



SUSTAINING THE LAND
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

By Don Stuart

Photography by Charles Gurche

As the August harvest draws near in wheat country, something unusual happens on a farm out in the Palouse area of Eastern Washington. What takes place each year on the Cochran farm has implications that can affect us all—implications for the future of food production and for our hopes for the environment.

Some of the several thousand acres of nonirrigated wheat land in this farm are owned outright by the Cochran family. This land has been in the family for three generations, and is expected to one day be handed down to a fourth. The rest of the farm is on adjoining land that the Cochrans have in recent years added to their operation by way of lease. The remarkable thing about this farm is the difference between the productivity of the land that has been in the Cochran family for three generations and the productivity of some of the adjacent land they now lease. As Larry Cochran tells it, he consistently gets more wheat per acre off the land they own than off that leased land.

Keep in mind that all this land is now farmed as a single unit, using the same management practices everywhere. The basic soil type is the same. The topography is the same. The climate is obviously the same. There's no fence or other marking to show where the Cochran land ends and the lease begins. The only real difference is the care the Cochran family has taken in the management of their land over the years. Soil biologists at Washington State University have confirmed that the soil on the adjacent fields is distinctly different. And when the wheat is ready for harvest, you can stand there and actually see the legal boundary between those properties, written in the ripening wheat, as though a line were drawn upon the earth.

Land stewardship, preserving biological diversity, and conserving soil productivity are nothing new for Larry Cochran. He is an elected supervisor with the Palouse Conservation District and one of those people who has been advocating conservation much of his life. But this is not something he created for himself. As the third generation on this farm, it is an ethic he learned from his father and from his grand-



father. And the Cochrans are not alone. For many thousands of other American farmers just like them, maybe even most farmers, the tenet of conservation is an inherent part of being a farmer. They represent mainstream agriculturists all across this country who are trying to earn a living and who, at the same time, want to do what is right for their families, for their communities and for the land.

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They have what revered conservationist Aldo Leopold called the "land ethic." That these farmers have such an ethic is critically important for the rest of us. This is because it is not just the productivity of the Cochran's land we need to be thinking about. The reason this land produces a higher yield per acre is, among other things, because its rich, valuable topsoil is under the crop rather than having washed down a nearby stream, harming fish, or blown away in the wind, polluting the air.

It takes decades to make a difference like this. On the Cochran farm, it has taken three generations of consistent application of a whole range of conservation management practices. The practices farmers like the Cochrans use nurture complex mini-ecosystems that slowly increase productivity and protect the environment. The alternating crops they use and the way in which those crops are planted, the areas they do not cultivate on hillsides, in corners, or along the edges of their fields, the crop residue they

leave on the ground after harvest, the manner in which they manage pests, weeds, and disease, how they maintain wetlands, trees and hedgerows, how and if they till the ground, all the complicated, interrelated choices they make in the cultivation of their land have a deep, lasting impact. These choices affect the presence of beneficial insects and useful predators. They affect the richness and complexity of soil biology. And

they ultimately affect both the farm's total productivity and its environmental impact.

The impact that farm practices can have upon the environment is massive. Approximately half of the U.S. land area is in agricultural use. The 1.9 million farmers and ranchers who own and manage this land, however, represent less than 1 percent of the population. To them we entrust the environmental stewardship of this huge area of our country. Their practices affect all of us who are their neighbors. So in this day of endangered species and sprawling cities, of polluted waters and a swelling human population, we need to be asking ourselves this question: Where do the Larry Cochrans of this world come from? We obviously need more of them. Are we creating or destroying the conditions under which they thrive?

The thing that leaps out when one hears Larry Cochran's story is how patient and committed he and his family are. In this age of instant gratification, who among

us will wait decades or generations for our labors to produce a return? Yet it is important to keep in mind that for the Cochran family conservation stewardship is an investment as well as a personal obligation. They make that investment anticipating that, some day, there will be a return. And there have been returns. But unlike investments in the stock market, they can't sell off in a week, a month or a year when things look opportune. Theirs is a long-term investment—ultra long-term.

We need to put farmers in a position where they can make such investments. We need farmers who are committed to agriculture as a calling and who see their future as tied to that land, indefinitely. We need stable farm families where the chil-

dren can also consider farming as their future and where that makes sense. And we need farm communities that respect their farmers, provide the community network in which farming is welcome, and retain the economic infrastructure needed to sustain viable agriculture. To get sustainability, in other words, we need long-term investment stability in our farm economy.

Most of us know that this is a time of challenge for agriculture and a time of threat for farmers. The same global economy that brought great wealth to America's cities also brought bitter international competition to ag country. For nearly every agricultural product, prices are down and costs are up. The Cochran family has seen and survived these times be-

fore. Given continued wisdom and careful management, there is every hope they will survive this one. But this is at least partly because they have had certainty in the one thing that is absolutely essential for their livelihood—the land itself.

Because of where it is, far from urban centers and concentrated growth, the Cochrans' farm is insulated from the ever-growing pressure on land prices driven up out of a farmer's reach by their value for development. The value of their land is still measured by its productivity for agriculture. That means that Cochran doesn't have to think about how his land will be used 10, 20 or even 50 years from now. He can be confident that it will be in agriculture. It is possible that his children will farm this land, but even if they don't, should he ever have to sell, he knows he



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will sell to another farmer, to someone who will value and be able to pay for the productive soils and conservation management that he and his family have been building for three generations.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in a good deal of what we ordinarily think of as ag country. The most recent Farming on the Edge study from American Farmland Trust found that our nation loses 1.2 million acres of prime farmland to development every single year, an area the size of Delaware. We're using up new land at a rate that is two or three times our population growth. The 1997 USDA's Census of Agriculture indicates that 86 percent of total U.S. production of fruits and vegetables, 63 percent of our dairy products, 39 percent of our meats, and 35 percent of our grains are grown on land that lies in the path of development. We grew our cities where our best farms had been, and today we're paying the price. We have also widely extended our systems for transportation, telephone, electrical power and other public services allowing people to live conveniently almost anywhere. All this has opened our agricultural lands to long-distance commuters and to recreational and retirement development. Amidst a bitter farm depres-

Photos pages 10-13: Cochran family farmstead and wheat harvest on the Cochran farm in Palouse County, Washington. At left: Larry Cochran.

sion, farmers simply cannot compete with urban wealth—farmland is cheap when put to uses other than agriculture. And in consequence we are fragmenting what used to be farmlands into ever-smaller parcels of ever-lesser economic sustainability for agriculture and driving the cost of our best lands up out of reach for most farm businesses.

This forces farmers to work on a closer investment horizon. If 10 years from now the land is likely to sell to someone who wants to build homes or a shopping mall, why make a 20-year investment in farming? And investments in conservation are the longest-term investments of all. Examples include growing trees for a riparian buffer, planting a more sustainable crop, constructing systems to deal with animal waste or installing a more efficient irrigation system. Typical farm infrastructure investments are worthless to a developer-buyer—sometimes they even depreciate the market value of the land. This is especially so for investments in conservation. A farmer simply cannot make those investments if there is no real hope of a timely return.

For the rest of us, this means a threatened environment. Those riparian trees never get planted and fish and wildlife suffer. The original waste management system, cropping practice and irrigation system stay in place. Soil erodes, and a nearby stream is dewatered or polluted. More intensive, chemical-dependent management practices continue, biological diversity in the soil suffers and the entire farm ceases to be the flourishing and friendly habitat it could have been for native plants, birds and other animals that would otherwise thrive on a more congenial farm. And at the same time the farm's productivity suffers also.

Thus emerges a fundamental principle: If we are to have sustainable agriculture, we need a sustaining land base upon which to conduct it. When farmers know the land will always be in agriculture, investments in stewardship become automatic. And whether the land will some day pass on by inheritance, or whether it is sold, it will always remain in the hands of a farmer, someone who can value and who will benefit from the sacrifices that were made.

This principle applies with equal force at the community level. Like our farmers, communities need to invest in the future of agriculture. This investment starts with a firm commitment by citizens and public officials



LIKE OUR FARMERS, COMMUNITIES NEED TO INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE. —

to protecting agricultural lands. Then, building upon that commitment, public investments are needed in agricultural easement programs that pay farmers a market price to keep farmlands out of development. We need stronger conservation incentive programs that help farmers deal with rising environmental compliance costs. And we need agricultural economic development assistance to help our farms find market viability in a rapidly changing world.

Once our communities and our farmers know the land base is secure, and once there is commitment to agriculture as a permanent part of the future, all these investments, public and private, suddenly make sense. Yes, there will also need to be regulation and enforcement of our environmental laws. And we will need to monitor our progress and adjust as we go. But beneath it all, that one fun-

damental prerequisite will be there: an agricultural land base that all of us, farmers and urban-dwellers alike, know is permanent. After that, everything else follows.

This is how we empower ourselves to prevent a terrible alternative future of sprawl, disconnectedness, environmental loss and insecurity in our food supply. Investing in protecting the future of that land base is how we, together with thousands of American farmers like Larry Cochran, can assure the long-term environmental and economic sustainability of American agriculture.

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