

Robert Rodale: A remembrance and perspective

In late September, Robert Rodale, Chairman and CEO of Rodale Press in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, was killed at age 60 in a Moscow car accident. He was in the Soviet Union working on publication of a Russian language version of *The New Farm*. As always, Bob was attempting to reach still another audience with his message of agricultural and community regeneration.

Speaking out on the importance of what Bob called regenerative agriculture was a central and abiding aspect of his life. In the fullness of time, history no doubt will provide a more complete picture of Bob's influence on agriculture and health policy, both here and abroad. For now, in the immediate aftermath of this tragic loss, it is only possible to offer a personal and tentative sketch.

I first met Bob Rodale in 1979 during the initial phases of work on USDA's 1980 organic farming report. I well remember his interest in my earlier work on the ideology of alternative agriculture. We discussed this matter several times during a 10-day tour of organic farms in Europe in the Fall of 1979.

During his active life, Bob must have touched scores of others in a similarly personal and positive way. This alone is a major contribution. However, it seems quite likely that Bob will be remembered most, at least within agricultural circles, for his impact on our agricultural thought and institutions.

Over the past 10 years or so, under Bob's guidance, agricultural activities at Rodale Press focused increasingly on the sci-

ence of alternative production systems. The hiring of Richard Harwood in 1978 as Director of Research, coupled with creation of the Rodale Institute, the nonprofit arm of Rodale Press, in 1982, marked a major turning point in Bob's efforts to bring scientific credibility to the field. These efforts continue. Through Rodale International, a division of the Rodale Institute, they now extend worldwide. Such publications as *The New Farm* and *Organic Gardening* carry information to an enormous lay and professional audience.

In the mid 1980's, Bob's attention began to focus on the research and education policy needs of alternative agriculture. The Rodale organization was one of the many groups instrumental in developing USDA's LISA program.

Bob Rodale was a major ideological and spiritual figure within alternative agricultural circles. During more recent years, his influence extended to the conventional agricultural community as well. His untimely death constitutes a profound loss for all of agriculture. We hope that his personal legacy, including the role of the Rodale organization, will continue under new leadership. To those faced with the daunting task of guiding the Rodale organization in the years ahead, we offer our hand of cooperation. To Bob's family, close friends, and colleagues, we offer our sincere sympathy.

Garth Youngberg, Editor




OPINION

Developing a socially sustainable agriculture

Chuck Hassebrook

Sustainable agricultural systems should be shaped to enhance the quality of the social as well as the natural environment. Toward that end, we should develop environmentally sound farming systems that maximize the number of economic opportunities for people to own and operate their own farms and that

reduce socioeconomic inequality.

This idea runs counter to much of the conventional wisdom in both agricultural and environmental circles, which shuns socioeconomic structure concerns and resists mixing social with environmental issues. However, research has revealed an inextricable link between the structure of agriculture and the quality of life in rural communities--in short, the public interest. A

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University of California researcher summarized research on the topic as follows:

As farm size and absentee ownership increase, we have found depressed median family incomes, high levels of poverty, low education levels, social and economic inequality between ethnic groups, etc., associated with land and capital concentration in agriculture....Communities that are surrounded by farms that are larger than can be operated by a family unit have a bi-modal income distribution with a few wealthy elites, a majority of poor laborers, and virtually no middle class. The absence of a middle class at the community level has a serious negative effect on both the quality and quantity of social and commercial services, public education, local governments, etc. (MacCannell, 1983).

Likewise, Nebraska research reveals a direct correlation between concentration in agriculture and the social and economic decline of agriculturally based communities (Swanson, 1980).

The challenge to sustainable agriculture is to develop farming systems that address these social concerns, as they address environmental quality. Just as sustainable agriculture seeks to address problems of production holistically, we will be most effective if we address social and environmental goals simultaneously and holistically. A piecemeal approach may result in social and environmental initiatives that are at odds with each other. For example, commodity programs aimed at supporting farm income now undermine sustainable production systems. Such conflict is not inevitable, but rather is a result of seeking piecemeal solutions to intertwined problems. We can choose to develop and shape sustainable systems to enhance family farming and the rural environment, or we can ignore the former and blindly develop systems that put the two in opposition.

Following are some approaches for incorporating social sustainability in sustainable farming systems by consciously shaping them to provide increased opportunities for moderate-sized owner-operated farms:

--Reduce purchases of both chemical and nonchemical inputs from off the farm, rather than replacing petrochemicals with environmentally benign alternative products. Reducing input purchases reduces capital barriers to young people getting started in farming. It keeps a larger share of the farm dollar on the farm to provide income to farm operators. Finally, it reduces the advantage that large farms gain over moderate-sized farms through volume discounts, and thereby helps level the playing field. Volume discounts provide a significant competitive advantage to large farms (Knutson, 1987).

--Increase opportunities to apply and earn a return on *skilled* labor and intensive management in the field and barn. Skilled and highly motivated labor and hands-on management are the principal strengths and competitive advantages of family farmers. Strategies are needed for using them to reduce input costs and capital requirements and increase returns. However, systems dependent on large amounts of *unskilled* labor beyond that which can be provided by farm families (for example, extensive hand weeding of field crops) may instead lend themselves to a class-structured agriculture with armies of poorly paid farm

workers. Likewise, production systems that require high degrees of organizational management easily separable from provision of labor and performed in the office, such as acquiring assets, managing investments, and risk management, also lend themselves well to a class-structured agriculture.

--Develop farming systems that can be applied at least as economically on moderate-sized farms as on large operations. Typically, farming systems that require large fixed investments of capital, such as total confinement livestock systems, are most economical on a large scale because of the need to spread high fixed costs over many units of production. However, moderate investment systems can often be as profitable on a moderate scale.

The environment and family farming need not be placed in competition. Farming systems can be designed to support farm opportunities, equity, and rural community vitality as they sustain our resource endowment. However, that will not happen unless we make it happen. We must consciously set research priorities and design farming systems that advance the public interest in its social as well as its environmental aspects. In short, sustainable agriculture must take an holistic approach to issues of social justice and environment, just as it takes an holistic approach to problems on the farm.

References

1. Knutson, Ronald. 1987. Why the Mid-Size Family Farm is Dying. Department of Economics, Texas A & M University.
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3. Swanson, Larry D. 1980. A Study in Socioeconomic Development: Changing Farm Structure and Rural Community Decline in the Context of the Technological Transformation of American Agriculture. Ph.D. diss., Department of Economics, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Editor's note for future AJAA authors

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The reason for this recommendation is that a citation not only gives credit for other people's work, but should also allow the reader to pursue the matter in more depth. The latter function is fulfilled only if the material you cite is reasonably available, either at a library or from the source. Remember, too, that "available" means not just immediately, but for as many years into the future as you would like your article to be read. It is frustrating if the reader is not able to get hold of a key reference; by citing available sources, you will greatly enhance the value of your article.