



The Resources We Share



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Food for Fuel?

With gas prices sky-rocketing and scientists increasingly concerned about global climate change, people have been looking for alternatives to using fossil fuels like oil and gas.

The farm is a promising new source for fuel. Researchers have found ways to use corn to make ethanol, an alcohol that can be blended with gasoline to cut down on harmful fuel emissions. Soybeans can be used to make another alternative fuel called biodiesel.

Some debate has gone on about whether it requires more energy to make biofuels than they provide. A 2006 study by researchers at the University of Minnesota showed that corn produces 25 percent more energy than it uses in being produced while soybeans produced 93 percent more.

However, until scientists, farmers and economists work out how to produce these fuels efficiently on a larger scale, we may have to wait a bit longer before we get these fuels at the pump.

Early in United States history, the farmer was the symbol of American values. Hard-working, independent and self-sufficient, farmers were the economic backbone to the country. In fact, in the 1900s farmers made up half of the labor force.

Small farms initially served individual families, but then they developed and grew. Now American farms feed people around the world.

Farms in the United States have been very successful at producing food. Advances in technology have considerably boosted farm yields. In the 2006 fiscal year alone, agricultural exports to other countries totaled \$68.7 billion.

High-tech machinery such as tractors, plows, tillers and harvesters have allowed farmers to work more land with fewer workers. Also, biotechnology has protected farmers from some of the forces of nature that made farming more difficult in the past. There are now seeds resistant to disease and drought, and pesticides that protect crops from being destroyed by animals and insects.

Computers are also used on modern-day farms. They help track the best places to plant and fertilize, as well as other farm operations.

However, growth in agriculture production has been a double-edged sword.

The supply of agriculture products produced in the United States has far exceeded the nation's demand for them. In other words, farmers have produced more food than Americans can eat. The abundance of products available has made the market value for fruits, vegetables and other crops fairly low.

To make up for the low prices in the past, some farmers tried to increase their incomes by growing and selling more crops. However, this practice drove prices further down, and farmers were left with a surplus of unsold products.

Overproduction of this kind was particularly rampant during the Great Depression. The U.S. government responded by introducing subsidies and price floors (a minimum value that farmers would get for their products). However, the federal budget has been unable to sustain these programs, and in the last two decades, the U.S. Congress has tried to phase them out.

In an increasingly global world, farmers have been trying to find new markets for their products by exporting goods to foreign countries. With the passing of trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and the Uruguay Round in 1995, which allowed for freer agricultural trade among 90 countries worldwide, the United States has become the largest exporter of agricultural products in the world.

However, small farmers have found it hard to compete in the world market. Many American farms have consolidated or merged into "agribusinesses," creating fewer but larger farms. In the 1940s, there were 6 million farms in the United States averaging 166 acres each, while in 2005, there were only 2.1 million farms with each averaging 444 acres.

As farmers forge ahead into the global market, they will certainly meet new challenges, in terms of business management, developing technology, health issues, and more. However, what will continue to stay the same is their commitment to work with the land.

Fun Facts

- Consumers spend \$547 on food that came from American farms and ranches. However, farmers only receive about 23 cents for every dollar spent.
- One U.S. farm can produce enough food and fiber for 144 people.
- Women are breaking into the field of farming. In 2002, women operated 236,269 U.S. farms.



Small Farmers Staying Strong

Smaller farmers have come up with inventive ways to cut costs and maximize on profits.

Farmers Markets — Farmer's markets allow producers to sell directly to consumers. By avoiding paying a middle man, farmers can make more money for their fresh and locally grown products.

Community-Sponsored Agriculture — CSAs are farms on which the customers are all shareholders. At the beginning of a season, customers invest or pay a certain amount in exchange for receiving weekly produce. When crops do poorly, all the shareholders bear the costs. However, during good seasons, customers usually pay less for their agricultural products than those shopping in supermarkets.

U-Pick Farms — Farmers can save money on paying workers by having consumers pick their own fruit and vegetables. At U-Pick farms, customers are typically charged a fixed price per bushel they pick.

The Economics of Organics

In the last decade, organic farming has been big business. Since 1990 the growth in the organic market has been approximately 20 percent per year. This is compared with 1 percent growth in the overall food industry.

Fueling the growing market is an increased consumer demand for organic food. Particularly in the United States, Europe, Australia and Japan, people have become concerned about the effects of pesticides, hormones and genetically modified seeds in food production. Also driving the demand are environmental concerns about animal welfare and soil preservation.

But does switching to organics make economic sense?

Studies have shown that when farmers switch from conventional farming to organic farming they experience a decrease in revenue for the first three to five years. Losses are partially due to initial costs associated with the transition and lower crop yields as the soil gets accustomed to organic farming techniques. Also, farms are not considered organic until they have been chemical-free for three years, which means they cannot charge organic prices for their goods during this period.

However, after the initial transition period, organic farmers can produce 90 to 95 percent of conventional farming yields. Even better, they can get a higher price for their agricultural products. Organic products can sell anywhere from 25 to 200 percent more than conventionally grown products.

Organic farmers also fare better during fluctuations in the market. Since most conventional farmers grow only one or two crops, falling prices in one product can spell disaster for their overall income. In organic farming, it is necessary to grow a variety of crops. As a result, when the price of one crop falls, farmers have other crops to fall back on.

The cost of production can be lower in organic farming, but it varies from farm to farm. Organic farmers save money by not buying chemicals but their farming methods require more paid workers.

The greatest economic shortfall for organics is the amount of land needed to produce the crops. If organic farmers were to produce food at the same large scale as conventional farmers, they would need considerably more land. And during a time of focused land preservation, this is a real obstacle.

Learn About Farm Jobs

Once small operations handed down in families, farms are now often big businesses. A lot of skills are needed to make sure they run smoothly. Farm work is usually strenuous and calls for long days. Income varies depending on weather conditions and demand for products. But farming offers a chance to work outdoors and on the land in rural areas where life is less hectic.

Farms need many agricultural workers to plant, maintain and harvest crops. This can mean working with food crops, animals or plants used in landscaping.

Workers do everything from taking care of livestock and poultry to applying fertilizers to fields to repairing fences and buildings to operating milking machines and harvesting equipment. Farm workers are usually trained on the job.

Some agricultural workers are trained to grade and sort products. Inspectors often have college degrees in biology or agricultural science.

Responsible for running farms are managers, who oversee the planting and harvesting and transporting of products to market. They are usually college-educated in agriculture and business.



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LAND IN THE NEWS

Farm work includes many jobs beyond planting and harvesting. People who work in farming have to know everything from the science of fertilizers to methods of transportation. Find a food you like in the ads or stories in today's newspaper. On a sheet of paper, write down every job that was involved from growing the food to getting it to your supermarket. Then write a short poem or rhyme detailing "The Jobs of Food."



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