

## Keeping farms in the hands of farmers

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The rancher who stood up wore scuffed boots. His aged jeans had never seen acid wash, only dirt and rock. His face was sunburned and creased. He wore thick eyeglasses with heavy plastic frames. These were not the kind of frames that metrosexuals wear with such studied irony. They were stained white with sweat. His drooping moustache was a similar color. This man was one of several hundred ranchers and environmentalists who had come together in Albuquerque that day, in an attempt to find common ground.

I had been asked to speak about the growing disconnection between the young and the natural world, a topic that seems to bring together people who normally find little in common. I told them a standard story, how when I was eight or nine growing up in the Midwest, I felt an intense sense of ownership of the woods – my woods – that stretched behind my house into what seemed like endless farmland. My sense of ownership was so keen that I pulled out dozens – perhaps hundreds – of survey stakes that I knew had something to do with the earthmovers that were taking out other woods.

“You know that story you told about pulling up stakes?” the man said, after the presentation. “I did that when I was a boy, too.”

The crowd laughed. I laughed.

And then the man began to cry. Despite his embarrassment, he continued on to describe his sense of attachment to his land, and his sense of grief that his might be the last generation of Americans to feel this way. He sat down and looked at his hands. The moved crowd was quiet.

The key to saving what's left of rural West is to keep Americans like this man on their land. The odds of doing that are not favorable.

In a recent issue, Colorado-based High Country News, which covers 11 Western states, reported that in eastern Montana, “populations are wavering at the critical threshold necessary to fund county government.” Retirees cashing out from California and hobby ranchers move into the mountain towns. The older people of the plains leave or die or their children move to away.

But hope survives. A new breed of optimists is creating a new “vanguard agriculture,” as High Country News puts it. (A few weeks ago, in this space, I referred to “green ranchers,” and have since learned that this term sounds too much like, well, the Sierra Club, for most vanguard ranchers' tastes.) Even without the federal subsidies that conventional farmers get, organic farmers and ranchers are creating co-ops and building their own mills and bakeries and packing operations. Some vanguard farmers are also creating full-processing operations, “from seed to sandwich” under the same roof – similar to the microbreweries popular in hip urban centers.

The newspaper describes enterprising Bob Quinn, a Montana farmer who has revived a “nearly forgotten strain of Egyptian wheat called Khorasan, which is extraordinarily high in protein” and best grown on high, dry plains. “Kamut,” as Quinn calls it, is a sweet wheat that can be used in breakfast cereals without sugar.

Quinn is also “growing and brewing” his own biofuel from an oilseed called Camelina. He estimates that three acres of Camelina can supply enough fuel for 100 acres of farming. This is not your grandfather's ranching.

Could vanguard agriculture save the rural West? Maybe. Organic farming is certainly catching on in California, where the number of organic wineries jumped from 6,492 in 2002 acres to 8,000 acres this year. In San Diego County, the nonprofit Tierra Miguel Foundation Farm supplies organic food for the OB Peoples Food Store and sponsors school programs that, according to its Web site, “give kids a chance to be 'Farmer for a Day.' ” When I visited the Tierra Miguel farm, an elementary school teach said her school (only five miles from the farm) has dropped field trips, so she can no longer bring her students there. But someday, farms and ranchers could be the new school yards.

Just as some ranchers charge fees for hunting on their land, vanguard farmers and ranchers might attract extra income offering rural experiences to young city dwellers. If government can pay farmers not to plant seeds, it could help farmers and ranchers plant the seeds of nature in the next generation.

Indeed, in Norway, farmers and teachers are working together to create new curricula. Students there spend part of the school year on the farm, immersed in science, nature and food production. Government helps make that happen, to improve education and to help farmers stay on the land.

Doing something similar here wouldn't save the small farm, not by itself. But it would be one small way to help the rancher who stood up remain on his land. His grandchildren might even be able to stay, too.

Such an approach would work much better than pulling up stakes.

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