

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Subversion in the farmbelt

The "land stewardship" ideology is being used to divert attention from the farming collapse.

Working to ease the transition into neo-feudal agriculture in the United States is a farmbelt-based conservation outfit, called the "Land Stewardship Project." Founded about six years ago, nominally to address the problem of soil erosion, the group is now attempting to shape farm protest actions so as to divert attention from the collapse of traditional, technology-based American family farms. The group celebrates primitive, "low-energy" farming.

In March of this year, protests by the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota temporarily stopped the sale of a farm by the Farm Credit Services of St. Paul, on grounds that the potential buyer practiced undesirable soil management methods.

Millions of acres of farmland have been acquired through farm foreclosures by such creditors as the Farm Credit System—itself insolvent—the Farmers Home Administration, and insurance companies. Although soil erosion is a real problem, the issue facing the nation is to restore the foreclosed and save the financially troubled family farms, based on freezing or rescheduling of farm debts, and providing low interest production credits and parity-related pricing in order to expand food output.

However, the Land Stewardship front-group insists that soil conservation is the issue. It operates a protest effort called the Farmland Investor Accountability Project to this end.

The Land Stewardship Project is a "private" organization, at least 50%

funded by some of the major foundations of the Eastern Establishment. (Who else would you expect to organize "farmer protest?") Money comes from the Joyce, the Ford, and the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundations. Grants are also provided by various church groups, and Willie Nelson's Farm Aid, which funds farm-related activities approved by the major food cartel companies.

The main office is in Stillwater, Minnesota. Operatives of the project increased their activities after the waning of another Minnesota farm counterinsurgency effort, "Groundswell." Over the past couple of years, as various of the Groundswell operatives came down with AIDS or became advocates of hardcore kook counterculture, funding and publicity for the group was dropped.

The rhetoric and activities of the Land Stewardship Project have been aimed to present a more "mainstream" image, but the kook nature of the movement is still plenty evident. The project advocates "sustainable" agriculture—low-input, low-output farming methods. This parallels the thrust of the Greenie movement in Western Europe, which advocates free-range chickens, elimination of red meat production, banning of nitrogenous fertilizers, etc.

A featured speaker for the Project is Dick Thompson of Boone, Iowa, who is one of the national boosters of "regenerative agriculture." Thompson told farmers in Stewartville, Minnesota last fall that God told him to

stop poisoning the Earth and over-producing food. He said that regenerative agriculture "must begin in the heart before it can begin in the soil." He specified certain weed control and other techniques using minimal herbicides, but his main message was to get "spiritual" about farming.

This viewpoint has been heavily promoted nationally by the Conservation Foundation, the Washington, D.C.-based mother organization of dozens of regional conservation groups. Its efforts are directed to oppose technology and otherwise favor special-interest ownership of farmland (insurance companies, private estates, etc.).

Everything is done in the name of "stewardship" of natural resources, however. In the early 1980s, the Conservation Foundation published many books and articles on the theme that U.S. food exports, and food "over-production" were depleting the soil, which is irreplaceable. Thus is provided the academic rationalization for dispossession of farmers and reduction of U.S. output potential.

In March, the Land Stewardship Project itself put out a report saying that the land holdings of major insurance companies had grown by 55% in 12 southern Minnesota counties in only two years. The data, from courthouse records, showed that 18,789 acres are owned by the insurance companies. Representatives of the Family Farmland Stewardship Committee told the press they were seeking meetings with Travelers Insurance Co., John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Co., and others to discuss soil conservation programs. The group said they wanted to avoid an "adversarial" relationship with the companies.

Indeed. Their concern is that, as former independent farmers become serfs on big-company land, they don't harm the soil.