



## THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER JOHN IKERD

### Can small farms be sustained economically?

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Are small farms economically sustainable? Not according to a recent opinion piece in the *New York Times* written by Bren Smith, a small-scale farmer: “The dirty secret of the food movement is that the much-celebrated small-scale farmer isn’t making a living. After the tools are put away, we head out to second and third jobs to keep our farms afloat...Health care, paying for our kids’

college, preparing for retirement? Not happening” (Smith, 2014, para. 2).

Another widely shared opinion piece by a small-scale farmer, Jaclyn Moyer, began: “People say we’re ‘rich in other ways,’ but that doesn’t fix the ugly fact that most farms are unsustainable” (Moyer, 2015, para. 1). Jaclyn was asked by a student if her farm was sustainable. She replied that

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*Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 25 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.*

her farm was certified organic and conserved water, but later reflected: “I didn’t think my farm was sustainable. Like all the other farms I knew, my farm relied on uncompensated labor and self-exploitation...I knew the years my partner and I could continue to work without a viable income were numbered” (Moyer, 2015, para. 22).

Both Smith and Moyer were distressed by how much work was required for the small amount of money they were able to earn on their small-scale farms. They both claim that few farmers they know are able to make what they consider an acceptable income farming. However, many non-farm couples both work long hours at good-paying jobs and are barely able to make ends meet. It takes all of their time and energy to earn enough money to support their chosen lifestyle—much like many farm couples. What matters is whether such couples are able to pursue their chosen way of life, not how much money they earn and spend in the process.

There is a fundamental difference between a farm being “economically sustainable” and being the most profitable use of one’s time, energy, and money. As I consistently advise would-be farmers, “If your primary interest is making money, you shouldn’t even consider farming as an occupation.” I believe “sustainable farming” is one of the most demanding occupations a person can choose. Many other occupations promise greater economic returns with far fewer physical and intellectual challenges. The challenges of small, sustainable farms are made more difficult by government programs that subsidize large, industrial farms, while allowing them to *externalize* their social and environmental costs. Unless they truly believe that farming is their “calling,” I advise would-be farmers to choose other occupations.

For those who feel that their purpose for being is to be a sustainable farmer, I am confident they can find ways to sustain even a small farm economically. First, they must understand that sustainable farming is not just a job; it is a profession.

It requires years of education, learning, and experience to farm successfully—like many other professions. It’s just not a high-paid profession, much like other “helping” professions, such as teaching, the ministry, or public service. Few people in such professions work from nine to five or leave their jobs at the office.

Still, making a decent living is a prerequisite for sustainable farming. Moyer defined “making a living” as weekly earnings equal to a full-time, minimum-wage job, with no unpaid family or volunteer labor and no off-farm income subsidizing the farm. However, these conditions describe a low-paying

job rather than a profession. A profession is an inseparable aspect of life—as much a matter of who we are as what we do for a living. We shouldn’t expect to be compensated economically for everything we do for the good of humanity. The rewards of a purposeful life extend far beyond economic remuneration.

As Smith and Moyer point out, most farm families—regardless of size or sustainability—do not depend on their farming operations for a

significant portion of their incomes. However, few non-farm families in the U.S. are able to support their chosen lifestyles with a single source of income, more than three out of four being dual wage-earner families (Clay, 2005). For many small farmers, their farm simply provides a good place to live and farming a good way to spend their discretionary time. They make their economic living elsewhere. Many small farms show losses year after year—and still continue to be farmed. These farmers obviously have good non-economic reasons for farming.

That said, many sustainable farmers do make a good living farming, and others certainly can logically aspire to do likewise. Lynn Byczynski, editor of *Growing for Market* magazine, probably has gleaned as much information about the economics of small-scale farming as anyone in the U.S. She has found a wide range of incomes: “At one end of

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the scale are growers who pay themselves the same wages as their employees, sometimes as little as minimum wage. At the other end of the scale are people who net [US]\$100,000 or more per year—but often that represents the work of both spouses, so the per-person income in even the high-end situations is modest, though certainly adequate” (Byczynski, 2013, para. 5).

With respect to part-time small farms, Byczynski (2013) writes that annual sales from market gardens with less than 3 acres (1.2 hectares) typically range from US\$20,000 per acre for mixed vegetables to US\$35,000 an acre or more for high-value salad mix, herbs, or cut flowers. Profit margins on such operations consistently run at about 50 to 60 percent of total sales (Byczynski, 2013). Farmers at this scale rarely hire labor, preferring to do the work themselves. This is not a bad part-time occupation—particularly if farming makes the non-farm job bearable.

For those who feel “called” to be full-time farmers, even a small farm can be sustained economically. For example, Jean-Martin and Maude-Hélène Fortier, a couple in Quebec, Canada, have been able to make a living farming 1.5 acre (0.6 hectare). Their gross revenue for 2013 was C\$140,000 (all data in this paragraph from Taggart, 2014). Sales from a 140-member community supported agriculture operation (CSA) accounted for 60 percent of gross income; sales at farmers market for 30 percent; and sales to restaurants and grocery stores for 10 percent. Farm expenses included two paid employees. Total expenses for 2013 were C\$75,000, leaving a 2013 profit of C\$65,000 to compensate the Fortiers. Both work on the farm, but they have two children and claim they have plenty of time for recreation. Currency exchange rates and differences in costs of living

between the U.S. and Canada complicate comparisons, but the Fortiers seem well satisfied with their way of life.

I talk with many young farmers who don’t want jobs in the corporate world or in industrial agriculture, no matter how much such jobs might pay. They are able to make enough money to continue farming and are happy to be ‘rich in other ways.’ To them, farming may be challenging, but it is not drudgery; it is an opportunity to live a purposeful, meaningful life. Farmers who have lost this kind of passion

for farming, or never had it, probably should choose a different profession.



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