

Kelsey Fitzgerald

As a small vegetable farmer who lives next to a giant corporate farm in Southeast Minnesota I have several concerns about our nations push for the industrial Ag model that bigger is better. A model that puts even medium-size farmers in a ever sinking hole of relying and paying big companies for seeds, chemicals, machinery and more all the while knowing and hoping the subsidies cover all their costs. Though many are ready to blame farmers, it's actually the way our government runs the Agriculture industry. I watch all summer as my neighbors, without warning, spray their corn and alfalfa with drones and helicopters several times a season and then spread their cow manure whenever they want regardless of neighbors, water quality, seasonal temperatures, rain, snow, frozen ground. They would never voluntarily do any sort of conservation practices. Their practices effect all my neighbors with their constant tractors, smell, runoff, chemical drift and more, but yet, it's legal and their is nothing we can do about. I do not sign up to live in the country and grow organic food only to die from breathing in toxic chemicals and drinking tainted water. Our counties hands are tied and we need real change. Something that sets regulations they have to follow. Something that encourages change and supports it as well.

I'm a small farmer. I don't get subsidies, I don't get crop insurance. I have two to three other part-time jobs to subsidize my farm and I work with mostly volunteers to run my farm. I don't ask for mercy or complain about not making ends meet because I'm better off than many who have the dream to run their own small farm and don't have the means.

Now is the time, as almost all farmers are aging out and we need more younger farmers. No one can afford it and unless a farm is passed down to a generation, the land prices are so high and the loans so ridiculous no one want's to farm. Our only chance to better our earth, world, farmer's worth and the land is to change our farming practices. We've never been sustainable the way we farm and it doesn't work. We are fighting large corporations who have lots of power and money and we need to stand up and say NO to them and change the game.

Another item to bring up is also the use of fertilizers and other chemicals on lawns, put down drains, stuff running into town storm drains. We can't just blame farmers. Especially here in Winona, which was built on a wetland and I know several people whose basements flood in huge rains. We need better systems for handling big rains like more permeable surfaces, rain gardens, roof gardens, rain catchment systems for watering city plants, encouraging native bee and butterfly gardens in yards instead of mowing and chemicals. We need more green spaces for people to grow their own food and have nature therapy after a hard day.

Minnesota does a lot of things right when it comes to preserving the environment and caring about natural resources. We need to do more and lead the way in creating a different type of agriculture system.

To that point, we need to change our Ag policies and not support this type of large-scale farming any more. We need to support those who do conservation or grow food in a manner that benefits the rivers and lakes, but also all of the environment including animals and people. We need to create avenues for farmers to sell the different products they grow and encourage diversification, but doing so.