Ten Years of Change

Viewpoint talk given by Jim Horne
President, Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
Tenth Anniversary Conference
Austin, Texas, March 5, 1998, noon luncheon

Thank you for allowing me to come to speak to this group of people who are deeply committed to sustainable agriculture. I came to hear Fred Kirschenmann speak just as you did, but Fred's barn burned, and he had to stay home and take care of business. I will do the best I can in sharing my insights and experiences in sustainable agriculture.

I have been involved with the SARE program since its beginning. One of the things that I like about the program, is that with SARE, everybody is somebody. It's a group of people who cooperate, share, work together, and do battle when necessary.

How did I come to be involved with sustainable agriculture? You may remember the classic movie *Cool Hand Luke*–– you may remember that Luke, a petty criminal, was played by Paul Newman. He was a man who just couldn't quite get it right, couldn't get his life moving in the right direction. We have all spent time in the wilderness trying to just get it right. With Luke it's his attitude that is doing him in. In one memorable scene his mother pleads with him, "Luke, get your mind right." Poor Luke never does get his mind quite right. But about twelve years ago I started getting my mind right.

It wasn't a spear in the chest like it was for Ray Anderson who is the Chairman of Interface, Inc. and co-chair of the President's Council on Sustainability, and neither was it a Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus experience for me. The change in my attitude came after a long journey.

I come from a background in very conventional agriculture, and I accepted the status quo as being the next wave. I believed in agriculture and I believed that agriculture was efficient at that point in time. I also believed, as ag economists believe, that the market mechanisms of competition and consumers voting with their dollars would allocate

resources fairly. I hadn't yet realized the consequences of a system that often sends the wrong signals.

I grew up on a small farm in southwestern Oklahoma. It was a diversified farm. We grew cotton, oats, wheat, cows and pigs. Our 160 acre farm was a mile long and one quarter mile wide-- those mile long cotton rows were long rows. When my mother and I were in the field, chopping that cotton, she would always encourage me to get a nice desk job in an office when I grew up. She felt that I would be far better off to leave the hard work and poor returns of the farm. My father was a tenant farmer. The most we ever owned was 40 acres and that was two years before I graduated from high school. But I loved farming, and like other boys I was in love with tractors and tractor magazines. We would exchange the latest statistics on the newest model of John Deere tractors. It was here on this farm and on my neighbor's farm that I started a college fund, picking cotton for two cents a pound and moldboarding for my neighbor Roy Wilkes. It was here that I gained a real feel for what it felt like to be tending the soil with my own hands. By the time I was a senior in high school I had amassed $800-- a hefty sum in 1965.

I started college in the mid-60's to become an agriculture economist-- these were the days when the industrial, conventional approach to agriculture was never questioned. My thesis even dealt with consolidation of farms and the efficiencies that would occur as farms were consolidated. The chemical approach to agriculture was endorsed and taught, and no alternatives were presented in my classes.

I have since come to believe that a chemical approach to agriculture is a sad one-- it is one of putting a mask over the real problems.

This chemical approach resulted in my father's death. When not working on our farm, he was a spotter for an aerial flying service. Many days he would come home wet with insecticide, and I have even seen his fingernails vanish from his fingers because of contact with these chemicals. He died of leukemia when he was barely into his forties. Now my mother suffers from a chronic lung condition which also is a result of exposure to chemicals.

I remember in the 60's when I questioned my entomology professor about Rachel Carson. I had read her book *Silent Spring* and wondered what he thought about it. He was quick to tell me that I was sounding like a troublemaker-- that she was a radical and there was no point in even taking class time to discuss the questions and issues that she raised. It was a

disappointing conversation, but nonetheless, one that stuck in my mind. There were times in my childhood that I saw fish kills, but I never associated them with farming practices.

When I left college, I became an agricultural economist with the Kerr Foundation in southeastern Oklahoma. I have been there twenty-five years and have been helping farmers for most of those years. The Kerr Foundation did interdisciplinary work from the very beginning, using a team of specialists to do whole farm planning. While we didn't have, at that point, an interdisciplinary approach along with a sustainable approach, we did see the value of holistic approaches, and the dynamics and synergies that occurred. I wish we would have integrated ecology, equity, and community more into our work.

I advised farmers on loans and government programs and how to farm those programs to get all that we could out of them. I visited many Farmers Home Administration offices, farm credit offices such as National Production Credit Association and the Federal Land Bank to seek help for farmers and to help them build their case for getting a loan. During this same time, I bought my own land and began raising cattle and my family. I did believe that if I owned and operated my own farm I would be a better consultant to our farmers than if I didn't do it, even though I already had a rich farm experience.

I began to see the negative effects of conventional agriculture slowly-- I saw fish kills, erosion, and clear cutting. I began to change my thinking about the success of agriculture. I began to read *Organic Gardening* magazine, and I also remember having to hide it behind the cover of *Progressive Farmer* to avoid being ridiculed for reading such a magazine. I hid it like a naughty boy reading *Playboy*.

Slowly I changed, and so did the times. In 1985 I was charged with the challenge of changing the direction of the Kerr Foundation and to begin leading the new organization into the sustainable arena. That year we became the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture. We were the first organization in Oklahoma to openly declare who we were and to work for sustainable agriculture.

It was a braver move for me than you might think. At that moment, everything in my life changed and became much more complicated. No one would now ask me to come to speak-- prior to that I had a heavy speaking schedule in Oklahoma. While that hurt a great deal and I became very lonely, it gave me the time I needed to determine what could truly make sustainable agriculture work.

And before long I began to take on new friends. The people in sustainable agriculture became my greatest support group. Everything was changing-- not only at Kerr Center but

in Washington, D. C. In April of 1987, I was called to testify in favor of establishing four regional research centers in sustainable agriculture. It was to be called the LISA program, standing for Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture.

(It is hard to believe how much better off we are that the SARE program evolved from this unfortunately-named LISA program and that we didn't establish four research centers. Our present structure gives much more leverage and affects many more people than the route that we might have taken if we had established the four experiment stations).

During that April appearance before Congress, I testified, "We need revolutionary thinking brought to bear on rescuing this nation's agriculture from its own success." The success I was referring to was a fact that many boasted about: that one American farmer was able to feed eighty people-- now that figure is more like 120 people. But, I pointed out, at the same time there was massive financial distress in agriculture. There were foreclosures, there were bankruptcies, there were sons and daughters who lost their father's farms. Just as disturbing, along with the financial difficulties, there was massive psychological distress in the countryside. There were stress-related illnesses and there were suicides. There was also massive ecological distress. Farmers were forced to mine their land of nutrients through the use of monoculture and walk away from conservation practices in order to simply feed their families. Few people seemed to notice the boarded-up windows, closed businesses, struggling schools, and declining churches that were beginning to be commonplace in rural areas. Many people didn't understand, and still don't, that when you have a decline in farming activity among small farm owners, small communities die.

I and others of my generation had accepted the model of industrial agriculture, but we didn't really realize the effects that adopting that model would have. Now we know that the corporate agriculturists, those out-of-state companies, often come and bypass local merchants for their purchases and local markets for their sales. It is a way that will further erode rural communities and will ensure that their survival is limited.

In the midst of this breakdown, I and others testified that what we needed from the USDA were programs that dealt with the problems at the farm level. Farmers needed alternatives-- but they could not get information at that time about alternatives to conventional agriculture. Since they could not get information about alternatives, farm credit agencies such as PCAs, land banks, Farmers Home, and others would not them lend money if it wasn't an already established practice or enterprise in the community.

After my testimony before the House of Representatives, I felt discouraged. I was convinced that no one had listened. I then testified before the Senate, and what a change there was in the atmosphere. I felt that something would come to pass as a result of that, and it did. I was wrong about no one listening because later in the year, Congress appropriated 3.9 million dollars to establish regional programs for low-input agriculture--finally funding the research and education mandate in the 1985 Farm Bill. Congress, you might say, had got its mind right.

And so it appeared had the USDA. On his last day as secretary of agriculture, Edward Madigan issued this statement -- The Department encourages research and educational programs and activities that provide farmers with a wide choice of cost-effective farming systems, including systems that minimize or optimize the use of purchased inputs and that minimize environmental hazards. The Department also encourages efforts to expand the use of such systems.

It was then that the National Sustainable Agriculture Advisory Council (NSAAC) was formed to make recommendations to the USDA, and I was elected to chair that committee for two two-year terms. Many of you served with me on that committee and you remember the frustrations and lack of progress. We were just able to keep sustainable agriculture on the agenda. While we thought that with LISA and later the SARE program which succeeded it, the USDA had begun to get it right, unfortunately many of the changes in the department were cosmetic. Even now, many in the USDA, other agencies, and the universities do not have the passion for a sustainable agriculture that we have. Our goal is to make sustainable agriculture the conventional agriculture of the future.

It was a challenging time for supporters of a sustainable agriculture, whether in the USDA, universities, Extension, or at the Kerr Center. It was like building a ship and trying to sail it at the same time. At the Kerr Center, we struggled with how to help farmers make the transition to sustainable practices. We struggled with how to help them understand what sustainable agriculture really meant. We had to answer the question: "What is sustainable agriculture?" Because I too was having trouble visualizing the answer and making the transition, I tried to think of ways to put sustainable agriculture in perspective and make it understandable. As a result, I came up with eight goals for sustainable agriculture that farmers and ranchers, and just as importantly, I myself could understand. More or less, I created a checklist for farming sustainably. It helps a farmer gauge his progress towards making his operation sustainable.

Today, this checklist takes the form of eight points. To be sustainable:

1. We have to conserve and create healthy soil

2. We must conserve water and protect its quality.

3. We must manage organic wastes (manures, litter) and agricultural chemicals so they don't pollute.

4. We have to be able to select crops and livestock that are adapted to the natural environment rather than trying to alter the environment to fit the plant or animal.

5. We ought to encourage biodiversity of domesticated animals, wildlife, microbiotic and aquatic life.

6. We have to learn to manage pests (weeds, insects, diseases) with minimal environmental impact.

7. We need to learn how to conserve energy resources, reduce our reliance on off-farm inputs, limit how much we use fuel, fertilizer, and chemicals-- all drains on limited fossil fuel reserves.

8. Last of all, to be sustainable we must be profitable and reduce financial risk.

It was a tall order to do the above, particularly when there was only limited information. However, SARE has filled that void very quickly with over a thousand projects. It has been able to get farmers and researchers together to work on real farm projects and practices that will protect the productive capacity of this nation into future generations. And beyond implementing these eight production goals, we need to look at how we address issues of social justice, intergenerational equity, community development, and protection of farm workers.

Working with SARE in those early years was, again, like trying to build a ship and sail it at the same time. It was never as quick and easy as we thought it would be. We found ourselves doing things like writing rules for Chapters 1 and 3, after the programs were up and running. There was a lot of criticism of how we ran the program. In retrospect I do see some mistakes that we made, but they were not purposefully made they were not mean spirited-- they just resulted from the complexity of introducing these other dimensions into a conventional mind set. I am quite proud of the progress we have made in the last ten years and I think over the next ten years we will continue to progress geometrically.

My involvement with SARE has been extensive. At Southern SARE, I have worked in practically every area. First I served on the technical advisory committee where we wrote

rules for evaluating proposals and evaluated them. On the administrative council, I served as chair of its operations committee. We wrote the guidelines for the programs and how to operate them. We helped write the policies and by-laws and my last major task with SARE was to serve as chairman of the Southern Region Administrative Council. At this time, I am serving on an Implementation Committee and we are in the process of an evaluation of SARE and trying to integrate Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 programs into a transferable model.

My experience has taught me that lasting change is not easy--as Luke found, it isn't easy to really get one's mind right. But ten years with SARE has proven that it is possible to make change. Even if you have a diversity of people like those involved in Southern SARE--conventional farmers, organic farmers, extension agents, agribusinessmen, people from both 1890 and 1862 institutions, and numerous non-government organizations. Because SARE attempts to be inclusive, we have had to do much work up-front; but the end result is an unsinkable ship that has sailed these waters for ten years now.

What we have been trying to do is pull people together to explore what might be sustainable in the South. Sometimes we had long, bitter, difficult arguments, but after each struggle, I found my own thinking sharpened. Persistence is necessary to accomplish any worthy goal. Persistence, it should be noted, is quite different than being hard-headed. To accomplish a goal, one must be able to compromise, work out alternative solutions, and explore new opportunities.

When I think of change, I often think of a river that flows deep, wide, and fast. Farmers, ranchers, and everyone else in agriculture is sailing down that river of change. We are all in different kinds of boats. Some are more sustainable than others-- more solid with better steering. Others trying to navigate that river need some help to keep going. At Southern SARE and at Kerr Center, I and others have often found ourselves at the side of the river in the eddies, helping people get their boats unstuck and back to the center of the river and the current of change. My dream is that over the next ten years we can move out of the eddies and spend more time launching better, new boats that have common sense, sustainable, appropriate technologies.

After ten years, we haven't found smooth sailing yet. Many dangers still lurk right under the surface of the river ready to rip our boats apart. One danger, one big tree right below the surface of the river, is the issue of increasing corporate control of agriculture and especially of vertical integration and animal production. This form of agriculture is not what this country needs and isn't what Thomas Jefferson envisioned. We must return animals to their natural environment and stop overcrowding and overloading nature's

ecosystems. If this trend of vertical integration and corporate entry into agriculture is not checked, we will find ourselves simply as serfs on our own farms. We will see the environment go down the tubes and in twenty-five years, this country will have destroyed its water resources.

If we can find ways to avoid that big snag, then we can continue to sail our boats down the river of change. The journey is not over. In fact, though ten years have passed, it has just begun. We must keep SARE focused. We must keep it farmer-driven and science based, and ensure that all costs that are external to the system are factored into our decision-making process. We must keep the faith-- change and getting things right is what it's all about. We must learn to use science and technology appropriately. We must avoid technologies that are not scale-neutral if we want to keep farmers on the land. Let's keep sailing and someday we will reach our destination. That destination will be a healthy and enduring agriculture. We must remember something that John Ikerd taught us: only in the short term are there conflicts between sustainability and agriculture. In the long run, there is complete harmony between good farming and nature.

Last of all, I want to leave you with the thought that nature never makes a mistake, but man often does.

Thank you for this great honor to come before you and to share my life and my experiences with you. Thank you very much.

Jim Horne