



An article from  
**Catholic Rural Life Magazine**  
Fall 2001 volume 44 number 1

## **CALIFORNIA FARMING: REFLECTIONS ON "LIFE BASED" AGRICULTURE**

**David Pollard**

Associate Director for Public Policy, California Catholic Conference

**Novelist James Michener expressed the feelings of guilt and sadness he felt, when he returned to a stream that he had frequently visited and where he dreamed as a child:**

"This marvelous stream in which I used to fish and where as a boy I had gone swimming, this ribbon of cool water which has been a delight for generations of farmers, was now a fetid body of yellowish water with not a living thing in it. Frogs, fish, water lilies, bulrushes, and duck's nests had vanished... The loss of my stream had occurred under my nose, and with me making no protest. When I finally saw what had happened, I was ashamed of my inattention. What in those years had I been doing that was more important than saving a stream? If we continue to abuse and destroy our resources, many of us will be asking that question thirty years from now, but by then it will be too late, and some of the precious things we have lost will not be recoverable."<sup>i</sup>

Those who find resonance with Michener's reflections on the stream will possibly feel similar sentiments as we enter a cursory appraisal of California Agriculture. The development of production and the acquisition of ever-greater wealth have become the supreme goal of contemporary Western civilization. All else is subservient to that goal. The result is a system of enrichment and returns that ravishes nature and mutilates the human race. The ravaging of our environment is symptomatic of the same disease ravaging our society under the symptoms of drug traffic, gang violence, disintegration of the family and rampant mental illness.

Some maintain that this continued growth is an essential consequence of modern democracy which demands that "expectations of tomorrow's bigger pie from which everyone will receive a larger slice...prevent people fighting to the bitter end over the division of today's pie."<sup>ii</sup>

They point out, as does author, Mel Ellis, that "Man almost literally made the cow, the fat corn kernel, the plump turkey, the beautiful rose. And if he erred in his enthusiasm and polluted his raw materials, his resources, he still made the world enormously better."<sup>iii</sup> These people also point out that in a zero growth economy, many people will be left in poverty and in financial insecurity.

From the standpoint of a "Life Based Economics," there is an interesting question as to whether this phenomenon is an "essential consequence of modern democracy" or rather the result of a consumer oriented

economy which must persuade and cajole the buyer into believing that more is better in order to increase profit. The principle of democracy would seem to be that all should have an equal opportunity to share in the fruits of their labor. If the purpose of an economy is to reap profit, then the horns of the dilemma are real and the problem is inherent in a democratic society. However, if the purpose of an economy is to sustain life, than the problem is not in democracy but in the present economy, or more precisely in the motivation driving it.

The Catholic view of economics places the human person's right to life as the foundation for development and economic growth. This view sees the necessity of a balance between the "no growth" and "pro-growth" positions. Growth is not an end in itself.

## I. THE CATHOLIC VISION

*“Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person...We believe the person is sacred—the clearest reflection of God among us. Human dignity comes from God, not from nationality, race, sex, economic status, or any human accomplishment. We judge any economic system by what it does for and to people and how it permits all to participate in it. The economy must serve people, not the other way around.”<sup>iv</sup>*

The purpose of agriculture in a “Life Based Economics” is the service of life. Secondly, and simultaneously, agriculture provides a livelihood for the farmer, the farm worker and all those involved in the food chain. The use of a carcinogenic pesticide to increase production while endangering the lives of farmer workers, children living in the area and consumers is seen by Life Based Economics in a way that is totally different from a profit driven economy. The inherent contradiction of growing a crop to sustain life, while simultaneously taking or crippling the lives of others demands immediate development of alternative means of control. There will be no reduction of effort to produce more to feed more economically, but there will be greater urgency to eliminate the life threatening chemicals immediately.

The Christian scriptural and traditional images of agricultural are rich.

- God is a loving parent, the source of all life and being.
- God creates humans in the divine image as participants in the community of creation.
- Man and woman in addition to being directed to increase their number are placed as stewards over creation.
- The creation is dynamic and focused. Its natural balance will sustain life endlessly, if we can learn to respect this balance.
- Reverence for this balance is reverence for God.

St. Paul eloquently writes that, *“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope, we are saved.”* (Romans 8:22-24a)

**We will study California Agriculture through the lens of Christian values.<sup>v</sup> From there can emerge a vision of life, based not in a reading of the market economy but on the sacredness of all life.**

## **II. TRENDS AND FORCES AFFECTING FARM WORKERS, FAMILY FARMERS, CONSUMERS AND OTHERS:**

### **Farm labor and rural poverty**

#### **1. "Rural Communities and Farm Structures"**

The regions of California where a family farming system of agriculture has predominated historically--where control over resources remained relatively decentralized--are frequently the sites of "healthy" rural communities. In contrast, communities that emerged amidst vast tracts of farmland in which agricultural resources were concentrated are characterized by poverty, poor services and an inadequate infrastructure. As residents of rural communities, both farm workers and family farmers share a common interest in advocating a system and structure of agriculture that fosters "healthy" rural communities.

Goldschmidt's 1944 study of two California farming communities demonstrated a strong relationship between average farm size in an area and the health of nearby rural communities. Goldschmidt found that the community surrounded by smaller farms had less poverty, higher median incomes, stronger social institutions, better education, and more retail businesses than the community surrounded by larger farms. Similar conclusions were reached in a 1985 study conducted by Dean MacCannell and Edward Dolber-Smith for the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). In summary, this study concluded:

*"The primary finding is that there is a strong correlation between increased concentration and substandard social and community welfare. However, this relationship is not strictly linear. As agricultural scale increases from very small to moderate farms, the quality of community life improves. Then, as scale continues to increase beyond a size that can be worked and managed by a family, the quality of community life begins to deteriorate.*

*"Increasing concentration in this region results in increasing poverty, substandard living and working conditions, and a breakdown of social linkages between the rural communities that provide labor and the farm operators.*

*"The greatest social ills--including up to 70 percent of the population living in poverty and over 40 percent living in houses with no plumbing--were found in the counties with the most concentrated and productive agriculture."<sup>vi</sup>*

**2. Increase in Immigration.** California continues to grow rapidly. While immigrants arrive from many countries of origin, the economic crisis in Mexico has prompted many people to seek work and/or residence in California. Historically, many of the immigrants from poor rural regions of Mexico have arrived in California to work as farm laborers. A National Dept. of Labor Survey of Agricultural workers found that 70 percent of farmworkers were immigrants, most from Mexico, married, young men 31 years of age or younger.<sup>vii</sup>

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was an attempt to limit and control the number of immigrants entering the United States. Under the Act's amnesty program, approximately 1.7 million undocumented foreign workers were granted legal status. In addition to the regular amnesty program, workers who had been employed for 90 days or more in fieldwork in the 12 months prior to May 1, 1986 could obtain legal resident status under the special agricultural worker (SAW) program.

Despite implementation and enforcement of the new immigration law, illegal immigration has continued. It is likely to continue as long as economic growth in Mexico is slower than the growth of the labor force. Since 1982 there has been no net economic growth in Mexico, yet one million people per year enter the labor market; immigration to the U.S. serves as the outlet. This influx, along with the Replenishment Agricultural Worker (RAW) and H-2A programs, likely will result in continued surpluses in the farm labor market, limiting workers' ability to make economic gains.

While many farm workers have established permanent residences in the last fifteen years—particularly due to the extension of unemployment insurance benefits in 1975 and the increased costs of moving—increased competition for limited jobs may disrupt this trend. Changes in immigration and changes in the agricultural labor market are inseparable from the realities of rural poverty.

**3. Labor unions under fire.** Labor unions throughout the country, including the United Farm Workers (UFW), were under increasing pressure in the 1980s. Both the National Labor Relations Board and California's Agricultural Labor Relations Board, along with the administrations in Washington D.C. and Sacramento, took a decidedly pro-employer stance. The resurgence of farm labor contractors and the continual turnover in the agricultural work force, due to continuing immigration, are further challenges to union organizing of farm workers.<sup>viii</sup>

**4. Fragmentation of the farm labor market.** Farm labor contractors and farm management companies account for a growing portion of the farm labor market. The increase in farm labor contractors has resulted in an increased exploitation of farm workers. Farm labor contractors tend to pay lower wages, offer fewer benefits, and hire more undocumented workers. Unregistered farm labor contractors are frequently involved in the worst offenses against farm workers.

**5. Increase in rural poverty.** The rate of poverty was also substantially higher in rural areas (12.2 percent) than in urban areas (9.5 percent) in 1987. The incidence of poverty appears to be extremely high for Hispanics and Asians in rural areas, but the statistics may be unreliable at this time. There has been a consistently higher incidence of female-headed families in poverty. But the poverty rate for both single parent female and male-headed families in rural areas is very high -- over 40 percent are poor. The percentage of children under 16 in poverty in California increased from 18.9 percent in 1981 to 23.2 percent in 1987. In absolute numbers, this represents an additional 437,000 children in poverty, an average of nearly 73,000 children were added to poverty yearly. The number and percent of the labor force in poverty in California has increased at a steady

rate since 1981, going from 7.1 percent of the labor force in 1981 to 9.0 percent in 1987. In absolute numbers, they have increased from 871,000 to about 1.3 million.<sup>ix</sup>

At the same time, due to governmental budget restraints, many public services, which would have assisted lower-income people, have been reduced or eliminated. Homeless-ness, hunger, and a rising crime rate are now rural as well as urban problems.

**5. Increase in labor-intensive crops.** In the 1980s California has seen an increase in the production of grapes, vegetable crops, fruits and nuts, and nursery products. These crops now account for two-thirds of the value of California's crop production. Included in this trend is a large increase in the production of "specialty" crops and products targeted for export. Concurrently, the number of acres planted with field crops has decreased. These increases are all in labor-intensive crops. A surplus of farm labor and prevailing low wages have encouraged this trend and probably will continue to serve as an incentive for further expansion of these crops. Because of this availability of low-wage labor, the pace of mechanization in agriculture has slowed, although farm workers continue to be displaced in some sectors, such as wine grapes.

**7. Increase in small-scale farming:** Despite its history as a state of large-scale agriculture, over the last few years California has witnessed a resurgence of smaller-scale farming. In 1985 there were 79,000 farms averaging 416 acres each in California. In 1999 there were 89,000 farms averaging 312 acres each. In part this has accompanied the rising interest in organic and "safer" produce and concerns about the environment; it is also related to the dramatic growth of direct marketing, on-farm sales, farmers' markets, sales of specialty crops, etc. A number of smaller-scale farmers have been able to find a "niche" in the market and build upon this effectively. Some of these smaller-scale farms are older, some are new operations, and most could be referred to as family farms.

## **B. CONCENTRATION IN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE**

The University of California's Small Farm Center defines a "small-scale" farm as "one which grosses approximately \$100,000 or less annually, with the farm family or owners providing most of the labor and management."<sup>x</sup>

FARMS BY SIZE	1992	1997
1 to 99 acres	71.5 %	70.7 %
100 to 499 acres	17.3 %	17.6 %
500 to 999 acres	4.8 %	4.8 %
1,000 to 1,999 acres	3.1 %	3.3 %
2,000 or more acres	3.3 %	3.6%

FARMS BY SALES	1992	1997
Less than \$50,000	68.9 %	64.6 %
\$50,000 to \$99,999	8.2 %	8.8 %
\$100,000 to \$499,999	14.4 %	15.9 %
More than \$500,000	8.6 %	10.7 %

Though family farms have been a part of California's agriculture from the beginning, concentration of agricultural resources and large-scale growers have also been present from the start. This concentration of farm ownership and operation continues. Large-scale growers have strengthened their position through a variety of policy biases, as well as economic, natural resource and technological advantages.

- 1) **Concentration in the ownership and operation of agricultural lands.** While the concentration and dominance by larger-scale agriculture is not peculiar to California, it plays a greater role in the state than in other sections of the U.S. The holdings of large-scale farmers continue to grow, particularly at the expense of the mid-sized family farmers. Those in the greatest danger appear to be mid-sized, commercial farmers.

At the same time, small-scale farmers are growing in number and market force, though they still are only a small sector in the state's agricultural economy. While agriculture in California has always been polarized, it is even more so now as the middle-sized group of farmers diminishes.

The figures for agricultural production point out a continued level of concentration. In 1982, only 6 percent of the farms in California, about 5,000 farms, took in almost three-quarters of the state's total farm cash receipts. On the other hand, approximately 58,000 farms, 70 percent of the total number, received only 3.5 percent of the cash receipts.

While the largest growers in California own vast tracts of land, California has also been marked by a separation of farmland ownership and operation—with the largest enterprises leasing thousands of acres. Over half of the agricultural land in California is leased land, and the increasing concentration of "operating enterprises," rather than simply of ownership patterns, is of particular significance. Large agricultural management companies, often national and international corporations, integrating numerous parcels of land into a single operation, have proliferated in rural California.

**2. Economic, natural resource, technological, and cultural advantages given to large-scale agriculture.** Large-scale agriculture has gained a competitive advantage through a number of institutional policy biases:

- Institutional biases toward bigness built into many agricultural policies have been a major force fueling continued concentration.
- Commodity subsidies, water subsidies, and tax breaks have disproportionately benefited the largest growers and encouraged non-farm investors to purchase agricultural property.
- Much of the agricultural research and technological development carried out by the University and the Extension Service has aided the largest commercial growers, often to the detriment of family

farmers and farm workers, e.g., the mechanical tomato harvester eliminated thousands of jobs for farm workers and was impractical for use by most small or mid-sized farmers

- Many of the alleged “economies of scale” favoring large-scale, industrial agriculture are actually the result of public or private decisions which have aided larger-scale growers at the expense of smaller-scale farmers and farm workers.
- Many aspects of federal policy have disproportionately benefited large growers and investor farms: tax policy, commodity subsidies, price supports, and farm labor policies. For instance, though commodity subsidies were enacted with the stated purpose of helping “family farmers,” they have been available to all growers, regardless of size. Consequently, large-scale growers have received the bulk of commodity subsidies in California. The largest growers have received millions of dollars worth of taxpayer subsidized irrigation water.
- Private sector decisions have also favored large-scale growers. They have benefited from the bias of wholesale buyers and processors, who are increasingly reluctant to deal with smaller-sized growers, although marketing cooperatives have helped to temper these dynamics.
- Credit is another area in which institutional biases have favored larger-scale growers. As the public and private sector credit system geared to rural and agricultural needs contracts and consolidates, the remaining lenders have demonstrated a preference for the bigger borrowers. With more limited assets for collateral or security, smaller farmers have limited access to the credit system

### **C. URBANIZATION AND POPULATION CHANGES IN RURAL AREAS**

Despite agriculture’s leading role in the state’s economy, California is primarily an urban state. As the rate of growth accelerates, formerly rural and agricultural areas are being developed for residential and industrial use. Such pressures have an impact on the remaining farmers, farm workers, and the new residents of communities experiencing rapid change.

#### **1. Urbanization and Growth.**

In 1987, California had an estimated population of 27.3 million, with over 90 percent living in urban areas. There were 83,000 farms in the state occupying 31,900,000 acres. In the year 1999 the state’s population had reached to over 32 million and continued to climb.. There were 89,000 farms covering 27, 800,000 acres. As the urban areas continue to spread out and the industrialization of the formerly rural areas accelerates, thousands of acres of prime agricultural land are giving way to houses and factories. New urban uses claim about 44,000 acres of cropland each year, including 36,000 acres of irrigated land. As many acres of prime agricultural land are taken out of production, marginal land is newly irrigated—resulting in an increase in irrigated land, but at a high social cost.

Much of the urban and suburban development in agricultural areas is occurring in places where family farming has been prevalent. Cities such as Stockton and Modesto, whose early success depended in part on good farmland and relatively easy access to water, are now the sites of rapid expansion. As a result, some of the best farmland in the state is being paved over, destroying hearty pockets of family farming. Balancing the needs and wants of the new residential communities with those of the working farms provides one of the greatest challenges, particularly severe in those farming areas on the border of the expanding urban/suburban ring. Homeowners object to the farmers’ use of pesticides and other chemicals, while farmers must contend with a changing community less attuned to the needs of agriculture.

- a. **Changes and Challenges in Rural Communities.** As agricultural areas become more industrialized and urbanized, the remaining farms must contend with a number of new difficulties:
- Air pollution,
  - Rising land values and rising taxes rising prices for housing, food, and services;
  - Growing pressure for limited water resources,
  - Occasional vandalism to crops and livestock, and
  - Longer-term residents have commented on the diminishing sense of community amidst the growth and a loss of control over the future of the area.
- b. **One aspect of the changing rural population is seen in the increasing percentage of Latinos in California's rural communities.** The rural Latino community is likely to have an increasing role in local politics. However, this transfer of political power will be effective only if rural communities have sufficient resources to govern.

#### **D. TOXIC CHEMICALS AND ORGANIC PRODUCE**

Industrial agriculture relies on the extensive application of chemicals. In recent years, many have become concerned about the dangers such chemicals pose to farm workers, consumers, and to the environment. Organic farming practices, which involve no harmful chemicals have generated more interest and are proving to be financially rewarding.

##### **1.Dangers to health and the environment from pesticides and other agricultural chemicals.**

The appearance of cancer clusters in agricultural areas (e.g., McFarland) and the disproportionate number of children affected, has been one of the most dramatic and tragic developments.

The U.S. General Accounting Office in a 1993 report described California's Department of Pesticide Regulation Worker Health and Safety Program as "by far the most effective and well-established monitoring system."<sup>xi</sup> Farm workers and farmers have become increasingly aware of the dangers from pesticides and other chemicals used in farming, yet many dangerous chemicals remain in use.

A growing concern for the environmental effects of petro-chemical farming also can be seen in both urban and rural areas. Groundwater contamination, surface-water pollution, air pollution and soil erosion are some of the issues raised by environmental, health, consumer, children's and farm worker advocates.

##### **2) Public Concerns and Responses to Food Safety.**

The increased demand for organically-grown produce and anxiety over the potential longer-term health effects of pesticides and chemical additives, point to the possibility for significant changes in food marketing and public policy. Responding to these new consumer demands, a number of major grocery chains have started to publicize the testing of their produce and others have begun to sell a greater volume of organic produce.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), in response to health and environmental concerns, requires farmers to report all applications of pesticides on their fields. .

To ensure compliance with the nation's toughest pesticide laws, California has the largest and best-trained enforcement organization in the nation. DPR oversees licensing and certification of dealers, pest control advisors, pest control businesses and applicators; assumes overall responsibility for pesticide incident investigations; administers the nation's largest state pesticide residue monitoring program; and coordinates pesticide use reporting.<sup>xii</sup>

### **3.Organic Farming.**

While still comprising a relatively small segment of the market, organic farming has become increasingly visible. Sales of organic produce increased from an estimated \$50 million in 1986 to \$100 million in 1988. Primarily smaller-scale farmers still grow organic produce, though some larger-scale farms have shown an interest in organic farming as a facet of their operations.

## **E. MARKETING**

California agriculture faces increasing international competition. At the same time, new marketing opportunities, e.g. direct marketing, have proven to be beneficial for many family farmers. The food wholesale and retail industries also have changed, with some segments becoming more concentrated at the same time as new forms of retailing appear.

### **Increase in international competition.**

Globalization and the free trade treaty have created problems for some growers and farm workers as well as consumers in California. Frequently the competition is with U.S. corporations, which have set up operations in countries with lower labor costs and minimal health or environmental regulations. Additionally tariff restrictions placed on developed nations don't apply to less developed nations, so the same corporation who has holdings in third world countries can at time import a product grown overseas and market it cheaper than it can market the same product grown on its California farm.

### **While the international market has benefited some California growers, other farmers have been hurt by the new and increased competition.**

About one-fourth of California's acreage is planted for export, and in 2000 California's export sales were estimated at \$7.6 billion. Efforts to open and expand markets in other countries are demonstrated by the establishment of a CDFA office in Japan and the California Export Assistance program. However, these programs have are often of greatest benefit to the larger-scale commercial operations.

**Top 5 Agriculture Exports, (Estimates for FY 2000)**

<b>COMMODITY</b>	<b>RANK AMONG STATES</b>	<b>VALUE IN MILLION \$</b>
Vegetables & Preps	1	2,223.0
Fruits & Preps	1	1,700.3
Other	1	1,503.3
Tree Nuts	1	872.1
Cotton & Linters	2	327.7
<b>Overall</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7,632.4</b>

**Increase in direct marketing and new market niches.**

Many family farmers, small-scale and minority farmers have begun to use and have benefited economically from direct marketing strategies such as "U-pick" operations, farm and roadside stands, direct sales to retailers, farmers' markets, and mail order. Many communities now have successful farmers' markets and a number of areas have vital "farm trail" organizations (providing directories of local farmers with on-farm sales). Direct sales to restaurants and grocers also provide an important source of income for many farmers, particularly for those growing specialty crops.

**Restructuring of the food wholesale and retail industry.**

Just as the forces reshaping agriculture are complex, those reshaping the food wholesale and retail industries appear to be manifold. In the retail industry, for instance, the sector made up of the largest supermarket chains is increasingly concentrated. Mergers and buyouts are displacing supermarkets with even larger "superstores." Finally, the burgeoning variety and number of food items is notable.

**C. BIOTECHNOLOGY**

While advocates claim that biotechnology provides the tools for overcoming the natural and social challenges facing agriculture, others argue that this new direction is fraught with ethical, ecological, and economic dangers.

**Growth and Scope of Biotechnology.**

The genetic manipulation of plants and animals, though slower growing than anticipated in the 1980's, grew swiftly in the 1990's. Sales of bio-engineered plants and animals were projected to grow to \$10.6 billion by the year 2000. There is substantial debate, though, over who might benefit and whether the net effects will be positive or negative.

**Advocates**

Argue that biotechnology will improve farmers' profitability through products such as frost and disease resistant plant varieties. Environmental benefits could accrue from plants that create their own biological pesticides or fix their own nitrogen. Third World countries could benefit from drought resistant strains of

plants. Bovine growth hormones are already used to make livestock grow faster and larger, while bioengineered cattle breeds are producing leaner beef with lower cholesterol levels.

### **Critics.**

Critics point to potentially negative consequences of biotechnology, such as plant varieties immune to herbicide applications—further threatening the environment. Serious ecological concerns are also raised by the release of bioengineered organisms into the environment. The health effects of bioengineered foods are generally untested and, as in the case of bovine growth hormones, are in serious question. Pressures from financial investors have prompted biotechnology firms to develop saleable products rapidly, though they have often been of questionable long-term value or safety.

Family farmers have also objected that increased yields in the short-term from bio-engineered plant strains would serve to further depress prices and force more farmers out of farming. The economic benefits would accrue to the large-scale growers who have the capital needed to purchase the most advanced products or arrange exclusive deals on new technology.

### **Finally, many have raised ethical objections to genetic manipulation,**

arguing that it violates the sanctity of living beings and natural creation. They point out that decisions in this area must be based on the question of what ought to be done, rather than simply that of what can be done.

### **Conclusions**

We observed at the onset of our review that the development of production and the acquisition of ever-greater wealth, have become the supreme goal of our modern world. All else is subservient to that goal. The result is a system of enrichment and returns that has ravished nature and mutilated the human race. The desolation of our environment is symptomatic of the same devastation of our society, which we see as drug traffic, gang violence, disintegration of the family and rampant mental illness.

The changes occurring in California agriculture and in rural communities provide a challenge, an opportunity and an important option for family farmers and farm workers. Their initial work must be directed toward furthering an understanding and analysis of their potential common interests, and initiating a dialogue. In addition to direct discussion between representatives of these organizations, educational programs designed for leaders and members of farm worker, family farmer and allied organizations would help to stimulate early thought and discussion on these issues.

In the Hearings on California Agriculture conducted by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on Agriculture, some family farmers, farm workers, and even representatives of agribusiness began to recognize the need to work together to curb the overwhelming influence of unbridled market forces. Instead of continuing the conflictive relations fostered by our current industrial system of agriculture, family farmers and farm workers shared an interest in fostering a more “sustainable” system of agriculture. They recognized a potential for change in the relations between farmers and farm workers—a new pattern in labor relations and agricultural politics

The following observations were generally agreed upon by participants from all sectors, farmers, workers, management, academic experts, advocates and those conducting the hearings:

**1. Control over agricultural resources has to be more widely distributed and decentralized.** There must be:

- broader distribution of land ownership creating more family farm scale agricultural units;
- elimination of legal and institutional biases favoring ultra-large-scale farms;
- Monitoring of mergers controlling food research, production, distribution and marketing.

**2) The urbanization of rural California is a pressing problem to be evaluated and confronted.**

Thousands of acres of prime farming land are being built over annually and, because of lack of planning thus contributing both to the deterioration of the environment and the increase of both

- rural and urban poverty in these areas. carefully planned growth strengthening rural communities and a family farm system of agriculture.
- The gradual erosion of the very wise, Williamson Act<sup>xiii</sup> by legislation and case law in favor of moneyed interests needs to be reversed to protect farmers, farmworkers, farming, the environment as well as urban and metropolitan populations.

**3) Legislation should insure that farming, farm work and other rural jobs provide a living wage and greater job security.**

Economically, family farming should be a stable way to live and raise a family with dignity, respect and security For farm workers, the increase in the minimum wage has only had limited effect due to lack of uniform, effective enforcement. Farm labor contractors control a larger portion of the farm labor market, leading to increased exploitation. Conditions for farm workers have worsened.

**4) Promotion of equitable relationships between farmers and farm workers.** Efforts are needed to encourage

- decentralized and more democratic decisions by labor and management;
- the development of farm worker production co-ops,
- ways to assist farmers and farm workers to coordinate off-season work and training.

**5) Legislation is needed to promote sustainable, environmentally sound, safe agricultural production, including laws/incentives to substantially reduce the use of toxic chemicals harmful to farmers, farm workers and the public.**

**6) Although significant public policy changes have been made, further actions are needed in food marketing to meet the concerns over chemicals and pesticide residues in foods.**

**7) A re-orientation of government programs and policies to provide full University of California extension services to:**

- focusing research on the needs of farm workers and family farmers;
- targeting and means-testing subsidy programs;
- ways to encourage extensive implementation of organic and biologically focused production practices;
- promotion of careful conservation and fiduciary responsibility for natural resources such as soil, water, timber and fossil fuels.

**8) California agriculture has increased its markets in other countries and the Dept. of Food and Agriculture has opened an office in Japan, but programs for export assistance are often of greatest benefit to large-scale operations, leaving most family farmers in a position of limited competitiveness.**

**9) Globalization and the Free Trade Agreement have created a number of problems for farmers and farm workers across the State. With the development of large corporate farms, which frequently are multinational, it may be cheaper for such a farm to grow a crop over seas that it also grows in California, but because of wage and tariff differences, it can sell its foreign product cheaper here than it will sell its domestic product. This impacts small farmers, farm labor and consumers.**

**10. Genetic Modification is also an area of concern due to the potential impact on consumers and on farming and farmers themselves. The vast quantities being spent on research both from private and public sources are precipitating change faster than the industry and the participants in the agricultural dialogue can understand. All need to be involved in decision making not simply capital interests.**

**11. There is a pressing need for legalization of undocumented farm workers. Across the United States, particularly in the agricultural industry, there is rampant abuse and exploitation of these workers. It is virtually impossible to protect the rights of undocumented workers to fair labor practices including a living wage, adequate benefits, job security and safe working conditions.**

Farm workers and family farmers now have the opportunity to re-evaluate and change the political and economic relations in rural California. By examining the potential for an alternative system of agriculture-- one that reflects the values of a Life Based Economics --family farmers and farm workers can begin to develop a strategy for effective change. Workers and smaller-scale farmers need a far stronger voice in agricultural politics.

If smaller-scale farmers and farm workers are to succeed in preserving and improving their way of life, they also will need to build power by reaching out to other potential allies. Farm workers have had some remarkable successes with such efforts in the past, and even "family" farmers saw some successes at the height of the "farm crisis." Future efforts will require a broader coalition, possibly including churches and synagogues, rural service, environmental, and consumer organizations.

Without such collaboration smaller-scale farmers may soon find their survival in question -- losing new market niches to larger growers and losing land to developers--`and farm workers will continue to face barriers to their efforts to improve living and working conditions.

California's unique character embracing natural beauty, oceanic, agricultural, mountain, timber, and large urban population and interests, make it a singular and focused opportunity to study the impact of economic ravishment on both nature and society. The question of agricultural land and production reform is intimately interwoven with environmental concerns. The social and economic problems confronting farmers, workers, consumers and the inner city are intertwined with the structure of agriculture and environment.



National Catholic Rural Life Conference  
4625 Beaver Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199  
(515) 270-2634  
email address: [ncrlc@mchsi.com](mailto:ncrlc@mchsi.com)  
website: [www.ncrlc.com](http://www.ncrlc.com)

This article was published in the fall 2001 issue of Catholic Rural Life<sup>®</sup>. No portion of this article may be reproduced without written permission from The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. To purchase the fall 2001 issue of Catholic Rural Life, please contact The National Catholic Rural Life Conference office at 4625 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199, call (515) 270-2634, or e-mail [NCRLC@mchsi.com](mailto:NCRLC@mchsi.com). The cost is \$2<sup>50</sup> an issue plus postage and handling.

---

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> The Quality of Life, James A. Michener. Lippincott, 1970. pp. 86-87.
- <sup>ii</sup> "The Worst is Yet to Come," Irving Kristol, The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 26, 1979. p. 24.
- <sup>iii</sup> "The Good Earth", The Milwaukee Journal (1974).
- <sup>iv</sup> *Economic Justice For All*, Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, #13, NCCB, Washington, D.C., Nov. 18, 1986.
- <sup>v</sup> Much of this report relies on work done a number of years ago by a group called the Rural Realignment Project's Working Group, which compiled an excellent and comprehensive "Discussion Paper." I have removed dated material, added elements and rearranged. The present author, and indeed very few individuals can claim to be an expert in California Agriculture. It is too vast and complex to allow such pretense. But the following contributors certainly indicate why I felt justified in borrowing their thought and experience: Ralph Abascal, General Counsel, CRLA, Sal Alvarez: National Farm Worker Ministry; Glenn Anderson: Organic Farmer; Calif. Assoc. of Family Farmers, Comm. for Sustainable Agriculture; Pablo Espinoza: Farm Labor Secretary, American Friends Service Committee; Tom Haller: Executive Secretary, California Association of Family Farmers; David Runsten: Director of Research, Working Group on Farm Labor & Rural Poverty, California Institute for Rural Studies; Julie Sly, Communications. Dir., California Catholic Conference; Ron Stief: Director of Ethics in Economic Life Project, Center for Ethics and Social Policy; Russ Walker: Farmer; Chairperson, Agricultural Crisis Committee, United Methodist Church; Nancy Warner: Organic Farmer; Certified Organic, Farmers; Father William Wood S.J., Exec. Dir., Calif. Catholic Conf
- <sup>vi</sup> U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, "Technology, Public Policy, and the Changing Structure of American Agriculture, Washington, D.C., March 1986, pp.221-249.
- <sup>vii</sup> National Dept. of Labor National Survey of Agricultural workers for 1994-1995.
- <sup>viii</sup> See Wells & West, "Regulation of the Farm Labor Market..." Gwynn et al., "California's Rural Poor..."; Villarejo, "Farm Restructuring"; Martin, "California's Farm Labor Market"; and Suzanne Vaupel and Philip Martin, "Activity and Regulation of Farm Labor Contractors," Giannini Information Series No. 86-3.
  7. Douglas B. Gwynn, et al., "California's Rural Poor: Trends, Correlates and Policies," Working Paper #7, Working Group on Farm Labor and Rural Policy, CIRS, Davis, February, 1989, pp.7-17; also
  8. Suzanne Vaupel, "Small Family Farms in California: The Definition Dilemma," Small Farm Series, Small Farm Center, University of California (U.C.), Davis, July 1986.
- <sup>xi</sup> Preventing Pesticide Illness, <http://www.cdpr.ca.gov>
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.cdpr.ca.gov>
- <sup>xiii</sup> **California Government Code 51220.**, the *Williamson Act* provides that (a) That the preservation of a maximum amount of the limited supply of agricultural land is necessary to the conservation of the state's economic resources, and is necessary not only to the maintenance of the agricultural economy of the state, but also for the assurance of adequate, healthful and nutritious food for Californians; it also recognizes that (b) That the agricultural work force is vital to sustaining agricultural productivity; that this work force has the lowest average income of any occupational group in this state; that there exists a need to house this work force of crisis proportions which requires including among agricultural uses the housing of agricultural laborers; (c) That the discouragement of premature and unnecessary conversion of agricultural land to urban uses is a matter of public interest and will be of benefit to urban dwellers themselves. in that it will discourage discontinuous urban

---

development patterns which (d) That in a rapidly urbanizing society agricultural lands have a definite public value as open space, and the preservation in agricultural production of such lands, the use of which may be limited under the provisions of this chapter, constitutes an important physical, social, esthetic and economic asset urban or metropolitan developments.(e) That land within a scenic highway corridor or wildlife habitat area has a value to the state because of its scenic beauty and its location adjacent to or within view of a state scenic highway or because it is of great importance as habitat for wildlife and contributes to the preservation or enhancement thereof.