



Center For Rural Affairs

September, 1996

A newsletter surveying events affecting rural America.

Duly Noted

Center staff travel: **Juli Baker** is attending the National Small Farms Conference in Nashville, TN, Sep. 10-13. **Nancy Thompson** is speaking in Wheatland, WY, Sep. 21 on corporate farming. **Wyatt Fraas** will attend a WK Kellogg Integrated Farm System meeting in Wenatchee, WA, Oct. 28-30...the **Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture** holds their annual Ranch Field Day in Poteau, OK, on Oct. 25. Contact **Lara Ervin**, 918-647-9123...The Illinois Farm Bureau's new *Can I Farm* program links retiring and beginning farmers in Illinois. Contact **Dave Stille**, Bloomington, IL, at 309-557-2537. Montana's Alternative Energy and Resource Organization (AERO) has also launched a new linking program. Contact **Pam Mavroales** in Helena, MT, at 406-443-7272.

Center Memoir Available

Whittler's Songs, a collection of previously published essays by **Marty Strange**, is available from the Center for \$10.00. The 87-page bound, softcover book is "a memoir between the lines. It tells the story indirectly of the development of the Center by repeating the thoughts I expressed as we went along," according to **Strange**. Order your copy now.

Whittler's Songs



Marty Strange

Economic Sustainability Measures for Farms and Ranches

Economic standards of farm sustainability are easily calculated with University of Minnesota Agriculture Economist **Dick Levins'** approach. He proposes using information from standard tax returns to calculate critical benchmarks for the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of farms or ranches. **Levins** takes a straightforward, common-sense approach to analyzing expenses and assets. **Levins'** categories are:

Reliance on government payments: "A sustainable farm should not require the continual assistance" of government subsidies, says **Levins**. He measures "the extent to which a farm is indebted to taxpayers for its survival."

Use of Equipment, Chemicals, and Non-Renewable Energy: "The history of US agriculture in the 20th century has been one of people being replaced" by "assets" such as fertilizers, machinery, and farm chemicals, says **Levins**. Its history has also "been one of environmental problems resulting from the use of these assets...Nonfarm, largely non-local, corporations have generously agreed to help farmers do their jobs in exchange for \$50 billion per year...Expenses accounted for by chemicals, commercial fertilizers and gas-guzzling equipment are a measure of how a farm is interacting with the environment. When measuring sustainable agriculture, the rule must be 'the less, the better'."

Creation of Jobs: Agribusiness trumpets the statistic that each farmer's work feeds 100-odd people. But, says **Levins**, "Whether the job is in the farmer's family or someone else's family..., the downside is that economic activity at the farm level employs virtually no one." Profits to support the farm family have shrunk, while farmers spend more for

interest, equipment, or fertilizer and pesticides than for hired labor. "What are we to make of such an agriculture?" he asks. "Is it one that is a model of efficiency in labor use? Or is it one that is a massive engine for generating rural unemployment?...Providing a living for a local family is something good, not something to be avoided."

Balance Between Feed Use and Feed Production: "One of the biggest transformations in American agriculture," notes **Levins**, "has been that farmers, as a group, have decided to spend their lives waiting hand and foot on livestock. Farmers routinely grow feed, harvest it, bring it to animals who live indoors with absolutely nothing to do, pick up the manure, and carry it back to the fields so they can grow more feed....Working like a dog (or more properly, like a cow or pig) is hardly satisfying, so farmers start looking for ways around it. Some buy 100-horsepower tractors to pull manure spreaders while that much horsepower, and more, is in the animals they are keeping on welfare." Other farmers specialize in growing only feed or only livestock, and "where to put manure becomes a major problem."

Levins doesn't include the cost of owning land in his calculations, saying "land cost is unavoidable. Society has chosen to allow land to be controlled by the highest bidder, rather than for other proposes," such as land transfer between generations, preservation of agricultural land, or land stewardship.

Levins' report, *Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data*, costs \$7.00 from the Land Stewardship Project, 2200 Fourth St., White Bear Lake, MN 55110 (612-653-0618). WF

ALL LAGOONS ARE NOT THE SAME

A spectator at the Center for Rural Affairs Annual Meeting workshop entitled "Consequences of Industrialized Pork Production" made the point that a lagoon is defined as a body of fresh water. You won't find Brook Shields swimming in any of the less-than-blue lagoons found on the corporate hog farms in this country. He suggests these lagoons be labeled for what they are, cesspits - a pit designed for the disposal of refuse (sewage).

Dr. Dennis Schulte, UNL, warned that many manure holding ponds are leaching as much liquid into the soil as evaporates in the air. In the future these facilities way come under further scrutiny as point pollution sources.

Schulte also warned of the dangers of over-applying phosphorus to crop land when manure pits are cleaned. He said, "Since phosphorus settles to the bottom, there is a virtual phosphorus mine here that needs to be dealt with at some time in the future".

SELECT GILTS EARLY

It is important to know which litter replacement gilts are selected from. Research from Illinois suggests, that gilts taken from predominantly male litters (75% male with at least eight pigs per litter) are more apt to have reproductive problems. They conclude that female embryos laying close to male embryos are less likely to conceive because they have been exposed to the male hormones.

MEASURING UP

How sustainable is your farm? Minnesota Ag Economist Dick Levins thinks you can get a good idea by how you spend your money. He asks four questions (based on common tax-return numbers) to create a relative picture of a farm's relationship to economics, environment and community.

- Government programs: What percentage of farm income comes from government subsidy? "A sustainable system of farming should not require this type of continual assistance."

- Equipment, Chemicals, Energy: 'Conventional' agriculture has replaced jobs with machinery, farm chemicals and non-renewable energy while causing environmental and human health damage. What percentage of the farm expenses go for these categories?

- Jobs: "Is our agriculture a marvel of efficiency in labor use or one that is a massive engine for generating rural unemployment?" What percentage of your farm income goes to people expenses and profit for the farmer?

- Feed balance: Specialized farms with only grain or only livestock are "out of balance" and have to purchase nutrients or dispose of waste manure. What is the ratio between feed produced and feed consumed on the farm? And what are you spending to do the work of cows or hogs: harvesting and hauling feed or spreading manure?

Levins' booklet, "Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data", is available for \$7 from the Land Stewardship Project, 2200 Fourth St, White Bear Lake, MN 55110, 612 653-0618.

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