

Farm Consolidation and Corporate Agriculture in the United States: Historical Impacts on Farmers, Federal Policy, and Sustainable Food Production

Tyler Baird[†]

Agriculture is a central issue in the U.S. federal policy landscape, with the next Farm Bill anticipated to allocate trillions of dollars in agricultural subsidies over the subsequent decade. However, federal farm spending disproportionately benefits large-scale industrial grain producers, presenting distinct challenges to the sustainability of American agriculture - especially in the face of climate change. However, urbanization and globalization have obscured the nature and precarity of the national food system from most consumers in the U.S. To combat farm consolidation and its negative impacts, it is necessary to clarify historical policy decisions and contexts that now entrench the status quo. This paper covers the primary moments and policy decisions that encouraged farm consolidation and continue to drive overproduction of agricultural commodities: the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, the Agricultural Acts of 1956 and 1961, and the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973. Massive and complex social movements informed these policy choices; with a historical perspective, we can begin to approach policy reform for improved social, economic, and environmental outcomes. I conclude by recommending subsidy spending redistribution to specialty production and rejuvenating the rural population, with considerations for recent executive cuts to agricultural support programs.

The Harms of Modern Agriculture

Social and Economic Harms

The agricultural industry weighs heavily on the inner workings of the U.S. federal policy machine. Although farms and farming are far removed from the increasingly urban experience of most Americans, the production of food and fiber touches nearly every aspect of the national policy

space, from social welfare to national security. The “Farm Bill,” a recurring legislation that authorizes federal spending on agricultural subsidies and conservation efforts, has upheld and steered the agricultural industry since the 1930s. However, the newest Farm Bill and its estimated \$1.51 trillion in funding for 2024-2033 is over a full year late,¹ with no meaningful progress toward an updated budget resolution.² While

[†]Recent Master of Science and Master of Public Policy graduate, University of Michigan

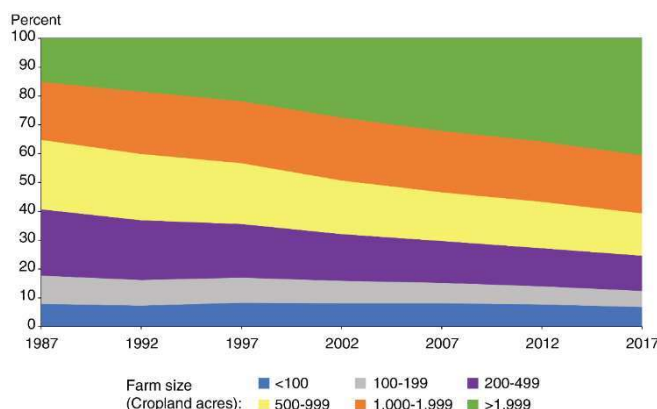
¹ *Minority Analysis: The May 2023 Farm Bill Scoring Baseline*, US Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry (May 15, 2023).

² *The Latest Updates on the Farm Bill*, Farm Aid (Jan. 3, 2025), <https://www.farmaid.org/issues/farm-policy/the-latest-updates-on-the-2023-farm-bill/>.

intensified political polarization and election year turmoil undoubtedly contributed to the impasse, another key political force has been building in recent decades: consolidation and corporatization of agricultural production.³

Agricultural consolidation is the trend of fewer, larger farms taking over land and resources from smaller farmers and landowners, and it has been accelerating since the 1980s.⁴ Several socioeconomic factors contribute to this trend, including federal subsidies and crop insurance, the implementation of labor-saving technologies, and specialization of agricultural production toward monocropping or animal confinement operations.⁵ The corporatization of farming is less straightforward, as family-owned and operated farms constitute over 90% of agricultural production, and about ¼ of family farms are registered as corporations for tax or management purposes.⁶ As discussed later, there are no functional differences between a corporate farm and one classified as a partnership or a sole proprietorship; these distinctions are purely legal terms. Generally, corporate farming as a concept centers on a profit-driven growth mindset standard among businesses in other sectors and operates consistently with microeconomic principles such as efficiency and economy of scale. However, there are valid concerns regarding the big business of agricultural production. National and international corporations have large and productive

Cropland kept moving to larger farms over 30 years



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data compiled from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017.

Figure 1: Farmland consolidation trends from 1987 to 2017. (Figure by James M. MacDonald in *Consolidation in U.S. Agriculture Continues*, USDA ERS (Feb. 3, 2020).)

agricultural land holdings in the U.S.⁷, and Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates is famously America's largest private owner of farm and ranchland with ~275,000 acres spread across 17 states.⁸ Additionally, as of 2022, only six percent of farms produce 90 percent of all animal products in the U.S.⁹ These examples have become possible through federal policy decisions, which have come at a significant cost to smallholder farmers, rural communities, and environmental quality.

Farm consolidation impacts are not limited to issues of market share and competition; demand for labor has been a key factor driving social change and the proverbial urban-rural divide. Socioeconomic issues contributing to rural exodus, or the mass movement of people from rural to

³ James M. MacDonald et al., *Three Decades of Consolidation in U.S. Agriculture*, USDA ERS (Mar. 2018) [hereinafter *Three Decades of Consolidation*].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Tim Gibbons, *Family Farms Are the Solution, Corporate Agriculture Is the Problem*, Missouri Independent (May 3, 2021).

⁸ *Bill Gates Land Ownership: How Much Land Does Bill Gates Own?*, The Land Report (2024).

⁹ Peter Lehner and Nathan Rosenberg, *The Climate Crisis and Agriculture*, Environmental Law Reporter (Feb. 2022).

urban areas, can be associated with current trends in farm consolidation and corporatized farming, primarily due to farm mechanization and decline in labor demand.¹⁰ With fewer opportunities for farm work due to the use of planting, cultivation, and harvesting machinery, rural populations have looked elsewhere to support themselves. Additionally, national and international corporations, with better financial resources and tax conditions, are better equipped to weather any agricultural storms (pun intended) than smallholder farmers.¹¹ As rural populations continue to decline and smallholders sell their land, large-scale corporate farming operations often offer the best alternative to residential development.¹² As of 2022, there are fewer individual farms in America than since before the Civil War,¹³ and there are fewer individual farmers and farm laborers than there have ever been in our history – about 1.2% of total US employment.¹⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), there were reductions in the number of farms across all sizes except for a singular increase in farms with over 2,000 acres of harvestable cropland – the top census category.¹⁵ Additionally, farms with revenues over \$5 million are

the lowest in number but represent the highest aggregate value of agricultural products sold and government payments received by a large margin.¹⁶ All this is to say that farms are becoming fewer, larger, and richer – and this is a problem. But what do these data have to say about the nature of farm business today?

Family vs. Corporate Farms: Is there a difference?

Corporate farming is often pointed to as the problem with modern agriculture, but corporations constitute a wide range of practices and conditions on the ground. The USDA tracks farm ownership by individuals or families, corporations, partnerships, and other entities. Family ownership is demonstrated when the farmer and their relatives own the majority of the farm business, and corporate ownership is demonstrated when non-family business entities own farmland.¹⁷ By these metrics, 96% of U.S. farms are family-owned.¹⁸ In 2022, family farms had an asset value of over \$2.6 trillion compared to nearly \$724 billion in corporate farm assets. Family-owned farm assets are worth \$1.5 million on average compared to nearly \$4 million for non-family

¹⁰ Andrew Schmitz and Charles B. Moss, *Mechanized Agriculture: Machine Adoption, Farm Size, and Labor Displacement*, AgBioForum vol. 18 (2015).

¹¹ Ronald Nigh, *Agriculture In The Information Age: The Transnational Ecology Of Corporate Versus Smallholder Farming*, Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development vol. 28 (1999).

¹² Ben Felder, *As Investors Pay Top-Dollar for Land, Farmers Are Often Priced Out*, *Investigate Midwest*, (July 24, 2024); Mitch Hunter et al., *Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future*, American Farmland Trust (2022).

¹³ Andrew Keller, *2022 Census of Agriculture: Number of U.S. Farms Falls below 2 Million*, USDA ERS (Feb. 28, 2024), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=108629>.

¹⁴ Kathleen Kassel, *Agriculture and its Related Industries Provide 10.4 Percent of U.S. Employment*, USDA ERS (Nov. 3, 2023), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy/>.

¹⁵ *Land: 2022 and 2017*, USDA NASS 2022 Census of Agriculture (2022), at page 13.

¹⁶ *Economic Class of Farms by Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold and Government Payments: 2022 and 2017*, USDA NASS 2022 Census of Agriculture (2022), at page 3.

¹⁷ Macdonald et al., *Three Decades of Consolidation*, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ *Family-Owned Farms Account for 96% of U.S. Farms, According to the Census of Agriculture Typology Report*, USDA NASS (Jan. 22, 2021), <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Newsroom/archive/2021/01-22-2021.php>.

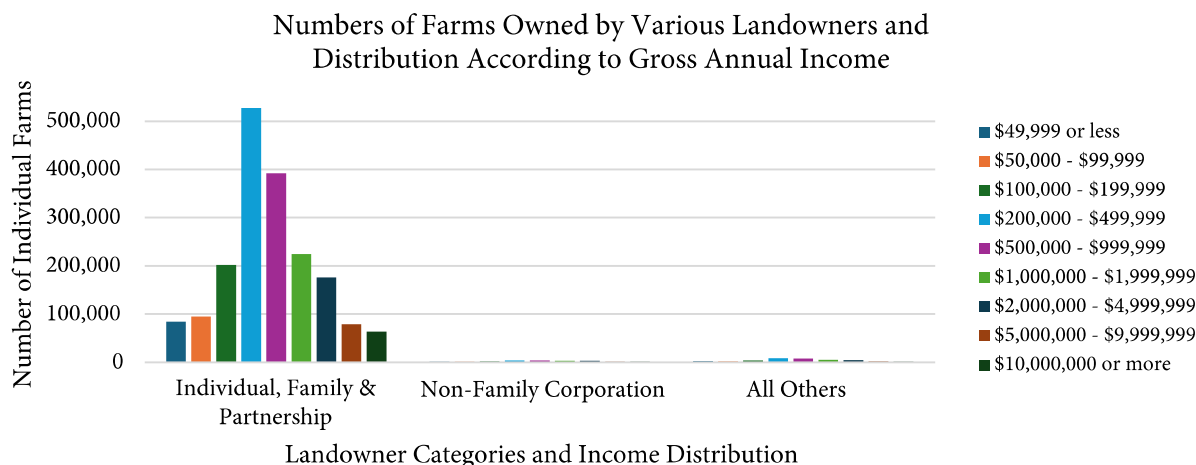


Figure 2: Numbers of Farms Owned by Various Landowners and Distribution According to Gross Income (Data sourced from USDA ERS, 2022 Census of Agriculture.)

farms.¹⁹ These variations align with land ownership trends, with family- and partnership-owned farms representing 87% of owned agricultural land and non-family corporations owning 2%.²⁰ However, differentiating between corporate and family-owned is difficult in practice. Although these statistics place family-owned farms squarely at the center of U.S. agricultural economies and environmental outcomes, these categories do not fully capture the business orientation of American farms. As one Kansas farmer notes, “There is no physical difference between a family farm and a corporate farm... [Scientific and technological] advancements are utilized on both large corporate farms and your typically family-owned farm.”²¹ Profit-driven notions of corporatized farming inform both family and corporate farming, with little difference, especially as farm sizes increase. The environmental and social

impacts of large-scale industrialized farming are consistent regardless of ownership conditions. Profit-driven notions of corporatized farming inform both family and corporate farming, with little difference, especially as farm sizes increase. The environmental and social impacts of large-scale industrialized farming are consistent regardless of ownership conditions.

Ecological Impacts of Consolidated Industrial Farming

Massive farms utilize mass-production technologies that intensify on a large scale the ecological damage of farming operations. Corn, soy, and wheat are produced as efficiently as possible, and the land itself is seen as little more than a medium for the seeds, synthetic nutrient supplements, herbicides, and pesticides to adhere to for the growing season.²² Common industrial (now

¹⁹ Data sourced from USDA ERS 2022 Census of Agriculture via USDA/NASS QuickStats Ad-Hoc Query Tool [hereinafter 2022 Census of Agriculture Data].

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Corporate Farms vs. Family Farms: What’s the Difference?*, Kansas Farm Food Connection (Jul. 2, 2018), <https://kansas-farmfoodconnection.org/blog/2018/07/02/corporate-farms-vs-family-farms-what%E2%80%99s-the-difference>.

²² Paul K. Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm: The Transformation of American Agriculture since 1929*, The University Press of Kentucky (2008) [hereinafter *A Revolution Down on the Farm*].

“conventional”) farming methods include tilling, fertilizer application, and chemical treatment for insects and weeds.²³ These practices present challenges to flora and fauna through the degradation of in-field soils due to tillage and compaction, as well as field runoff from irrigation and rainfall events.²⁴ Sedimentation of waterways and wetlands due to tillage and field erosion can drastically change the landscape and wetlands’ crucial riparian filtration function, along with their unique and decreasing habitat footprint.²⁵ Sprayed fertilizers, namely nitrogen and phosphorus, also make their way off the field and into waterways, driving bacterial algae growth and spoiling local and downstream water supplies.²⁶ This phenomenon made national news in 2016 when the municipal water supply in Toledo, Ohio, was tainted with a hazardous cytotoxin produced by bacteria feeding on agricultural nutrients flowing into Lake Erie.²⁷ Up to 500,000 people could not touch or drink their tap water for three days, driving states, provinces, and US and Canada national governments to commit to solving the problem of nonpoint source nutrient pollution.²⁸

This same phenomenon is replicating across the globe, notably in the Gulf of Mexico, where the hypoxic dead zone caused by nutrient flows from the Mississippi River reached approximately 6,705 square miles (or 4 million acres), seriously impacting fisheries.²⁹ Similarly, pesticides and herbicides intended to be harmful to field-level organisms also “trespass” into bodies of water and other areas, demonstrably degrading the health of humans and ecosystems.³⁰ Although the externalized harms of industrial agricultural practices are significant, these practices remain the status quo in agricultural production due to their scalability and simplicity. Industrial agriculture, with its efforts to improve efficiency and standardize operations, goes hand-in-hand with farm consolidation.

What are we getting for all this environmental and social upheaval? Of the nearly 14 billion bushels of corn harvested in 2022,³¹ 43% was made into animal feed, and 44% percent went to ethanol production to meet the Renewable Fuel

²³ Antonin Le Campion et al., *Conventional versus Organic Farming Systems: Dissecting Comparisons to Improve Cereal Organic Breeding Strategies*, *Organic Agriculture* vol. 10, no. 1 (March 1, 2020).

²⁴ Afroz Alam, *Soil Degradation: A Challenge to Sustainable Agriculture*, *International Journal of Scientific Research in Agricultural Sciences* vol. 1 (August 1, 2014); Robyn S. Wilson et al., *Improving Nutrient Management Practices in Agriculture: The Role of Risk-Based Beliefs in Understanding Farmers’ Attitudes toward Taking Additional Action*, *Water Resources Research* vol. 50, no. 8 (2014).

²⁵ Susan K. Skagen et al., *Reducing Sedimentation of Depressional Wetlands in Agricultural Landscapes*, *Wetlands* vol. 28 (September 1, 2008).

²⁶ John Manuel, *Nutrient Pollution: A Persistent Threat to Waterways*, *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 122 (2014).

²⁷ *5 Years since the Toledo Water Crisis: A Timeline of What Happened*, *wtol.com* (Aug. 5, 2014), <https://www.wtol.com/article/news/local/protecting-our-water/5-years-since-the-toledo-water-crisis-a-timeline-of-what-happened/512-71a2414b-a34d-4b4a-9632-58e1c212d098>; Morgan M. Steffen et al., *Ecophysiological Examination of the Lake Erie Microcystis Bloom in 2014: Linkages between Biology and the Water Supply Shutdown of Toledo, OH*, *Environmental Science & Technology* vol. 51, no. 12 (Jun. 20, 2017).

²⁸ *Lake Erie Binational Phosphorus Reduction Strategy*, International Joint Commission (2019).

²⁹ S. S. Rabotyagov et al., *The Economics of Dead Zones: Causes, Impacts, Policy Challenges, and a Model of the Gulf of Mexico Hypoxic Zone*, *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* vol. 8 (Jan. 2014).

³⁰ Elvia Rufo et al., *The Social Costs of Pesticides: A Meta-Analysis of the Experimental and Stated Preference Literature*, *Scientific Reports* vol. 14 (Dec. 30, 2024).

³¹ *2022 Census of Agriculture Data*, *supra* note 19.

Standard.³² Of the over four billion bushels of soybeans harvested,³³ more than 90% were used for animal feed,³⁴ with growing interest in soy-derived biofuels to aid in decarbonization efforts, especially in the maritime industry.³⁵ Due to significant increases in meat consumption in the US and globally, corn and soy are anticipated to continue increasing in production to support animal agriculture, a highly inefficient caloric pathway from farm to plate.³⁶ In a strange twist, crops raised for human consumption are legally defined as “specialty crops” and constitute just 4% of the land planted to grain corn, soy, wheat, and cotton.³⁷ Animal farming is its own brand of harmful, especially in the corporatized version of cow, hog, and chicken farms, termed Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, or CAFOs.³⁸ CAFOs are linked to excessive manure spreading, high water use, antibiotic-resistant disease, GHG emissions, and other factors contributing significantly to environmental degradation.³⁹

To address the significant issues facing the US and the world that agricultural production poses, we should remember that it was not always like

this: How did we get to this point, and what lessons can we draw from our history that might be applied in the current moment?

Industrial Farm Policy: A Review of American Agricultural History

Social and Technological Change

The history of American farming is one of ebbing and flowing agricultural production, primarily driven by wars, economic crises, and policy attempts at stabilization.⁴⁰ The agricultural focus shifted toward commodities that could be dried, shipped, and stored without refrigeration (e.g., corn, wheat, and soy), rather than food products, with limited exception for states like California and Michigan, where specialty crops constitute a relatively larger portion of agricultural production.⁴¹ Simultaneously, rural populations migrated to urban centers and urban mechanization metastasized in rural communities, decreasing

³² Aaron M. Ates, *Corn and Other Feed Grains - Feed Grains Sector at a Glance*, USDA ERS (updated Jan. 5, 2025), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/corn-and-other-feed-grains/feed-grains-sector-at-a-glance>.

³³ *2022 Census of Agriculture Data*, *supra* note 19.

³⁴ *Animal Agriculture & Soy*, American Soybean Association (2025), <https://soygrowers.com/key-issues-initiatives/key-issues/other/animal-ag/>.

³⁵ Shuyun Li et al., *Techno-Economic Analysis of Sustainable Biofuels for Marine Transportation*, *Environmental Science & Technology* vol. 56, no. 23 (Dec. 6, 2022).

³⁶ Hannah Ritchie, *If the World Adopted a Plant-Based Diet, We Would Reduce Global Agricultural Land Use from 4 to 1 Billion Hectares*, *Our World in Data* (Mar. 4, 2021), <https://ourworldindata.org/land-use-diets>; Hannah Ritchie et al., *Meat and Dairy Production*, *Our World in Data* (Nov. 1, 2019), <https://ourworldindata.org/meat-production>.

³⁷ *What Is a Specialty Crop?*, USDA AMS (accessed Mar. 30, 2024), <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop>.

³⁸ Colin G. Scanes, *Chapter 18 - Impact of Agricultural Animals on the Environment*, in *Animals and Human Society*, eds. Colin G. Scanes and Samia R. Toukhsati, Academic Press (2018).

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, Iowa State University Press (1994).

⁴¹ *Specialty Crops in California*, USDA Climate Hubs (accessed March 20, 2025), <https://www.climate-hubs.usda.gov/hubs/california/topic/specialty-crops-california>; *2023 Michigan Agriculture Facts & Figures*, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (revised 2023).

the supply of and demand for agricultural labor.⁴² Agricultural industrialization quickly took off, and some hold that the development of American capitalism was possible only with the supply of labor released by the mechanization of farming.⁴³

Policies to offer land, irrigation, and finance most often benefited the already successful farmers and ranchers who had attained an economy of scale that enabled them to cultivate failure-prone parcels.⁴⁴ As historian R. Douglas Hurt summarizes in his discussion of early government efforts to support farmers, “In the end, federal land policy profited those who needed it the least.”⁴⁵ Tractors puffed onto the scene throughout the 1920s, forever changing agricultural productivity potential. Scientific breeding developments in the 1930s and 1940s created uniform crops in size, shape, disease resistance, and ripening, enabling the success of mechanical pickers and increasing farm production intensity.⁴⁶ These developments led to increasing agricultural productivity and had significant economic consequences. According to agricultural historian Paul Conkin, “...surpluses have always generated a crushing paradox: they reduce prices as more product comes to market. But at the same time, the only way any individual farmer can earn money is to produce

more.”⁴⁷ This supply-side tension continues into the present day, with many farmers struggling to remain profitable. In light of these technological and economic pressures, it became apparent that more centralized policy work was needed to secure farmers’ livelihoods and avoid a downward spiral in agricultural markets.⁴⁸

New Deal and Farm Consolidation

In the swirling contexts of post-WWI agricultural price collapse, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 and his New Deal programs initiated the first phase of consolidation-supporting federal agriculture policies.⁴⁹ These were primarily driven by Henry A. Wallace, Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, who “understood the problems of farming better than any secretary of agriculture before him.”⁵⁰ As a successful farmer and businessman (founding what would be the largest hybrid seed company in the country) and the son of the Harding administration’s Secretary of Agriculture, Henry C. Wallace, he leveraged his family’s prestigious agricultural newspaper, *Wallaces Farmer* to urge mechanization for floundering farmers in the 1920s.⁵¹ Seeing first-hand the impacts of surplus production, he was a proponent

⁴² Steven Conn, *The Lies of the Land: Seeing Rural America for What It Is—and Isn’t*, University of Chicago Press (2023) [hereinafter *The Lies of the Land*].

⁴³ Charles Post, *The ‘Agricultural Revolution’ in the United States: The Development of Capitalism and the Adoption of the Reaper in the Antebellum U. S. North*, *Science & Society* vol. 61, no. 2 (1997).

⁴⁴ Traci Bruckner, *Agricultural Subsidies and Farm Consolidation*, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* vol. 75 no. 3 (2016).

⁴⁵ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, *supra* note 40.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, *supra* note 22.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, *supra* note 40.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

of policies to reduce farm production to stabilize prices for producers, and he was hired as Secretary of Agriculture in 1933.

Wallace saw the need to financially support producers and oversaw efforts to limit production surpluses and provide credit to farmers through government and farmer-owned credit associations.⁵² He also developed a new price support scheme that would become law in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938.⁵³ This program, which remained in effect for over three decades, was a federal loan and crop storage program to smooth market prices when they were unfavorable to producers. The program enabled farmers to sell their commodities when prices were high and to receive a parity loan from the government when prices were lower than production costs. If prices rose again, the farmer could sell and repay the loan. If not, the farmer could keep the money and hand his grain to the government for storage against future demand. This scheme was called the “Ever-Normal Granary” and served alongside the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), later renamed the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) program, which paid farmers not to produce.⁵⁴

These programs epitomized government involvement in agricultural production throughout the mid-century, even as World War II (WWII) drove booming prices for American farmers supporting the war effort. However, they weren’t without consequences. The Ever-Normal Granary and

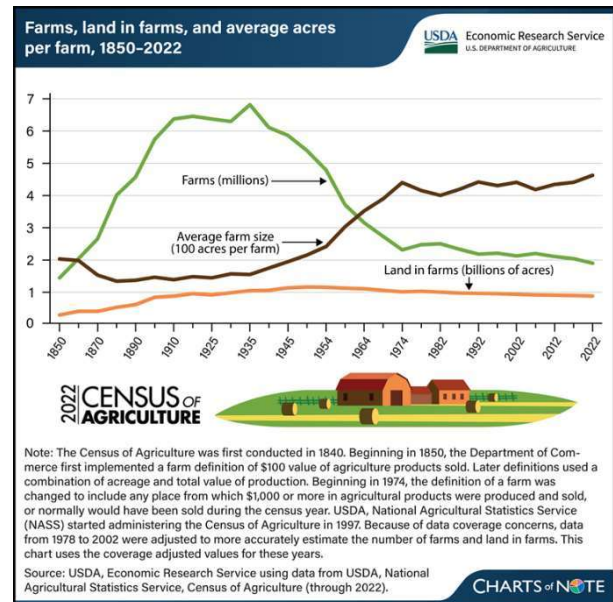


Figure 3: Farms, land in farms, and average acres per farm, 1850-2022 (Figure by USDA ERS in 2022 Census of Agriculture: Number of U.S. Farms Falls Below 2 Million (2024).)

SCS programs most benefited farmers with larger plots of land who could produce at larger scales.⁵⁵ This trend continues into the present, as landowners with the most farmland and farm income tend to make the most money from conservation programs while maintaining profitability from high-intensity operations.⁵⁶ Moreover, WWII and the U.S.’s proficiency in mass production for the war effort drove farm efficiency and mechanization.⁵⁷ Bomber factories were converted into factories for farm vehicles and agricultural implements, and nitrogen mass-produced for use in

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, *supra* note 22.

⁵⁶ Anton Bekkerman et al., *Where the Money Goes: The Distribution of Crop Insurance and Other Farm Subsidy Payments*, American Enterprise Institute (Jan. 2018).

⁵⁷ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, *supra* note 40.

explosives was easily transitioned to fertilizer.⁵⁸ While the war did not directly contribute to policy development for farm consolidation in the US, it helped to create conditions and systems that supported big farm business, more than quadrupling agricultural revenues by 1945.⁵⁹

Agricultural technology improvements allowed fewer farmers to cultivate more acres for larger profits. However, the now-familiar post-war price drop provided the basis for additional legislation supporting farm product prices without serious attempts to reduce the now-exploding grain yields produced in the Midwest and Great Plains.⁶⁰ The Agricultural Act of 1956 established the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which created conservation contracts with farmers to remove land from production and is the primary federal farm subsidy mechanism in place today. The Agricultural Act of 1961 consolidated agricultural price supports, food stamps, and school lunch programs to give the federal government a mechanism to offload the ever-increasing grain reserves from back in 1938. These acts supported the ongoing trend of farm consolidation by making it economically feasible for both larger producers and the government to participate in the price support programs. However, it wasn't until 1973 that farm consolidation became a cultural movement under the leadership of U.S. Secretary

of Agriculture Earl Butz.⁶¹

Get Big or Get Out

Earl Butz was appointed Secretary of Agriculture under the Nixon administration in 1971 and contributed to Nixon's reelection the following year.⁶² Butz was a polarizing figure who directly subverted New Deal policies with messaging that farmers should "get big or get out" and "plant fence row to fence row."⁶³ During a previous stint as an assistant to Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson under the Eisenhower administration, Butz saw a brief removal of price supports by Secretary Benson, who was a strong believer in the free market and sympathetic to the business interests of the American Farm Bureau Federation.⁶⁴ This removal under Benson resulted in crashing commodity prices, and the experience would be a useful tool in Butz's toolkit. Additionally, Butz oversaw the 1972 "Great Grain Sales" to the USSR during its grain famine, thereby opening the door to the U.S. weaponization of wheat and other grains to pursue its global interests.⁶⁵

The political climate in 1973 had Nixon under quite a lot of pressure. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo, the open sore of the Vietnam War, and massive food price inflation that had plagued the USSR just a year prior due to domestic weather

⁵⁸ B.A. Stewart et al., *The Nitrogen Dilemma: Food or the Environment*, Journal of Soil and Water Conservation vol. 72 no. 6 (Nov. 1, 2017).

⁵⁹ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, *supra* note 40.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ Conn, *The Lies of the Land*, *supra* note 42.

⁶⁴ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, *supra* note 40.

⁶⁵ David L. Evans, *Harnessing the Amber Waves: U.S. Grain Embargoes against the Soviet Union and the Politics of Insecurity, 1975–1980*, Cold War History vol. 24 no. 4 (Oct. 1, 2024).

patterns, were all clawing at Nixon's doomed presidency [cite]. Butz was directed to address the food price issue, and his previous experience would guide his proposed solution. That year, he delivered the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act (ACPA), which incentivized farmers to produce as much commodity volume as possible through government price support payments [cite]. Supporting President Nixon's request to fix the food issue, Butz hypothesized that this boost in the supply of agricultural products would cause commodity prices to fall dramatically, lowering the prices of grocery items and assuaging public concerns. Government subsidies would keep the farmers afloat, and any overproduction could be exported overseas. Although it ultimately did not save the Nixon presidency, the success of ACPA has kept these policies largely intact; farm subsidies play a commanding role in agricultural production over 50 years later.

However, prioritizing low prices and farm consolidation have caused negative impacts on rural economies and the ecosystems upon which agricultural production depends. The ACPA encourages producers to produce as much as possible, providing further advantage to large-scale producers who can leverage cutting-edge equipment and economies of scale to maximize their yields. Smaller operations cannot compete without off-farm incomes, and more and more are failing to pay their bills.⁶⁶ Additionally, the Act set the stage

for the political economy of agriculture to shift from a basis among producers to consumers. As long as we can afford cheap processed foods and produce imported from South America, consumers are unlikely to shift this policy discussion. Proponents of the bill claimed that thanks to the invisible hand of the free market, the subsidy payments would shrink and eventually disappear over time as the commodities market reached equilibrium. This never happened.⁶⁷ Now, billions of dollars in annual Farm Bill subsidies are distributed disproportionately to the largest and most successful producers across the country, an ironic outcome of *laissez-faire* market policy.⁶⁸ According to Conn, "Butz's policy to promote maximum yields was a gift to agribusiness that continues to give and give." This policy gift supported the trends of farm consolidation that began in the early 1980s and continues to play a role in environmental degradation and rural exodus today.⁶⁹

Contemporary Questions

Returning to the present, scholars and historians appear divided on whether agriculture is aligned with mass production by necessity. Many claim that farm productivity must increase to keep up with global population growth,⁷⁰ implying, sometimes overtly, that industrialized agriculture is a necessary and positive feature of modern food systems.⁷¹ However, in his 2022 book *The Need to Be Whole*, Wendell Berry posits, "This pattern

⁶⁶ Nigel Key, *Off-Farm Income, Credit Constraints, and Farm Investment*, *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics* vol. 52, no. 4 (Nov. 2020).

⁶⁷ Conn, *The Lies of the Land*, *supra* note 42.

⁶⁸ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, *supra* note 22.

⁶⁹ Macdonald et al., *Three Decades of Consolidation*, *supra* note 3.

⁷⁰ Ronald D Sands et al., *Scenarios of Global Food Consumption: Implications for Agriculture*, USDA ERS (Sep. 2023).

⁷¹ Shelby Buchanan, *The Truth about Industrial Agriculture*, AgAmerica, (Jul. 17, 2024), <https://agamerica.com/blog/industrial-agriculture/>.

of [environmental, social, and moral] degradations is perfectly compatible with, and is of a piece with, industrialism and its economy of consumption and waste. That pattern and that economy are directly opposed by the principles of agrarianism, which contradict the principles of industrialism at every point.”⁷² Steven Conn takes a more cynical perspective, “If we don’t immediately think of West Virginia’s coal mines as part of our rural imaginary, it’s doubtless because we think of ‘factory’ as the antithesis of ‘farm.’ Yet that dichotomy is a false one altogether—certainly in the United States, and certainly since the Civil War.”⁷³

Does industrial agriculture run counter to a cultural heritage of agrarianism? Is it inseparable from other forms of industrial production? These questions help us frame an approach to national farm policy that could help alleviate struggling rural economies, deteriorating ecosystem services, and bitter urban-rural divides. Federal policy initiatives have endeavored to close the gap between the farm and the factory by incentivizing yield efficiency and mass production on fewer farms. Returning to principles of agrarianism may provide a pathway away from the farm-factory paradigm.

Regardless of the (un)natural association of farming and industry, Paul Conkin gets at the primary issues at stake in our current situation:

“Most critics of present-day American agriculture focus on federal policies that helped produce the present size and efficiency of a few farms and policies

*that now subsidize even the largest and wealthiest farmers. Governmental policies helped create the oligarchy at the top and now help perpetuate it. ... Mixed in is a sense of loss as the traditional farm is passing away, and with it the noncommercial, nonconsumer values that Americans purportedly once held dear. The “soul” of America is thus at stake.”*⁷⁴

How do we ensure the soul of America is not lost to time and climate change? The links between high-intensity, large-scale agricultural production and environmental degradation are clear. However, this focus on the relationship between industry and the environment obscures central humanistic aspects such as agrarian values and reliance upon the land and natural systems. There may be less support for the environmental arguments for significant agricultural industry change due to the ongoing urbanization of the US and the resulting disconnect between the most basic and rewarding aspects of humanity and our modern, ultra-busy, and hyper-distracted lifestyles.⁷⁵ And yet, recognizing and acting upon such a disconnect may be a key part of the solution.

Considerations for Redistribution

There is potential for a youth-targeted back to the land movement, supported by key policy decisions in the agricultural subsidy space. The youngest generations are coming up entirely in the era of common climate change knowledge, and by many accounts they bear a significant

⁷² Wendell Berry, *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice*, Shoemaker & Co. (2022).

⁷³ Conn, *The Lies of the Land*, *supra* note 42.

⁷⁴ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, *supra* note 22.

⁷⁵ Buchanan, *The Truth about Industrial Agriculture*, *supra* note 71.

burden of this knowledge and the resulting disillusionment with modern Western society.⁷⁶ Although their plight is not the subject of this paper, one potential answer to this problem of farm consolidation could be a federal policy aimed at helping interested young people relocate to rural areas, offering them educational opportunities, land, and equipment leases. This could solve farm consolidation by reviving localized rural communities and economies with people who prioritize the environmental outcomes of their work. While some state-level programs exist to facilitate personal connections and land sales between young would-be farmers and the aging agricultural population,⁷⁷ this effort would require a New Deal-esque government intervention to drive the redistribution of land. Still, with the average farmer aged 58 years or older,⁷⁸ there are many opportunities to secure farm succession for relocated and reeducated city dwellers. Such a movement would change the political landscape and allow for a real shot at substantive changes to the Farm Bill subsidy structure. As Conkin puts it so elegantly, “After all, the greatest surplus problem in American agricultural history has involved not commodities but people.”⁷⁹

In the context of status quo U.S. politics and industry influence, any plan to redistribute productive and profitable land is a non-starter. However,

understanding the ways that crop subsidies have been established to support commodity production artificially may provide an opportunity to reframe the policy landscape for better social and environmental outcomes. Considering the recent U.S. election and Donald Trump’s return to the presidency, actively redistributive policy activity of this kind is especially unlikely. On the contrary, executive cuts made to USDA programming in the name of government efficiency are resulting in canceled contracts with farmers and farm service providers.⁸⁰ This stands to impact smallholder farmers disproportionately, with some claiming that farms have already begun to shut down due to financial hardship.⁸¹ Due to these new threats, there may be important implications for specialty farmers, with promise and political will in shifting the provisions in the Farm Bill toward supporting smaller and more diverse agricultural operations. The current political climate is such that these issues are becoming more visible to lawmakers. On February 25, 2025, the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry held a hearing on the impacts of federal policy on specialty crop producers for Farm Bill consideration.⁸² Producers and policymakers from Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas argued convincingly that specialty agriculture is a cultural and economic staple across the country, and that subsidy-induced economic advantages of

⁷⁶ Hannah Block et al., *In/Action in Addressing the Climate Crisis: The Possibilities of Generation Z*, in *Resolving the Climate Crisis*, Routledge (2024).

⁷⁷ E.g., MIFarmLink (<https://mifarmlink.org/>).

⁷⁸ *Selected Producer Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity: 2022 and 2017*, USDA NASS 2022 Census of Agriculture (2022).

⁷⁹ Conkin, *A Revolution Down on the Farm*, *supra* note 22.

⁸⁰ Lisa Held, *USDA Has Begun Canceling Contracts Based on Trump’s DEI Order*, Civil Eats (Feb. 26, 2025), <https://civileats.com/2025/02/26/usda-has-begun-canceling-contracts-based-on-trumps-dei-order/>.

⁸¹ *Perspectives From the Field: Farmer and Rancher Views on the Agricultural Economy, Part 2*, The United States Senate Committee On Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry (Feb. 26, 2025), <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/hearings/perspectives-from-the-field-farmer-and-rancher-views-on-the-agricultural-economy-part-2>.

⁸² *Id.*

commodity production are misplaced and misguided. The committee responded overwhelmingly in agreement that federal subsidy and crop insurance structures should benefit more specialty crop producers in the U.S., an important step toward reframing the agricultural policy landscape.

A policy solution that may draw enough support from a coalition of rural constituents, environmentalists, and smallholder producers is reappropriating subsidy funds away from ethanol and animal feed grain production and into smallholder fruit and vegetable production. Removing price supports from industrial grain agriculture would immediately impact the scale at which most producers can operate, effectively freeing millions of acres for use in less intensive ways. Rather than holding thousands of acres of marginal land or being bought out by government programs, the redistribution of land could fall to the market, where the efficient allocation of land could result in many more people owning many

smaller parcels. The resulting drop in production of commodity grains might then cause a price rebound, where scarcity of supply would drive prices higher in the neoclassical estimation. Additionally, availability and affordability of working land is critical for attracting urbanites to the rural landscape. In such an idealized scenario, it would be possible to reduce overproduction by industrial methods, restore prices for grain producers, make more land available for specialty crop production or rewilding, and support the return of rural residents and local economies. Research in this area should estimate the price impacts on grain producers, the cost savings of reallocating commodity subsidies, the role of SNAP and WIC in stabilizing price shocks, and the potential economic benefits of repopulating rural regions and localizing supplies of goods and services. By steering agricultural policy toward land redistribution, U.S. agriculture can serve the nutritional and economic needs of all Americans while contributing positively to global climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.