

6/1/08

Wolfgang Rounge

“Why Young Folks Aren’t Farming: A Young Farmer’s Testimony”

Dear Ag Vision team,

At the Redding listening session, several board members wondered aloud how to “get young people interested in farming.” Since I am a bona fide young farmer, fresh out of ag university, I am hoping I am allowed to submit a second comment to share what I have learned on this score.

First of all, I can assure you that plenty of young folks DO want to farm. They want to be stewards of the environment, work hard for gloriously tangible rewards, savor the intellectual challenges of the farming adventure, and enjoy the rock star status farmers have nowadays. The majority want to farm organically. Many – maybe most – will be first-generation farmers, like me.

Getting training and experience is actually not much of a problem for us. Most colleges have a student farm nowadays, staffed by an experienced farmer/mentor, and WWOOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) is also wildly popular. If you have a few weeks or a few months to spare, and enough money for a bus ticket, you can immerse yourself in organic farming by apprenticing under some of the most gifted farmer-teachers in the world. So ag education in the schools is important for general citizen ag literacy, but it’s probably not going to increase the number of young folks who want to farm.

The following are the top reasons young folks don’t want to farm.

Price of land. This is the single biggest one. Land is just completely out of reach for most young folks. Although there are plenty of workarounds (rent land! just till up your uncle’s pasture! check out California FarmLink!), most young folks aren’t really thrilled about working that hard on land that isn’t really quite theirs. It takes a pretty special person to invest the same care in someone else’s acre as she would in her own. Besides, after five years of working from dawn to way past dark, you’re not necessarily any closer to owning a place of your own.

County assessors, realtors, and banks all have a somewhat parasitic interest in boosting the price of land way beyond what is reasonable. I don’t know how, but at some point we need to stop and realize that this inflation in land prices is only depriving us of food security. Someone who is going to cultivate land and raise food for you is kind of a public servant, and perhaps deserves different treatment than someone who is going to mow a lawn.

Since an agrarian revival is in the public interest, it’s a mystery to me why states and counties don’t subsidize new farmers. I mean, governments will fall all over themselves to subsidize a new refinery or coal-fired power plant, so how is that more rational?

When farmland is developed, developers must pay to “mitigate” habitat losses or loss of open space, but how do you mitigate the loss of a farmer? If you want owls, you put up owl boxes, right?

Maybe we need some kind of fund to start new farmers off. If you received publicly-funded farmland, you would pledge to keep it cultivated and productive for your lifetime. You could

live there until you died and choose your successor, but only if she was a full-time farmer too. (No bequeathing it to your non-farming offspring.) No doubt the realtors will rail against this as socialized agriculture.

Italy provides its new farmers with mandatory paid training and a government pension. I'm just saying.

Problems arranging farm succession. One excellent option for young folks is to connect with an older farmer who wants to pass the reins of his farm to a successor. It makes perfect sense, but it's not catching on the way you'd think it would. When you're young, maybe just married, with everything still to prove, what you most crave is privacy and autonomy, the two cardinal privileges of adulthood. You need space to nurture your relationship with your sweetheart, plan your family, develop your career. The last thing you want to do is move in with a fractious elderly stranger who will watch you work like an ox for a year or two before telling you whether you're worthy to pay a quarter of a million dollars (only 20% of fair market value!) to keep living in the shack he's renting you. And that's how a lot of young farmers see FarmLink. We perceive it as a lot of stress and trouble for a small chance of a lucky break.

I am a highly skilled, college-educated worker. I am in demand! If I wanted to work that hard without a guarantee of building up equity, I would take one of the several unsolicited farm-manager job offers I get *every month*.

There is much work to be done in easing fears for young and old farmers alike. FarmLink is still in its infancy and we could learn a lot from following up on deals which have been completed!

The State should generously fund FarmLink to study which kinds of farm succession agreements work best, then invest in popularizing them so as to smooth the transition for as many farmers as possible.

Isolation. This is what is usually meant by "I'm not farming right now, because my girlfriend wasn't into it," which is the second biggest reason I hear that young folks aren't farming. Even if you and your partner both love farming, it's a lot to ask of someone to move to a vacant field 15 miles from the nearest tiny hamlet, with no possibility of off-farm work, no social life, and no chance of a vacation. Don't give me that line about how the Internet brings the world into my living room: The Internet won't feed my cows when I go away for the weekend. The solution, of course, is a return to the vibrant, densely populated rural landscape of a hundred years ago. Back in horsepower days, almost no one lived more than three or four miles from a church, school, post office, and market. (Or so I hear.)

Unfortunately, the land use pattern which would revitalize the rural landscape is one which has fallen out of favor with planners: the "ranchette" model. Today we think it is better to leave the agricultural landscape largely vacant and under the supervision of a few professionals (who may not even live on their land!). We take it for granted that residents of small towns are either economically unproductive or commuters. It is virtuous to live in a city... because then you don't have to commute so far to work.

Well, you may not commute, but your food does. It might be wiser to depopulate the cities, *bury the suburbs in the topsoil that's accumulated behind all the dams we're about to blow up (right?), give everyone an acre, and let rural California surge to life.*

Hard work for not much security. By and large, young folks don't mind the hard work so much – it's the uncertainty of the paycheck. It's not just the weather and the pests, it's the mysterious surges and contractions of the market. Why do I make \$500 one week and \$180 the next? I did the same work!

First and foremost, the price of food needs to rise – most goods, like land and equipment, have risen in price about tenfold since 1950 while food prices have barely doubled. We will need to think really hard about how to get good food – food that should cost three times what it does now – into the hands of the poor... but that is a topic for another, wiser citizen to tackle.

In terms of assuring farmers a regular paycheck (like everyone else has), a CSA is a good solution, and I hope they will become more widely accepted.

Another idea is that of the “community farmer”. (I think a friend of mine just got hired in Sunnyvale for this gig.) This is catching on in some progressive urban areas: A neighborhood holds a meeting, seizes the budget for maintaining some park, sells off the swingsets, and converts that budget item into the salary for a community farmer. Her duties are to plough the park, grow food for the whole neighborhood, and host field trips for the neighborhood schools.

Just like you, she gets social security deducted from her paycheck and has health insurance through her job. She rents an apartment somewhere nearby, like any other worker. She's a farmer four days a week, an ag educator one day a week, and a young fabulous urbanite the rest of the time. Not a bad life.

-Wolfgang Rougle