ABSTRACT

GROWING A NEW AGRARIAN MYTH:
THE AMERICAN AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT, IDENTITY,
AND THE CALL TO SAVE THE FAMILY FARM

by Ryan J Stockwell

This thesis examines farmers’ changing identity and rhetoric in response to the shifting structure of American agriculture in the mid to late 20th century and places the development of the American Agriculture Movement in historical context. Faced with increasingly competitive markets as a result of rising production, farmers turned to large-scale production for survival. A rapidly declining farm population with growing consumer political power led to concerns that the agrarian way of life—what many believed to be a vital part of America—was quickly dying and that farmers could do little to stop the process. These trends led to transformations in farm identity reflected in changes in farm protest group strategy and rhetoric of the National Farmers Organization of the 1960s to that of the AAM of the late 1970s. Non-farmers, while believing in the agrarian myth, did not see modern farmers as representative of old agrarian values.
GROWING A MODERN AGRARIAN MYTH: THE AMERICAN AGRICULTURE MOVEMENT, IDENTITY, AND THE CALL TO SAVE THE FAMILY FARM

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The Changing Nature of American Agriculture

Throughout American history farmers have reacted to economic troubles with political protest. Faced with continued problems, farmers of the 1970s created the American Agriculture Movement (AAM). Protesting farmers in 1977 sought to rally public support and convince government officials to raise federal assistance to farmers to combat growing difficulties. Tractorcades, the agricultural equivalent of protest marches in the 1960s—dramatized their cause. Members of the AAM, like participants in earlier farm protests such as populism and the Farm Holiday Movement, argued that farmers represented Jeffersonian agrarianism: they were God’s chosen people, if ever there were such. Unlike earlier agrarian protests, members of the AAM argued not only that the agrarian lifestyle was beneficial to America, but also that it needed to be saved.

The rise of corporate agriculture and consumer political power with the continuing decline in farm population convinced many farmers that they had lost control of federal agriculture policy and that the family farm, once a prominent part of American culture, was becoming extinct. Despite farmers’ pleas to save the family farm, consumers held different values and perspectives. For many urban Americans, the protesting farmers appeared more like the representatives of large agri-businesses threatening to take over family farms than the last generation of small farmers seeking to save a dying way of life. Moreover, rising food costs threatened consumers more than the perceived loss of an American ideal. Farmers of the AAM confronted not only technological, economic and political change, but also changing attitudes and social values toward farming and technology.

American agriculture experienced radical changes in the 20th century. During this period, every aspect of life and work was transformed through technological advances. The introduction of hybrid seeds increased total production and per acre output while the development of gasoline-powered tractors allowed farmers to expand acreage and to plant and harvest crops faster than farmers of the 19th century ever dreamed possible. The spread of electricity to rural areas opened a whole new world to farmers and farm families. Within years of rural electrification, almost every chore on the farm, from
milking the cows to washing the clothes, became electrified to ease the workload and improve the rural standard of living. For Americans, this represented the arrival of the modern age where industrialization and technology provided the possibility for a quality of life inconceivable before that time. Few could escape the changes occurring in the 20th century and few wished to do so. In fact, farm families openly welcomed changes in living and working environments.

While most agricultural historians, especially of the last twenty years, note the nostalgic view farmers took toward old work methods and social patterns, they often ignore farm family desires to live easier lives and the new technology which enabled them to do so. Few farmers truly wished to go back to simpler times where small farms, relatively shielded from world events and the world economy, represented the standard. Only recent historical interpretations have noted that changes in production provided a standard of living that few farmers, despite their yearning for the past, would willingly give up. It is important to note, however, that farmers realized and experienced problems as part of the rapidly developing agriculture that they had not experienced before. They had little knowledge in dealing with problems of rising costs and declining income brought about by overproduction and falling farm prices.

By the 1960s, farming had become a business that depended on management skills much like any other business. It required handling labor, machines, plants and animals for maximum output. This often forced farmers to hire cheap labor or, when that was not available, labor-saving devices to replace labor entirely; labor that was once supplied by large families that had, by the 1960s, declined in size comparable to urban families.

More important than technological trends were the economic and social values behind them. For many farmers, the decision to implement costly equipment was based on simple economics. The idea of technology itself had an unseen yet unmistakable influence over people in the 20th century. Industrialized agriculture represented farmers’ acceptance of dominant social values of increased production. Yet the idea of technology as “progress” or “modernization” contained important biases and implications for everyone, not just farmers, in the 1960s and 1970s. To refuse to use new technology would be a rejection of these social values. Farmers who kept older systems of small-
scale agriculture were often considered backwards or ignorant. Throughout the 20th century, farmers sought to remove the stigma of limited education and of reactionary attitudes. They attempted to prove to the urban population that they were capable and dependable producers. They bought into urban values of modernization and progress through technology, despite the risks involved.\[1\]

For farmers of the 1960s and 1970s, two solutions appeared that held the possibility of solving problems of over-production. Many believed further integration into the world market would provide a safety valve for America’s abundant crops. Farmers called for increased trade that would allow American farmers to continue to produce surpluses, but would provide an outlet to dump surpluses. Farmers of the 1960s and late 1970s found out, however, that other nations were not always receptive to that idea. Farmers also turned toward domestic politics in search of a solution. Since the 1930s, farmers have been aided by government programs that not only helped them produce more through the extension service and land grant universities that have provided new information and developed new equipment, but have also protected them from overproduction with subsidies and support prices.

This is a study of political action, beliefs and values of farmers; to be sure, but the promises made by political incumbents and hopeful challengers during election years are just that, mere promises and are not really useful here. Politicians have often thrown promises around to every imaginable voting group to get votes. In order to get to the heart of political values of the various presidential administrations, one must look at the how they distributed resources and funds through government spending. More important, the way in which administrations dealt with various farm protests is more telling than election year promises or budgetary funding made years before farm problems or protests developed. One will see in this study that, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, administrations refused to take strong action to aid farm communities for fear of inflationary results and a consumer backlash.

Despite seeking obvious pathways to resolve the overproduction situation, farmers, for their part, were often unwilling to change the way they farmed. They had

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become so imbued with the technological spirit of progress and modernization that producing more appeared to be the only option to saving themselves from economic ruin. Unfortunately for farmers, few acknowledged that millions of farmers producing as much as possible on an individual level only exacerbated the problem of collective overproduction.

All of these factors—technological change and associated social values, chronic overproduction, continued attempts by farmers seeking help from the federal government, global integration of markets and the development of consumer political power—altered the way agriculture policy was formed in the 1970s and eventually led to a change in the way farmers appealed to government and the public. Members of the American Agriculture Movement of the late 1970s sought to solve problems stemming from overproduction with appeals to saving the family farm. The movement built on lessons learned in the National Farmers Organization (NFO) milk strike of March 1967, the last of the widespread and relatively peaceful holding actions by the NFO before its years of militancy.

In the years between the protests of the NFO and the AAM, economic and political developments altered the farmers’ world, but also, and perhaps more important, the way in which they viewed themselves in the world. While the NFO milk strike and the AAM tractorcades both sought to alleviate problems stemming from overproduction, the ways in which farmers of the two groups addressed the situation and whom they addressed to find solutions were radically different. The well-established argument to “save the family farm” that became the major message of the AAM was not present in NFO battles. This development exemplifies the changing nature of farmers’ self-view.

To understand farmers’ changing identity and protest style they must be placed in historical context. Besides the consumer movement that raised people’s awareness of consumer interests and the farm workers movement that brought widespread attention to large scale farming, four events or trends played important roles in shaping farmers’ worldview and their arguments for public support. The continuing Cold War and world politics had a direct impact on the markets available to farmers. Established in 1954, Public Law 480, commonly known as the Food for Peace program, used surplus farm commodities as a weapon against the spread of Communism. Unfortunately for farmers
and nations in desperate need for food, the federal government periodically withheld food as a protest against Soviet expansion, as in the grain embargo of 1979, or to bring down domestic retail prices, as in the 1975 grain embargo.

Farm labor issues of the 1960s and 1970s also had an impact on the debate to save the family farm. For the most part, farm labor issues were restricted to the Pacific Coast and the Deep South where fruits and vegetables were the main agricultural products. Farmers of the AAM consisted mainly of wheat and corn growers, dairy farmers, and livestock producers of the South, Mid-West, and Plains regions that required little farm labor. Consumers developed an awareness of farm labor issues that shaped the way they looked at all farmers in general, but also made them more aware of growing differences between large industrial farms and smaller family farms. The well-publicized ill treatment of migrant farm workers led the general public to question the morality of large farms that abused hard working laborers. In this sense, the farm labor issue heightened public awareness of the innocence of family farms in a rapidly changing agricultural world.

Increasing costs of food packaging and rising efficiency of farmers shifted more of the retail income to food processors and away from producers. While consumers paid more for their food, farmers received less, creating all sorts of questions and tensions. Consumers and farmers asked how one group had to pay more when the other received less. Both groups felt uneasy about the economic impacts of industrializing agriculture. Feeling nostalgic for the past, few farmers or city dwellers wished to see the predicted passing of the family farm and takeover by corporate agriculture.

Many agricultural historians, such as Harold Breimyer, have noted that to urbanites the family farm stood “for democracy in its purest and most classic form, a better world, past but not quite lost.” Most Americans possessed conflicting views of farming. While they still believed in the agrarian myth, they also wanted cheaper food. Industrialization made this possible. The battle against inflation and high food prices in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s became a major factor in forcing many farmers out of business. The federal government maintained high interest rates in hopes of

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limiting the amount of money in circulation to bring down inflation. Farmers seeking to purchase new technology depended on loans to pay for expensive purchases. With dwindling returns on their commodities, farmers in debt often failed to pay back loans, forcing them to sell the farm.3

The importance of technological developments cannot be ignored when studying agricultural history. In examining various technological developments, I will focus on the results of those developments and suggest how they directed the way farmers dealt with their economic stability. For simplicity I will mention technological developments where needed, but for the most part, I will keep the treatment in broad terms. I hope to show the impact technological change in agriculture had on farmers’ identity, beliefs, and values as well as on their actions off of the farm in political life.

This thesis will demonstrate the way in which farmers of the 1970s changed their attitude and identity, as well as their political message in the face of continuing concerns and new threats. Much like earlier farm movements of the 20th century, the American Agriculture Movement arose in midst of economic struggles brought on by overproduction. Farmers throughout this time, and particularly in the post-World War II era, accepted dominant social beliefs about business, industrialization and technology. Protests such as those by the National Farmers Organization reflect farmers’ identity as producers and businessmen, not necessarily as family farmers. With the rapid development of corporate farming and increasing competition in agriculture, especially in the post-World War II period, farmers began to worry that smaller farms and the associated way of life were dying. Confronted with continuing struggles and new issues, farmers of the AAM, armed with a new mentality and identity, turned toward the urban public, which now held control of agriculture policy, to save the family farm. Urban concerns about rising food costs and inconsistencies between the AAM message and its articulation through tractorcades led many Americans to perceive AAM protesters as representative of the forces working against smaller farms, rather than their saviors, undermining the force of their critique.

The National Farmers Organization and the Right to Organize

For the most part trends in farming during the 1960s and 1970s merely continued patterns evident in the 1940s and 1950s. Farm population declined, mainly due to greater opportunity in urban areas, easier transportation to off-farm employment and rising farm costs coupled with falling income. All of these factors helped push rural people to urban areas. In 1950, 23 million farmers represented 15 percent of the national population. By 1960, 15.6 million farmers represented 8.7 percent of the total population. As much as these numbers speak about the changing nature of agriculture, they fail to reflect the nature of farms and farm work throughout this period. With improving farm technology, farming required less work, but more monetary investment. Farmers found themselves with more time on their hands, but needing more money to pay for more land, animals, or equipment. By the mid-1950s, more than 630,000 farmers farmed on a part-time basis, picking up second jobs to help pay for farm expenses. Farmwomen, freed from major farm work, provided a stable source of income for farm families. Increasingly they took off-farm jobs to help cover farm expenses and improve their standard of living.

Despite the decline in farm population and farm size, the total acres farmed and the output per acre both rose through the 1960s and 1970s. From 1945 to 1960, total acreage harvested rose from 324 million acres to 354 million acres. At the same time, per acre output rose 20 to 25 percent due to technological advances. Farm sizes rose in order to pay for this new technology. Forced to “get big or get out,” farmers had to make a choice between increasing farm size through large capital investment to survive or leaving farming to find work that provided a better return on investment and labor.

The changes in agriculture, although revolutionizing the nature of work and the demographics of the farm population, failed to improve farm income. Americans in the 1950s saw an increase in average income from $1,331 to $2,017. American farmers lagged far behind, however, improving from a mere $886 to $1,195 average annual

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4 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 122.
income. This rise in farm income was due mainly to large numbers of poorer farmers leaving agriculture for other occupations.

Changes in politics, brought about by the demographic change, had a direct impact on farmers’ perceptions of government in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the actions they chose to take to confront economic problems. Falling rural populations shifted representation in Congress to mainly suburban and urban districts, away from farm interests to consumer and worker interests. The 1963 Supreme Court “one man, one vote” ruling in the Baker v. Carr decision required periodic redistricting to provide better representation according to population. Before this decision and the rapid decline in farm population, farmers maintained a disproportionate share of political control in Congress due to the nature of representation in the Senate and the House according to outdated population records. Without the power to elect representatives that farmers held through the early 1960s—and which had given them domination for decades—farmers held little hopes of regaining political influence, especially with a dwindling population.

Public policy in the early and mid-1960s was moderately helpful to farmers. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy used the food stamp program to reduce commodity surpluses, raise prices for farmers, provide food to the needy, and yet keep costs low for consumers and taxpayers. The food stamp program quickly received support in urban areas as a solution to under-nourishment regularly experienced by low-income families while also keeping costs low for taxpayers. Since the food stamp program fell under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), urbanites, particularly those opposed to expensive farm subsidies, regularly supported farm bills with moderate economic support to farmers as a trade-off to maintain or strengthen the food stamp program. Rural and urban Congressional representatives regularly traded votes on particular programs and developed a log rolling system that allowed farmers to maintain some political power. The Great Society’s domestic programs such as the War on Poverty maintained the importance of a plentiful and dependable food supply allowed farmers to maintain some political power through the 1960s. By the late 1960s, however, the rift between rural and urban interests widened as urban representatives used their

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7 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 129.
political power to appropriate larger funding to the food stamp program while effectively preventing a similar rise in farm subsidies.

Changes made to the Food and Agriculture Bill of 1965 typified growing consumer power in shaping agriculture policy. The bill originally proposed special charges on food processors to pay for agriculture subsidies and set-aside programs—payments made to farmers for not growing crops on a portion of their acreage. Processors would pass along these charges to the consumer through higher prices. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations opposed the food processing charges since they would raise food costs. The AFL-CIO lobbied the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson and succeeded in removing the special charge and made regular taxes the source of funding for agriculture programs.  

In 1966, President Johnson asked farmers to play a vital role in world politics and in the fight against inflation. Through the Food for Peace program, the Johnson administration hoped to stave off starvation in third world nations and, in the process, prevent communism from taking over these nations. The Johnson administration also hoped that increased food production would slow the rate of inflation that had started as a consequence of growing national debt. Since everyone bought food and could not avoid doing so, any price fluctuations in the food industry had important inflationary implications on the entire economy. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman reduced set-aside limits to allow farmers to increase acreage by 26 percent so they could meet the humanitarian call to feed the world and to increase domestic supply to stem inflation. Increasingly through the 1960s and 1970s, farmers were called on to aid American foreign policy or to meet humanitarian goals of fending off starvation around the world. As in 1966, farmers, for the most part, accepted the call and increased production.

For farmers, like other business leaders, the decision to increase production came down to simple economics. They believed increased production would bring them greater profits. Unfortunately for farmers, they rarely saw the economic consequences of increased production. Some persisted in believing that their own increased production would help them despite collective overproduction which depressed commodity prices. Most farmers viewed farm commodity markets as a zero sum game where one either

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8 Wilson, *Special Interests in Policy Making*, 76.
increased production to stay ahead of falling prices or sat back, merely maintained farm production, and succumbed to the consequences of collective overproduction. After President Johnson’s call to farmers to increase production for the Food for Peace program, wheat farmers responded with a 15 percent increase in production over 1965 levels, which pushed down the price of wheat on the open market from $1.74 per bushel in July 1966 to $1.34 in July 1967.

The consequences of overproduction—not just in wheat in 1967, but in other commodities such as corn, beef, pork, and milk throughout the 1960s—frustrated many farmers. They felt that the government had misled them and no longer offered a fair return for their work. For years farmers believed they deserved more in return for providing a steady and ample food supply to the growing consumer population. Moreover, farmers became frustrated with declining political power. Many of these frustrated farmers turned toward the National Farmers Organization (NFO), which boasted membership rivaling that of the powerful American Farm Bureau Association. Created in 1955 as a lobbying group to raise government price supports, the NFO turned to direct action and became a bargaining agent for farmers. It was an organization that could represent a group of farmers to contract for a set price with processing companies.

In order to understand farmers’ actions, one must understand their beliefs. Many NFO farmers truly believed, regardless of the reality, that they had lost most of their power in shaping agriculture policy and had been suckered into overproduction by the government while processing companies took advantage of farmers and the glut of farm commodities by forcing down commodity prices. Rising prices on the goods farmers needed for production only caused further frustration. Farmers viewed the government as a servant to consumers eager to keep retail food costs low and giant food companies determined to increase profits at the expense of farmers’ income. As one journalist pointed out, “Farmer after farmer recalled to Mr. Freeman the anti-inflation actions taken by the White House a year ago and interpreted them as favoring consumers at the expense of farm prices.” Farmers, moreover, blamed processors and food companies for their problems, often citing the dwindling share of retail food prices going to the

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farmer while the corporate share increased. Farmers in the 1920s took home around 40 percent of the retail cost of bread. By 1967, that percentage had dwindled to around 15 percent. To farmers, the powerful chain store presented a major obstacle to their survival.  

To voice their frustration with the growing economic power of food corporations and the rising cost of products farmers needed, the Farmers Union, a farm organization based mainly in the northern plains and upper Midwest with views similar to the NFO, organized a machine boycott. The organization proposed that farmers refuse to purchase new farm equipment and automobiles to protest prices rising from two to five percent while farm income was falling by as much as ten percent. Most farmers, however, did not heed the boycott call, as machinery sales continued unabated in 1967 due to increased demand for larger equipment that farmers needed to plant and harvest more acres.

Farmers may have blamed their problems on the government and big business, but they did not accuse consumers of using their growing political or economic power to affect farm prices. New York Times writer Douglas Kneeland, who covered farm news in the 1960s and 1970s, noted that “When the farmer catalogues his grievances, it is not the politically powerful urban consumer but the financially potent chain store that appears nearest the top of every list.” This attitude of farmers changed by the mid-1970s as consumers sought an increasing role in farm policy in order to prevent a repeat of the rapid price inflation experienced from 1973 to 1975.

Despite farmers’ refusal to blame consumers for their problems, farmers of the NFO saw consumers as a major part of the solution to falling farm prices. Oren Lee Staley, president of the NFO from its founding in 1955 until his resignation in 1979, presented the farmers’ case to the consumers as one of maintaining a steady supply of food and, in the case of the milk strike of March 1967, of milk.

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If the consumers are going to have an adequate milk supply in the future, they’re going to have to pay an American price for an American product. The farmer is not going to do it for nothing. He’s going out of business.\[13\]

Farmers of the NFO believed they had a legitimate case. Urbanites, concerned about a steady and relatively cheap food source would, once properly informed, accept a slight rise in retail prices to insure the food supply.

The NFO made further arguments about why consumers should allow the withholding of milk in order to get a fair price. Unlike later protests by the American Agriculture Movement that relied on the ideal of saving the family farm and the emotional attachments people held toward such a noble and historic ideal, NFO participants justified their actions on the basis of equal rights. Farmers had the right to organize and strike, just like labor, and also had the right to refuse to market products to get a higher price, just like business. As Oren Lee Staley noted:

> Individual producers cannot compete successfully in today’s organized economy… When you have an organized economy, those who remain unorganized get in a weaker and weaker position. This is the position producers of agricultural commodities have found themselves in.\[16\]

Staley argued that farmers held the right to organize granted to all businessmen and moreover, that farmers should act like businessmen.

And they did, farmers saw themselves as businessmen first with huge investments and narrow profit margins, then as family farmers. The use of the emotional attachment of the family farm did not arise until the mid-1970s after the public became aware of long-term trends in agriculture toward incorporation and industrialization and away from small, independent farms. Staley’s arguments represent the attitude and identity of farmers of the 1960s of businessmen deserving equal rights: “Producers are businessmen

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15 Ibid.
with tremendous investment. They must act like and be like businessmen.” For farmers of the 1960s, the identity of businessmen was also an attempt to earn respect from the urban population that had for so long considered farmers and other rural people inept and out of step with modern values. Farmers believed that if they could show the urban population the businesslike nature of farming, urban Americans would start respecting farmers for their dedication to common values of modernization that increasingly involved application of scientific and technological advances.

With frustration high, the NFO organized a milk withholding action that began on March 15, 1967. Farmers in 25 states, mainly in the Midwest, South, and East dumped their milk rather than ship it to processors to voice their anger with low prices. They hoped that their collective action would drive up the price by two cents per quart. Until that time, they had received eight to ten cents per quart. In hundreds of rural communities, protesting farmers gathered in streets, open fields and at small streams to dump their milk on a daily basis. Farmers held up protest signs, just as they had seen other protest groups do on television, voicing their complaints and demands. The media attended many of these milk dumps to record the events and farmers were more than willing to tell their story.

Thousands of farmers had experiences similar to that of Dale Burdick of Hillsdale Wisconsin. Burdick, with his wife and children, farmed a 157-acre, 40-head dairy farm. Seeing no hope in continuing to farm with falling prices and the debts incurred from the previous year, Burdick decided that dumping his milk was the only option:

We haven’t got anything to lose. Comparing the price we’re asking with what we’ve been getting, we gave it away for 77 days last year…with gross income of $23,000 and expenses of $21,000 I lost about $2,000 if you figure depreciation.

Not only did farming not pay for the Burdick family and the many others like them, but it forced Burdick to work his children to unreasonable levels since they were the only form

17 Oren Lee Staley, NFO Reporter (February 1968), 7 as quoted in Rust, “A Political Analysis of the National Farmers Organization,” 111.
of cheap labor available to try to make ends meet. As he noted, “You have to make your children work such long, hard hours that, well, if a man in town did that to his children they’d put him in jail.”

For the most part, non-farm rural residents supported the milkstrike as a justified action taken by frustrated farmers. For them, farming provided an indirect livelihood in that many owned or worked in businesses that depended on farmers as their customer base. Feed mills, hardware stores, implement dealers, and rural grocery stores felt the difficulty farmers faced every time commodity prices fell. As R.A. Fischer, secretary-treasurer of the Creamery Cooperative in Turtle Lake, Wisconsin noted, “If the farmer doesn’t make money, none of us do. If the farmer makes money, we all make money, right down the line.” Rural communities and businesses faced the problems with their farm neighbors, without the farms that brought in a large portion of their business, most would go bankrupt just like the farmers. Rodney Becker, owner of a grocery store in the Turtle Lake community concluded, “Without a good income from the farmers we might as well not be here. That’s out livelihood.”

Not all farmers supported the withholding actions. Many farmers opted to continue to ship their milk for a variety of reasons. Some decided that even if the money made from the milk produced did not meet operating expenses, they would continue to sell their milk since doing so made more money than dumping it. Refusing to sell milk would only hasten bankruptcy. Other farmers refused to participate because they did not feel demonstration and protest was necessary. They had developed a more efficient farming operation that could survive on lower milk prices. For still others, it was not about economics, but about morals. They could not see the justification of destroying or dumping perfectly good milk; such an idea went against every value of a farmer. Famine and starvation around the world made milk dumping even more upsetting, even if the milk dumped would not help the starving across the globe. The guilt associated with wasting food was not worth the political statement for some farmers.

These divergent values among farmers led to violent confrontations between protesters and those seeking to continue to market their milk. A few days after the start

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19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
of the milkstrike, reports began to surface of farmers shooting at milk trucks and dumping chemicals in milk tanks to contaminate milk of farmers who continued to ship their milk. Farmers who refused to join the protest sometimes found their fences cut or sharp objects placed in their fields that would puncture tractor tires. The NFO had a long history of violence since its first withholding actions. In 1964, during a meat-withholding strike, two protesting farmers were killed at a Bonduel, Wisconsin livestock action barn as a truck entering the auction yard jerked forward while trying to get through the crowd. In other withholding actions, farmers who refused to participate received death threats and awoke in the night to detonating dynamite that destroyed parts of their barns. While the NFO and most of its participating farmers, such as Eugene George of Birchwood, Wisconsin, never supported or took credit for these violent actions, the general public usually associated such violence with the organization, detracting from the political message protesting farmers sought to provide. George represented the majority of NFO farmers who tried to organize their neighbors, but knew that if they could not get others to join it was not worth the animosity. “We still have to live together after this is over,” he said. “I’ve talked to them but if they feel they don’t want to go along—well, it’s their milk.”

The milk strike had little effect nationally, cutting milk shipments on average by a mere two percent. Since milk has a relatively short shelf life and is not suitable for long-distance shipping, the withholding had some impact on the local level. The Nashville, Tennessee area experienced a milk emergency when the normal milk production for the area fell from 12,000 to 1,800 gallons per day. With supplies so limited, authorities directed all available milk to hospitals under police escort. A few cheese factories and milk processing plants shut down in Wisconsin as a result of a drastic cut in the milk flow. But for the most part, consumers felt little impact of the NFO strike with a steady supply of milk at steady prices.

Despite the relative ineffectiveness of the withholding action, consumers voiced anger and resentment for farmers using milk as a device to get more money. Newspaper editorials and cartoons described consumer opposition to what they saw as immoral

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action. Similar to public reaction to the Agriculture Adjustment Administration of the 1930s, many asked how farmers could purposely destroy food or dump milk down the drain while people went hungry. Already frustrated with inflation that pushed up living costs, consumers did not like the idea that farmers withheld milk simply to get more money, which many consumers interpreted would eventually mean higher retail prices if the farmers succeeded in their strike. Oren Lee Staley attempted to justify the action to consumers: “We are not trying to deprive the consuming public of food. We are only trying to get a fair price for dairy farmers.”

Despite these pleas, few could see the situation from the farmers’ perspective. Sam Lester, president of the Nashville Milk Producers, Inc., recognized the primacy of price to consumers:

> If we raise prices locally produced milk will cost about three cents more a quart than milk from Louisville, Bowling Green and elsewhere north of us. How many people will walk into a store and buy the most expensive milk?

On March 29, 1967, two weeks into the withholding action, the Department of Justice filed an injunction in Federal court against the NFO, requiring the farm organization to end the strike. The suit charged that the NFO attempted “to achieve monopoly status through means other than legal organization.” The Justice Department argued that the NFO used violence to coerce or prevent nonmembers and non-participating milk haulers from producing and shipping milk. Some instances of violence did occur. In some cases, milk of non-participants was contaminated to prevent shipment and sale. Reports of tanker trucks being shot at also surfaced. The NFO and Oren Lee Staley repeatedly denied responsibility for the violence, pointing out the NFO stance against the use of violence and the organization’s continued calls on participants to remain nonviolent. Unfortunately for the NFO, a handful of participants took matters into their own hands, using violence to try to get non-participating farmers to join or at least prevent them from shipping milk. Some NFO members hung unexploded sticks of

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dynamite in barn doorways of non-members as a warning if they continued to ship milk
during an NFO strike. These few overzealous members brought negative media
attention to farmers and the NFO and harsh public reaction to the withholding action.

Deciding in favor of the Justice Department’s injunction, Judge Roy L.
Stephenson prohibited the NFO from “threatening, intimidating, harassing, or engaging
in acts of violence.” Judge Stephenson noted that the injunction did not prohibit the
withholding action, just the acts of violence and intimidation against non-participating
farmers and milk haulers. Nonetheless, the injunction immediately and effectively ended
the withholding action after two weeks of protest by farmers seeking higher income
through organized action in the market.

Regardless of the government’s intentions in bringing the injunction against the
NFO milk withholding action, farmers interpreted the move as an anti-inflationary attack
on farmers and a cheap food policy by President Johnson. National Farmers
Organization members and withholding participants believed that without the
government intervention, they would have made some gains in milk prices. Despite their
claims, milk prices in almost every marketing region except the Nashville area remained
relatively stable and showed little sign of impact. Many farmers called for a protest
against the Johnson administration after the end of the milk strike; “Sell your milk and
dump LBJ” became a favorite slogan. Charles Walters, Jr., an NFO farmer who
participated in the 1967 withholding action, described the Justice Department injunction
as “a bomb from the White House [that] ended the milk holding action.” Walters’
views represented typical farmer attitudes towards government. For him and others, the
government had become beholden to consumers, taking any action necessary to keep the
majority happy and to quell the discontent of the growing consumer movement, much
like Russel Fischer, a wheat farmer near Dodge City, Kansas had concluded.

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27 Don Muhm, The NFO: A Farm Belt Rebel: The History of the National Farmers Organization (Lone
Oak Press, 2000), 74.
We need higher prices to meet higher costs, but [President] Johnson wants prices to be held down to keep housewives happy. When we get no return, we are subsidizing the majority. Is that fair?

The Justice Department suit against the NFO was eventually settled in December 1967. The Justice Department dropped the suit when the NFO agreed to notify the Justice Department before each future holding action. In making this agreement the NFO ceded the element of surprise, its only advantage in withholding strikes. The government and food processing companies would now know in advance of any pending strike and could take the necessary measures to avoid food shortages or spikes in costs.

In the years following the milk withholding action, the NFO turned toward more expressive and extreme means of voicing frustration with commodity prices and the increasingly antagonistic role the government had taken to ensure low food costs for the majority urban population. In early 1968, the NFO attempted a grain strike to raise corn prices from $1 to $1.50 per bushel, wheat prices from $1.35 to $2.00 per bushel and soybeans from $2.45 to $3.00 per bushel. The grain strike experienced less violence than the 1967 milk strike, but it still failed to achieve its goals. Wendell Carlson, a farmer near Stratford, Iowa, noted the confusing and frustrating nature of the farm commodity market: “Just why is it that we have to take such a cut in our prices when the consumer—well it hasn’t made much difference to him?” Carlson voiced further frustration with the market and anger at processors: “Somebody else is getting this profit. Why can’t we keep the price of hogs $2 or $3 higher?”

Bargaining simply did not work for the farmers when so many were vying for economic survival. The nature of their products also did not lend to withholding actions. During milk strikes, farmers had to continue daily operations since cows did not stop producing milk. Striking farmers incurred regular operating costs without any income. Striking grain farmers similarly experienced difficulties in maintaining withholding actions. Planting and harvesting grains incurred costs that only selling the product could

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33 Ibid.
pay off. Few grain farmers could commit to a strike and refuse to plant crops for fear that prices would miraculously turn around by harvest time, leaving them without a product to market. Many farmers simply could not afford to strike.

Farmers became disenchanted with withholding actions as they usually resulted in minimal short-term gains. Those devoted to the NFO cause turned to publicity stunts, usually animal slaughters where farmers shot pigs and calves in open pits to voice their anger at markets they considered uncontrollable and unfair. While NFO protests grabbed the attention of non-farmers, they did not garner sympathy for the farmers’ situation. Instead, the graphic executions in which farmers emotionlessly killed hundreds of animals at each of many slaughters throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s backfired as urbanites voiced anger and disgust with the farmers’ protests rather than with their situation.

For all of their frustration with falling prices, uncertain markets and an increasingly consumer-oriented government, farmers rarely voiced anger or revolted from the implementation of technological and scientific advances. Instead they rapidly increased the size of farm operations to make such advances economically feasible. In fact, farmers embraced further development and implementation as a combative measure against low farm commodity prices. Despite low average farm incomes in 1967, farm equipment dealers set a record to that date for annual equipment sales, with larger, more powerful tractors the most popular farm item. Rather than aim for less dependence on technology, farmers increasingly applied industrial values of greater production to balance rising costs. This trend, along with declining farm population, the cost-price squeeze, and declining political power, continued to shape agrarian actions and attitudes through the rest of the 1960s and 1970s.

Consumer Awareness, the Family Farm, and the Corporate Threat

34 See Muhm, The NFO: A Farm Belt Rebel.
The late 1960s saw a dramatic rise in the percentage of farmers who turned toward part-time farming as a solution to the cost-price squeeze. The category of part-time farms, defined as a farm where more than one third of overall income comes from off-farm sources, increased 60 percent between 1957 and 1967. Increasingly, off-farm income became a necessity for farmers who wished to continue to farm as credit and capital demands rose with escalating costs. For farmers such as Raymond Warner of Scottsbluff, Nebraska, a tractor mechanic and part-time farmer, off-farm income provided stability when farming did not. “I’ve had a crop every year since ’48, but if I have any trade at all, it’s machinist.”

Advancements in technology had made part-time farming not only possible, but for many, a necessity by the late 1960s. Bigger farm equipment meant farmers spent fewer days in the field to plant and harvest crops. Genetically modified seeds and improved chemical applications increased per acre output allowing farmers to increase production, even if they could not afford to expand acreage. Better roads and more dependable vehicles allowed farm people to travel greater distances from the farm in search of non-farm jobs. A decline in the need for farm women to work on the farm and a decline in family size allowed farm women the time to leave the confines of the farm and find off-farm jobs that contributed to family income, without which many farm operations would have gone bankrupt.

The part-time farming trend represented not only a changing economy and the impact of technological advances, but also changing values among farm people. Off-farm income provided a stable income not only to balance the fluctuations of farm income, but also a regular income to purchase consumer goods. Increasingly, farm families sought the affluent lifestyle popular with urban and suburban America. Many rural parents believed that if they provided the urban lifestyle, farm children would be less inclined to leave farming for other occupations, usually located in urban areas. Yet

farm families did not entirely give up or trade in the farm life for a seemingly more enjoyable consumer lifestyle. Many continued to farm on a part-time basis if only to keep the quiet and family centered lifestyle associated with small-scale farming. For part-time farmers, the agrarian lifestyle was worth preserving, but also in need of change to meet growing consumer desires that had become popular in the urban and suburban setting and had spread to rural areas.

Trends outside of agriculture also had a powerful impact on farm economics, politics, and the way farmers and non-farmers viewed farming. Too often historians discuss the decline in farmers’ political power without identifying the political and/or social force that had developed at the expense of the farmer. The consumer movement, although having emerged over concerns of car safety, reflected in Ralph Nader’s popular and industry-changing 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, eventually turned to concerns of food quality and price. In 1968, consumer advocates formed the Consumer Federation of America and established an office in Washington D.C. to lobby the federal government on behalf of consumer interests. The CFA quickly gained popularity with a majority of Americans, since so many could identify with, and benefit from, consumer advocacy. By 1970, consumer interest groups such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the National Consumers Congress, the Public Citizen Congress Watch, along with the Consumer Federation of America, played an important role in shaping federal policy, including agriculture. The Agriculture Act of 1970 placed limits on the subsidies a farmer could receive from the federal government and also continued the increasing attention given to the food stamp program. In the matter of a couple of years, funding for the food stamp program more than doubled, going from $340 million to $750 million. Consumer organizations also played an integral role in directing the Nixon administration to place fewer regulations on farmers so they could plant to meet market demands. Consumer groups saw less regulation and government intervention as an advantage in keeping retail prices down.

The increasing focus on rising food costs—due mostly to inflation and rising processing costs rather than increased profits to farmers—pushed consumer groups to

39 Ibid, 93.
question subsidies to farmers. Further awareness of the growth of corporate farming and its associated practices that negatively affected migrant labor, the environment, and smaller, somehow more acceptable farms directed consumer groups to take a participatory role in agriculture policy formation. By the early 1970s, this new awareness in agricultural issues created within the public a sense of the growing gap between industrial corporate farms and smaller family farms. Part of this awareness and attention paid by the general public to agricultural issues created dissonance between the ideal farm—single-family-owned that was considerate of food quality, farm laborers and the environment—and what many larger farms had become in reality—corporate entities that sought profit above all else, including concerns for consumers, farm workers, and the environment.

Farmers in the 1970s responded to rapid technological, political and social changes that threatened economic survival by appealing to historically popular ideas of Jeffersonian agrarianism, that farms and farmers provided social benefits to the nation that urban Americans could not provide. Protesting farmers, much like protesting farmers of the past, charged their political message with Jeffersonian agrarianism. The message of the AAM in the 1970s however, took on new urgency to save the family farm and new perspectives as the farm population quickly dwindled to less than three percent of the national population. Farmers experienced a complicated relationship with modernization, taking new technology and production methods while criticizing the impacts of higher productivity on the survival of smaller farms. This response continues a long history of farmers attempting to deal with modernization in the 20th century as outlined in books such as Mary Neth’s *Preserving the Family Farm*. Few, however, have discussed how forces of modernization affected farmers’ mentality and identity in

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the 1960s and 1970s when the argument to save the family farm developed in a context of growing incorporation, rising prices, increasing urban participation in agriculture policy and declining farm population.

Throughout the 20th century, farmers and non-farmers alike have supported the industrialization of agriculture and the application of technology as solutions to problems ranging from rural poverty to meeting the food needs of a growing world population. The Country Life Movement of the 1910s, in which urban organizations supported a back-to-the-land concept, appears to many as a quest to save the family farm. But it was not. Instead, the Country Life Movement reflected urban concerns about rising food prices and unstable supply. Twentieth century farmers and farm protests through the 1960s tried to establish themselves as business leaders, adhering to the popular ideals of industrialization, scientific and rational management, and efficiency through growth. The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) developed in the years before World War I with the plan to educate farmers to become better businessmen. The AFBF developed along with the extension service of the federal government that directed county agents to local farms to educate farmers about new techniques, services, and products in agriculture that would increase their output. The extension service provided a popular educating arm of the federal government that helped farmers adhere to dominant American values of industrialization. The NFO accepted these values and only sought to resolve problems stemming from these values. Members of the NFO attempted to justify withholding actions by legitimizing themselves as businessmen with rights equal to all other organized businessmen and laborers.

Awareness of a growing corporate influence in agriculture, at the expense of small farmers, did not fully develop until well after World War II for a variety of reasons. Before World War II, technology had yet to develop that would make large farm systems possible. Farm machinery size was still based on the small farm system. Before the mass migration to urban centers by rural Americans in the 1940s and especially in the 1950s, the limited availability of land prevented any one owner from amassing the thousands of acres required to make a corporate farm. Not until the steady prices and mass migration of the 1950s did corporations begin to fully consider large-scale farming as a viable
business opportunity. Technological development, for the most part, emphasized improved efficiency of smaller, family style farms rather than implementing industrial systems in agriculture. That emphasis changed with the development of corporate agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s.

Labor problems in corporate farming further increased public awareness of growing differences between family and corporate style farming. Farm worker organization of the 1960s, led by César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, attempted to appeal to consumers to rally support for their cause of better wages and working conditions. Chávez’s well-publicized hunger strikes and various produce boycotts raised consumer awareness about developments in agriculture. Consumers quickly supported the farm workers as a moral crusade to combat the growing power of industrial style farms and the terrible working conditions they forced upon their workers. Reports in the late 1960s and early 1970s surfaced of United States government complicity in the maltreatment of farm workers. Programs set up to protect workers from abuse such as the United States Training and Employment Service, merely perpetuated the problems rather than resolved them. Often these programs institutionalized racial discrimination, neglect of laws regulating child labor and working conditions.

The environmental movement of the 1960s further cultivated awareness of farming techniques used by industrial farming that harmed food and water supplies for hundreds of birds and animals, not to mention food and water supplies for humans as well. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* pointed out the harmful effects of DDT, a widely used pesticide that helped farmers retain higher crop yields by preventing pre-harvest loss to insects. Other works criticized the use of numerous other chemicals as herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizers by farmers, most often those operating large-scale industrial-style farms. To those concerned with environmental integrity, farmers who overused chemicals appeared as businessmen bent on making a profit at any cost.

Besides concern over treatment of farm laborers and environmental impact, the development of corporate farms brought concerns over taxes and federal subsidies in the

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agricultural sector. Developed in the 1930s to combat low farm income, federal subsidies helped stabilize farm income so smaller farms more susceptible to bankruptcy through fluctuating commodity prices could survive temporary periods of low market prices. Farm subsidies during the Great Depression were also a means of preventing unemployment. Government payments to farmers allowed many to stay on the farm rather than migrate to urban areas in search of industrial employment. While farm subsidies of these earlier periods had some basis in saving a rural and agricultural tradition, their focus lay primarily in bolstering the entire economy. Up to World War II and through the 1950s—when America’s rural population still represented a large portion of the total population—farm subsidies were based on simple economics, providing a stable income to farmers aided the entire nation and prevented problems from occurring in other sectors of the economy. Not until the 1970s—with a much smaller and continually shrinking farm population—did farm subsidies represent the manifestation of commonly held beliefs that farms provided the nation with social values and an agrarian identity of democracy that deserved economic consideration and support.

By the 1960s large, corporate farms had taken advantage of the subsidy and tax system that had intended to help small farms survive through economic difficulty. Large farms consisting of thousands of acres and often employing hundreds of workers at harvest time received millions in subsidies, adhering to the subsidy formula, but drastically missing the intentions of the federal agriculture policy. These large farms, operated by farmers such as Fred Sulyer, received the vast portion of federal subsidy money. In 1969 Sulyer, a farmer in the San Joaquin Valley of California, received $1.7 million in federal subsidies. Corporations involved in agriculture, such as J.S. Boswell Company of Corcoran, California, received as much as $4.4 million in subsidies. When consumers began to recognize a trend, many of these corporations argued that they kept costs down for consumers. At the same time, farmers like Thomas Washington of South Carolina, who farmed 67 acres, received a $300 annual subsidy. Supporting Sulyer and other large, industrialized farmers did not sit well with many Americans.

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They felt cheated as taxpayers with apparently rich farmers profiting immensely from a policy aimed at helping small farmers survive.

The problem was a matter of application of subsidies rather than intentions. In order to keep costs down and prevent a flooded market—which the government was not always able to achieve—the U.S. Department of Agriculture devised a system to pay farmers according to the amount of land they removed from production. Farmers with more acres could remove more from production, thereby receiving larger subsidies. The subsidy plan effectively removed sharecroppers from the South in the 1930s as they were pushed off of their plots by landowners who set aside their land to receive federal support.\(^{48}\) By 1970, urban and suburban Congressional leaders had enough public support to change the farm subsidy system. Many felt, in the words of a *New York Times* journalist, that “agribusiness had been feeding at the public trough too long.”\(^{49}\)

In 1970, Congress, with Nixon administration approval, passed a $55,000 subsidy limit per crop per farmer. Many non-farmers hoped that the subsidy limit would convince corporations to stay out of farming, thereby saving the federal government money and preventing the richest five percent of all farmers from receiving 40 percent of all subsidies as they had in the past.\(^{50}\) Unfortunately for those supporting the limits, large agriculture entities at which the subsidy limits were aimed effectively avoided the limits by dividing their holdings and ownership among shareholders so that they received the maximum subsidy allowed.\(^{51}\)

Others took advantage of the tax system as well. Investing in farm operations became a popular means of cutting taxes for non-farmers because of the tax deduction options available to agricultural producers. Even if farm investments led to a loss, investors profited through tax laws that allowed them to deduct all losses. In the process, investors could drop their taxable income into a lower tax bracket, saving themselves thousands of dollars in the process. By the late 1960s, agriculture had become a popular

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\(^{48}\) Fite, *New Minority*, 61.


investment choice, with three out of four people with income over $100,000 investing in agriculture, mainly for tax purposes.\textsuperscript{52}

Farming became a tax write-off for businesses and corporations, not just for wealthy individuals looking for tax shelters. Companies such as Greyhound and International Telephone and Telegraph operated turkey and pig processing plants. Getty, Superior and Belridge Oil Company used subsidies from their petroleum division to purchase and farm 71,000 acres of fruits and nuts in central California.\textsuperscript{53} In 1971 Tenneco Oil corporation owned 35,000 acres in southern California, leased 100,000 more acres, and contracted dozens of other farmers to grow crops. In some situations, corporations not only got involved in agriculture, but also cornered the market for some commodities such as lettuce, with Purex and United Brands controlling a near monopoly.\textsuperscript{54} Farm corporations formed through investors could sustain losses while family farms required profit in order to survive. Moreover, corporations with more available capital and investors who could take a loss on investments drove up the price of farm land, requiring small farmers with less capital who could not afford to take a loss on investments to pay more for productive farm land.\textsuperscript{55}

Developments in agriculture technology aimed at providing greater output through higher-yielding hybrid and genetically modified seeds and larger, faster planting and harvesting equipment that overwhelmingly aided larger farmers more than smaller farmers. Many of these developments were provided through research and development funded by the USDA. Technological advances rarely came in forms applicable to small farms. New tractors, storage facilities, harvesting equipment, etc. were built with large farms in mind. Rarely could a small farmer profitably use equipment suited for larger applications. Land grant universities came under criticism in the early 1970s for directing their research and development toward corporate, large-scale farming and neglecting to develop technology suitable for smaller, family farms. Universities received criticism for focusing on production and harvesting technology, often at the expense of food quality.

Unfortunately for consumers, advancements made in agriculture did not necessarily translate into lower costs at the supermarket or higher quality food. The introduction of corporations into farming allowed some companies to integrate vertically and control production from planting and processing to packaging and retailing. Food quality declined for farmers in general, not just the large corporations. Jim Hightower’s *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* documents the genetic alteration of tomatoes to make them firmer and give them a tougher skin to handle new tomato harvesting machines that could not harvest the soft skinned, non-genetically modified tomatoes. Hightower’s groundbreaking exposé brought attention to the production-oriented agricultural industry that alarmed consumers:

> The land grant complex has come to serve an elite of private, corporate interests in rural America, while ignoring those who have the most urgent needs and the most legitimate claims for assistance.  

Numerous articles and other exposés educated the public about industrial agriculture’s genetic modification of food for harvesting purposes. Many felt frustrated and cheated by agriculture for altering food merely to make harvesting more convenient for farmers and began to question the strict adherence to industrial production. As one journalist noted, “It is time to examine this technological mystique of ‘progress’ in agriculture and subject it to rational choice and deliberate judgment.”

These trends, along with the fact that larger farms could survive on lower income, meant that from 1961 to 1971, one million farms disappeared while the number of large producers rose from 350,000 to approximately 600,000. Part of this transformation included a decline in rural population due to families leaving rural areas for the opportunities found in cities and suburbs, which represents part of a larger trend of off-farm migration that began in the 1920s and increased rapidly in the 1940s and 50s. The

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58 Len Richardson, “Big-Scale Agriculture,” *New York Times*, 14 November 1971, sec. C. Large producers were defined to be any farm that produced over $20,000 of agricultural products in a year.
1940 farm population of 30.5 million fell to 9.7 million in 1970.\footnote{David Danbom, \textit{Born in the Country: A History of Rural America} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 244.} As a sign of the increasing dominance of large-scale farming, tractor power increased as larger tractors became the predominant source of power, increasing from nine tractor horsepower per farm worker in 1950 to 46 tractor horsepower per worker in 1970.\footnote{Richardson, “Big-Scale Agriculture,” \textit{New York Times}, 14 November 1971, sec. C.}

Non-farmers, educated about the rapid changes occurring in agriculture and about all the problems associated with these changes—poor treatment of farm workers, genetically modified food, an unfair tax and subsidy system, and the growth of corporate farms at the expense of single family farms—began to participate in the discussion of agriculture and federal agriculture policy. For many people family farms provided an emotional attachment that justified their concern and involvement in agriculture policy. Many had parents or grandparents who grew up on farms; some—representing more recent migration—had themselves lived on farms. Moreover, many truly believed that family farms did provide a democratic and social value to the nation. For them, the Jeffersonian ideal of democratic and independent farmers lived on. This attitude, however, lasted only as long as low food prices. For years, rural Americans had discussed issues that plagued agriculture, but a declining population, with a correlating decline in rural representation in Congress, effectively removed this discussion from the public world.

President Nixon’s nomination of Earl Butz for appointment as the Secretary of Agriculture in late 1971 to replace Charles Hardin—who had coincidently resigned his position as Secretary of Agriculture and took up the position of vice-chair of Ralston-Purina—revived the debate over corporate versus family farms and represented the zenith of urban concern for the protection and survival of the family-style farm threatened by the quickly growing corporate sector of agriculture. Butz’s nomination raised red flags for many concerned with the direction of agriculture and the declining numbers of family farms. Earl Butz, a professor at Purdue University in agricultural economics, had taken active positions on boards of major agricultural companies such as Ralston Purina, Stokely-Van-Camp, J.I. Case Corporation, International Minerals and Chemicals
Corporation and Standard Life Insurance Company of Indiana. Butz took a laissez faire philosophy when it came to agricultural economics and argued that the market would resolve problems of chronic overproduction by forcing producers to grow only as much as the market demanded. Part of this market-oriented philosophy meant allowing family farms to go bankrupt in difficult times. Butz did not believe family farms could survive. “You can’t raise the income of all these people if you keep them on the land,” he said. In making such an argument, Butz concluded that the government had to stop interfering with agriculture and commodity markets.

Many farm groups, particularly the National Farmers Union and the National Farmers Organization, opposed the nomination of Butz as Secretary of Agriculture. They feared that once Butz became Secretary, he would get government out of agriculture, forcing many smaller farmers to leave farming because of the cost-price squeeze and growing corporate competition. Other groups outside of agriculture also sought to get the Senate to reject Nixon’s nomination of Butz. Organized labor, consumer advocacy groups, and independent writers all saw Butz as an advocate of corporate agriculture and an enemy to the family farm. Like the farmers who opposed his nomination, urban groups expressed concern over the survival of smaller, family farms if Butz’s policies were implemented. Non-farm groups based their concern not on the economic factors of inflation and cost-price squeeze, but on the non-economic factors that would be lost with the failure of family farms. The Center for Study of Responsive Law on Food Safety and the Chemical Harvest, led by Ralph Nader, drew distinct differences between family farms and corporate farms with agricultural business ties and saw family farms playing a valuable role in food production since they did not integrate vertically to control every aspect of food production. Nader noted:

While the growth of mechanized, corporate farms and ranches swallowed up small farmers with drastic social consequences for the nation, a parallel growth of

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61 B. Drummand Ayres, “Rise of Corporate Farming a Worry to Rural America,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1971 and Lauren Soth, “Politics and Agribuz: The Operations of Dr. Butz,” *The Nation* (26 October 1974), 398. Ralston-Purina and Stokely Van Camp are food processing companies. J.I. Case was one of the largest manufacturers of farm equipment and machinery. International Minerals and Chemicals Corporation was a major producer of chemical and mineral based fertilizers.


chemical technology occurred with equally unexamined secondary consequences for public health and the environment. 64

Nader was quick to point out that family farmers, as the antithesis to corporate farms, did not participate in mechanization nor the use of chemical applications. Family farms ensured a stable, responsible, and fair system of food production that, among other benefits, ensured a dependable source of cheap, quality foods for consumers. 65 Like other non-farmers, Nader assumed smaller, family farmers did not participate in mechanization. Many wanted to believe that family farms still looked and acted like small independent farms of the past that used old farming techniques.

Labor organizations, particularly the AFL-CIO, called for rejection of the Butz nomination out of concern for farm workers, but more important, out of concern for the family farm. Andrew Biemiller, legislative director of the AFL-CIO, called on senators to deny confirmation because “Dr. Butz already views farming as big business and considers the corporate farm superior to the family farm—a concept we do not share.” 66 Many of these groups argued that family farms were not only important for democracy and distributing power in food production, but that family farms were more efficient than corporate farms since family farmers were willing to survive on lower profit. Family farms, these groups argued, took better care of the environment and the land since many intended to pass the farm onto the next generation unlike corporate farms that sought immediate profit and cared little about long-term environmental consequences. Family farms also created strong rural communities by keeping more people in rural areas. 67 Non-farmers could not imagine, nor accept the changes happening in agriculture that altered even the smallest and most independent of farms. For them, the Jeffersonian ideal of farming did not change despite living in a rapidly modernizing world.

Despite common values, conflicting economic goals often drove apart family farmers and consumers. As a sign of building animosity between farmers and consumers

65 Ibid, xi.
and the tenuous alliance they held based on the idea of preserving the family farm, Ralph Nader filed a federal suit in early February 1972 against Associated Milk Producers, Incorporated—a 40,000-member marketing association, much like the National Farmers Organization. The suit charged the marketing group with illegal actions to keep milk prices high for members and low for nonmembers. In the suit that was eventually settled out of court, Nader further charged the group with making campaign contributions to Republican political committees in exchange for favorable government action. For Nader and his consumer advocacy group, saving the family farm could not justify unfair marketing actions, especially when such actions hurt consumers.

Writers such as Wendell Berry participated in the public discussion, through literary criticism, of the meaning and value of the family farm and sought to defend small producers by examining the role dominant values played on agricultural trends. Berry questioned agriculture’s adoption of industrialization held by many Americans. For many people, value equaled price, and nothing beyond the monetary reward. Berry noted that in agriculture, all relations had become mechanical with no human relationships. Berry further questioned the focus on competition and the single-tract view that community is only a resource for production. Berry and others sought to challenge the dominance of industrialization of agricultural and rural America and saw its rejection as a first step in reinvigorating the family farm in the face of the growing corporate threat.

People from rural and urban areas alike called for a new awareness of the corporate power in agriculture and an alliance between family farmers and urban Americans to combat the seemingly powerful and destructive nature of corporate agriculture that sought profit above all else, including the welfare of farmers, consumers, workers, and the environment. Those representing rural America, such as South Dakota’s second Congressional District Representative, James Abourezk, called on urban Americans not already educated about the farm situation to realize the dependence everyone has on agriculture. Abourezk argued, “It is in the interest of people living in

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70 Berry continues to write about the value of family farms. Jane Smiley has added to the literary criticism with her award winning novel, A Thousand Acres which outlines the loss of family, farm, and environment brought on by that family’s attempt to industrialize.
New York City as well as rural South Dakota to keep family farms.” Urban Americans, concerned with the disappearance of family farms, but also with food quality and price, called for a political alliance to confront the trends in agriculture. Ralph Nader, while most concerned with food price and quality, declared, “It is time for a new populism, this time uniting the city and rural America.”

Despite the broad popular opposition to Earl Butz becoming Secretary of Agriculture, the Senate confirmed his nomination in early 1972, putting him in charge of agricultural affairs for Presidents Nixon and Ford until Jimmy Carter’s presidential election in 1976. Secretary Butz shaped events in 1972, particularly the rapid price inflation on food products and eventually passage of the 1973 Farm and Consumer Protection Act that redirected federal agriculture policy away from supporting farmers toward providing a cheap and stable food supply for consumers, a reversal of federal agriculture policy.

The rapid decline in world food supply, the quickening pace of price inflation, and declining government assistance to farmers took many people by surprise. Consumers, earlier interested in seeing the protection of family farms, became focused on prices and once again the subsidies farmers received as farm income skyrocketed to record levels by 1974 and 1975. Farmers, once strained under a cost-price squeeze, experienced record profits and sought to take advantage of the sellers’ market by expanding production. Within a short period, the argument to save the family farm almost disappeared from the public debate of agricultural issues. In its place arose concerns of profiteering and massive inflation. The argument to save the family farm that arose in response to growing corporate control of agriculture and industrial influence became an argument to save the consumer in light of unforeseen events.

A New Day In Agriculture Policy: From Record Profits to Record Surpluses

Crop expectations for 1972 rose early in the year as good weather maintained excellent growing conditions throughout the nation. With an expectation of such a large crop in the major grains—corn, wheat, and soybeans—the federal government braced itself for paying out a record $4 billion in subsidies to assist farmers in a glutted commodity market. The USDA planned to remove 38 million acres from production, through set-aside payments, to ease surpluses for the following crop year.\footnote{“Record Subsidies Are Expected For Farmers to Stem Surpluses,” \textit{New York Times}, 1 June 1972.} By October, however, the actual surpluses fell well below expectations, despite a record harvest, due to strong world demand for grains. Wheat surpluses fell from 370 million bushels in 1971 to 180 million bushels by October 1972.\footnote{“Surplus Shrinks For Commodities,” \textit{New York Times}, 5 October 1972.} By December, many commodity prices had hit record highs. Wheat sold at $2.38 per bushel and hogs sold for a record $29.50 per hundred pounds.\footnote{“Farm Prices Up 5% in December,” \textit{New York Times}, 30 December 1972.}

This rapid change in supply and market price resulted from weather patterns halfway around the world, where the Soviet Union and India experienced terrible growing seasons. By the 1960s, globalization had created a single world market where events in one corner of the globe had an impact on domestic market prices. Inclement weather or poor harvests in one spot could create sharp fluctuations everywhere else.\footnote{“The Defeat of the Farm Bill,” \textit{Washington Post}, 15 April 1978, sec. A.} The domestic market moreover, had become so intertwined that a price fluctuation in one commodity could send ripples through prices of other commodities. A rapid rise or fall in wheat price could bump up the corn and soybean price since they provided an alternative to wheat. A rise in grain prices would also create a rise in beef and pork prices since grains provided the main source of food for beef animals and pigs. From July 1972 through February 1973, the Soviet Union purchased $1.1 billion in grains from the United States, nearly one-quarter of the entire grain crop for 1972.\footnote{“Butz Forecasts Record Exports,” \textit{New York Times}, 9 March 1973.} With international demand growing, domestic prices for commodities rose sharply, pushing up consumer prices. Commodity prices for wheat rose from $1.32 per bushel in July 1972 to $2.38 per bushel in December 1972.\footnote{Allan Cigler and John Mark Hansen, “Group Formation Through Protest: The American Agriculture Movement,” in \textit{Interest Group Politics}, ed. by Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, (Washington: CQ Press, 1981), 86.}
Quickly, consumers responded to rising prices with protests, boycotts and political action. In April 1973, the Consumer Federation of America, led by Carol Tucker Foreman, who later became President Carter’s Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Service, organized a meat boycott. The meat boycott garnered the attention of the Nixon Administration that was concerned about the potential repercussions of an unhappy and organized consumer movement. President Nixon found himself caught between farmers and consumers. While Nixon did not want to alienate the normally Republican farm vote, he also could not deny the growing political power of organized consumers that represented a much larger portion of the population than farmers.

Government representatives found supporting the consumer movement a political necessity. Consumerism appealed to every voting group, regardless of politics, and provided representatives with an issue that they could use to appeal to a wide voting base rather than specific interests. Business Week noted the broad appeal of consumerism: “Candidates hope consumer issues will appeal across the board to every voter, rich and poor, young and old, black and white.” Opposing the consumer movement would have been political suicide.

Consumer groups took an active approach to resolving the inflationary cost of food by seizing a share of the political power in determining agriculture policy. Their influence as a large, organized voting group with lobbying power gained them quick strength in politics. This time, instead of seeking to help the embattled family farmer, consumers sought to enforce a cheap food policy that would cut agriculture subsidies across the board, regardless of farm size, forcing all farmers to plant more crops if they wanted to survive. In an attempt to appease consumers, as well as to halt the rising cost of food, President Richard Nixon placed a temporary embargo on all soybean and cottonseed exports in early 1973 to keep domestic food prices down. He also froze beef prices to stop the inflationary impact of rising beef costs. Farmers complained bitterly about the freeze in food prices and the embargo. While their income could not increase

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79 Joel Solkoff, The Politics of Food (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1985), 57.
81 “Congress Votes For the Consumer,” Business Week (18 May 1968), 32.
82 Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 133.
due to the freeze, prices on products farmers needed, such as machinery, seeds, fertilizers, and chemical applications were allowed to continue to rise.

Farmers, such as Max Naylor of Greene County, Iowa, raised concerns about stagnant price supports while inflation raised food prices and costs to farmers. “There hasn’t been a raise [in price supports] in four years,” he said “and I’m beginning to wonder if the Department of Agriculture ever knew there was inflation.”\(^{83}\) Naylor’s comment reflected broader concerns of the farming population of inflation. Price supports propped up farmers’ income to keep pace with rising inflating costs, particularly of machinery, seeds and chemical applications.

After ongoing debate in Congress on the direction of agriculture, guided by concern over rapidly rising demand for American commodities and subsequent increase in domestic retail food prices, President Nixon signed the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 into law on August 10. The new plan replaced the Agriculture Act of 1970, which aimed at relieving farmers of surplus commodities and low prices with a plan to prevent food price inflation and ensure an ample supply of food to keep retail prices down. The new four-year plan lifted acreage restrictions on farmers to allow them to plant as much as they wanted and still receive subsidies. If commodity prices fell below the target price or minimum price, the government would make up the difference.\(^{84}\) Earlier systems of subsidization provided farmers with guaranteed income or a minimum price on the crops they sold if they set aside a percentage of their acreage. Now the government decided no longer to attempt to keep commodity prices up for farmers and allow the market to set prices. Many felt this would induce farmers to plant “fence row to fence row,” according to Secretary Butz, thereby increasing the food supply and bringing down retail prices. President Nixon declared that the plan should “help in our battle against inflation by encouraging American farmers to produce at full capacity.”\(^{85}\)

Consumers were pleased with the legislation because it took action to meet the high cost of food and its inflationary impact on the rest of the economy. Many had


\(^{84}\) Solkoff, *The Politics of Food*, 62.

become concerned with the cost of food and especially the rapid rate of inflation. The consumer price index for food went from 114.9 in 1970 to 141.4 by 1973, outstripping most other items on the consumer price index. In March 1973 alone, grocery prices jumped 3.2 percent, causing panic and concern among the vast majority of Americans, especially those who experienced a wage freeze, imposed by President Nixon as part of his anti-inflation plan.

The 1973 Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act represented a major shift in policy formation. From the 1920s through the early 1970s, farm populations and their representatives in Congress held the reins in shaping agriculture policy. However, by 1973, farmers’ political power had declined and consumers had joined the debate to ease retail food prices. Not only had farm populations plummeted since the 1930s due to technological advances in farming, but other interest groups developed through the 1960s that represented interests seeking to change agriculture policy and the structure of farming to ease high prices, make agricultural practices safer on the environment, or provide better working conditions and wages to migrant farm labor. For policy makers, it became a matter of 200 million consumers versus six million farmers.

Farmers did not strictly oppose the dramatic change in federal agriculture policy. Many felt lower supports and target prices were an acceptable tradeoff for increased profits through the market, especially with the market demand expanding so rapidly after the Soviet grain purchases in late 1972 and no end in sight to the rising world demand for American commodities. The reversal in agriculture policy appealed to many farmers’ conservative beliefs in limited government. When President Nixon signed the bill into law, wheat sold for $4.67 per bushel on the open market, over twice the target price and $2.07 higher than wheat prices just a month earlier. Yet farmers felt anxious about the

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88 Cigler and Hansen, “Group Formation Through Protest” in Interest Group Politics, 86.
89 Carroll Kilpatrick, “Wheat Prices, Interest Rates Hit New Peaks: Nixon Signs Bill Altering Farm Goals,” Washington Post, 11 August, 1973. Corn target prices were set at $1.38 per bushel while contemporary market prices had corn selling for over $3.00 per bushel.
growth of consumer political power and feared consumers would seek a complete end to
farm subsidy programs that provided farmers a low, but dependable safety net. Despite
farmers’ idealistic image of themselves as independent entrepreneurs and their
conservative values of independent producers and laissez-faire government, they still
liked the idea of government assistance to balance times of low commodity prices.

World events continued to have an increasing impact on American farmers
through the 1970s. In October 1973, just two months after the Agriculture and Consumer
Protection Act passed into law, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
(OPEC) imposed an oil embargo that lasted until March 1974. The embargo quadrupled
oil prices in a matter of months, raising heating, transportation, and production costs. For
farmers the embargo created other additional costs, more than doubling the price of
petroleum based fertilizers on which they depended for improving per acre production.
From 1972 through the oil embargo of 1973-74, fertilizer costs rose by 1000 percent.90

Despite the added cost of fertilizer, not to mention the cost of operating farm
machinery dependent on oil as a fuel source, and increased costs of farm machinery,
farmers continued to focus on boosting production through industrialization rather than
pursuing systems of production less dependent on costly technology. For them the
industrial value could not be ignored, especially with commodity prices hitting record
highs in 1974 and sustained high prices from 1973 through 1975. Grain farmers, such as
Dwight Winkleman of Thompson, Iowa, took advantage of the high prices by squeezing
every last bit of production from their fields. Through better farming methods, better
seed and more fertilizer, Winkleman raised his 1972 corn yield to 130 bushels per acre,
seven more per acre than his 1971 harvest. Winkleman’s experiences displayed the
growing efficiency of farmers.91 From 1950 to 1977, farm productivity rose more than
40 percent.92

This increased efficiency had its price, however, as farmers increasingly depended
on fertilizer and larger equipment to make their farms more productive while reducing
the amount of time required and making the work easier. Farmers like Raymond McNeff

of Fullerton, Nebraska turned to larger tractors not only to plant more crops and take advantage of higher prices, but to ease their workload. Tractor manufacturers took pride in providing farmers machines with modern amenities such as enclosed cabs, air conditioning, and AM/FM stereo to make fieldwork more enjoyable and advanced communication systems so farmers could stay in contact with others. Warren Wagner of Freehold, New Jersey used an industrial band radio to sell crops directly from his cab after hearing the market reports on the stereo radio in his tractor cab. Moreover, average tractor size rose from 55 horsepower in 1963 to 100 horsepower in 1976 as farmers needed bigger equipment to cover more acreage. These amenities did not come cheap, however, as tractor prices skyrocketed through the early 1970s, going from around $10,000 in the early part of the decade to $30,000, rising on an average of 10 to 12 percent per year. While inflation explains part of the increase, most of the price rise could be blamed on the sheer cost of bigger tractors with better amenities.

Seed costs had risen as well due to increased world demand for production, almost doubling within a three year period. Fertilizer costs for most farmers rose by an annual average of 10 percent due to OPEC embargos and rising demand for fertilizer. In 1973 alone fertilizer costs increased 20 to 40 percent as fertilizer companies tried to keep up with the rising cost of oil. Inflation on fuel costs had also occurred. Gerald Quattlebaum, a farmer near Lamar, Colorado, noted that his cost of fuel rose from 18 cents per gallon to 39 cents from 1973 to 1974 alone. Many farmers also noted higher taxes as a major cost, with property taxes rising by as much as 240 percent between 1967 and 1973. Between 1973 and 1974 alone, operating costs increased by 40 percent for most farmers.

For American farmers, an increase in foreign demand from late 1972 through 1975 provided incentive to raise production. Food shortages occurred not just in the

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Soviet Union, which became the biggest importer of American grains, but in Peru, China, Australia, and India, which raised demand for corn, soybeans and oilseed products. For the first time since World War II, the United States had an almost empty grain reserve. Farm income rose astronomically as domestic and foreign demand for American grain drove up prices and allowed farmers to sell as much as possible. Throughout the 1960s, agriculture exports averaged $5 billion per year. In 1970, agriculture exports reached $7.5 billion. That amount jumped to $9.4 billion in 1972 and over $9 billion for just the first six months of 1973 as world demand hit its peak, with the United States supplying 44 percent of the world’s grain needs. Farm income reached a record $34.4 billion in 1973 and hovered just below that mark for 1974 and 1975. For the first time in American history, farmers experienced a higher disposable income than non-farmers.

Despite increased costs, farmers sought to expand acreage to take advantage of higher prices and technological advances. Shortly after the Soviet grain purchases of 1972, farmers began a land rush that continued through 1975. Land prices doubled and in some locations, tripled, as farmers competed for prime growing land. Dwight Winkleman, of Thompson, Iowa is a good example of farmers seeking more land, often finding little available or high prices on available land:

I could handle more land if I could get it, but there’s little for sale anywhere in Iowa, and the prices they are getting for an acre these days, at least $440 for even middling land, are hard to believe.

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For those who bought land during the land rush, purchases came back to haunt them when commodity prices returned to normal in 1977 and they got stuck having to pay back loans for inflated land purchases with minimal income. For many in this position, the American Agriculture Movement provided some hope.

The race to expand at this time took on a variety of meanings for farmers. For many, expansion was simply a necessity to survive in an increasingly competitive and global commodity market. Implementing new and costly technology represented an investment in a business that allowed many farmers, such as Pat Benedict of Sabin, Minnesota, to survive. Benedict noted that for his $3.5 million investment in his wheat and sugar beet farm he received about a 3.5 percent annual return, though this was not near the return from typical non-farm investment of that amount. Yet such an investment provided some stability in an occupation he enjoyed and did not wish to leave. Benedict concluded: “Eliminate uncertainties, that’s the golden rule. You eliminate uncertainties through technology and careful management.”

Many farmers explained the failure of smaller farms as a result of their refusal to implement new technology and purchase new land. Earl Zumbach of Prairie Township, Iowa, made sure he kept up with technology, implementing new seeds, fertilizers and equipment whenever feasible. To not do so would be asking for failure. “The reason a lot of farmers fall by the wayside is that they don’t keep up with trends. Like more mechanization, better seed, more nutritious feed for livestock.”

While most farmers generally accepted the changing nature and requirements of agriculture and altered their definition and identity of family farming to suit their needs, some farmers, and for the most part the urban population, recognized growing differences between modern farming and older, more bucolic views and definitions of family farming. As William Serrin, a journalist for the New York Times noted: “The enemy of the family farmer is, as much as the corporation, the family farmer next door.” Melvin Mann of Boykins, Virginia became frustrated with the requirements of technologically advanced farming because they drew him further away from the agrarian values of earlier generations. What was once a family business had become an enterprise no different

from running a factory. Boykins complained, “I’m going to have to build an office…and hire a full time bookkeeper.”  

Indicative of the growing differences in defining the term “family farm,” a court case involving the National Broiler Marketing Association sought to gain tax-exempt status through the Capper-Volstead Act, a 1922 law that allowed farmers to organize collectively and achieve tax-exempt status. The NBMA, basically a nationwide network of integrators—companies that provide young chickens to contract farmers who raise the chickens for a period of time then return them to the integrators to be processed—argued that since they took most of the risk involved in growing chickens, they deserved farm organization status. Members of the NBMA accounted for nearly all of the broiler industry’s $3 billion in sales in 1976. The 5th United States Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed:

We cannot conceive that the ordinary, popular sense of the word “farmers” would fit broiler integrator companies. When the common run of people wish to speak of the broader spectrum of modern agriculture, the word generally used is “agribusiness.” “Farmers” still means what it meant in 1922—one who owns or operates a farm.

In its appeal to the Supreme Court, the NMBA warned against “a romantic view of agriculture, which has changed greatly from the Jeffersonian conception of the self-sufficient yeoman.”

While farmers dealt with higher profits but with higher costs, consumers became enraged at the rapidly rising cost of food. With the Soviet grain purchase starting in late 1972, food supplies dwindled, causing domestic retail prices to rise quickly. Grocery prices jumped 3.2 percent in March 1973 alone. In August 1974 the Consumer Price Index rose by 1.3 percent—due mostly to rising food costs—the largest monthly increase

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since 1947. With food costs rising at an average rate of 10 percent per year, consumers turned to politics to voice their displeasure and to find solutions. Politicians had to listen and take action to ensure support of the majority of voters. Unfortunately for farmers, who lacked political power to counter anti-inflation measures, the government’s anti-inflation approach was aimed directly at rising commodity prices and farm income, what many consumers perceived as the source of retail food price increases.

Due to the continuing trend of off-farm migration in which the farm population experienced a 14 percent decline from 1970 to 1976, farm political power conversely fell. Representatives of rural districts had to develop logrolling and vote trading techniques with representatives of urban and suburban districts to gain support for farm legislation. Often farm representatives voted to increase funding for the food stamp program—a primarily urban interest—to get others to vote for agriculture bills. Increasingly throughout the 1970s farmers had to rely on more votes from urban areas and when farm interests appeared antagonistic to urban interests, urban representatives refused to offer support. Representative of this loss in political power, funding for the food stamp program rose much faster than funding for agriculture support programs and by 1977, cost over half of the $5.4 billion appropriated for the Agriculture Act.

Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford both sought to stem rising retail food costs by bringing down wholesale prices paid to farmers. As stated earlier, farm income had reached record highs from 1973 to 1975 due to increased world demand for American commodities. Starting with President Nixon’s food price freeze in March 1973 and continuing through President Ford’s embargo of all grain sales to the Soviet Union in 1975, the federal government sought to stem rising food costs by first limiting farm prices, then by limiting farm income. In March 1973, President Nixon imposed price ceilings on beef, veal, pork and lamb since little could be done after the start of the growing season by the government to increase the supply to bring retail prices down. In

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115 Ibid, 25.
June, price freezes spread to all farm products.\footnote{116} By placing price freezes on food, processors could not afford to purchase expensive commodities on the open market, process them, then sell the products at government imposed prices. Domestic food supplies quickly dwindled, which only raised the price of food to record levels after price freezes were discontinued in August.\footnote{117}

President Ford attempted to reduce domestic retail prices by raising domestic supply which required limiting exports. In July 1975, the Soviet Union purchased 14.6 million tons of American grain—the largest purchase ever. Consumers recognized that such a purchase would inflate their own food costs and protested. That same month, longshoremen struck in protest to the grain sale, refusing to load grain bound for the Soviet Union. This grain sale and consumer protest held important political consequences for President Ford. He could ignore the protests and ship the grain to the Soviet Union to show the world that the United States was a dependable source of food, providing foreign outlets for American surpluses, or he could honor the strike and place an embargo on the grain sale, earning the support of consumers. Despite record crop production leading to a return to surpluses and signs of falling retail prices, President Ford embargoed all grain sales to the Soviet Union on August 11, 1975.\footnote{118}

While Ford lifted the embargo on October 20 and agreed to sell six million tons of grain to the Soviet Union, the damage had been done to farmers. Retail prices began to fall in late 1975, but not because of the embargo. Farmers had produced record crops, allowing for surpluses to build, depressing prices. In using an embargo against grain sales, nations depending on the United States for food, such as India and various African and European nations, began to question the reliability of the United States as a food provider. They turned to other providers, particularly Argentina and Brazil. Producers in Argentina and Brazil were more than happy to take over part of the market once dominated by the United States. During the high food prices of 1973 through 1975, Brazil invested in beef production to take advantage of the high world demand,

\footnote{117} Ibid, 192.
\footnote{118} Solkoff, *The Politics of Food*, 79.
developing large feedlot systems similar to those found in the United States.  

Argentina likewise invested in its grain production to meet a larger portion of world demand. 

The instability of American food exports led to problems as American farmers returned to chronic overproduction and needed export markets to bring up prices. By 1977 wheat prices fell to $1.92 per bushel from $5.86 in February 1974. Corn prices took a similar tumble from $3.02 per bushel in 1974 to $2.02 in 1977. 

Farm income for 1977 fell over 40 percent from 1973 levels, causing serious financial problems for many farmers. Those who bought land during the profitable years of 1973 through 1975 at inflated prices especially felt the crunch since they now had 40 percent less income than a few years earlier. Farmers like Herbert Huffman, who expanded during the food crisis, realized the difficult economic situation they put themselves in by buying land at inflated prices. “We started believing the good times would go on forever,” he said, “We should have known better.” Moreover, the impact of declining income hit every farmer with higher costs, driving total farm income down to depression levels. Farm income fell from $34 billion in 1973 to $20 billion in 1976. Adjusted for inflation, the 1976 income was less than annual farm income during the Great Depression.

Despite a return of surpluses and falling farm income, inflation continued to affect the economy, causing continued increases in retail food prices. Moreover, the 1973 Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, created in times of food shortages, did not suit surplus conditions. When the four-year act expired in 1977, farmers sought a return to higher support prices in the 1977 agriculture bill to help them with rising costs and falling income. Consumers, however, wanted an end to rising food prices which they believed were caused by government subsidies to farmers. Farmers blamed rising retail prices on food processors and retailers who continued to make a profit while many farmers harvested a loss. E de la Garza, a representative of a rural district in Texas noted:

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123 Ibid.
Many of our consumer advocates blame the American farmer-producer for all of our inflation problems. We cannot just point the finger at the agricultural sector whenever the price increases at the supermarket.\footnote{124}

These conflicting views of the causes of rising food prices continued well after the passage of the 1977 Agriculture Act. Part of the intent of AAM members was to publicize falling farm income and show urban America that farmers did not benefit from rising retail prices.

Consumers sought continued low support prices for farmers despite farmers’ pleas for help in the cost-price squeeze. Congress concurred with consumers and supported the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, which kept subsidies much lower than farmers desired.\footnote{125} The act further met consumer demands by authorizing the USDA to sell its grain reserves when retail prices got too high and by giving consumers representation in agriculture policy panels. Consumers gained a major role in policy formation with the appointment of Carol Tucker Foreman, the executive director of the Consumer Federation of America, to the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in 1977.\footnote{126} Ralph Nader’s admiration of Secretary Butz exemplified the consumer happiness with agriculture policy that suited their needs.\footnote{127}

The return of tough times by 1976 for farmers brought back the discussion on the decline of family farms. During the food crisis of 1973 to 1975, few farmers or consumers worried about the condition of rural America. Farmers were too busy adjusting to new markets and conditions and consumers worried about their own food costs. Neither could justify concern for smaller, family-style farms when the reduction in

\footnote{124 House Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition and the Subcommittee on Department Investigations, Oversight, and Research of the Committee on Agriculture, \textit{Review of Administrations’ Efforts to Deal with Food Price Inflation}, 96th Cong., 1st sess., 4 April 1979, 5.}
\footnote{126 Harold Guither, \textit{The Food Lobbyists: Behind the Scenes of Food and Agri-Politics} (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1980), 91, 92.}
\footnote{127 Marian Burros, “Nader: Smiles For Bob Bergland,” \textit{Washington Post}, 23 February 1977, sec. E. Nader was quoted as saying he “thinks very highly of Butz for his defense of the family farmer, his determination to take women and blacks into the administration, his concerns about the deterioration of foods like processed meat and because he is determined to stamp out commercial crimes.”}
the number of farms slowed dramatically during the food crisis due to better commodity prices. Terrible drought conditions throughout the southern and plains states—many areas receiving less rain fall than during the dust bowl days of the 1930s—coupled with low commodity prices, aroused concern that America might lose its family farms. For many farmers who participated in the AAM, the drought conditions made protest seem like the only solution to accumulating difficulties, especially to perceived unresponsiveness of the federal government.

Consumers may have worried about rising food costs and opted to take political action to limit government assistance to farmers in hopes of bringing down inflation. Nonetheless, the vast majority valued the family farms as the basis for the nation’s agriculture system. According to consumers, retail food prices were too high, yet family farms deserved help in an increasingly competitive and technology-driven agriculture system. A survey of 25,000 consumers in 16 major cities showed that 85 percent were unhappy with the cost of food, yet 79 percent said that “having a large number of family-owned farms is in the consumer’s best interest” and 70 percent believed “increased government expenditures are appropriate for strengthening family-owned farms.” So although consumers did not support government subsidies to farmers for fear that would raise retail food prices, they also believed the government had an obligation to ensure the survival of family farms. Consumers felt conflicted between their own economic well being and the survival of an American ideal. The AAM confronted consumers on the definition of a family farm and made them choose whether family farms or the consumers’ bottom line would get first priority.

Tractorcades, Saving the Family Farm and the Urban Response

In 1977, the worst drought of the century covered much of the nation’s agricultural areas, particularly in the South and the Plains states, with two-thirds of the nation’s counties put on the federal emergency drought impact list. Meanwhile, farm commodity prices failed to rise as surpluses from previous years, as well as rising imports from other nations, glutted the market, forcing farmers’ income below Great Depression levels.

Faced with new problems of terrible growing conditions and increased competition, coupled with continuing problems of a glutted market and a consumer interest seeking to use government agriculture policy to ensure low retail food costs, some farmers decided to take political action. Their ideas quickly caught on with farmers across the nation.

In October 1977, a group of farmers met in Campo, Colorado to discuss farm conditions where they quickly decided to take collective political action by calling for a nationwide strike. Members of this initial group, including Darrel, Gene and Bill Schroder, Alvin Jenkins, and Lawrence Bitner, became the organizers of the American Agriculture Strike which eventually became known as the American Agriculture Movement. They argued that, with enough farmers participating, the AAM could cut farm production enough to raise consumer costs and awareness of the farmers’ predicament so that consumers would not only accept, but help push through legislation to provide farmers with a small guaranteed profit so that they could stay on the farm. Many farmers believed that success required consumer support, especially since farmers saw Congress as dominated by urban interests. Accordingly, farmers proposed to not plant for the upcoming year and not buy farm machinery or unnecessary items. As Lawrence Bittner, one of the organizers noted: “We won’t buy and we won’t sell. And when planting time comes, we won’t put the seeds in the ground.”

The organizers proposed a loosely knit farm organization without a lot of structure. Historically farmers have despised organizations with a strict hierarchical structure in which activities, ideas, and decisions flow in a top-down format. Groups such as the National Farmers Organization provided members with a valuable marketing and organizing service, yet the structure of established groups offered little in the form of grassroots or bottom-up decision making. While an effective communication and organizational structure, the NFO’s system of national, state, district and county officers and representatives ensured top down control and limited the potential to channel the

power of a frustrated, but motivated farmer base.  Organizers hoped to present the AAM as a new and innovative farm group that offered farmers an option to the established farm groups, much like the NFO sought to do when established in 1955. In a survey conducted by Aruna Michie and Craig Jagger, a full 42 percent of farmers surveyed considered themselves members of the AAM. Of the remaining 58 percent who considered themselves non-members, 45 percent were sympathetic to the AAM, 34 percent were neutral, and 22 percent disapproved of the AAM strike. In its early days, the AAM enjoyed broad-based support.

Inconsistencies in determining the type of farmers who participated in the movement have arisen among sociological studies of the AAM protests. Mitchie and Jagger conclude that middle-level farmers provided more support than small or large producers for protest movements like the AAM because they depended more heavily on the market than small producers, yet did not have the cushion against price fluctuations that larger farmers enjoyed. William Browne concludes, however, that 90 percent of AAM participants were large-scale producers. Cigler and Hansen avoid the size issue and conclude that participants appeared to be a demographic cross-section of the farm population, with farmers having more credit problems and perceived economic vulnerability more likely to participate.

The message of the AAM appealed to all levels of farmers since the AAM sought to save the family farm, a definition that, for many farmers, had subjective boundaries. Although farms operated on a wide variety of sizes and management techniques, few did not consider themselves some form of the family farm. Active participants of the AAM, however, proved to be predominantly larger-scale producers who depended on farming as their main source of income. Moreover, the dominance of large and expensive tractors in many tractorcades of 1977 through 1979 suggest a lack of small farm representation that

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134 Joseph Honan, “The National Farmers’ Organization: A Study of Agricultural Protest,” (Ph.D. Diss. University of Missouri 1966), 62-64. Honan outlines the structure of the NFO with four officers and 28 board members at the national level; a director and executive board at the state level; four officers, three trustees, and a board of directors at each district; and four officers and three trustees at the county level.

135 Aruna Mitchie and Craig Jagger, *Why Farmers Protest: Kansas Farmers, the Farm Problem, and the American Agriculture Movement* (Manhattan: Agricultural Experiment Station, Kansas State University, 1982), 61.

136 Ibid, 62.


did not use, nor could afford, tractors of such scale. The issue of defining the participants and benefactors continually arose for the AAM as farmers confronted organizing and support issues as well as a non-farm population that had completely different definitions of family farmers than that presented by protesting farmers.

Organizers of the AAM formed five demands that the federal government had to accept by December 13 before farmers would plant their crops for 1978. They wanted 100 percent parity on domestic and exported agriculture products, all agriculture products contracted at 100 percent parity, food imports prohibited until domestic supplies were used to fulfill domestic demand, agriculture policy announcements made in advance to give farmers time to adjust production, and a way to give farmers an influence in policy matters. AAM organizers based many of their demands on parity, a term used to describe farm prices that provided farmers with a reasonable income. The formula for parity was based on the income of farmers related to cost from 1910-1914, what some consider a time when farm prices were in step with expenses, providing a reasonable income. According to that formula, farmers should have been receiving $5.02 per bushel for wheat, over twice the market rate of $2.26 in 1977. The parity rate for corn, $3.47 per bushel, also stood at over twice the market rate, $1.61. The AAM argued that inflation had driven up costs and, therefore, farm income should also rise. Presenting the AAM case to Congress, Jim Kramer, a farmer from Hugoton, Kansas noted that it once took two bushels of wheat to equal the cost of one barrel of oil. While the supply of oil and food had both increased through the 1960s and 1970s, it now took eight bushels of wheat to equal the cost of one barrel of oil.

The call for parity sparked a debate over fair pricing for farmers as well as for consumers. Farmers felt that since their costs had risen, especially from 1973 through 1977 when expenses rose by 23 percent and farm income fell by 30 percent, and because they represented a dying American icon that required preservation, they had a legitimate

140 “Prices Are Up, But Not Enough,” Alliance (2 December 1977), 10.
reason to seek increased income.\textsuperscript{142} The cost of oil alone rose by 18 percent and the cost of a new four-wheel drive tractor rose by 10 percent in 1978.\textsuperscript{143} Consumers and the federal government, on the other hand, argued not only that artificially raising farm income would cause inflation in the entire economy and drive up retail food prices, but also that the parity formula represented an outdated system of determining fairness in food pricing. In arguing against the formula, a journalist for \textit{Time} compared farm and weapon technology and prices paid for food and weapons:

\begin{quote}
Considering that the farm productivity has changed drastically in six decades, the notion of fixing farm prices to achieve a certain parity point is about as sensible as an attempt to set the defense budget on the basis of musket prices.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

Farmers’ efficiency had improved greatly since 1914 with the advent of tractors, hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and chemical pesticides and herbicides, making farms more productive than ever imagined in the 1930s when the government first established parity.

Most farmers, regardless if they joined the AAM, believed that the continuing decline in the farm population posed a threat to the stability of agriculture, and even the nation. For them the family farm still held Jeffersonian ideals of a close connection to the soil, a family-oriented lifestyle enriched with environmental and humanitarian values and a strong work ethic. Many concluded that family values were dying since the farm population was quickly declining to obscurity. Jeanne Rohl, who farmed with her husband in River Falls, Wisconsin, concluded that urban troubles resulted from the decline of the family farm:

\begin{quote}
If small farms could have prospered, you never would have seen a drug problem in this country. We wouldn’t have had to waste millions of dollars on sex education and birth control clinics for 12-year-olds. Our nation’s industries
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{143} House Subcommittee on Livestock and Grains of the Committee on Agriculture, \textit{Increase Target Prices of 1979 Crops}, 96\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess., 3 April 1979, 15-16.

\textsuperscript{144} “Time to Plant a New Farm Policy,” \textit{Time} 101 (26 February 1973), 22.
wouldn’t be filled with working people so inefficient and lazy that millions of dollars are lost each day to make up for the apathy they carry to their jobs.  

The AAM justified its protest and demands for economic assistance on the idea that such a protest would preserve an icon and its associated values. Bill Parker, a farmer from Harrington, Delaware concluded: “It is the lifestyle, not merely the money that is at stake now.” Farmers argued, moreover that family farms provided the nation with plentiful food that allowed the United States to become an economic superpower. Harvey Gardner, a farmer from Hydro, Oklahoma argued that family farms have “almost single-handedly made our country the best fed nation in the world, at the lowest cost to our citizens.”

Government officials countered that raising parity prices to AAM demands would only exacerbate the farm plight and make survival of the family farm more difficult. Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland noted that raising price supports to 100 percent parity would drive up the cost of land since land values fluctuate according to potential income. “Because land prices generally reflect the value of the crops grown on them,” he said, “[even] 90 percent of parity would serve to drive those land prices even higher than they are today.” This would make the land market more competitive, ensuring that only the biggest farmers—usually corporations that could afford expensive land purchases—would continue to farm and smaller farms would be forced out of the market. Secretary Bergland argued, moreover, that the parity formula would help all farms regardless of size, giving larger farms more federal support. Historically that has been the case with federal agricultural support programs; 100 percent parity would be


\[148\] Bob Bergland, “United States Farm Policy: The Future of the Family Farm,” in *Vital Speeches of the Day* 45 (15 May 1979), 457. This address was given March 7, 1979 in response to AAM demands of 90 percent of parity; a reduction from the 100 percent parity demands after farmers realized few in government or the urban public would accept full parity.

no exception. In 1977, the largest six percent of farms—those with a gross income of over $100,000—received one-third of all federal support while the smallest 80 percent of farms received just 40 percent of federal agricultural support.  

Convinced few other options existed politically or economically, farmers supported a strike plan that, if successful, would have reduced agriculture output to a fraction of full production. Despite their intentions, few farmers actually followed through on plans to not grow crops or even expected such a plan to work. By March 1978, it became apparent that a farm strike would not materialize as acreage reports showed no considerable decline in acreage planted or intended to be planted. Even livestock markets showed no drop-off in cattle sales. If farmers did cut back their acreage, it was to receive government subsidies through set-aside programs. For farmers like John Rupp of Holcumb, Kansas the decision came down to economics, not protests. “I’ve got to cut back to comply with the government program.” For most other farmers, maximum production still provided the best chance of survival, despite glutted markets. Lee Mcguire, a Spokane, Washington farmer noted: “Nobody I’ve talked to is cutting back. If they wanted to their banks would be after them.”

The failure of a farm strike by the AAM mirrors a similar failure of the withholding action by the NFO in 1967 and also alludes to larger trends in agriculture in the 20th century. While protests challenged problems caused by increased production brought on by increasing implementation of technology, farmers often viewed that technology as a solution to economic difficulties. The potential seen in technology convinced many farmers that further industrialization, rather than reverting back to earlier

151 Browne, “Challenging Industrialization,” 12. Only 5 out of over 100 surveyed believed a farm strike would work.
systems of production, provided the best possible solution. James Kroke Jr., writer for *The Nation*, commented on this irony:

The family farmers who have survived the postwar shift to industrial agriculture have been those who have changed the most. Increasingly, they thrive by mimicking industrial management strategies and methods of production.\footnote{James Kroke Jr., “Big Agribusiness Plowing Under the Family Farm,” *The Nation* (2 June 1979), 630.}

In the fight for survival, farmers became the enemy which they despised. The necessity of survival conflicted with the idealistic desires of maintaining an older, and rapidly antiquated, agriculture system. Farmers became caught in a system where all planted as much as possible in hopes of a good crop year while quietly wishing a bad year on other farmers so they could benefit from higher commodity prices.\footnote{Gerald McCathern, *Gentle Rebels: The Story of the Farm Protest of 1977 Thru 1982 By Members of the American Agriculture Movement* (Hereford, Tex: Food For Thought Pub., 1982), 218.} William Serrin, journalist for the *New York Times* noted that, while few willingly admitted it, “the enemy of the family farmer, is, as much as the corporation, the family farmer next door.”\footnote{William Serrin, “Plowing Farmers Under,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1979.}

Coinciding with the threat of a farm strike that eventually failed, the AAM organized protests using phalanxes of tractors with which farmers would take their case to consumers and the government. In December 1977, the AAM organized a nationwide protest at almost every state capital; approximately 200,000 farmers drove their tractors in a symbolic march to gain public empathy. In January 1978, protesting farmers converged on Washington to take their case to the federal government. Participants argued that a large part of the problem lay in the government that had become more concerned with keeping consumers happy than helping farmers survive.

Many farmers blamed the government for their problems, especially after the passage of the 1977 Agriculture Act that called for increased production despite sizeable surpluses that had depressed commodity prices.\footnote{William P. Browne, *Private Interests, Public Policy, and American Agriculture* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 66.} Darlene Harrison of Mobridge, South Dakota, who farmed 6,000 acres with her husband, announced: “I came on the tractorcade because I know there is a problem, and I believe the problem is in
Many farmers like Donald Willms of Hutchinson, Kansas felt taken advantage of after they had met world food demands during the food crisis of 1973 through 1975 and now faced depression level prices:

We were all told to produce all that we could just two years ago, so that people would not starve, and we worked overtime to do an excellent job. Now, our country is saying that since we did such an excellent job, we are not going to be paid.  

In the eyes of protesting farmers like Alvin Jenkins, one of the organizers of the AAM, the federal government, while the source of their problems, also had the power to save the family farm: “The grave crisis in American agriculture necessitates immediate executive action to prevent irreversible losses of family farms and ranches in America.”  

Many of the participating farmers drove their tractors around the nation’s capital to take their message to the public to educate them of the farm problem. Bill Strausser, a Cambridge, Maryland farmer summed up the purpose of the tractorcades. “Most people in the city don’t know about the farmers. All we’re trying to do is take our story to the public.” The tractor both aided and hindered farmers’ attempts to rally public awareness of and support for the family farm cause. On the one hand, the thousands of tractors in Washington took the message to urban Americans, as had no other farm protest group. Farmers used the massive machines intended for heavy fieldwork and turned them into political tools as slow moving roadblocks to get consumers and the media to sit up and take notice. Too often farm protests of the past—including the withholding actions of the National Farmers Organization in 1967—appeared a distant problem to urban and suburban Americans who were unaware of the origins of their food.
and had become accustomed to the convenience of a plentiful food supply. Urban Americans and the media quickly took notice of the tractors and listened to the farmers’ message. Gerald McCathern, leader of the Washington tractorcades, noted the power of tractors in gaining notice:

The tractor had become the symbol of their discontent. It also was a news media gimmick. A farmer or group of farmers could shout from the housetops that agriculture was going down the drain and the news media would not give them a passing notice. That was old news; farmers for years had been saying the same thing. However, tractors in the city was different, and the news media flocked to see what the tractors would do next.165

Unfortunately, the use of tractors as a protest symbol created unforeseen problems for the farmers. The massive tractors used by many protesting farmers cost as much as $50,000, causing many urban Americans to become confused by the seeming contradiction between farmers’ claims of bankruptcy and the appearance of well-equipped tractors that easily cost more than a luxury car. Non-farmers started to question the claims of protesting farmers that economic and technological trends were forcing them out of agriculture. More importantly, large tractors led many observers to question farmers’ claims that they represented family farms, exemplifying a growing divergence between farm and non-farm definitions of family farmers. Onlookers like Patrick Frazier questioned farmers’ definitions as they watched farmers march around Washington in their massive farm vehicles while calling themselves family farmers: “Despite their ownership of multi-thousand dollar tractors, trucks and camper homes, the farmers who paralyzed commuters tied up the city and broke the law describe themselves as ‘small farmers.’”166 Urban definitions of family farms did not include four-wheel drive tractors complete with air conditioning and stereo systems. Columnists like Ken Ringle of the Washington Post commented on the noticeable differences between the protesting

165 McCathern, Gentle Rebels, 54.
farmers’ and urban Americans’ definitions of family farms: “Dust Bowl rhetoric rings a little hollow inside a tractor dressed with stereo sound.”

Protestors achieved initial success in January 1978 when the Department of Agriculture, after listening to farmers talk about the potential loss of a way of life, passed a moratorium on all Farm and Home Administration (FmHA) foreclosures. According to Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland: “Under no circumstances will a farmer be foreclosed on or denied new credit for which he is eligible as long as there is a reasonable chance he can remain on the farm.” In May 1978, after threats that he would veto any farm bill if too costly and inflationary, President Carter signed an emergency farm bill that raised price supports on wheat by 40 cents per bushel, from $3.00 to $3.40.

After achieving some political gains, farmers returned home to start the crop year. Despite this limited success, some AAM members felt the government had cheated them once again by not fulfilling all of their demands. Sociologists William Browne and John Dinse succinctly characterize farmers’ displeasure with their political gains. “The greatest frustration for the amateur lobbyists of AAM resulted from their greatest legislative achievement.” The AAM criticized President Carter for his threat to veto farm legislation that would have provided higher supports. His failure to fulfill farmer demands marked him as the enemy in the eyes of many farmers like Gerald McCathern: “He [President Carter] became the symbol of oppression to farmers, the symbol of unpaid mortgages and farm foreclosures. He became the ‘enemy’ to be conquered!” AAM protesters lashed out particularly at President Carter since he identified himself as a simple peanut farmer from Georgia in the 1976 presidential campaign.

Seeking further help from the government and support from non-farmers in their cause to save the family farm, the AAM returned with their tractorcades to Washington in 1979. Protesting farmers, however, did not realize that conditions had changed dramatically from just one year earlier. Since many representatives had just come off of an election year in 1978, they were no longer willing to listen to the farmers’ concerns

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169 Browne and Dinse, “The Emergence of the American Agriculture Movement,” 225.
170 McCathern, Gentle Rebels, 107.
and to take action to gain popularity with their own constituents. Supporting slight increases in price supports for wheat farmers based on the idea of saving the family farm was, for many politicians, merely campaigning for votes in an election year. In an off-election year few representatives willingly took action to help farmers.

Urban Americans had little sympathy for the second round of tractorcades and farm protests. Many voiced frustration as retail food prices rose 12.5 percent in 1978, the first time since 1974 that food price inflation hit double digits. In Brooklyn, New York retail prices on eggs rose 50 percent, flour 45 percent, chicken 35 percent and beef 50 percent between August 1978 and April 1979. Urban Americans also became upset with farmers who returned for further protests after learning that farm income had risen by 18 to 36 percent from 1977 farm income levels. For many consumers, concern for the survival of an American icon took a backseat to concerns for self-survival.

Democratic Representative John Brandemas summarized urban consumer concerns over rising food costs in light of farmers’ rising income: “At a time of rising food prices and rising income for farmers it’s unreasonable to assume that a protest in support of more government spending to boost prices would be effective.” Government officials and urban Americans saw the second round of protests as a greedy attempt by farmers to secure guaranteed income in spite of rising costs for everyone, including consumers. Secretary Bergland concluded that the farmers who came back to protest a second time were motivated by “just old-fashioned greed.”

Fewer farmers arrived in Washington in 1979 to petition the government and urban Americans, lending the appearance that the problem had disappeared. For some, farming had improved in 1978 due to increased income as stated earlier. The drought had ended in many parts of the country, allowing farmers to plant a full crop and put their trust in the market rather than rely on assistance from the federal government. Moreover, the legislative gains made in the 1978 protest—albeit a far cry from original demands—had given many farmers a sturdy enough safety net to allow them to try the market.

171 House Subcommittee on Domestic Marketing, Consumer Relations, and Nutrition and Subcommittee on Department Investigations, Oversight, and Research of the Committee on Agriculture, Review of Administration’s Efforts to Deal With Food Price Inflation, 96th Cong., 2d Sess., (4 April 1979), 1, 2, 44.
Regardless, some farmers returned to Washington to protest and get the government to raise supports to 90 percent parity, what protesting farmers believed to be a reasonable compromise.

The second round of tractorcades upset urban Americans not only for the traffic problems they caused and the apparent lack of concern for consumer prices, but most important, because urban Americans recognized important differences between farmers in Washington and the ideal they claimed to represent. Protesting farmers represented predominantly large farms that often required expensive equipment and the help of outside labor. Dave Evert, a farmer from northwest Kansas represented the large farm dominance of the AAM. Evert, who farmed over 3,000 acres with the help of heavy equipment and numerous employees, noted this large farm dominance: “The guys who come to Washington are the big, serious, fulltime farmers.” President Carter noted that at a meeting with AAM farmers who urged him to save the family farm, “20 of those 21 farmers had gross sales of $200,000 a year or more.”

For AAM organizers, large farm dominance provided an opportunity to bring a large portion of agricultural production under one organization. Marion Kuhlman of Sharon Springs, Kansas believed the AAM could succeed because of the production power of a few large-scale farmers. Kulman noted that 1.8 million small farms with sales under $20,000 produced only ten percent of all farm sales while the largest four percent of farms produced 46.8 percent of all farm sales. Kuhlman argued the large farmers of the AAM did not need small farm help. “We don’t need them on our side. We want their support, but we don’t need it to be successful.” Bill Parker, a farmer from Harrington, Delaware who had over $2 million invested in his dairy farm operation, argued that small farmers “don’t understand.” He claimed, moreover, that bigger farmers were hit harder by low commodity prices and that if large farms went bankrupt, corporations would get control of agricultural production.

Regardless of urban expectations, farmers of the AAM, like Howard and Darlene Harrison of Mobridge, South Dakota who owned 6,000 acres, participated in a large-scale dairy operation, and owed over $700,000 in Farm and Home Administration loans, argued they represented the typical family farm. In testimony to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Forestry and Nutrition as part of the hearings held in response to the AAM protests, Darlene Harrison said that she and her husband were family farmers struggling to survive in an industrialized world. “No one is as efficient as the family farmer, simply because we love what we are doing and are willing to work hard for it.”

Protesting farmers had become business owners who, due to industrialization, had to invest heavily in their business in land, labor and technology to survive the growing pressures of falling income and rising prices. The dominant social values that emphasized economic survival through growth and industrialization prevented farmers from seeking others avenues of economic survival. These farmers viewed themselves as the epitome of the family farm in a new era of industrialized agriculture.

Many urban Americans, however, did not see industrialization as part of the ideal family farm. The public response to farmers’ tractors typified the growing contrast between urban Americans’ and farmers’ definitions of the family farm. Ken Ringle, journalist for the Washington Post voiced the common response to the AAM tractorcades in light of their goals to save the family farm:

Rolling into Washington in $50,000 tractors whose tires can cost $800 apiece, they warn that the loss of America’s independent family farms will leave the nation’s food supply in the hands of large agribusiness cartels.

Urban Americans saw protesting farmers not as family farmers, but as business owners similar to other business owners. Ringle concluded: “They are small to medium sized

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179 Senate Committee on Agriculture, Forestry and Nutrition, American Agriculture Movement, 96th Cong., 1st Sess., 1979, 4-5.
180 Ken Ringle, “Middle-Class Protest Against Rising Costs, Deepening Debt,” Washington Post, 6 February 1979, sec. A.
businessmen—basically middle class—caught in the same inflationary pressures squeezing other Americans.  

To many urban Americans observing the farm protests, the AAM protesters looked like large-scale business owners that had become dependent on government subsidies while the farmers’ argued they represented the last of the agrarian ideal. This contradiction led many non-farmers to wonder what had happened to the farmers they readily believed had once dominated American agriculture. In a letter to the editor of the Washington Post, John Matticks, a resident of Washington D.C., perceived the farm protests as antithetical to the ideal of the family farm: “What became of the central American character who prided his rugged individualism, who scorned government and its intervention in his life in any form?” In light of the apparent industrialized nature of the protesting farmers, urban Americans yearned for the bucolic and often inaccurate ideal of farms in the past that informed their ideas of what modern family farmers ought to be: simple, rugged, and independent of government assistance.

Did the Protest Make a Difference?

Frustrated with the negative response to their tractorcades, protesting farmers left Washington in early March 1979 and returned to their farms for spring planting. Urban and suburban Americans may have had genuine concern for family farms, but from their point of view the protesting farmers did not represent family farms. Moreover, concerns over rising food costs and their own economic survival received more consideration. A small contingent of AAM farmers vowed to stay in Washington to lobby Congress and President Carter until farmers gained greater federal support. Their lobbying efforts, much like earlier attempts, proved to be fruitless as the government concerned itself with rising food costs and inflation rather than saving an icon that had perhaps already passed into extinction.

181 Ibid.
With few other options, farmers once again turned to industrialization and increased production for survival. Through improved seeds, chemical applications and farm equipment, farmers in 1979 increased their man-hour efficiency by 2.5 times over farmers in 1960 and were ten times more efficient than farmers in 1930.183 Farmers continued to squeeze more and more production from their land, even though doing so often required capital inputs that negated any advantage in production. Faced with increased competition to survive, farmers either left farming altogether, became part time farmers and took on more non-farm work, or expanded in size and production. This led to continued off-farm migration and fewer, but larger, farms. In 1979, the number of farms fell by 37,000 or 1.6 percent of the national total.184 Despite the protests and tractorcades, off-farm migration continued according to the post-World War II trend.

Problems for farmers persisted throughout the 1980s, causing greater concern for the well being of the family farm. In 1979, Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker raised interest rates to curb inflation, which raised borrowing costs for farmers and also made their products more expensive on the world market. On January 4, 1980, President Carter imposed a grain embargo on the Soviet Union in protest against the invasion of Afghanistan.185 The Department of Agriculture agreed to buy all grain contracted to the Soviet Union so farmers would not experience any short-term effects. Regardless, farmers felt disgusted with President Carter for the embargo. In the AAM Newsletter, Richard E. Buzbee voiced farm anger with what seemed an unfair dependence on food as a foreign policy tool: “Only the nation’s farmers must stay in the trenches.”186 The use of the grain embargo, however, called into question the dependability of the United States as a food source, once again driving many potential customers away. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan pushed through a tax cut plan that ensured the government would use high interest rates to combat inflation.187 Regardless, farmers produced record crops and faced massive surpluses that depressed prices and led

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183 “Farm Productivity In U.S. Rises Sharply,” Washington Post, 10 July 1979, sec. A.
185 Danbom, Born in the Country, 263 and Bower, Rasmussen and Baker, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 485, 36.
187 Danbom, Born in the Country, 263.
to the farm crisis of the mid-1980s. Much like the crisis of the mid-1970s, when land and commodity prices fell after farmers took out loans at high interest rates, the crisis of the mid-1980s brought high rates of farm foreclosure and another round of farm protest calling on America to save the family farm.\textsuperscript{188}

The AAM protests raised awareness of the decline of smaller farms. The urban and suburban public, while unwilling to increase direct government support to help family farms survive for fear of rising food costs, provided moral support for a cause that few could publicly oppose. The idea of the family farm, while having drastically different definitions for urban Americans and farmers, still held an emotional value for all. Urban Americans believed farms of the past better represented the family farm, rather than the industrialized, incorporated farms of contemporary times. Farmers recognized this bucolic view that often refused to consider larger farms as family farms. Steve Cain, a writer for \textit{Successful Farming}, a farm journal aimed at a large-scale farm audience, noted this bias: “The small farm, which often is confused with the term ‘family farm,’ has a magnetism to the nostalgic emotions in off-farm groups.”\textsuperscript{189} While modern farms may have been large in scale with high investment requirements, they were still often owned and operated by single families.

The AAM, while achieving few short-term political gains, succeeded in altering the structure of the farm debate through its protests and rallies to save the family farm. The group successfully focused attention on trends in agriculture: declining farm populations, the growing size and industrialized nature of farms, and the apparent endangerment of a national icon in the family farm. The tractorcades, moreover, provided farmers with an introduction to interest group politics and public relations campaigns that increasingly played important roles in their attempts to attain favorable legislation.\textsuperscript{190} The AAM failed, however, to alter urban American perceptions and definitions of family farms.

Farmers of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, much like Populist farmers of the 1890s described by Richard Hofstadter in \textit{The Age of Reform}, saw themselves as representing

\begin{itemize}
  \item Barlett, \textit{American Dreams, Rural Realities}, 376 and Mark Friedberger, \textit{Farm Families and Change in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century}, 193. From 1981 to 1985 land lost 55 percent of its value due to inflation and poor world markets.
  \item Steve Cain, “You Have a Stake in Saving Small Farms,” \textit{Successful Farming} 77 (April 1979), 33.
  \item Fite, \textit{American Farmers}, 217.
\end{itemize}
the ideal while acting differently in reality. Farmers of the 1970s saw themselves as family farmers, but often they had to become large businesses or corporations to survive. Farm protest groups of each era developed as a response to increasing costs as part of industrialization. Both believed in the agrarian tradition, but the historical context shaped the mentality and rhetoric of each group in different ways. With farmers representing a large portion of the population in the 1890s, the Populists called for more direct democracy so that farmers could use their voting strength to shape government to their needs. Farmers in the 1970s represented less than three percent of the population, forcing the AAM to call on urban Americans to take action to save farmers. The dramatic decline in farm population in the post-world war II era, in combination with the growing awareness of corporate control of agriculture, led farmers of the 1970s to distrust industrialization for its consequences. Out of necessity however, farmers of the 1970s reluctantly accepted new, more industrialized farming methods while also changing their definitions of family farms to fit modern needs. Farmers in the 20th century, unlike farmers of the late 19th century, altered their identity and definitions of ideal farming to meet their needs.

Confronted by urban Americans’ romanticized definition of the family farm and the need to expand and industrialize for survival, farmers, particularly large-scale farmers, were torn between urban values and economic realities. Steve Cain noted the importance of ensuring the viability of smaller farms. “You (the average Successful Farming subscriber farms 644 acres and grosses $60,000) sic have an important stake in the future of these small farms.” Cain noted that small farmers not only voted with larger farm interests and carried clout with the American public, but also provided the first line of defense against potential ruin for larger farmers. “If today’s trend toward larger farming units continues,” he wrote, “even you and your life-style as family farm units will be jeopardized along with the small farm.” Cain made an important distinction in that larger farms now represented the American family farm. Yet these same farmers followed business ideas that often led to the decline of smaller farms. In

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193 Ibid, 19.
the September 1979 issue of *Successful Farming*, just five months after proposing support for smaller farms, the editors presented readers with the question, “Is this the year to incorporate?” The editors argued that incorporation provided easier inter-generational property transfer as well as better tax rates, especially to farmers with larger incomes. Tax advantages to larger farms, while making them more competitive, would only make survival of smaller farms more difficult.

A comparison of farm attitudes reflected in *Successful Farming* articles shows the change in views toward corporate farming from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. An article in the July 1969 issue of *Successful Farming* indicates the initial response of self-defined family farmers to the growing trend towards incorporation. Writer Dick Hansen drew distinct differences between family and corporate farms and concluded that corporate farms could not compete with family farms:

> There’s a real question in my mind whether the salaried employee of a corporate farm can compete with the personal touch of the family farmer who is totally dedicated to the success of his farm.  

The suggestion by *Successful Farming* editors in the 1970s that farmers should incorporate for tax purposes indicates an acceptance of incorporation as a means of survival that Hansen could never have imagined.

The decline and eventual division in the AAM typifies the contradiction felt by many farmers about how to fight for farm-friendly legislation and for survival. By June 1979, over two-thirds of all AAM offices had closed as a result of the group’s precipitous decline in popularity with both urban and farm populations. In 1982, the AAM formally split into two organizations with opposing philosophies. Grassroots AAM, a loose collection of AAM farmers, sought to rally popular farm protest and encourage farmers to take political action into their own hands, often suggesting strikes and tractorcades. Organizers of Grassroots AAM argued that farmers could still take their message of saving the family farm directly to the people and could succeed with increased participation. Meanwhile AAM, Incorporated became a political action

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194 “Is This the Year to Incorporate?” *Successful Farming* 77 (September 1979), 11.
committee in Washington D.C. Supporters of AAM, Incorporated argued that direct lobbying techniques provided the most effective means in trying to gain favorable government action. While still believing in the existence of the family farm, supporters of AAM, Incorporated realized that farming had become an industry with special interests, much like so many other industries, that required lobbying efforts and public relations campaigns to survive.

The AAM continued the agrarian tradition of protest in difficult economic times, often brought on by overproduction. Like other people, farmers, particularly in the post-World War II era, believed in the benefits of business, industrialization and technology. The NFO protests typified farmers’ beliefs in, and appeals to, popular notions about business and industrialization. The NFO message indicated a mentality of business owners, not necessarily of family farmers. Increased competition in agriculture, coupled with the rapid development of corporate farming, especially in the post-World War II years, changed the way farmers viewed themselves. Urban Americans increasingly participated in agriculture policy debate over concerns of environmental consequences of chemical applications, the treatment of migrant labor, and especially of rising food costs. Confronted with continuing struggles and new issues, farmers of the AAM armed themselves with a new mentality and identity and turned toward the urban public which now held control of agriculture policy, to call for the rescue of the family farm. Inconsistencies between the AAM message and presentation through tractorcades led many to perceive AAM protesters as representative of the forces working against smaller farms, rather than their saviors.

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