

Tonight There is One Less

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Without fanfare and almost unnoticed, the generation of people who settled North Dakota has died. Even more startling is the fact that the sons and daughters of these pioneers are quickly leaving their shoes to be filled by a generation once removed. The current generation no longer shares the deep roots of life on the land as the settlers knew it.

It is about people is a phrase utilized by NDSU President Joe Chapman. This phrase is at the core of what we do. To dismiss the need for people and minimize the importance of the sociological balance between urban and rural interactions oversimplifies and destroys the sustainability of any social and production system.

We must have people to sustain the future of this region and the world. The population needs to be in balance with the total environment and sustaining dignified lifestyles. Those dignified lifestyles, all too often lost in the slow demise of the family farm, are at risk today.

This is not to presume that current lifestyles are not dignified. The definitions and expectations are the difference. What it meant to be raised on a family farm, a group of enterprises that were in total connectivity with the food produced, is no longer a majority opinion.

Western North Dakota is at another fork in the road, dealing with problems associated with current and historical agricultural systems. Although these systems work for some, the end result is that depopulation has accelerated, leaving an aging rural population.

Leadership, direction and answers are needed. The answer is not more of the same. The concept of the family farm is certainly in limbo.

In contrast, the larger food suppliers are showing a stronger desire to source food back to the family-type farming unit -- a unit placed in jeopardy by the very economic principles many larger food suppliers have utilized to become what they are. It is a true oxymoron. In addition, the dollar-driven agricultural systems continue to balk at the concept of connecting the source to the consumer. In response, a new approach needs to be embraced.

A concept of integrated agricultural systems, sustainable at the local level, keeping rural population abundant, beneficial to our urban partners and capable of feeding the world's people, is needed. This system needs to enhance production efficiency and integrate sequestration of carbon to offset the industrialization and concentration of the world's population (greenhouse effect) and reduce negative impacts on soil and water quality (environmental quality concerns).

Increased energy efficiency within the carbon cycle must be sustainable and bring about a reduced dependence on nonrenewable energy use. In today's environment, as recent events have so well documented, the system must offer greater protection from bio-terrorism threats by dispersing/decentralizing food production.

Did the settlers really think through all the consequences of pounding a claim stake into a piece of ground? Probably not. The need at the time was a potato to eat, some eggs to collect, a daily bucket of milk, a cellar for dry goods and hopefully, a piece of meat.

Starvation, not economics, drove many settlers here. Retaining the next generation is certainly not dependent on food availability. The current transition within agricultural enterprises assumes larger and more efficient farming and ranching operations. A eulogy for the family farm is in the transition.

Is that right? Are there other options? Many questions pop up, fewer answers. One must reflect on the Native American saying, 'We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.'

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0220.

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