

Have we figured out what sustainable Ag is yet?
(Maybe we could get closer to the truth by figuring out what it's not.)

Sustain, Webster's definition: 1) to keep in existence; keep up; maintain or prolong, syn. –support, adj. –sustainable.

I have never claimed to be brilliant. Really, I am just a farm grown boy in a big world –at times scratching my head wondering if it's me that's not understandin' somethin', or if, what seems to be the rest of the world, is a couple bricks short of a load. For example, take the common definition of *sustainable* above. With Joe six-pack average reading comprehension, I can come away with a fairly good grasp of what it means to be sustainable.

Nevertheless, whenever I'm mixing with peer advisors in our Ag industry and happen to mention that I'm a proponent of *sustainable* Ag and the *family* dairy farm it is inevitable that at least one in the crowd will suggest that neither of the two is definable. *Sustainable* can't be defined because it's *always* too soon to tell (not enough data to make a judgment) and family can't be defined either because it's not *politically correct* to do so! Since that individual usually has more letters behind his name than I do, it's then that I pull my seed corn cap off to scratch my head. (I've got a friend who told me it would automatically raise my IQ by 30 points whenever I would *remove* a baseball cap –and listening to classical music could double it.) Yep, there's things going on in our dairy industry that've got me darn close to trading in my Charlie Daniels for Beethoven in order to grasp the deep (I mean waders) meaning of it.

How about this: according to Dun & Bradstreet the two most common reasons for business failures in the late 1990s were: #1 insufficient profits; and #2 too much debt. Hmmm . . . This is so confusing . . . Those fellers obviously don't understand the dairy business very well. *Everybody knows* (just read your farm magazines and listen to the appointed leaders) that to be progressive, to be *in dairy in the future*, one needs to embrace the strategy of those who've (successfully?) gone before us –the poultry and hog producers! You can read all about the "benefits" of this approach in your April 2000 issue of *Dairy Herd Management*. Quotes:

If we really want to learn how to get through the next few years [in the dairy industry], we need to look at the successful people in the poultry and pork industries . . . They [poultry] are managing pennies, or fractions of pennies, by carrying out each cost item to the fourth decimal point. *They have to, since they are operating on very tight profit margins* . . . family farms exist in the poultry industry, but are really *under direct control of large companies*. Contract hog-raising [again

under the influence of large companies] has become more pervasive in the hog industry . . . [emphasis added].

Gee, someone has already done our thinking for us -so the rest of us don't need to ! Just follow (*the Pied Piper?*).

Don't get me wrong, I really don't care how *big* your definition of *big* is or if your definition of family is a bit more inclusive (within moral constraints anyway!). The questions

that keep nagging a simpleton like me are: how big (production size) will be big enough? How small (profit margin) will you accept? Take this to its logical end. If the former is the *only* answer and the latter is accepted as *beyond control*, how

will you keep from eventually being owned or controlled by the large corporations / Co-ops who claim to be "helping" you operate? *If* the boys at Dun & Bradstreet could be on to something in regard to the issue of debt, what makes the dairy *business* immune? Many progressive dairymen are locking in (low but acceptable) prices with production contracting –has anyone investigated how this has worked out for the poultry and hog guys? This appears to be ideal for top-down vertical integration: get independent farmers out on a limb (debt) and then *saw it off*.

Back to that definition of *sustainable*. Everybody in Ag says they're for it, but most seem to want to avoid the Webster's definition for something much more nebulous. By doing so, we can pay lip service to it *without ever having to really do anything*. Example: June was "*Dairy month*". What was actually done to "keep" the family farm "in existence"? In July, we celebrated our independence. Are the decisions you're making this year helping you to *sustain* your independence or are they giving it away? Patrick Henry, the guy who said "Give me liberty or give me death!" also said "It is natural for a man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth." The truth is the current direction of the dairy industry is not *sustainable* for the *independent* family farm (small business). On the production management side, we're *turning* cows and incurring costs that are way out-of-line / unnecessary. KOW would like, for our part, to help change this. On the marketing side, we need some *Patrick Henry style* leadership to rise up *from within* the family farm community to establish a *sustainable* price *before the milk leaves the farm*. Don't believe the "*surplus*" propaganda. Don't "hope" in the government or big business to do anything. The status quo is working out very well *for them*. Wake up dairymen!

"The small landholders are the most precious part of a state." –Thomas Jefferson