Developing and Extending Sustainable Agriculture, a New Social Contract


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Developing and Extending Sustainable Agriculture, a New Social Contract is a collection of essays by several authors, most of whom are involved with cooperative extension programs and midwestern land grant universities. Charles A. Francis of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, is the primary author or coauthor of 7 of the book’s 16 chapters and is the first editor listed, so his influence is especially important throughout. Many chapters describe extension and applied research programs created to help farmers and farm communities cope with the harsh economic pressures that continue to affect rural America, emphasizing here the north-central region of the United States, including the Corn Belt. Most of the authors advocate fundamental changes to the prevailing agricultural system in the Corn Belt, characterized as large-scale, intensive corn (Zea mays L.) and soybean [Glycine max. (L.) Merr.] cropping systems, dependent on national and international commodity markets. Many of the authors foresee gradual or even catastrophic failure for the current agricultural system of the region, if not economically, then socially or ecologically. The answers to the problems with this system are alternative approaches to crop and livestock production. Collectively, they are called sustainable agriculture. Sustainable agriculture includes the development of alternative farming systems that add or substitute different crops, which can be sold through more local markets. Sustainable agriculture farms may integrate livestock and crop production effectively.

The research and extension programs included in this volume were developed initially contrary to prevailing economic pressures and disciplinary norms. Novel and creative approaches to agricultural extension, including farmer and community participation, and on-farm research were part of this process. Since the future is unpredictable and change occurs ever more rapidly, a range of well-developed alternative approaches to food and fiber production is valuable. Even if gradual or catastrophic failure of farming in the north-central region is not to occur, it is a benefit to the public that the U.S. land grant university system can support a diversity of solutions to problems of agricultural production.

The editors’ and authors’ emphasis on innovative extension programs and untraditional research approaches is the most original and useful contribution. This book directs the reader toward a specialized target audience: agricultural scientists and others concerned with cooperative extension. By emphasizing here the north-central region of the United States, the editors and authors are interested in promoting sustainable agriculture (SA). Several chapters (Chapters 5, 7, 8, 11, 12) focus on extension programs in several midwestern states that support the adoption of SA. These are mostly narratives that are followed by the authors and the steps that evolved outreach programs that promote SA. Because the authors include descriptions of their own outreach and research programs, the book’s autobiography is part of each narrative. Chapter 13 describes its author’s attempt to develop understanding tools for farmers in Kansas, as well as their own small farm. Different extension programs and whole farm analysis are compared. Chapter 9 describes the history of successful SA extension and research in Iowa, including narratives resulting from a network of farmers cooperating with Iowa Cooperative Extension and engaged in on-farm research. Other chapters are other descriptions of innovative applied research, particularly emphasizing on-farm research. Chapter 9 discusses the role and evolution of the outreach programs that promote SA in Nebraska and more broadly in the agricultural region. Chapter 9 discusses the role and evolution of the outreach programs that promote SA in Nebraska and more broadly in the agricultural region.

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