

COMMON SENSE FOR GLOBAL CRISES • A PAMPHLET SERIES

Go Farm, Young People, and Help Heal the Country

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The future of rural America is a paradox. A large part of the progressive agenda runs through the countryside: renewable energy, diversified agroecological farming that rebuilds soil health and protects waterways, ecological forestry that promotes biodiversity and stores carbon in both forests and durable wood products, significant land returned to people of color, more wild places.

But at the same time, existing rural alienation has been effectively mobilized to thwart these ambitions (along with the rest of the progressive agenda), thanks to gerrymandering and the outsize power of rural states that is built into our political system. The situation is only getting worse.

A radical imbalance in population has put us in the strange position where a small minority of rural voters controls the fate of the nation, if not the entire planet. Everybody knows this. Various electoral reforms have been suggested, most of which I favor—but, of course, they have been equally thwarted. They cannot be enacted because of the very imbalance they aim to fix. Given this reality, urban progressives are often urged to listen more closely to the concerns of rural voters. I am all for that, and I favor hunting, logging, and raising beef—we do all of those things on our farm. But I don't think merely stating these facts will swing many rural votes.

Here is a more practical solution, progressives: move. Rebuilding rural America will require more people. It will also make the countryside, along with its small towns and cities, a beautiful place to live. My advice is, go now. Light out for the country ahead of the rest. Learn to get along, but live and vote your values. The relocation of a relatively small slice of the citizenry could first enable, and then fulfill, the vision of a just, sustainable world.

When I make this simple suggestion, people look at me as though I am delusional, devious, or possibly dangerous and trying to start a civil war

(like that needs my help). Those with a sense of history start muttering about carpetbaggers, or Bloody Kansas. Well, that's maybe not such bad company, but here is a more peaceful example: Vermont. The Green Mountain State vies with the Cowboy State (Wyoming) as our most rural, but its politics, rock-ribbed conservative at the time of the New Deal, are now flexibly progressive. Like some rare and endangered species of pollinator, Vermont is the [rural blue anomaly](#). How did that happen?

There might be several reasons, but let's not discount an invasion of hippies. During the 1970s, an estimated 35,000 back-to-the-landers [flocked to Vermont](#), letting their freak flag fly. Others moved to western Massachusetts and southern Maine, and a few even settled in New Hampshire, West Virginia, and Arkansas, god love 'em. They amused the locals, but if they demonstrated that they were capable of learning anything, the locals, being neighborly, [helped them out](#). Only a few survived as farmers, but it was significantly more than zero, and all the rest did not go crawling back to the city—unless you want to count Burlington. They grew up. Many stayed on and became contractors, teachers, small business owners, social workers, and senators. For decades they have served on town boards, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The new rural culture they helped forge has drawn another generation to tend the same rocky ground. The New England rural economy still isn't that great, but after college and a few years spent enjoying the bright lights, some of their offspring miss the stars and find their way home, and more keep coming. For better or worse, this influx of flatlanders has remade Vermont. Forgive me, woodchucks, but I would say for the better.

Northern Maine, by comparison, where fewer young people ventured a generation ago, has been reduced to a flattened paper industry and old potato fields full of pucker brush, and votes more like central Pennsylvania. That is a calamity, but also an opportunity. Such economically distressed places need a new generation of farmers and loggers practicing new kinds of land stewardship that are aimed both at sustainable production and healing the planet. Let's get more people out there running for school board—and building soil.

For more than a century rural America has endured a boom-and-bust economy that has supplied wealthy processors with cheap food, timber, and fuel, but has left the countryside impoverished, and nearly deserted.

Rural America hasn't been "left behind" in the march of progress—it has been systematically gutted. The conservative agenda does not address this grinding reality—it just exploits it. It capitalizes politically upon the pain it has wrought economically. Simply accepting this catastrophe as an immutable fact of modern civilization is not a viable political strategy.

To succeed, a national progressive movement has to offer a better hope for the country. It cannot get home with a metropolitan, coastal constituency alone. It might succeed, though, by empowering rural people to replace that extractive economy with an *attractive* economy and by repopulating the countryside with enough young people to help drive change. As long as rural votes count more than urban votes, isn't it just common sense to encourage a couple million people and their poorly distributed political weight to leave the cities and suburbs and reinhabit the countryside? Going back to the land has become a matter of national survival. Rural America has been gerrymandered by a century of depopulation to be ripe for transformation by a new back-to-the-land movement, and a relative handful of migrants would do it. Call it the Vermont strategy.

A vision for sustainable development that would join urban and rural areas in common cause does not need to be invented; it already exists. It can be found in the blossoming local food movement, in the budding local **wood movement**, and in the drive for a regenerative low-carbon economy—now given political shape as the Green New Deal. These vigorous initiatives, at their best, are connected through networks of land trusts, sustainable farm and forest organizations, and advocates of healthy eating and food justice. All they need is more money. A lot more.

The people to drive it are ready, too. Right now, the local food movement is being energized by another wave of young people who want to become farmers. Having done that in the 1970s, and then watched as interest waned for a few decades, I have been encouraged to see this new surge (which began around the turn of the century) prove more tenacious. But it is still up against long odds and cannot prevail without patient financial support.

Farming is a noble calling, but a cruel business that has long been precisely engineered to drive small farmers out. To succeed, these young farmers will need more than a good "business plan." As the business of

farming is structured in America, the plan is for most of them to fail. What these intrepid young people need are new mechanisms, first to connect them with land on favorable terms, and second to empower them to manage those farms and woodlands in ways that deliver a wide range of social and environmental benefits—not just a flood of cheap commodities. The real business of farmers, young and old alike, should be not only to grow food, but also to make the countryside beautiful. The plan should be to pay them not just for their produce, but also for their service to the planet.

Ultimately, government support will be needed to help such farmers stay on the land and flourish, in place of the current policy of subsidizing those who serve a market economy that is relentlessly skewed towards cheap extraction. There would be nothing new about that—it's just the New Deal made new again, only this time greener and racially just. But it will be difficult for such policies to be enacted, funded, and carried out without the rural constituents in place to demand them. Therefore, we need to start with a new kind of private investment in land and with the migration of people. Those with the means to do so should be investing heavily in building healthy rural economies and in repopulating the countryside.

Of course, we also need a powerful food-justice movement in our cities, with urban forests and thousands of acres of neighborhood-controlled intensive gardens. But, I tell my students, there are already plenty of city people working on that. They need funding, they need allies, but they don't need *you*. Look: the equally beautiful and deserving countryside is sitting there half empty, expressing its righteous anger at the liberal elite by perpetuating its own ruin. We don't need more white suburban kids going off to combat food apartheid in the city—we need more black city kids getting access to land in the country. We don't need young men to go West and grow up with the country anymore, as Horace Greeley supposedly urged at the height of manifest destiny. We need young people of all kinds to help resettle depopulated rural districts in a more just and enduring way. Do the math, and move where it matters. Go farm—just don't go it alone.

Building Regional Regenerative Visions: A New England Example

What would such a regenerative rural economy look like? Each region is different in what it can grow, of course, but there are some common

principles. One concerns how land is owned and occupied, and the other how food and wood are produced. Forest and farmland must be conserved for the common good, but at the same time made accessible on secure terms to small and medium-sized producers. To thrive, these farmers and loggers (I could add **fishers** to that, but that isn't something I know as much about) will need to sell a substantial portion of their products and ecological services in strongly supported local and regional markets, thus rebuilding rural economies.

Why smaller, family-sized farmers? Isn't that just pure nostalgia? First, favoring smaller producers means more people to maintain viable rural communities and more widely dispersed landholding: it is more democratic. The agrarian ideal, for all its flaws, envisioned the countryside not so much as a storehouse of extractable wealth, but as the stronghold of self-reliant citizens. There is still something to be said for that. Second, smaller producers are capable of high production while still taking good care of the land—the kind of ecological intensification we need to survive, let alone prosper, in a warming world pushing ten billion people. Larger producers may achieve economies of scale and more “efficient” extraction, but that is largely thanks to negative social and environmental externalities—workers exploited, waterways polluted, people made sick by hyper-processed food, biodiversity poisoned and swept away, collapsing communities. By contrast, well-supported smaller producers can generate positive *internalities*: not only healthy food and wood but a healthy landscape that engages people and supports communities. Places where people want to live.

Such social and ecological intensification has real economic value that exceeds the cash returns of the material produced: it will help attract even *more* people to return to rural communities, which is where the greater economic growth lies. Local production of both food and wood should be explicitly aimed at broader social goals: food justice, healthy eating, affordable housing, and community development. This is not so much about shortening food miles; it is about building local connections. It embraces both city and country, and it links them with a common set of principles running from sustainable rural production to urban access to healthy natural products.

Here in New England, such a vision is being advanced by a broad network including **Wildlands and Woodlands** and **Food Solutions New**

England, among many others. This vision spans the region from Boston Common to the Northeast Kingdom, from Aroostook to Bridgeport, and highlights the reinforcing social benefits—biodiversity, water protection, climate mitigation, recreation, broad access to local food and wood products—that are conferred by forests and farmland in urban, suburban, and rural settings. It calls for protecting at least 70 percent of the land in conserved forests (including at least 10 percent wildlands), and at least 7 percent in conserved farmlands—all the farmland we have left, plus any more we might borrow again from the forest in the future. Even this heavily reforested region could sustainably produce all of its own wood products, and half of its own food. The other half, primarily grains and oils, would still need to be purchased from the Midwest—a reasonable balance for the densely populated Northeast.

In this way, environmental goals would be achieved not by shielding the landscape from human use, but by promoting forms of productive stewardship that are designed to foster those benefits. Ecological intensification would revolve mainly around perennial crops: trees and grass. New England would still be covered by mature forest, including both long-rotation timber stands and old-growth wild reserves. But every year, a small percentage of the landscape would be returned to patches of early successional regenerating forest (or kept in uneven-aged stands, depending on the forest type). Another part would be maintained in orchards, pastures, and hayfields, managed for the benefit of grassland birds and pollinators. A relatively minute, heavily manured, intensively managed sliver of cropland (about 1 percent of the landscape) could supply the great bulk of New England's vegetables. This mosaic would sustain a full range of biodiversity, even as the climate changes.

A resilient landscape dominated by trees and grass is also inherently well-structured to protect water quality, as long as low-impact timber harvesting and farming designed to limit sediment and nutrient runoff are enforced. Similarly, this would be a landscape predisposed to mitigating climate change by reducing the region's energy footprint and employing regenerative farming and forestry methods aimed at healthy soils and carbon storage. None of these benefits will be automatic—they will require hard work and close attention. But they cannot be obtained in a system driven only by the bottom line of extracted profit.

In this vision for the future, nature is not just set aside for the passive benefits it confers unassisted, but is engaged with sustainably, which reinvigorates the rural economy. Production is designed to yield not only commodities but also communities. One can imagine similar visions for other regions, such as for the Midwest, replacing fencerow-to-fencerow herbicide-soaked corn and soybeans with legume-grain rotations, permanent pasture, prairie strips, savanna-like agroforestry, riparian forests, and [perennial grain crops](#). Taking good care of the land in this way demands that we have *more* people working in the countryside, not fewer, and that we pay them well. This is a “[Shared Earth](#)” vision, unapologetically anthropocentric, but at the same time profoundly bio-inclusive. How can it be achieved?

Regenerative Rural Investment Strategies

Accomplishing a vision for rural regeneration will require an enormous surge of investment in the countryside—but investment that expects a different kind of return. Who will buy and protect American forests and farmland and reverse the trend towards consolidation in the hands of the few? Ultimately, the land needs to be owned by those who are committed to maximizing common values, not simply individual enrichment. Investing in rural land should no longer be driven by its rising value for extraction or development (as real estate investment ordinarily is), but instead must be enlisted in the existential planetary struggle for sustainable production and conservation.

Who might these countercyclical angel investors be? They might be owners who keep the land intact and limit their return to what can be gained by regenerative practices, and who partner with land trusts to protect the property so that their good work can endure beyond their own possession. This can take many forms—tribal lands, community forests, farmland commonly owned by co-ops, privately owned land that is protected by conservation easements.

My first exhibit is our farm, which we own jointly with another family. We raise grass-finished beef, pastured pigs, winter squash, and timber on 170 acres. At the time we bought the farm, it was already in the process of being protected by a state “[Agricultural Preservation Restriction](#),” facilitated by [Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust](#). Before the APR was

finalized, we split off a small lot where we built a house for the second family (us), using timber from our woodlot. The new house stands adjacent to the existing farmhouse and barn. While neither house is legally tied to the farm partnership, in all likelihood the future owners of these homes will also own a stake in the farm just as we do, so we have created a new unit of rural housing without fragmenting the working farm and woodland upon which it sits. Instead of dividing the farm, we divided the ownership and put the houses together. In time, our place may descend to a slew of bickering heirs—but however they work it out, they will never be able to subdivide the property or sell it to a developer. Somebody will have to farm it.

Because the APR is a “working farm easement,” our land will always remain a farm. We strive to break even while making improvements such as new buildings and fences, so I guess you could call it a hobby farm—though a pretty strenuous hobby for farmers who can sort of remember when Richard Nixon was *vice*-president. It is a working farm, and we do the work. In time, our enterprise will pass to others who may work it more intensively—perhaps our children, or other ambitious young people we partner with, or lease to, or ultimately sell to. Though our investment is primarily for our own enjoyment, through us the farm is much more productively managed than it was before we bought it, and it is primed for the future.

Clearly, we need a large increase in the flow of funds from government and philanthropy to land trusts that partner with private owners to protect working farms. But this would still limit ownership to those who have the resources to purchase the property, like us. Even after the easement has been applied, that is hardly everyone—in our case, it took two families with decent professional incomes. Without the easement, forget it: the price of rural land is rising rapidly in the wake of the pandemic, putting it out of reach of most who would like to farm. We need ways not only to protect farmland but also to broaden the pool of those who can gain access and get into farming. [Working farm easements](#) are good, but not the only solution.

Another way is to separate the farming from the owning but to keep the tenure secure. Down the road from us is [Simple Gifts Farm](#), where our friends Jeremy Barker-Plotkin and Dave Tepfer run a more intensive integrated produce and livestock operation, with a [CSA](#) and farm stand.

The farmers own the business and some of the buildings, but they do not own the land. Instead, they have a long-term renewable lease from [North Amherst Community Farm](#), a nonprofit that was formed to conserve the farmland when it was about to be sold for development. This was accomplished through private contributions, a reduced price from the owner, help from the town and [Kestrel Land Trust](#), and a state APR. Adjoining lots were carved off where the two farm families built their houses. The existing farmhouse has been rehabbed to (get this) house farmers. The farmers can run their business and live by the property; the group of neighbors owns the land, allows public access, and runs educational programs. This model of cooperative land ownership, with the farmland leased to a grower and sites reserved for farmer housing, has great promise for regenerating the countryside.

You can find many similar examples springing up around the country. [Poudre Valley Community Farms](#), in Colorado, is a land cooperative that purchases farmland and then leases it long-term to farmers. One such farm is part of a collaboration with a planned community development, or “agrihood,” as they are called. Similarly, the [Sustainable Iowa Land Trust](#) not only protects farmland through easements but also makes land available through affordable long-term leases, often targeting beginning farmers. Back in Vermont, the [Cobb Hill Cohousing](#) community leases land to [Cedar Mountain Farm](#) and manages other farm and forest enterprises on the property. Across the state, [Bread and Butter Farm](#) has worked with a host of community partners to protect, purchase, and lease farmland, and is planning to move from owning land to an “[agrarian commons](#)” model in which the land is held by a community nonprofit, which then leases it back to farmers at a more affordable rate.

Bread and Butter is partnering with [Agrarian Trust](#), which is pioneering such agrarian commons across the country. Farmland, once acquired and protected, is leased by a local commons board to growers, for ninety-nine years. This relieves farmers from having to sink a big chunk of their income into mortgage payments, which they can only recoup by cashing out. Farmers whose retirement savings are tied up in their land often find it impossible to pass the farm along even to their children, without saddling them with a crushing load of debt. Under the agrarian commons model, the farmer owns only the buildings and the business. They can eventually pass that equity to a younger farmer who has the skills but may lack the

capital to purchase the underlying land itself. Agrarian Trust is pledged to work with historically marginalized people and communities, to help get them onto land. Another fledgling organization, the [Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust](#), is dedicated to reconnecting BIPOC farmers to land using a similar model. Groups such as [World Farmers](#), [New Entry](#), and [Pine Island Community Farm](#) of the Vermont Land Trust are working to provide immigrant farmers with training, resources, and land.

The mechanisms are prepared. The great challenge remains to acquire the land. Rural land is rising in value, due to pressure from two groups of wealthy buyers. One is speculators—neighboring large-scale farmers, billionaires, Wall Street investment firms. The other is affluent covid refugees—which, in regions like the Northeast, we expect to morph into climate refugees and keep on coming. At the very least, those of you fleeing the city who profess progressive values should recognize that you have an opportunity, nay an obligation, to invest in something larger than your own private sanctuary. You can help protect land and underwrite its resettlement by young farmers. If you and your money are coming, please bring along some capable people, or engage locals to do useful things like caring for your land on generous terms. The planet will thank you.

In many of these examples, the initiative comes from non-farmers who want to live around farms, and who are willing to put time and money into it. But we need to mobilize more than the capital of those who are themselves moving to the country. Imagine “common land investment funds” that would acquire farm and forest land on a larger scale and then make it available to farmers on favorable terms, while permanently protecting it. The return on such investments would run below the market rate, by definition. But they could yield a long, slow return through a combination of affordable leases, selling easements, selling protected land to farmers who still prefer to own, and selling selected lots for housing. Such slow money funds might not be able to compete directly with flush speculators, but don’t despair—land purchased for speculation will be sold again. All we need to do is move enough people to the countryside to enable the passage of a more just tax and regulatory structure that will make holding land for extraction unprofitable—then they can sell to us at a loss. This is similar to what needs to happen to the subterranean assets of fossil fuel companies, in that case rendering them worthless. Both are necessary, both will be

difficult. But at least in the case of protecting farmland from speculation, time is on our side. The land will outlive the market economy, I promise.

Secure, affordable access to land is only half the battle, though—small farms must also be economically viable. For the most part, sustainable farming and logging cannot compete with extractive producers and survive without some kind of outside support—there is no shame in that. Today, that subsidy comes mostly from the farmer’s own back pocket—some other source of family income that makes up for the inadequate return, or sheer loss, from the sale of what is produced. The majority of American farmers are, in effect, hobby farmers, whether they admit it or not. They farm primarily for love. People keep saying this self-exploitation is “economically unsustainable,” yet it has persisted for generations, with, of course, fewer and fewer farmers. What could improve it?

What farmers ultimately need is **parity**: that is, equitably apportioned control over production, combined with price supports that guarantee costs are covered, and a decent living. To earn such support, producers would have to meet high standards of agroecological practice and pay a living wage to their farmworkers. But parity seems more likely to be achieved by the consummation of the political struggle I have been describing than to be enacted preemptively to drive that transformation. To work in that direction, we need to do two things: broaden the pool of consumers who have access to sustainably produced food and wood, and make payments to farmers and forest owners for providing ecological services.

Just, sustainable food costs more than conventional fast food—that is as it should be. You cannot internalize all the unpaid social costs that make industrial food cheap and expect to sell healthy food at the same price. But this restricts the number of consumers who can afford to buy it, which is itself unjust, and in turn, limits the number of producers who can serve those niche markets. Ultimately, the cure for this ailment lies in a broad package of progressive reforms: a living wage, universal health care, affordable housing and education. **Consumer expenditure surveys** show that people who are more secure and have more money to spend, spend more money on food. Healthy, local food is something that a decent middle-class income should be able to afford. Until sweeping measures can be passed that would enable more people to make such choices

without assistance, we need greatly increased funding for programs to expand access to healthy food for all. Maintaining adequate SNAP benefits would be a good place to start. So would farm-to-plate programs for schools and hospitals, and “[healthy incentive](#)” programs that augment SNAP dollars when redeemed for local produce. Such programs can be deliberately tied to supporting local and regional agriculture.

Similarly, affordable housing can help support sustainable forestry. The nation faces a housing crisis, and wood remains the best way to build. Community housing projects should employ not the cheapest available materials, but sustainable timber from the surrounding countryside. This would realize another dual benefit, matching urban needs with rural jobs while creating housing that is a credit to any community. Such housing will be a joy to live in and people will care for it, so it will last. New mass timber technologies, which are far more climate friendly than concrete and steel, can be [an important part of the solution](#)—as long as the timber comes from forests that are equally well cared for, so they will last, too, in their full beauty and complexity. That will increase short-term costs, but multiply long-term benefits. This urban-to-rural connection, which is being energetically promoted by the [New England Forestry Foundation](#), should be actively endorsed by state climate-action plans, as it is in the [Massachusetts Decarbonization Roadmap](#).

The best way to promote sustainable food and wood production, primarily (though not entirely) in rural areas, is by directly funding socially just food and housing programs, primarily (though not entirely) in urban areas. The commitment to a regenerative rural economy can work in harness with a parallel green agenda to revitalize America’s cities. Indeed, the inner city and the back forty share a legacy of exploitation and abandonment. They should share a common future of empowerment and regeneration.

Farmers can also be paid directly for ecosystem services, such as protecting water quality, providing diverse habitats, and sequestering carbon. That way, they will not be placed at a disadvantage by farming in ways that protect the land. For example, [Vermont farmers are being compensated](#) for taking up practices that prevent phosphorous runoff into Lake Champlain. [Forest owners](#) can be rewarded for practices such as lengthening harvest rotations that maximize the long-term accumulation of carbon on the landscape, as well as in building materials. Taken

together, payments for ecosystem services and expanding the market for sustainable products can take us a long way towards parity, keeping small and medium producers on the land.

Back to Back-to-the-Land

A healthy countryside will require more stewards, so we should start sending them now. Some of these aspiring farmers will come from our cities and suburbs, others from rural cultures around the world who have immigrated to our country but have not forgotten their heritage. A meaningful part of the support for connecting farmers to land should be devoted to historically exploited people, such as the children of immigrant farmworkers, the descendants of African slaves, and the indigenous people from whom the land was taken in the first place. This would go some way towards making amends. It would also take advantage of the powerful traditions of caring for the land that these cultures possess but have long been prevented from fully enacting.

Creating neighborhoods of diversified farms in charming rural townships, with ties to urban consumers, will attract other businesses such as farm-to-table restaurants, craft breweries, cider makers, artisanal bakers, cheese makers, woodworkers, farm vacation rentals, and bed and breakfasts. This is already happening. Rural charm is not dreamy nostalgia: if enough people share that dream and are willing to pay to enjoy it, charm is fungible. Agrarian revival can also engender village and mill town renewal—many small urban places have attractive ridgetop or waterfront settings and lovely old buildings to restore. They just need to be rescued from a century of neglect. We need a unified vision of rural and small-town cultural and ecological renewal.

The combination of thriving farms, woodlands, and communities will attract retirees and telecommuters, but we need better outcomes than the market economy naturally yields—failing farms and untended forests being chipped away by the onslaught of bulbous houses with extravagant, rail-fenced lawns, dumping more pesticides and fertilizers into our waterways than a cornfield, overrun by smug deer that can no longer be hunted. We need rural development that safeguards a healthy landscape as an irreplaceable ecological and economic asset, and that creates affordable housing as a necessary part of that landscape.

Fresh investment in conservation and stewardship can draw new people to the countryside and provide satisfying work for existing residents. If such work is compensated at a level that reflects the real skill it requires, young people will stay and raise families. This rebounding population will return rural schools to viable capacity so that kids don't have to be bussed to the next county to field a ball team. Teachers will be paid good salaries and retained because there will be a robust tax base to support them. Doctors and nurses will be drawn back to small towns. In time, regenerative development from the ground up can transform rural culture, both economically and politically.

This transformation will not be without friction, but what transformation ever is? Rural America is changing, one way or another. It has long been treated as a colony of the metropolis for the extraction of resources, the disposal of waste, or for refuge and recreation for the better off. We can let that process play out, or we can try something better. Some rural residents may see an influx of hopeful young farmers and remote information workers as yet another wave of urban colonization, and so it may be. But if urban-to-rural migration brings demand for sustainable farming, logging, and home construction, there are country people who already have the necessary skills and will be glad to take advantage of those opportunities. A surge of economic growth that does not turn the countryside into suburbia will be a welcome change from the long-established norm of pillage and loss. I have lived not only in Massachusetts but in rural Kansas, and I know the countryside is already blessed with many people who hold similar values, working steadfastly against long odds to bring them to fruition. They need our help.

While the resettlement of rural areas may change them culturally, it need not destroy all that went before. Take hunting. Many people moving to rural areas who are not hunters themselves post their land but still allow their neighbors to hunt. They *want* to eat that local venison, slowly braised with woodland mushrooms (hunters give you meat, believe me). They *want* hunters on their land in hopes of protecting their children from Lyme disease—ticks are approximately one billion times more dangerous than archers in tree stands. Newcomers who welcome their neighbors to keep hunting their property are starting off on the right foot. That is how it works

on our place. We farm and log it, our neighbor beyond the woodlot hunts it as he always has. He keeps an eye on that side of it for us, too. I don't know whether our politics align, but our neighborly interests do.

For the past century, American farmers and loggers have been assigned a brutally spare task: supply processors with cheap food and wood, employing ever fewer workers and paying them as little as possible. If they are undocumented and without power to defend themselves, so much the better. Accomplishing this has left the countryside in ruins. The farmers who remain are supremely capable, but almost without neighbors and often without successors, because the stress of farming on such grinding terms kills the dream of independent country living for their children. These people believe to the bottom of their souls that they are called upon to leave their place a little better than they found it, but economic reality often forecloses that possibility. We need to give that next generation of farmers their dream back—and to send them good neighbors. A higher agrarian mission must be resurrected, one worthy of the Grange: to pass along rural places where people *want to live*. Those who believe in that mission should not be counting on some miraculous change in what the market will deliver; rather, they should be investing generously in land, and in more farmers.

It is encouraging that so many progressives, who are mostly cosmopolitan in outlook, love the idea of local food—romanticized though it may be. We are drawn to local food partly because many things we eat really are better when local and fresh, and partly because we don't want to be completely dependent on a destructive global supply chain, where we are all idiots who can't even feed ourselves. But we are drawn mainly because food connects us so intimately to the living world. Many of us like the idea of having farms around, where we can see the good earth even as we partake of it. That is, if it is pastured beef, we do—if it is feedlot beef, probably we don't.

That being so, farmers should be rewarded for the full value of the soil and water that they tend for us in ways we want to see, first through private investment that affords them a secure hold, and ultimately through supportive public policies that need to be won at the ballot box. The object of farming, logging, and fishing is *not* just to produce food and wood as

cheaply as possible. It is to reproduce a beautiful world, over and over again, generation after generation. That is the land we need to get back to.

Go farm, young people. Bring your parents, and vote for the future you are building, where it really counts.

Brian Donahue is associate professor of American Environmental Studies at Brandeis University. He has also been a farmer for almost fifty years. He is author of Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farming and Forestry in a New England Town (Yale University Press, 1999); and co-author of Wildlands and Woodlands, Farmlands and Communities: Broadening the Vision for New England (Harvard Forest, 2017), and of A New England Food Vision (Food Solutions New England, 2014). He is on the board of the Massachusetts Woodland Institute and The Land Institute.

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