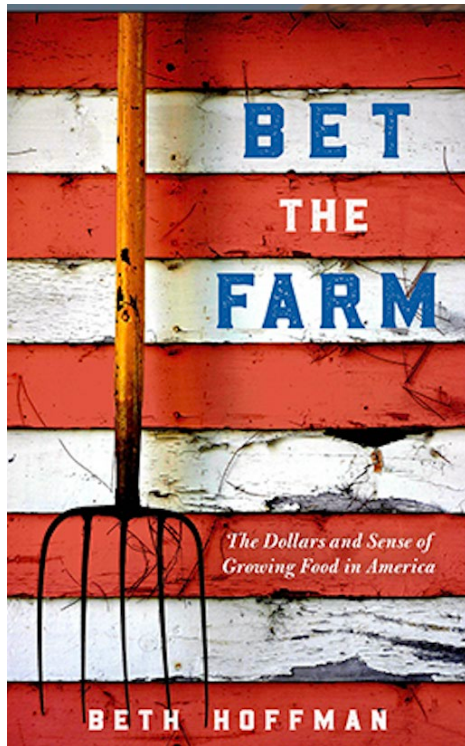


Readers Guide



Bet the Farm

The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America

By Beth Hoffman

Why did you write the book?

Several years ago, I had a stark realization about the finances of farming, even though I had reported on food and agriculture for almost 25 years.

We lived in San Francisco at the time, but for my husband John, moving back to the farm in Iowa where he grew up was a lifelong dream. We started to talk to his father Leroy about taking over—he was still the farmer in charge and rented the land out. The

problem was that Leroy was “land rich, cash poor” — like most farms, all the money he had made over the years had gone back into the operation. So we had to figure out a reasonable amount of money to pay him in rent, without us going belly up before we even got started.

But there were so many other costs too that we needed to keep in mind. There was fuel for the tractors and salt and minerals for the cattle, equipment to fix and seeds to buy. The list went on and on, the money we would need just to run a farm streaming out of our bank account like a leaky tire.

And because we were committed to regenerative farming, it would be at least two years before we would have any grass finished cattle to sell. It would be a long time before we would earn any money at all, and even after we had paid things off, our projected profits were slim to none.

But it wasn't just going to be hard for us, I learned. In 2019, half of America's 2 million farms made less than \$300. I was shocked. Even after all those years of reporting, I had no idea how challenging making money on a farm was.

Yet I also realized, the economics of agriculture is deeply tied to sustainability — we cannot expect the food system to become more resilient and sustainable if most farms barely squeak by. If we are to make real, lasting change, it is imperative that Americans better understand the financial realities of agriculture and the pervasive history of farm debt and overproduction that has plagued American farms. And the time for change is now.

Thus *Bet the Farm: The Dollars and Sense of Growing Food in America* was born.

Classroom Materials

Study questions for each chapter

The Simple Life

In the first chapter Hoffman discusses her surprise at learning how little she might make as a farmer.

What do you *think* you know about the history of agriculture?

What was farming like a few generations ago?

Land Rich, Cash Poor

Hoffman discusses the concept of “land rich, cash poor,” in Chapter 2.

Explain what that concept means to you.

How does this impact families trying to transition farm land from one generation to the next?

The Price of Sustainability

Discuss at least two main reasons why growing alternative crops like oats can make a farmer’s life much more difficult than growing more popular crops like corn or soybeans.

What do you think can be done to remedy these issues?

Privilege to Farm

Why has Hoffman named this chapter Privilege to Farm? What are the privileges she had when she came into farming, and how are those privileges reflected in the makeup of the vast majority of today’s farm families?

Discuss at least one group covered in the chapter that has not been afforded the same privileges

How that has that lack of opportunity impacted land ownership for that group?

What about Subsidies?

Talk about at least two elements from the chapter that surprised you.

What did you learn from this chapter, and what questions do you still have about subsidies?

The Cattle Run Around

In this chapter, Hoffman discusses the issues with trying to sell cattle in today's market.

Describe how the system works for most cattle ranchers looking to sell livestock into the commodity market.

What are the pros and cons of selling beef directly to consumers?

Keeping Up with the Joneses

What is the impact of high debt on American farms today?

How does this reality conflict with the ideals we have of the independent farmer, free to grow what they wish?

Everybody Does It

Off-farm jobs contribute to the bottom line for farm families.

What do off-farm jobs do for a farm, and why are they so important?

A New Narrative

Hoffman describes two predominant myths in American agriculture.

What are they and how do they impact farmers?

Self-Care is Key

Being a beginning farmer can be stressful.

What resonated about Hoffman's experience and how can you use the ideas in the chapter in your own life?

Co-farming and Community

Hoffman talks about how her ideas of bringing new people onto the land were challenged in this chapter.

Discuss at least one of these "ah-ha" moments and what can be learned from her experience.

Sharing the Pie

There are many pros and cons of cooperatives.

How do cooperatives work best and what are they not as good at?

People and Policy

The "Farm Bill" happens about every five years and sets the policy for agriculture in the U.S. Hoffman points out in this chapter that although the policy itself is important, the people enacting such legislation are also key to making change.

Describe Hoffman's experience with federal policy.

What are some ideas you have for making those changes happen?

Meanwhile Back at the Ranch

This last chapter comes back to Whippoorwill Creek Farm and examines farm life two years in.

What sticks out for you in this chapter?

What resonates with your own experience or are surprises for you in this chapter?

What would you like to know more about?

Classroom Materials

A Q&A with Author Beth Hoffman

In the book, you detail many of the reasons why farms make so little, like the high cost of machinery and seed, the low prices for farm products, and consolidation of the market. But you also talk about the role of storytelling in limiting farmers' ability to be successful. Explain.

There are two overarching (and often overlapping) stories about farming that you see everywhere: the Bigger is Better narrative and the Agrarian Myth, both of which lead farmers astray.

The Bigger is Better theory tells us that larger farms are more efficient. Bigger farms produce more and therefore gross higher revenue, the narrative goes. Smaller operations with less land and equipment are just "hobby farms" that don't really produce much food. To be successful, farmers need to keep up and do better than their neighbors or risk being swallowed up by them.

This narrative fails to mention that few farms ever get big enough for an economy of scale to kick in. Getting big is not an incremental game but an exponential one — buying another machine and going into a little more debt is not enough to improve a

farm's financial prospects. And the end result of farms all trying to outdo each other is almost always more product on the market, oversupply, and lower prices. In other words, if we buy into the mythology and follow its tenets, in the end, we all make less.

The Agrarian Myth can also inhibit farmers. Told from the earliest days of colonization on the continent, this myth casts farmers as rugged, independent types who hold high moral values and work without complaint: they are the embodiment of democracy itself. This myth depicts farming in a romantic light, a “simple life” for happy, tight-knit families, with gigantic, laudable goals like conserving the environment and “feeding the world.”

Yet it is a lot of weight on a farmer's shoulders to be tasked with feeding the hungry, stewarding the planet's resources, and taking care of oneself at the same time. The myth leaves farmers feeling guilty for needing to make a living by charging to cost of doing business and leads to self-exploitation of farmer — and farm workers' — labor.

Farms are run basically as non-profits, in service to a higher cause. This leaves farmers broke and stressed. The rugged individual ideal also discourages farmers from effectively organizing together, to keep prices high by limiting their own supply, for example. And by idealizing the supposed virtue of the “family farm” — even though the vast majority of farms are owned by families — land remains in the same (mostly White) hands, making it even more difficult for new farmers to get into the business.

You say that in order to solve the U.S.'s agricultural problems, we first need a new national narrative around farming. What would that narrative sound like?

New stories would be rooted in the real world and honestly convey the truth about the difficult challenges of farming: the emotional stress of the work, the reliance on off-farm income to keep most farms afloat, and the treadmill of technological and financial debt most farms are on and cannot get off.

More truthful narratives would also provide a complete history of American agriculture instead of romanticizing the past as an agricultural utopia. Stories would tell of how, even from the very first settlements, farms were used to produce cash crops like tobacco, meat, corn, and wheat. The land was “raped” (my father-in-law Leroy's term) and Indigenous people displaced in order to produce crops throughout the country.

This is not to say that all of the new stories we need to hear will be harsh and negative. The narratives would support farmers in today's world by sharing examples of real

farms that collaborate, find successful niche markets, and prioritize their own economic and mental health.

Instead of the endless stream of stories that focus on the short term—stories about today's market price for beans, the USDA crop report for the year, the weather in Brazil this summer—we need stories about how farms are able to thrive over time. Stories would show farms as viable businesses, with value in their branding and their agricultural practices, not just their yields or contracts. It would encourage farm businesses and policy makers to think about future generations — socially, as well as ecologically and financially — and to consider the health and well-being of their neighbors as well as themselves.

Why is converting conventional farms to organic, sustainable farming a challenge? Why isn't organic farming necessarily profitable?

The quick answer to why “sustainable” or organic farms struggle is that it takes more labor and time to grow food in these ways. Because you don't spray chemicals, weeds often need to be picked by hand and raising animals on pasture means they are not quickly fattened and spend much more time on a farm than they do in a confinement facility. The direct marketing and food delivery for local farms is also labor intensive, as is sitting at a farmer's market multiple times a week or driving from small grocer to small grocer.

But beyond that, it is very hard for a farm to transition to sustainable practices because it often means that a farmer has nothing to sell, sometimes for years. The transition to certify organic, for example, takes three years.

There is also a lack of knowledge and infrastructure to support alternative farming systems in much of rural America. In the Midwest, for example, where corn or wheat is grown, very, very few farmers grow anything else, so there is not a culture of growing food crops—or even of eating fresh foods—for farms to tap into. And even when farmers choose to grow organic varieties of a dominant crop—say of soybeans—there is almost nowhere to sell it. Not being able to sell your crop is a risk most farmers cannot afford to take.

Land is expensive and valuable. Combine that with the fact that most 'family farms' have been in White hands for generations, there is little room for others to become farmers. How might this be corrected so that more opportunities are available? What

can White farmers do to help Black, Indigenous, or other Farmers of Color (BIPOC) gain more ground?

The term “family farm” now seems to mean to the public that a farm is small, cares for the land, and uses only wholesome techniques on a farm. But this is not true — 96 percent of farms in the US are categorized as a family farms — encompassing a huge variety of agricultural techniques and sizes. And while it is a badge of honor for a family to have kept control of land for generations and through many challenges, the term also speaks to a system that has allowed only some people (usually White) to retain ownership of the land.

One idea to make land more accessible that is gaining traction is for families to put the land into a trust, or to also turn over ownership to a non-profit who can then rent out the land low-cost to new farmers. This can make agriculture more affordable as the farmers gain the right to use the land (usually long term) without having to own it. Long term leases can also help new farmers feel more secure in their tenure. But neither of these ideas provides the opportunity for BIPOC farmers and their families to build family wealth over time — benefits White families have enjoyed for generations on their land.

With the help of BIPOC-led groups, some White families are exploring ways to simply give farmland back to local tribes (often called the “laidback movement”) or to farmers of color. White farmers have long benefitted from the displacement of BIPOC farmers — through the literal removal of Indigenous populations and the denial of loans and mortgages to Black, Hispanic, and women farmers. Allowing farmers of color to regain what has been taken from them over time would result in more economically and culturally vibrant rural communities and a more equal disbursement of wealth in the U.S. as a whole.

Yet while farmers of color need to more easily gain access to land, equally as important is providing the support for them to stay on it. Most current, multi-generational farm families have had access to low interest loans, agricultural experts, government programs, and generational wealth to help them acquire and keep land, while many BIPOC farmers have not. Going forward, support in the form of debt relief, specially targeted beginning farmer programs, and the funding of BIPOC- led advising and mentoring groups equipped with generations of agricultural knowledge would help close the divide and benefit all farmers.

One-third of America’s farmers are over the age of 65. What kinds of incentive programs are available to help bring in the next generation of farmers?

Many “simple” things like providing college debt relief, childcare assistance, or health insurance coverage could make it possible for new farmers to enter and stay in the profession. Because farming is such a labor and capital-intensive business with little yearly return, these measures would help individuals take on the financial burden required to get started farming and allow them to dedicate time on-farm to make their farms profitable. Additionally, expanding USDA-funded beginning farmer programs that focus on systemic problems in agriculture like land access and credit issues could also help get more people back onto the land.

Yet again, the goal can't be just to attract a new generation of farmers: we also need to make farming a profession in which people and land can thrive for generations to come. To do that, farmers need more than money; they need supportive communities and reliable expert advice consistently available to them over time. Land grant universities, the USDA, and extension offices are already tasked with bringing the most up-to-date research from the lab to the field – why not insist that these groups spend much more of their time and resources tackling problems of local infrastructure, diversification of crops, and rural development?

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

I see my book as a window into a world very few people understand, although many want to. Many other books describe the environmental issues of agriculture and the ways that public policy could be improved. But few books talk about what farming is really like, nor do they address the economic or social/cultural facets of farming - parts of the equation I would argue are even more important to consider if we want better sustainability in agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture – and farming in general – is often cast in a romantic light that does not convey the truth about America's farms. Equally toxic is the myth of 'Bigger is Better' that dominates conversations about “efficient” agriculture today. I see my book presenting alternative narratives to these myths, myths that have trapped farmers into thinking about farming in very limited ways, often to their own detriment.

The book also reveals surprising information about how farming has evolved over the course of our nation's history and talks about what that history means for us all today. Whether running small or large operations, organic or conventional, I also hope that farmers will see themselves represented fairly in the pages of my book. The book aims

to bring people together and allow us to understand why things are the way they are,
so we can improve the status quo for all.