

Environmental Concerns in Rural Communities

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The Great Plains “Dust Bowl” of the mid-1930s provided a wake-up call for farmers, ranchers and the federal government. The topsoil was being blown off the plains, leaving sterile hardpan behind. Natural resource conservation was added to the agenda of the Department of Agriculture.

Through the years, three distinct approaches have been employed—mechanical, chemical and bio-technological—to deal with this issue.

Initially, landowners were encouraged to adopt better techniques of tilling, planting and harvesting—techniques which would keep more moisture and root systems in place to hold the soil when the wind blew and the rainstorms came.

Coupled with this were efforts to curb flooding and conserve water resources. Both the Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority built dams on many of the nation’s rivers. Great strides were made, and fields were restored. But many observers have come to question the wisdom of damming rivers, cutting new channels and other efforts to control, mechanistically, the natural environment.

Later, many farmers started killing weeds with chemicals rather than by periodic cultivation or hoeing of crop rows. While this helped limit soil erosion, it added to water contamination as chemical residues found their way into the water table.

This was one of several catch-22s in efforts to deal with natural resource conservation. Similarly, chemical fertilizer was heralded as a great boon to productivity. But as the fertilizer washed off the land into ponds and streams, it stimulated plant and algae growth which threatened aquatic life.

Today, the bio-tech revolution promises to free agriculturalists and the environment from problems related to chemical use in agriculture. Some worry, however, that new catch-22s await us in diminished genetic pools for basic crops such as corn and soybeans, as well as the threat of genetic engineering producing rogue plants and diseases.

Most of the effort to conserve natural resources in rural America has come from farmers and ranchers. For many, stewardship of God’s world is a primary motivation. They want to leave their property to the next generation in as fertile and productive a condition as when they became its caretakers.

They should be applauded for this practical expression of their commitment to God. And while they have received significant assistance—technical and monetary—from the federal government to help with adopting good conservation practices, the choice to do so has been theirs alone.

In conversations with farmers and ranchers, they raise these four concerns about their future:

First, the globalization of food production. Farmers and ranchers are competing with their counterparts around the world who may not conserve natural resources or practice food safety; they thus have lower production costs. Consequently, production costs for food and fiber in America is often higher than world market prices

Second, the market system. America’s farmers and ranchers, unlike other manufacturers, cannot control the supply of product and adjust to changing demands. Fruit, vegetables and livestock must be sold when they are ready for market. Grains can be held for a few years, but most producers need to sell in order to pay the costs of production.

Third, the industrialization of agriculture. The growing practice of confining poultry, pigs and cattle in large numbers is producing waste that endangers the quality of the water tables. There's concern about the temptation to "mess the nest" and then move on to some other location.

Fourth, the dumping of toxic waste in rural areas. Certainly, it makes "utilitarian" sense for the dangerous waste products of our industry to be disposed of in as safe a way as possible. And it even makes sense to put them in places of low population density, in case of an accident. But it is still unnerving to watch tanker trucks pass my office on their way 40 miles down Alabama State Route 17 to the toxic waste dump at Emile, a small, largely African-American town. As always, "utilitarian" ethics appeal mostly to folk in the majority.

Mention should be made of other rural environmental protection issues, particularly those dealing with the extractive industries of mining and oil exploration and production, the over-use of fragile lands for recreational activities, and the clear-cutting of timber from highly erodible lands.

However, most of these problems have to do with governmental policy and the stewardship practices of corporations. They, too, have to face economic and market pressure, some real and some contrived.

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