Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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Breaking the cycles of co-optation

Published online July 16, 2026

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2026). The Economic Pamphleteer: Breaking the cycles of co-optation. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *15*(4), 7–12. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2026.154.001

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The industrialization of agriculture has faced resistance in the U.S. since at least the early 1900s. The rise of organic agriculture in the 1940s, of sustainable agriculture in the 1990s, local foods in the early 2000s, and regenerative agriculture in the 2020s were all responses to growing concerns about the environmental, socioeconomic, and public-health consequences of industrial agriculture. One by one, each movement has been co-opted by industrial agriculture. With growing concerns about increasingly volatile weather, market prices, and input costs, "resilient agriculture" could be the next challenge to industrial agriculture.

The co-optation is likely to continue, unless there is a fundamental change in strategies for challenging industrial agriculture and whatever its descendants may be in the era of high-tech farming. First, mainstream producers, processors, or retailers have waited for farmers to develop niche markets for organic, sustainable, local, regenerative, or other anti-industrial products. When a niche becomes large enough to become a significant source of corporate profit, they find ways to redefine the concept to accommodate their industrial production systems. They then make the redefined product more conveniently available at prices that are unprofitable for authentic organic,

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Why an Economic Pamphleteer? In his historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my "pamphlets" will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are available at https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection

sustainable, local, or regenerative producers and capture the market.

Organic food production is a prime example of this strategy (Ikerd, 2018). Organic farmers developed local and regional markets for organically produced foods, which were generally sold at farmers markets, local food co-ops, and health food stores. However, there was no single definition of organic farming. As the organic market grew, mainstream food retailers insisted that uniform national standards for organic production must replace the diverse state and regional standards for organics to continue growing. Organic farmers who wanted access to national markets worked with mainstream agri-food corporations and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish the National Organic Program (NOP). The new federal regulations defined organic production in terms of allowable and excluded inputs, ingredients, and production practices. Any product labeled as *organic* in the U.S. must be grown, handled, and processed in compliance with the NOP standards.

Industrial agriculture remains firmly in control of organic farming and food production in the U.S.

As mainstream corporations gained larger shares of the organic market, they gained enough political influence with the NOP to resist, revise, and reinterpret the organic standards to accommodate their industrial production systems. For example, USDA-certified organic vegetables and berries can now be produced without soil, and organic milk and yogurt can come from animals that spend most of their lives confined in large factory-like facilities. These standards are far different from the organic practices of the farmers who developed the organic market.

The Real Organic Project (n.d.) developed an optional add-on certification that prohibits hydroponic plant production and concentrated animal feeding operations. However, industrial agriculture remains firmly in control of organic farming and food production in the U.S.

Sustainable agriculture gained national attention as a compromise between advocates of organic and industrial agriculture policies. The 1980 USDA *Report and recommendations on organic farming,* commissioned by then-Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland and carried by a multidisciplinary team of scientists, concluded that USDA programs supporting organic farming were woefully inadequate, but perhaps more importantly, that industrial agriculture was not ecologically or socially sustainable (USDA Study Team on Organic Farming, 1980). The incoming administration at USDA ridiculed the report and had the remaining copies destroyed, but organic advocates continued to pressure the government for support.

Industrial agriculture advocates saw sustainability as an opportunity to defuse the growing political pressure of organic farmers. In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission concluded: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 15). Industrial advocates interpreted sustainable agriculture as the ability to continue increasing production while reemphasizing soil and water conservation practices, which the USDA had subsidized since the 1930s.

Organic advocates, on the other hand, understood sustainable agriculture as a *permanent* agriculture, capable of meeting basic human needs indefinitely. Organic farming pioneer Lady Eve Balfour wrote,

> The criteria for a sustainable agriculture can be summed up in one word—permanence, which means adopting techniques that maintain soil fertility indefinitely; that utilise, as far as possible, only renewable resources; that do not grossly pollute the environment; and that foster life energy (or if preferred biological activity) within the soil and throughout the cycles of all the involved food-chains. (p. 5)

Industrial organizations co-opted sustainability much the same as they had organics, but without going through the standardization process. The

corporate world, agricultural and otherwise, narrowed the definition of sustainability to environmental protection and resource conservation rather than permanence or the ability to continue producing indefinitely. Corporate sustainability programs generally include commitments to reduce emissions of toxic wastes, substitute renewable for nonrenewable resources, and increase the efficiency of resource use. And, they only implement programs that do not compromise their profitability. The corporate takeover of sustainable agriculture met with little resistance as the concept was never fully embraced by organic or other non-industrial farmers, perhaps because it seemed too abstract.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, consumers concerned about the industrial agrifood system turned to their local farmers to ensure the integrity of their food (Ikerd, 2020). They trusted local farmers to produce good food by organic, organic-like, or other sustainable means. However, as the popularity of local foods grew, mainstream marketers once again saw a potentially profitable niche market. The co-optation started with some innovative local retailers and national chains, such as Whole Foods. However, mainstream supermarkets soon started featuring a variety of "locally grown" food products (Ellis, 2025). Today, *local* in supermarkets may mean within 100 miles, 500 miles, in the same state, or the same general region of the country as the store. There is hardly an opportunity for consumers to assess the integrity of their farmers or food in such instances. Again, an anti-industrial market niche has been reinterpreted and co-opted.

The next challenge to industrial agriculture was regenerative agriculture. Advocates of regenerative agriculture claim that sustainable agriculture is not enough, implicitly suggesting that the current food system is sustainable, although it isn't (Rodale Institute, 2019). The Brundtland Commission concluded, "Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life" (United Nations, 1987, p. 15). Restoration and regeneration are requisites or necessary conditions for sustainability, not beyond or better than sustainability.

Regardless, industrial agriculture is currently co-opting regenerative agriculture In 2015, Regenerative International defined regenerative agriculture as farming systems that improve the health and productivity of the natural environment, soils, plants, animals, humans, and communities (Leu, 2023). Agribusiness corporations, in collaboration with the USDA and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have taken the lead in redefining regenerative agriculture as a set of farming practices to rebuild and sustain soil health (Bless, 2025). Advocates of the soil-focused definition of regenerative agriculture contend that only large farming operations can change agriculture fast enough to meet the challenges of climate change. However, the focus on soil health marginalizes or ignores the other ecological and social foundations of regenerative farming, much like the emphasis on inputs distracts from other essentials of organic farming.

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The USDA has launched a new US$700 million regenerative pilot program focused on soil health, water quality, and long-term productivity (USDA, 2025). An add-on *regenerative organic* certification program has been developed that adds criteria for soil health, animal welfare, and social fairness to USDA organic standards (Rodale Institute, n.d.). It remains to be seen whether the add-on certification will gain traction beyond row crop production, where soil health is an issue but animal welfare and social fairness concerns are absent or minimal. Retailers, thus far, are treating regenerative foods much the same way as organic foods before certification; a 2025 Congressional report notes,

> Despite a lack of consensus about how to define *regenerative* and the absence of federal enforceable certification standards, several

> food companies and retailers have adopted policies to label and market some food products as regenerative or as regenerative organic based on criteria developed under private sector (nongovernmental) initiatives. (Stubbs & Johnson, 2025, Summary)

The next logical challenge to agricultural industrialization would be *resilient* agriculture (Ostane-Baucom, 2025). Resilience farming refers to the ability to withstand, recover from, and adapt to disruptions or shocks—such as adverse weather events, volatile prices and input costs, and disease and pest outbreaks. Resilient farms rely on biodiversity, soil health, and adaptive management strategies to mitigate threats to their survival (Lengnick, 2021). Industrial agriculture, on the other hand, depends on government programs, such as subsidized crop revenue insurance and disaster payments. With the more volatile weather patterns associated with climate change, supply-chain vulnerabilities revealed by COVID-19, and continued disruptions in global trade, resilient agriculture seems a logical alternative to the taxpayer-supported industrial agrifood system.

With continued disruptions, resilient agriculture seems a logical alternative to the taxpayer-supported industrial agrifood system.

If so, what could be done to reduce the risks of co-optation for resilient agriculture? First, avoid uniform national standards for resilience, especially standards based on specific farming methods or practices. For example, while diversification is essential for resilience, the high-tech (biotech, infotech) descendants of industrial agriculture can manage any system that can be expressed as an algorithm, no matter how complex. The tendency to quantify resilience in terms of variability should also be avoided. Resilience requires the ability to rebound, adapt, and evolve as well as increase stability. Neither can resilience be quantified economically, since money cannot restore the life of an ecosystem, family farm, or community that fails to survive adversity. Advocates of resilient agriculture must also reject the claim that if large farming operations do not support resilient agriculture, change will not come fast enough (USDA Farm Income Team, 2026). The risk of large farms changing too little, or not at all, is greater than the risk of all farms changing too slowly, or too late.

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A more logical way to break the cycle of co-optation would be to change the basic approach to transforming the agri-food system. Past approaches have treated changes in farming practices as proxies for changes in the purpose of farming. For example, every significant challenge to industrial agriculture has been rooted in the principles of permanence. The original definitions of organic, sustainable, regenerative, and resilient included the ecological, social, and economic dimensions essential for a permanent agriculture. Industrial agriculture co-opted these initiatives by simplifying and redefining the concept in terms of production practices. But industrial producers cannot meet the needs of all in society indefinitely or permanently without abandoning the industrial system of production.

Two additional keys to avoiding co-optation are prioritizing individuality over uniformity and networking or scaling *out* over scaling *up*. Lady Eve Balfour wrote: "Contrary to the views held by some, I am sure that the techniques of organic farming cannot be imprisoned in a rigid set of rules. They depend essentially on the outlook of the farmer" (1977, p. 5). The same is true for other non-industrial approaches to farming. The techniques of permanent farming depend on the individual farmer's perspectives. Rather than uniform national standards, permanent agri-food systems also must be

local and regional to accommodate their unique ecological and cultural niches. Local food systems must network with other like-minded communities and scale out rather than scale up to perform functions and provide products that are not available locally. People in a permanent society must work and live in harmony with nature, including human nature.

Permanence will require a sense of connectedness, confidence, and trust between farmers and consumers to offset the cost and convenience advantages of industrial production and distribution. Local and regional food systems may choose to label their products organic, sustainable, local, regenerative, resilient, or any term that clearly differentiates them from the industrial food system. The more definitions and labels, the less risk of co-optation. However, permanence cannot be imprisoned by any rigid set of rules; it depends on the integrity of the farmer.

Permanence will require a sense of connectedness, confidence, and trust between farmers and consumers to offset the cost and convenience advantages of industrial production and distribution.

This approach to food production is consistent with agroecology, permaculture, food sovereignty, bioregionalism, and other non-industrial agri-food systems. There is no lack of information on farming systems that could accommodate the purpose of permanence. The success of these alternative approaches depends on people living and working together to restore, respect, protect, and preserve their quality of life and their unique niches in nature. They can minimize the risks and realize the benefits of regionalism, nationalism, and globalism by forming and sustaining positive relationships with those in other like-minded communities. Such relationships will be unique to specific people and places and cannot be co-opted.

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