

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Can We Talk? *By Cyndie Sirekis*

A recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* ([“Battle Over Slow Food Heats up in Heartland”](#)) highlighted our nation’s agricultural diversity. The article illustrated how the “tiny but fast-growing” number of farms that sell local and grow organic food contrast with “commodity farms that make up the great bulk of production and sell into a global food chain.”

The closing quote of the article, by California dairy farmer Ray Prock Jr., cut to the heart of much of the discord in the farming and ranching community today and even offered a solution.

“Instead of automatically thinking conventional ag is the enemy, and instead of conventional ag always thinking that organic and local food is the enemy, we need to sit down and figure out where we can work together,” Prock said.

Fortunately for Prock and others who are like-minded, addressing erroneous beliefs that have led some to think of any form of agriculture as “the enemy” got a little easier with the recent release of the latest National Resources Inventory report from the Agriculture Department’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. The NRI is a compilation of a broad range of 50 years of data related to the environment, U.S. land use and productivity, water consumption and many other factors.

The massive NRI survey results clearly show that farmers and ranchers are careful and caring stewards of our nation’s natural resources. They are producing more food using fewer resources. In fact, farm and ranch productivity has increased over the past two and a half decades, while at the same time environmental performance and water quality have been improving.

The shrinking environmental footprint of food and fiber production in the United States is the envy of the world. A few key examples from the NRI survey tell the story.

While farm and ranch productivity has increased dramatically since 1950, the use of resources (labor, seeds, feed, fertilizer, etc.) required for production has declined markedly. In 2008, farmers used 2 percent fewer inputs while producing 262 percent more food, compared to 1950.

Dairy cow milk production on farms operated by Prock and his fellow producers has become more efficient since 1980. The pounds of feed (grain, forage and so on) each cow needs to consume to produce 100 pounds of milk has decreased by more than 40 percent on average in the last 30 years.

Since 1982, U.S. land used for crops has declined by 70 million acres. Conservation tillage, a way of farming that reduces erosion (soil loss) on cropland while using less energy, has grown from 17 percent of land area (acres) in 1982 to 63 percent currently.

Careful stewardship by America's food producers spurred a nearly 50 percent decline in erosion of cropland by wind and water since 1982.

Fifty years of data tells the story—farm and ranch families, most of whom fall under the “conventional ag” umbrella, care for our natural resources while feeding our nation. Let's not let another 50 years go by without making Prock's plea for civil discourse among all types of food producers a reality.