and safety.
- Fair contracts for both farmers and farmworkers, arrived at through democratic process.
- Safe, sanitary, and healthy working conditions for both farmers and farmworkers.
- Adequate and fair grievance procedures (Henderson, et al., 2001)

These principles, shared by a broad consensus within the international community, represent the basic tenets of a just and humane food system for all those involved in production agriculture.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, agricultural health and safety concerns are a reflection of the wider food system of which they are a part. Perhaps even more fundamental than the economic complexities are the cultural implications of the current food system which has resulted in a process of alienation. Farmers become producers, farmworkers become wage laborers, and communities become mere consumers. Communities have lost contact with the growers of their food, and while farmers and farmworkers may still work closely together, farmers are compelled by the current model to view their workers as but one of many economic resources on the farm.

The creation of an alternative model, such as the one outlined above, creates the space for these three groups - small farmers, farmworkers, and the public - to work collaboratively in the interest of all. Such a model would be based upon the vision of a food system in which farm work would be valued by the larger society in direct proportion to the importance of food in peoples' lives. In such a food system farmers would receive a fair percentage of the "food dollar", allowing for a stable and dignified life for the farm family. In such a food system farmworkers would receive a

living wage, and be able to adequately provide for themselves and their families.

These types of labeling programs recognize and respond to the increasing number of people who wish to play an active and socially responsible role with their purchases, and who increasingly care about the origins of the clothing they wear and the food they eat.

Because their success requires that consumers be willing and able to pay a premium above market prices, such programs will probably never reflect more than a certain share of the agricultural sector. They are neither a substitute for improved public policy, nor a replacement for increased grassroots organizing by both workers and farmers. However, the success of the organic label has shown the strong potential for such labels. Furthermore, the growth of such a program would raise public awareness of agricultural health and safety in general, a vital step in the path of reform.

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