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Review: *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle*

Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson and Rick Welsh (Eds.)

Reviewed by Daniel S. Helman

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Lyson, Thomas A., Stevenson, G.W., and Welsh, Rick (Eds.) *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middle*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 296 pp. ISBN 9780262622158. US \$27.00, paperback.

The MIT Press volume *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, edited by Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson and Rick Welsh, is a summary of family farm conditions in the US, published in 2008. It is written at the level of a college freshman, a supplemental undergraduate text, and would be well-suited for libraries focusing on sustainability, economics, US culture, food, agriculture, direct marketing, organics, and others. If you don't want to put together a reader yourself, and are preparing to teach, this book would serve very well. *Food and the Mid-Level Farm* is an important book.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as the prices commanded for various agricultural products declined, the US media were replete with stories for the entire nation, dealing with the growing danger to the family farm. It wasn't just a postcard view. We learned, variously, about stewardship, creativity, democracy, economic security, and community, along with agriculture, from these early reports – though, perhaps, the message wasn't so clear to urbanites for why they should care about the demise of the family farm. Perhaps it was, since those stories were able to build a movement, in government and in the popular culture, to try and save the family farm. Real efforts were made, in the form of policy and governmental regulation.

The largest section of the book deals with legislation, and legislative choices, addressing such issues as how to define a family farm. Chapters on legislation analyze the conditions for cooperative associations, including quite a lot of information on the various types of associations, how they share pricing and weather information in order to avoid being taken advantage of, how they promote longer-term contracts with buyers, and how farmers are exempt from certain anti-trust legislation, and are therefore allowed to work collectively.

Food and the Mid-Level Farm also presents information on product differentiation and specialty crops, and how farmers are forming associations to get their products to the retailer or consumer, and allow for an easy transaction (via computer) while guaranteeing that larger orders can be met. There is also a treatment of value chains, with buyers, retailers, and those who supply seed/inputs and other materials to the farmers building healthy and cooperative business relationships.

Other sections of the book deal with the different types of subsidy programs available, and their various goals. Such include getting money to the right people to support mid-sized farming, and the sometimes conflicting aims of economic, and cultural stewardship for various regions, or environmental stewardship (e.g. to protect against eutrophication from nitrogen runoff, or against topsoil erosion). Mid-sized farmers ought to capitalize on

a growing desire from consumers to connect to the culture of farming. Smaller farms have done so with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) marketing programs, and the mid-sized farm might do so, as well.

I found this interesting to read, and, in short, quite informative. The conditions do look grim. It is heartening to know that there are people working on such things, but it would be even better if the numbers of that group were to increase. The crisis is real.

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