
Farmer's Rights: What is Fair?

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One evening as I walked to the pasture to herd my cows home for milking, I took a detour through my managed forest. What a thrill to come upon two young great horned owls perched on a fallen log. They solemnly allowed me to come within thirty feet of them before flying to a higher perch where they could still stare at me while I stared at them.

Raptors such as these giant owls, as well as hawks and eagles, have been making a comeback in this area of Wisconsin after all but disappearing a dozen or more years ago. DDT and like compounds had concentrated in their bodies and destroyed their reproductive capabilities. Banning the use of DDT finally allowed them to make a slow comeback. However, this past winter 14 bald eagles died in my county, all in an area where we have regularly observed them feeding on dead animals from confinement hog facilities. Laboratories reported no traces of poison, yet a mysterious poisoning remained the number one suspect in the cause of the deaths.

Are our raptors again in danger of extinction? Are we going too far in the use of questionably tested products to treat disease-prone livestock in confinement facilities? Are genetically engineered pork growth hormones adequately long-term tested?

In a lifetime of farming, I have learned some expensive lessons. Some methods and technologies are helpful, while others create more problems than benefits. Working with "Mother Nature" has been a much more productive and stress-free route than continually fighting her and upsetting her system of checks and balances. My farm is now more productive, more sustainable, and increasingly more environmentally and ecologically correct than any farm in this region. We put every acre of our farm to its highest and best sustainable

use, whether it be trees, pasture or cropland. In any technology I incorporate into my farm operation, I try to direct all decisions in a manner that has a positive impact on all farmers, be they in Asia, Africa or any continent.

People of the land — farmers and indigenous cultures — have a treasure of knowledge based on common sense experiences. How does anyone put a price on the contributions of generations of farmers in selecting plants for higher productivity and better quality? Using hypothetical scenarios to justify taking ownership of genes, information and other living material are both unethical and immoral. We farmers and indigenous peoples have certain rights to health, happiness, land and self-determination. Attempts by others to jeopardize our way of life, our culture, or in any way significantly alter our ability to make a living on our land is an assault on our basic rights.

Some persons have had almost unlimited access to formal education combined with other opportunities. These advantages do not ensure that they are any more intelligent or superior in decision-making than people of the land. They need to be sensitive to farmers, and make a sincere effort to be “in touch.” At a recent urban/rural conference in our rural area, for example, some of the farmers (several highly educated) felt ignored and put down by some of the college people who assumed they were ignorant. Although I assured them it was not intentional, for many non-rural people it is a common perception.

People of the land, including indigenous cultures, have a treasure of knowledge based on their common sense, their survival skills and their cultural heritage. They should have the dominating decision-making power to alter their way of life, their culture or their ability to stay on their land. Patenting knowledge and information can also be judged by some as stealing from the past.

Their common sense life experiences, combined with their cultural heritage, qualify the people of the land to maintain ownership of all of their resources. Sometimes resources are held in common, based on community, cultural or tribal history. In these instances, all people need a long period of discussion about how any changes in the economic and social structure may affect them before they make decisions.

Intellectual property rights is somewhat of a misnomer. It is not a *right*. Rather it is an *agreement*, a *sharing*, or a *leasing*. Any taking or patenting of genetic information or material should be dis-allowed and replaced with a fair rental contract, if a consensus can be reached.

We must slow this ruthless rush to force new products and technologies onto the market. Unlike some other progressive countries, the U.S. refuses to consider the social and economic consequences these products and technologies impose on our society. We need to work our consciences. Ignoring the societal consequences dehumanizes our society and destroys the dignity of all who are left out of the process, and they suffer greatly as a result.

Dignity is already being taken away from farmers and other basic producers of food and fiber. When the cost of growing and or producing food is higher than what the farmer receives, there is no dignity or value in that food or its production. It has a minus value. Approximately 75 percent of the farmers in this country are now in this crisis situation. They are holding on by a slave-like schedule that forces them to work off the farm to make up for the losses on their farms. We farmers are fast becoming part of the poverty and oppression that strangles our so-called Third World neighbors in Central America, South America, Africa and Asia.

When dignity is taken, pride and hope also disappear. People without dignity cannot help themselves — they can only struggle to survive. Desertification, destruction of the environment, and eventually the survival of the earth itself is put into grave danger. There are plenty of resources to provide a dignified living for all of us. The rich could still be rich — they simply do not need to be “filthy” rich!

Our policies, our research and our technology need to be directed toward a quality of life that enhances the dignity of all people on this planet, toward our children and our children’s children. We need to be repairing the damage to our earth and our society before we rush headlong at “creating” new “weeds” that pose grave questions for the future.

The Webster’s New World Dictionary definition of a weed is “a plant out of place.” It could also be used to describe a product or technology out of place. As a qualified well-pump installer, I am very aware that more than 58 percent of all water wells in the U.S. are now polluted with commercial and farm chemicals. It may require 30 to 100 years to clean and make them safe, if ever. This pollution came from chemicals that were largely applied 10 and 15 years ago, while the pollution from increased usage since that time is yet to be seen.

Another weed example: The fast growing California Pinion Pine was introduced years ago as a better tree crop in the steep mountains in the Basque country of Spain. Spending some time with friends in that region three years ago, the tree farmers repeatedly showed me the Pinion Pine stands as not only a failure, but as depleting the nutrients of the shallow mountain soil. After the Pinion Pines were harvested, the soil was so depleted that no trees would make any worthwhile growth on these areas. They learned the expensive lesson that only native varieties could continue to grow and produce profitably and sustainability.

Farmers and indigenous people have been misled by sales people who assured them that certain farm chemicals were so safe that they sometimes drank a glass of atrazine, for example, to prove it. Atrazine is now proven to be carcinogenic, polluting much of our drinking water in the Midwest. We need to keep in mind that unethical researchers, companies and individuals hurt the image of all good researchers and scientists.

The ethical and moral implications of emerging technologies need to be thoroughly examined and weighed as to their impact on cultures and economies. Will the economic and lifestyle impact be pleasantly progressive and stable, or will the impact be devastating to certain regions, countries or cultures? As an average American citizen, I need to know how my basic rights will be affected. What safeguards are in place or need yet to be developed to protect the health of people and the environment in the release of genetically engineered bacteria and other life forms? We must not allow governments to use food as a weapon to control and subjugate other countries or regions.

If we all do not take responsibility for the long-term problems following shortsighted decisions on patenting life forms and intellectual property rights, we will eventually all be losers. The earth is in grave danger; the land and the oceans are becoming polluted. Farmers in this country and around the world are being pushed off their land in record numbers. When large numbers of people are losing their rights and their land, we find a recipe for terrorism from which none of us can escape. People without hope feel they have nothing to lose by fighting back with violence. Forcing people off the land only creates more urban and rural ghettos, which will eventually drag us all down.

This rural crisis fuels rapid growing support for the militia and patriot groups that feel this country has betrayed them.

A serious problem is the growing sentiment to cut funding for public research. Legislators and congress people are responding to this sentiment and are proposing deep cuts in public funding for research in institutions of higher learning. Our country needs more public funding for research, not less. We need to balance the profit-driven motives of industry research with public research for the common good.

Historical lessons from Europe should remind us that any country that loses its family farm system of agriculture soon suffers a collapse of its entire economy. It then takes several hundred years to restore the family farm system and along with it — the economy.