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Small Farmer Commentary;

In a recent widely distributed column, cowboy poet and former veterinarian Baxter Black poked fun at those of us poor misguided souls who support or advocate sustainable agriculture. We tolerate or humor them, he claimed, as we would children who do not understand how the real world works.

We might as well call it "Model T Farming, or Third World Farming, or Farming to Feed the Few" he preached. Hobby farmers with their nice gardens and a few chickens are fine and even admirable, but no match for real men, er, agriculture, he patiently explains.

While Mr. Black excels at story telling, he got this one wrong. One hardly knows where to start but let me try.

First, the assumptions-- that sustainable agriculture is solely gardens and a few chickens for one household, or even market gardeners raising vegetables for themselves or a handful of other people, is wrong.

Second, that sustainable agriculture practitioners use farming methods popular in the first half of the 20th century and throw out all science and technology is also wrong.

Third, that modern industrial agriculture feeds the world now and can duplicate any past successes in the face of new and dramatic 21st century challenges is questionable if not outright wrong.

Quite simply, sustainable agriculture encompasses a broad range of farming practices and operations. It utilizes the best of available scientific information, (although it is based on a more ecological approach that receives far less funding for research than the industrial agriculture that emphasizes purchased inputs).

And although industrial agriculture has done its share to "feed the world", it has also made it harder for third-world farmers to feed themselves because they have been pushed into our export/purchased input model of agriculture. The 21st century will hold political, environmental, energy, and resource challenges that we can only begin to imagine, so to assume that the same approach will work in the future is dangerous if not arrogant.

It is true that modern industrial agriculture systems have seen tremendous increases in food production, and advances in food safety and processing, seeds and breeds, and equipment, due to dedicated research and scientific efforts. No one disputes the labor saving devices and improvements achieved, and lives saved.

But that same system that has given us 200 plus bushel per acre corn has given us high fructose corn syrup for an increasingly highly processed food world that any respectable nutritionist warns us against. It has given us Atrazine (and now perhaps Round Up) in our water supplies and our rainfall.

Its roadside ditch to roadside ditch planting philosophy has destroyed biological diversity, wildlife habitat, and filled our reservoirs and ponds with silt. Its industrial approach to animals has spawned anti-biotic resistant bacteria now threatening human health. And its monopolization of the seed industry with genetically engineered crops has created super weeds resistant to the very herbicides they were created for.

Additionally, evidence is mounting that these same genetically engineered crops are bringing unintended consequences to soil microbiology and plant health threatening the very food supply its proponents now laud.

It is a system of agriculture that has depopulated our rural areas to the extent that even industrial ag has trouble finding labor, our rural school enrollments plummet, and rural towns-like inner cities-- lack nearby grocery stores.

Sustainable farming supporters want no less than a world where we can ask questions about the unintended

conse-quences of technologies already adopted and those technologies proposed. Asking questions is the nature of all scientific inquiry, indeed of all human inquiry. And we want a world where we have a choice.

Sustainable farms range from the purely organic to those with reduced reliance on chemical pesticides and fertilizers to the market gardener who supplies a farmers market from a half -acre plot or the community supported agriculture operation that feeds 10, 50 or 100 families through-out the growing season. They include intensive vegetable production on 40 or 80 or more acres with mechanical pickers and harvesters that sell to wholesale processors.

They include the traditional crop and livestock farmer who plants forage cover crops to extend the grazing season, protect soil from run-off and provide nutrients; or the crop farmer who expands from corn and soybeans to include small grains and legumes for weed control and nutrients. They include the western Kansas farmer who opts to plant more wheat and less irrigated corn. Yes, some make more money than others; some rely more on government subsidies. But ALL are farmers seeking to practice a more sustainable agriculture.

I heard a speaker once argue that at least half of the advances of industrial agriculture over the past 60 or more years are in part due to our good fortune to have been living in an era of stable climate-an era that by all scientific evidence has ended. This means all bets are off for just how sustainable industrial agriculture is, and how it will fare in the future.

Instead of dismissing sustainable farming or defining it by their own terms, the apologists for industrial agriculture would do well to listen, ask questions, and to start thinking for themselves. A truly sustainable farming system is built on diversity- biological, social and economic, not the monoculture, monopolistic model of industrial ag. Making agriculture ecologically sustainable should be our goal.

The food future of our children and grandchildren may well depend not on what some CEO or financier of industry has decided is best for us, but on what some market gardener, organic farmer, or non-GMO crop farmer-some dreamer or Luddite as Mr. Black calls us-- has learned and shared with researchers, scientists, and other farmers.

Mary Fund farms with her husband in Nemaha County. She can be reached at ksrc@rainbowtel.net.