

Balance Sheet Switcheroo

Assets Become Liabilities in Industrial Ag



Confinement versus free-range — imprisoning animals in “factory concentration camps” robs them of natural medicinals available in a pasture-based system, as well as the emotional health that results from a natural environment.

by Joel Salatin

Industrial agriculture’s balance sheet turns historical assets into liabilities in a macabre cultural shift. As a full-time clean-food farmer, I am incensed by this torrent of evil thinking that holds all my sacred assets in derision and contempt. It does not dissuade me; rather, it energizes me to stay the course.

Articulating this topsy-turvy balance sheet is both hilarious and sobering. As the old song goes, it would be funny if it weren’t so serious. A look at this new balance sheet shows us where we’ve been and where we’re headed, exposing a new type of accounting in the food system.

1. Feeding ourselves used to be a matter of national pride. Historically, any nation unable to feed itself does not thrive. It may survive for awhile, but it will be an anemic culture. When the New World colonists first sustained themselves on their own production without being dependant on the generosity of Native Americans, it caused great celebration and prayers of gratitude.

Fleeing European famine and pestilence, these pioneers developed a unique apprecia-

tion for bountiful tables laden with food provided by their own hard work. Our nation’s leaders have historically lauded food self-sufficiency as a cornerstone of American independence and success. Preserving a viable domestic food production system has always been an assumed starting point for national security.

But today’s agricultural economists view domestic production as a liability instead of an asset. To the pure capitalists, tying up valuable real estate with lowly food production is a waste of precious land. The only thing prettier than a meadow of grass is a meadow of asphalt. Farmland is something that gets in the way of more important monetary agendas. On the other end of the spectrum, environmentalists view farmland as a liability because it accounts for the lion’s share of erosion and chemical use. The environmentalists want to eliminate farmland as fast as the developers, except that the land would be returned to some sort of government-administered wild park, like the

Buffalo Commons idea bandied about for the West.

From the left or right, from the capitalist to the environmentalist, the asset of viable domestic production to feed our own nation is now seen as a liability. The folks who would take farmland for nature preserves would make our population just as vulnerable to foreign political and nutritional blackmail as the folks who want to turn all of America into Silicon Valley. A policy that encourages the cheapest from the farthest guarantees the least accountability, the least nutrition, and the least ecological consideration.

The overriding climate in our culture is that those of us who would dare to coax food from our soil for our neighborhood are either holding back economic development or holding back ecological healing.

The really progressive thing to do, in this view, is buy Brazilian beef and Chinese cherries. Real patriots buy Mexican. What a wacky balance sheet!

2. Biology in the food system used to be enjoyed and revered. Under the new

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accounting, the living component is feared and even hated. Life is spontaneous and unpredictable. It doesn't conform well to Western reductionist, fragmented, compartmentalized studies and forms. Better to replace everything on the farm that's living with machines, starting with the farmer.

Machines respond the same way every day. They aren't moody or political. They don't write letters to the editor. Agriculture futurists and planners envision food production without people, where bacteria are replaced with infused nutrients. No need for roots. No need for soil. Manufactured flavors diffused through extruded, amalgamated, reconstituted protoplasmic mush provides edible pseudo-food morsels with guaranteed predictability. No surprising seasonal variations. No surprising nuances of flavor. No tantalizing regional distinctiveness. Just mechanically designed protoplasm for the palate.

The riches of moist earthworm castings deposited by tunneling wonder-working worms bears no value to the robot tending hydroponic fields fed computerized plant food beneath an impermeable climate-controlled dome. The whole farm will smell more like an antiseptic hospital than a forest floor rich with actinomycetes and scurrying voles. One of the farm's main attractions is the entertaining value of animals cavorting, the discovery of a new nest of fresh-laid eggs, or the minuscule dueling of lacewings and cucumber beetles.

Hen factories make no room for nests, as eggs whisk away on conveyor belts to automated washers, graders and packers. Animals crammed in batteries and cages on slatted floors fed grain from computer-operated augers cannot cavort. Cavorting would be inappropriate because it would burn up valuable calories needed for fat production. One of the greatest assets on a farm, in my view, is the sheer ecstasy of life. The priceless enjoyment of life's spontaneity must now bow to the unrelenting predictability of mechanized life. What an unfortunate change on the balance sheet.

3. Heritage wisdom, also known as indigenous information, used to be studied and held in high esteem. No more. Human cleverness has replaced

heritage wisdom. Knowing where the frost pockets were used to be highly valued information, and farmers would carefully locate frost-prone plants outside these zones. Today, this wisdom is cast to the wind, and what is honored instead is the cleverness to splice a frost-resistant gene from a poplar tree into the germ plasm of a tomato. *Voila!* No need to learn about how nature works, except to cleverly rearrange it.

Rather than vilifying the sponsors of research that gave us a 5-year-old cloned lamb named Dolly, or stringing up the corporate Neanderthals who developed genetically marker sterilized corn that drifted pollen into indigenous Mexican maize plantings, our culture lauds these yo-yos as the Messiahs who will heal everything that ails civilization.

The notion that humans are clever enough to overrun their own headlights never enters the minds of these self-consumed scientists. Intoxicated with the glory of their inventions, these researchers have thrown out nature's boundaries and embraced short-term, self-consumed technological answers to technologically created problems. Instead of solving hog factory odor problems by spreading hogs out onto millions of small farms and woodlots into ecologically appropriate herds, our great thinkers engineer soil-injection methods which turn the manure into a pollutant instead of a plant food.

Local, heritage wisdom contained in plants, animals, and people who, in the words of Wes Jackson, have become "native to their place" is dismissed willy-nilly as archaic backwash in an enlightened age. Human cleverness, *sans* morals, ethics, or natural parameters, moves to the asset column; heritage wisdom moves to the liability column.

4. Pasture-based livestock and poultry-production systems, including symbiotic plant-animal relationships, were once part and parcel of the American farm and food system. Any pre-1950 book about livestock farming assumes a grass-based template. But that was before Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) became normative. In the industrial template, pasture threw too many variables into the production system. Confining the animals in factory

concentration camps offered ration specialists the opportunity to concoct Total Mixed Rations (TMRs).

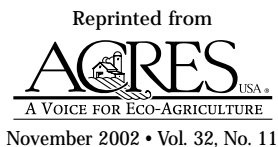
In the pasture-based system, the hedges offered medicinals and seasonal variation, including wild garlic and plantain's cleansing properties. Animals could intuitively choose certain plants at certain times of the year for pharmacological reasons. The antibiotics contained in unwilted forages maintained vibrant health. But all these variables drive the industrialist crazy because they are too dynamic to control.

Concentrating the animals on concrete and formulating the ration offers ultimate control. To further enhance this procedure, pelletizing the diet became common. Every day, day after day, animals only receive what some laboratory technician determines will be on the plate. Pelletizing simply adds insult to injury — the material's ingredients cannot even be distinguished. Eliminating choice is fundamental to the industrial approach. Tomorrow must be just like today. Same concrete, same confinement cell, same human-manipulated pellet. Pasture is out; CAFOs are in.

5. Historically, regional diversity and sufficiency offered robust indigenous economies. The multi-enterprise farm, sporting numerous outbuildings and value-adding infrastructure, created numerous income streams and closed waste streams by routing the waste from one enterprise into another. But in the industrial model, regionalism becomes a liability as centralization becomes the asset.

The homestead laying flock that recycled kitchen scraps into orange-yolked eggs is now a liability, especially to concentrated chicken factories. Leaders in the chicken industry are blaming everything from avian influenza to corona virus on open-air chickens. Getting rid of range-based chickens is now a goal of the industry, all in the name of biosecurity.

Where each community had a neighborhood abattoir, now only a few dot the countryside. Small, local abattoirs do not stink up the neighborhood like massive centralized facilities running 24/7. Local milk processors have been replaced with massive factories that generate mountains of waste. Centralization insures that dollars for processing and distribution move away from rural areas and cycle around only in the urban community.



Franchising and global branding feed the centralization altar, where Wall Street bows with reverential awe. A McNugget in Sri Lanka is basically identical to the McNugget in West Palm Beach. The principal of the interchangeable part for machinery, which works incredibly well in its proper context, when extended to living food creates a centralized production, processing and distribution network. An industrial food system cannot exist within a regional framework because regionalism inherently generates local appropriateness to the product because all the people involved in the business live, work, and worship together.

That connectedness and the natural accountability it engenders are unattainable in an industrial model. Centralization creates a structure that is big enough and run by people who are removed enough to steamroll cookie-cutter consistency worldwide. After all, a McNugget in Mogadishu absolutely must taste the same as one in Anchorage. Anything less would be downright un-American.

6. Once upon a time, farmers and related agribusinesses hired their neighbors. Folks would come together for the thrashing or the hog killin'. But an industrial food system cannot afford to hire neighbors; they are a liability. Instead, industrial food requires importing foreigners. Now I certainly have nothing against foreigners. I don't even laugh at ethnic jokes. But when a business, because of its working conditions, wages, or whatever, cannot even hire members of its community, what kind of social responsibility does that indicate?

But social responsibility has no place in the mind-set of the industrial food system, which views cheap foreign labor as a great asset. Never mind the school system that must suddenly accommodate language barriers. Never mind the social upheaval created by injecting thousands of people with different cultural norms and value systems into a community. All of this is an asset on the balance sheet of an industrial food system.

This issue spans not only the obvious, entrenched industrial food system, but also the wanna-be organic empire with its Wall Street mentality to harvest vegetables and slaughter chickens at the least possible cost. Shame on people who buy food based only on price, who aid and abet this social

upheaval and irresponsible business behavior by buying its wares.

7. During most of America's history, farmers peddled their wares in town. From milk routes to portable vegetable concessions, farmers dedicated to decent incomes practiced direct marketing. Patrons encouraged direct marketing by canning seasonal overproduction and by cooking from scratch. City folks were not that far removed from rural skills, which meant they still knew how to use their kitchens, how to can, and how to measure ingredients.

But this is all a liability today. The asset is global marketing. Archer Daniels Midland's slogan "supermarket to the world" makes people gasp in reverence. Ah, the enormity of it all is just wonderful. The more processing and packaging food goes through, the better it is. Amalgamated, extruded, reconstituted, genetically engineered, hormone-enhanced, preservative-laced, emulsified, stabilized and irradiated, anything and everything from the global glitzy market is guaranteed bacteria-free and properly vitamin fortified.

Direct marketers are loose canons, hard to control, and might be untrustworthy — so the consumer advocates push for laws upon laws emanating from Washington to control dirty food. By the time the global marketing network has wined and dined the legislators and bureaucrats, however, the sincerely intended legislation ends up putting the kibosh on small producers and direct marketers who cannot cash flow the required quintuplicate government forms or unnecessary infrastructure.

In order "to protect the general welfare," "to fight bio-terrorism," and "to create food security," a plethora of new government regulations bury small direct marketers and have no real impact on global marketers who are above the law. The much-lauded Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) program intended to eliminate food-borne bacteria from the marketplace only managed to put nearly 50 percent of the small abattoirs out of business; it is now commonly believed to be ineffectual.

The reason it doesn't work is because no one can legislate integrity. The greatest integrity comes when buyer and seller


look each other in the face. Accountability occurs when distance between producer and consumer is short rather than long. The average morsel of food consumed in America sees more of the world than the farmer that grew it. Global marketing reigns supreme. In fact, some counties are now interpreting zoning laws in a way to preclude direct farm marketing, calling such activity "retailing," therefore impermissible in agricultural zones. Global marketing is the new asset.

8. Before the dominance of industrial agriculture, compost and farm manures generally were considered a valuable resource. In the industrial production system, chemical fertilizer is the real asset. In the lexicon of agriculture industrialists like Dennis Avery, manures are the most harmful substances in the universe — more harmful than plutonium, for sure.

They cause *E. coli*, salmonella, and countless other food-borne pathogens. In a world that needs to be sterilized, manures are a liability we dare not use. But beyond that, CAFOs create such mountains of these materials that they can't be ecologically carted off to build soil. Instead, manure now powers California electric plants. All of us in the ecological farming community have blanched every time we see folks in India cooking over dung fires, realizing that such a culture is burning its true wealth.

But our culture is now worse. In fact, many of these nutrient-rich manures are now so laden with parasiticides, hormones, pharmaceuticals, heavy metals and poisonous appetite stimulants that their use is questioned by the organic community. Old-timers in my neighborhood tell about how this precious resource was stewarded 50 years ago. They would walk around the barn lot with a pitchfork and wheelbarrow, gathering up dung pats that had fallen outside, and carry them into the barn, where they were mixed with straw and sawdust for a carbon-nitrogen bedding. Each evening animals were properly bedded to absorb nutrient-rich urine and eliminate leaching or vaporization.

Not anymore. During the 1970s, land grant colleges, at taxpayer expense, printed thousands of bulletins telling farmers that the nutrients in manure were not

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worth hauling to the field. As petroleum prices increased, agronomists have softened this stance, but the industrial-generated manure from CAFOs is a completely different blend than excretions from pasture-based livestock. New dangers lurk from this industrial manure that did not exist when farms were more appropriately sized and farmers really wanted their children to inherit good soil.

Throw out the manure, says the industrial model. Bring in the chemicals via global positioning satellite technology and truly scientific farming. Chemicals and science. After all, they go hand in hand. A true asset.

9. Celebrating food, with all its taste, texture and aroma, once dominated conversations in our culture. Older folks remember actually looking forward to York apples in the fall. They could recite varieties of fruit like today's youngsters recite video game producers. The family meal, laden with local, seasonal food, is now considered a liability. The asset is ready-to-eat everything.

Military Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) have now invaded our culture to such an extent that the rich aroma of roasting chicken or the intoxicating vapors emanating from a boiling pot of apple butter have no place in the memory bank of the average American. Instead of meals being a special, reverential gift, food is bolted on the run between soccer games and ballet class.

Having vacated the home of its Dad craftsman, industrialism took Mom away from her homemaking role, children away from chores, and the soul away from the home. Home is no longer where the heart is. It's just a pit stop on the way to whatever activities occur outside the home. Excitement exists outside the home, not inside. The time required to prepare a kitchen garden meal is considered a waste rather than a precious blessing.

As our hurried and harried industrially same-same-same culture disrespects food, it disrespects the entire culture of agriculture. It disrespects rural common sense, country wisdom and honest work. Pre-cooked, microwaveable foods are the asset because they can be consumed on the run noncommunally — ultimate democracy and individualism. You can munch your MRE while multi-tasking — sitting

on the toilet reading the newspaper. What a waste of time, to actually sit around a scratch-prepared, home-cooked meal celebrating the earth's bounty. And even pausing to express gratitude for it. What a waste of time.

10. The early American ideal of the gentleman farmer, the noble, landed yeoman, was once revered as a cornerstone of the true wealth in this nation. What separated the American Dream from any civilization preceding it was the freedom to own and husband a piece of soil — that people could partake of creation in a way that would allow them to express themselves through the earth and its bounty was a revolutionary thought.

Certainly some were poor stewards — in fact, many were poor stewards. But the aspiration to make a living from the land was culturally noble, lauded, and admired. Farming was a noble occupation, worthy of the best and brightest.

Enter industrial agriculture, which has vacated the countryside of all the best and brightest. The industrial template does not want thinkers. It does not want creative, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed entrepreneurs. No, industrial agriculture works best when peasants and dummies inhabit the countryside, willingly following orders and never pausing to think.

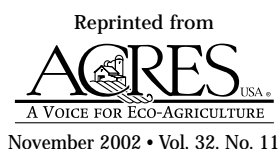
This mind-set is ubiquitous in our culture. Look at the Sunday comics. In the *Beetle Bailey* strip, the farm boy is the biggest dummy — Zero. In *Garfield*, Jon Arbuckle is the proverbial redneck hillbilly from the farm. Visit any school in America and you will hear guidance counselors discouraging A and B students from being farmers — just as they did me. That noble vocation is reserved for C and D students. It's called "rural brain drain." During the industrialization of agriculture, our culture has systematically emptied farms of the best and brightest, while the gee-whiz buffoons inherited food production. Is it any wonder we live on junk food?

Farmers were once considered the pillars of the community, a real asset. Now they're the butt of jokes. Is it any wonder that we farmers, as a class, act like we can't think? But as long as our cultural policy disrespects farmers through a cheap food policy, our landscape will be stewarded by the dregs of society rather than the

cream. The supermarket chain Farmer Jack's slogan, "Pile It High and Sell It Cheap," captures this spirit in all its vile-ness. Tomorrow's landscape is being created by the way each of us spends our money on food.

We can either create a landscape that will be inhabited by noble stewards or one controlled by nonthinking peasants bowing to the wishes of the industrial food system. Certainly an industrial food system thrives on followers. Thinkers? They are a liability. With a heavy, heavy heart I realize that everything I hold dear, everything I've passionately extolled to my children, everything I've preached to aspiring wanna-be farmers, is considered a liability on the industrial food system's balance sheet.

But my balance sheet holds wisdom above Wall Street. It holds integrity higher than income, ecology above empire. And in the final analysis, on that great judgment day, I'll submit my balance sheet with confidence and shameless enthusiasm. May I receive the commendation: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." ❖



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