

Food for Thought

Written by

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There is a lot of debate going on worldwide regarding the preservation of agricultural land currently in use and rehabilitating formerly productive lands. The debate has many facets to it and one thing that no one seems to disagree on is that we need to have land we can grow food on.

Without arable land there is no way to grow crops that will feed people or livestock. It should be a no-brainer that in order to secure our ability to feed ourselves and the upcoming generations, that we should be doing everything we can to ensure that the arable land is protected.

Yet everyday it seems we are inundated with proposals to build residential or industrial areas and the roads that feed them on the very agricultural land we profess to want to protect. Why is that?

To answer that question we need to take a look at those who own that land and their reasons for wanting to dispose of it rather than farm it. Unfortunately, a great number of "farms" and the land they sit on are owned by multi national corporations or numbered companies. The land was likely bought or optioned for purchase from the original owners in the latter half of the 20th century. This was the time when development was rampant and little thought or regard was given to the massive spread of suburbia or what the unintended costs to the world would eventually be. Agricultural land was flat and cheap and there seemed to be an abundance of it. No one really gave any thought as to the reasons that cities were located near rich and accessible soil. That reason of course was because those lands could feed the city dwellers. Unfortunately, like the Aztecs and other cultures before us, we kept expanding into the land that fed us until we ended up having to bring our food in from further and further away.

Whenever mankind imposes his will upon the natural world the laws of unintended consequences push back. The rising price of agricultural land came about because the land was worth more built upon than it was to grow things on. This was not lost on land owners and speculators and we saw our farms and farmers become developers. Who could blame them? Their land was worth considerably more growing buildings rather than crops. Especially when they were forced to compete against the multinational food corporations that had put a stranglehold on the agricultural marketplace.

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Not every farmer saw things that way. There have been generations of farmers who resisted selling out and they have tried desperately to keep working the land they love and understand. Those generations who didn't sell found themselves in a precarious position, garnering very little support from the various levels of government and having their lands encroached upon by a public who didn't understand that you just can't create farm land from lava rock, sand and old growth forests that had been logged. No, those areas where food was now being grown could not be fertilized and irrigated into being forever productive. The piper would have to be paid and we are only now recognizing the cost.

Arid lands cannot be irrigated forever as they have learned in California and Arizona and the use of man made chemical fertilizers have been proven to be unhealthy and are causing terrible illnesses and draining the medical system.

We are now seeing a movement to desperately try to reverse the mistakes made in paving over what has fed us by a new generation who recognize that we cannot continue as we have. So why do we still see governments unwilling to take firm and solid stands to prohibit development on the agricultural land? Why do we see development proposals even being considered that promise to give us "some" farmland forever, in exchange for paving over most of it? They try desperately to greenwash their developments to the public using made up phrases like 'New Urbanism' or 'Urban-Ruralism' and print pretty pastel brochures depicting an urban-rural utopian community. The other tactic is the infamous game of 'tradesies'. Developers will give twice as much farmland somewhere else, such as mountainous areas only suited for growing sagebrush, if they get to develop the viable farmland which happens to have the misfortune of being close to a city. Developers will convince governments, usually easily purchased municipal politicians, that the farmland in question is no longer any good for farming. The reasons for this are numerous and erroneous and it's awfully hard to argue with those who have contributed so much to their election campaigns.

This brings us to the saddest of situations and that is the developer/farmer syndrome. As agricultural land has continued to rise because of development pressures and weakened protection laws, farmland became one of the best investment plans around. The dramatic increase in land value brought with it the advent of the developer/farmer. The developer/farmer is usually not actively involved in farming the land themselves and will lease the land for other large food producers to seed, grow and harvest with corporate machinery. This keeps their land productive with little cost to them. This allows them to bide their time until it's possible to develop. Or conversely, there is the developer/farmer who sits on the land that their ancestors farmed and lets it go, farming nothing but weeds and allows dumping of all sorts to take place. This of course results in the degradation of the land and soils and, after time, the cost of replenishing the land becomes uneconomical and they can apply pressure to the community to develop. While developer/farmers live on the farm, they have other occupations and careers that enable them to wait for the change of land use designation. You'll often hear them say they had to give up farming because it just wasn't profitable and that's likely very true.

Neither model is a good option for those who would like to buy the land and actually farm it. The possibility that the land could more than quadruple in value once it achieves a higher use

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zoning such as residential or commercial is just too good a chance to pass up. Who among us would be altruistic enough to turn that down and willingly sell off the land at \$50,000 an acre when the land it's worth 10 times that amount developed? Granted, there are some out there, but in all honesty would you be one of them?

So where does that leave us? Can we blame the multi-generational farming families for wanting to be developers instead of farmers? No. Can we sympathise with their plight and the difficulties inherent in farming? Yes. Can we say no to more destruction and paving over of agricultural land? Yes and we must and we must do it now.

At the same time we need to insist that governments make it policy that there are hard lines drawn that will no longer allow for the side deals and trading off of some good land for a lot of mediocre land someplace else. What is agricultural land now stays that way. We need to see tax policies and laws that will favour and help small private farmers to compete against the huge corporate farms that make it difficult for them to buy seeds for their fields and feed for their animals.

Most importantly, we as consumers must make it a hard and fast rule stop buying industrially farmed food and to buy our food locally or as close to home as possible. Most importantly, we need to stop complaining about the cost of our local food. Imagine the cost savings to tax payers when we as a society begin to make the right nutritional choices.

This will require huge policy shifts in governments and as we all know, the only way to get huge policy shifts is to make huge changes to the governments we elect. There will be opportunities to change these government policies by how you vote and who you vote for. Make it your business to find out what your candidates views are on food security. Find out if they are willing to 'draw the line in the soil' and put the brakes on development of all agricultural land no matter what sort of incentives are offered. Our future as a self-sufficient nation depends upon it. Our children depend upon it. Their children depend upon it. At one time Africa was a continent that could not only feed itself but others as well. What will we do as a nation? Food for thought don't you think?