

Iowan: Farm program works against growers, environment

By [JERRY PERKINS](#)

REGISTER FARM EDITOR

George Naylor seems like a curious choice to serve as the model for the "industrial corn farmer" in Michael Pollan's book, "Omnivore's Dilemma, A Natural History of Four Meals."

Naylor, 59, has been an outspoken critic of the U.S. government's farm and trade policies since he returned to the family farm in 1976.

Since 2002, Naylor has been president of the National Family Farm Coalition, a national alliance of farm groups in 30 states. The coalition is part of Via Campesina, an international alliance of farmers and farmworkers.

In 2003, Pollan spent a couple of days on Naylor's 470-acre farm near Churdan during corn planting time.

Pollan used the experience to describe in his book how corn fits into what he calls "the industrial food chain" that leads from Naylor's cornfield in Iowa to a fast-food dinner eaten on the road in Marin County, Calif.

Naylor is a veteran of farm organizations that take a view of agriculture that often runs contrary to groups like the American Farm Bureau Federation.

"I've been involved in what I'd call the family farm movement since I started farming," Naylor said. "I participated in forming the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition during the farm crisis in the early 1980s, and I've been involved with Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement for 10 years, but I have less time to focus on Iowa issues since I'm dealing with international and national issues."

Last month, Naylor traveled to both the East and West coasts to speak to non-farm audiences about farm and trade policies.



JOHN GAPPS III/THE REGISTER

Churdan farmer George Naylor doesn't think much of today's farm policies. He says the current farm program only works for large agribusiness corporations that want cheap commodities. He believes there is a revolution happening in the way people think about food.

George Naylor

WHAT: President of the National Family Farm Coalition. Farms 470 acres near Churdan.

AGE: 59

FAMILY: Two sons, 14 and 16 years old.

In New York, he spoke to journalism students at Columbia University on the globalization of agriculture.

"It's hard to say if the journalists at the (New York) conference got what I was talking about because they didn't have a lot of time to ask questions," Naylor said, "but they had read Michael Pollan's book."

At the University of California, Berkeley, where he spoke at a "teach-in" on the 2007 farm bill, 700 people showed up.

"People respect my ability to explain farm programs," Naylor said.

"I told them that this idea of letting free markets regulate agricultural prices and production is absurd and has been known to be for a long time. ...

"There is no difference between the kinds of misrepresentations that have gotten us into the war in Iraq and the misrepresentations that have gotten us into the kind of agriculture we have today."

Q: What kind of farm program do you advocate?

A: John Maynard Keynes, Henry A. Wallace and others have all recognized the importance of having a farm program and commodity agreements that put a floor under farm prices.

That way, you have a transparent system where everybody knows what the floor price is going to be, and you put the excess production in a food security reserve.

Farmers know their crop prices won't go below a certain level and consumers know food prices won't go above a certain level. The Chicago Board of Trade can organize the distribution of the commodities to the various users.

Q: What's wrong with the current farm program?

A: Now, we let the market determine prices, but the system can't work without major government involvement - like the subsidies paid to farmers and the acres put in the Conservation Reserve Program.

The current program doesn't work for farmers or the environment. It only works for large agribusiness corporations that want cheap commodities.

It also provides a guarantee to lenders so that they will loan money to farmers to plant the next crop. Otherwise, the lenders wouldn't loan farmers money.

Q: The price of corn is the highest it has been in more than a decade. Doesn't that mean the current farm program is working?

A: Current corn prices could be a temporary thing. Last August, I hauled corn out of my bin and sold it for \$1.82 a bushel.

Nobody knows how low or high the price of corn can go because we don't have a food reserve like every civilization before us has had.

Crops like corn, wheat, rice and oilseeds can all be stored in food reserves, so if there's a drought or a catastrophe, we can prevent famine.

We've imposed our system on virtually every country in the world through the World Trade Organization. It's destroying family farms all over the world and replacing them with industrial production.

Q: Why should people who aren't involved in agriculture care about farm policy?

A: There's definitely a revolution going on in how people are thinking about their food. What needs to be done is to get all these people concerned about farming, food and the environment to focus on the farm bill.

As long as you let big corporations use these cheap commodities, they tend to crowd out local food producers and processors.

You're destroying the local food markets with basically junk food.

A lot of people are concerned about the loss of the quality of food and the loss of local and regional food supplies.

In Berkeley, local food is a big issue. Restaurants and schools stress using local produce. There's really quite a food revolt happening.

Q: What's your message when you talk to people on the coasts?

A: My message is we need a sustainable agricultural system, not just a few sustainable farmers. That's only going to happen if we have a farming system that supports family farms and shuts down industrial livestock production.

A study at Tufts University showed that the biggest four hog production companies benefited by \$3.6 billion by buying their feed at below the cost of production from 1997-2005.

The top four broiler producers saved \$5 billion by buying feed below the cost of production in the same time period, the study showed.

I don't know how many times you read about the conflict between livestock producers and crop producers. It's a totally phony conflict unless you are talking about large livestock operations that buy all their corn.

If you're talking about a diversified farmer who feeds all his corn to livestock, he doesn't care what the price of corn is.

The other misconception people have is that farmers raise too much corn and soybeans because they are subsidized.

But farmers are raising those crops because that's what they can raise. The subsidy is only there to keep the bankers happy and the supply of credit coming.

A strategic food reserve and a floor price under crops through a non-recourse loan would do a lot to keep the family farmer on the farm.

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