

"LETTERS TO THE EDITOR"

(HUNGER NOTES always likes to hear from readers, although we don't carry "Letters to the Editor" as a regular feature. The January 1987 issue on "Alternative Agriculture, however, raised some particularly articulate readers' hackles. Their objections and our response are printed below.)

Dear Editor:

[The article on "Reduced-input Agricultural Systems" by Frederick Buttel, Gilbert Gillespie, et al. at Cornell University] presented many valid and legitimate arguments regarding current thought on alternative agriculture....[but] much harm is done to any coalition of support from most farm groups by references to farmers as "among the most anti-environmental of major social groups", [or saying] "that these farmers generally have not adopted non-chemical practices for philosophical, religious, or ideological reasons" (and) ..."if farmers are compelled to greatly reduce erosion and run-off of chemicals and sediments ...many more farmers will find these systems attractive if they are forced to stop imposing high costs on the rest of society," etc. [*emphasis added in the letter*].

Personally, I find such statements offensive, evidently [by] writers who are either ignorant of or insensitive to the historical development of agriculture in the U.S. which has forced most current farmers into high usage of fertilizers, pesticides, etc., due to cost constraints. [The authors] unduly accuse farmers, who may be misinformed or unaware of the environmental effects of some practices, of being "anti-environmental", simply misunderstanding the current situation of the U.S. food producers.

Such attacks on producers will undoubtedly bring about a negative retrenchment of thinking. I suggest that efforts toward reduced-input agriculture be undertaken with the farmer as a partner and not as an enemy. The farmer, if you really know him/her, is someone who is very sensitive to the productivity of the land, and someone who understands the literal meaning of the word "stewardship." You will find that most producers are utilizing conservation practices in coordination with local Soil Conservation offices....

Brent Searle, Agriculture
Aide to Congressman Richard
Stallings (Idaho)

HN: It was not our intent to pour salt into the wounds of farmers already suffering from the ills of the historical development of U.S. agriculture to which you rightly refer, but rather to point

in the direction of some good news: some farmers who did not follow the conventional wisdom of the predominant "experts" are not hurting as bad now. What looked like foolishness not so long ago may offer the neighbors of these non-conformists some hope. A major point the authors make is that the economic "bottom line" has been more persuasive than environmental doctrines among the farmers they had studied who were adopting low-input technologies, although these technologies are also environmentally benign - contrary to some practices the "bottom line" in conventional U.S. agriculture has promoted (whether farmers liked it or not). The damage to U.S. water resources impresses the authors more than soil damage - the mining of underground aquifers and the poisoning effects of chemical run-off into water systems from farmlands. If Idaho has escaped this problem, her farmers are to be congratulated.

Dear Editor:

[R]eading the January issue ... two pictures caught my eye. The one on page 2 (pitch fork in hand) [*Grant Wood's "American Gothic" drawn by a cartoonist with a mortgage foreclosure notice in the other hand*] has done more damage to farmers, farming, and agriculture since it was painted than anything before or since in my opinion... [I]t portrays farmers...as dumb, unintelligent people...Agriculture and rural business are having enough problems without our city cousins thinking we haven't enough smarts to come in out of the rain. And believe me, there are enough who think that way. The second picture in question is on page 5: the hay loader, rick and horses. What was the purpose of this one?... [L]et's try to make a better image of our agriculture and rural communities.

Leroy F. Perkins
Corydon, Iowa

This editor has never taken Grant Wood's farm couple for dumb - just straight-arrow, hard working, and worried (like many fine farm people I know). It is a bitter commentary now that such people are being driven off the land. As for the hay wagon - pure nostalgia! Your editor helped bring in hay like that on a small farm once. This rig is still in use on the Malachite Small Farm School in Gardner, Colorado.