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Are farmers becoming serfs to Big Ag?

By Jim Nowlan

Based on what I hear from atop my perch in rural central Illinois, I worry that my farmer friends may become but serfs to Big Agriculture. That is, farmers provide the labor, soils and risk in service to a very few global chemical and other ag companies. The farmers must buy their inputs from these few companies, yet the companies call most of the shots and reap the rewards, it seems.

[I grew up a “town boy” in a tiny farm town; never knew much about ag, still don’t. After a career away, I moved back to my hometown. I love my farmer friends and appreciate the bounty of American agriculture, so I yearn to be proved wrong about all this.]

The following is what I observe and also hear from my farmer friends at the back table at Connie’s Country Kitchen in my town.

The farmers buy seeds, but don’t own them; they cannot plant with seed they have harvested. They used to own and work on their equipment; now farmers often lease, because it’s too expensive to buy.

Well, you say, at least farmers can decide what crops they want to plant. Yes, to paraphrase Henry Ford, they may plant any crops they want so long as they are corn and beans. That is because nothing much else is protected by subsidized government crop insurance, which includes some price protection. Thus, the bankers who hold the loans on land and for spring planting needs insist that the farmers buy this insurance, which also indirectly protects Big Ag.

Down the road a piece, my friends Lyndon and Kymberley Hartz farm 15 acres of greens, vegetables, fruits and more in a sustainable way. They produce \$15,000 per acre in product each year, 11 months a year, versus around \$800 per for corn or beans, yet the couple are offered no government risk insurance.

What really sets me off on this topic is dicamba, a herbicide from global-giant BASF, a German company. Dicamba kills all broad leaf plants in its path—except soybeans from seeds from the German company Bayer/Monsanto and a couple of other seed giants. Their seeds are genetically modified to block dicamba. Unfortunately, the spray from applying dicamba sometimes drifts over nearby farmers' fields, where it kills their crops as well—unless of course those farmers also plant Bayer/Monsanto seeds.

I heard a recent NPR report in which a farmer said his local seed salespeople were marketing these dicamba-protective seeds—as the only defense against dicamba! “Buy from us, or else!” If there is anything to this, it illustrates the word predatory.

Further, I have an agronomist friend who ran a successful soil-testing business for decades. Friend provides this background: After waging WWII by building huge stocks of munitions, chemical companies had to look elsewhere to develop uses for their chemicals. They turned to pharmaceuticals and agriculture.

Since then the companies, consolidating along the way into a handful of behemoths, have directed their research—and that of our land grant ag research schools—toward how to use more of their chemicals to grow ever more bountiful crops.

But agronomist friend worries that we have transformed our natural biosystem, with its rich, water-retaining organic matter, into unnatural chemical factories. As a result, organic matter in

the soil is down, critical water retention rates are therefore also down, and the once-spongy soils are now susceptible to compacting into concrete-like surfaces.

Maybe drenching the soil in multiple chemicals every year is for the best. Yet, there are consequences; note the expanding aquatic dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, spawned by nitrogen fertilizer runoff in the Midwest, which ultimately reaches the Mississippi.

Farmers have always been vulnerable to the vicissitudes of weather, market speculators, supply-and-demand volatility. So, maybe most farmers appreciate having others make all the big decisions for them.

Yet there is much media chatter at present about how farmer profits are down or negative, while Big Ag prices for inputs, as well as their profits, have soared in recent years.

I have questions, not answers: Can and should farmers share more in the fruits of their labor?

Can American farmers create big cooperatives that would own input production and share profits with farmer-owners? Should the handful of global Big Ag companies be broken up?

What is the future for the yeoman farmer? And whither are we tending with all our chemicals, and with our soils?

Maybe we will conclude that all is hunky-dory. Yet this town boy worries about the future for his friends at the back table at Connie's Country Kitchen.