



Agriculture of the Middle

During the past several decades, the American food system has increasingly followed two new structural paths. On one hand, small-scale farm and food enterprises in many regions have thrived by adapting to successful direct markets which enabled them to sell their production directly to consumers. This is an encouraging trend with real benefits to their communities. On the other hand, giant consolidated food and fiber firms have established supply chains that move bulk commodities around the globe largely to serve their own business interests.

This new pattern of food systems has had a disastrous effect on independent family farmers---it has led to a disappearing "agriculture of the middle." These farms and enterprises of the middle have traditionally constituted the heart of American agriculture. They operate in the space between the vertically integrated commodity markets and the direct markets. While the bulk of these farms have gross annual sales between \$100,000 and \$250,000, it would be a mistake to characterize them simply as "midsized" or "small" farms. Many of these endangered "agriculture of the middle" farms are what the USDA's Economic Research Service calls "farming-occupation farms" and "large family farms."

Since only 10 percent of today's farmers produce more than 60 percent of the bulk commodities for the commodity market, it falls to 90 percent of the farmers, including the farmers in the middle, to supply the other market. And it is precisely those farmers who are in the best position to produce the unique products demanded by that market. As numerous market analyses have shown, approximately 25 percent of today's food customers want the unique products that this second market can offer them. One of the attributes which these markets increasingly want in their food choices is locally grown by a family farmer. And that market appears to be growing. So the markets are there and the producers are there. What is needed is the value chain to connect them.

The Northeast Iowa Food & Farm (NIFF) Coalition and the Food & Fitness Initiative are working together to create community environments that support access to fresh, locally grown, healthy, affordable food and safe environments for physical activity and play. More information about these programs can be found at www.niffcoalition.org.