I think it is possible to return to a system that is self-renewing like the forest and prairie were and yet be capable of supporting the current human population. We have the opportunity to develop a truly sustainable agriculture based on mixtures of perennials. This would be an agriculture in which soil erosion is so small that it is detectable only with the most sophisticated equipment, an agriculture that is chemical free or nearly so, and certainly an agriculture which is scarcely demanding of fossil fuels. Public awareness of the need to change our direction is increasing as more and more of our drinking water becomes polluted with chemical fertilizers.

Demand for certified organic produce increases every year. The National Academy of Scientists has recommended that children eat organic produce because (continued on page 14)

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pesticide residues build up to dangerous levels in relation to their body's size. An increasing number of farmers are making the transition to more sustainable practices, such as composting their animal manures for fertilizing their soils, rather than spreading raw manure on their fields. Organic farmers also gain fertility from diverse crop rotations, fertilizer supplements of kelp, rock phosphate, fish emulsion, and other products which do not harm the microbial life of the soil or pollute the groundwater of streams. Organic farmers control weeds and insects by using timely planting, shallow tillage, cover crops, beneficial insects, resistant varieties, and diverse crop rotations that disrupt the weed and insect cycles.

To achieve a system of agriculture capable of saving our life sustaining soil, what must we do? I believe we must change our direction from more and more centralization of larger and larger corporate farms back toward smaller family farm units where farmers are also the owners who want to take care of their soils so that their children and grandchildren will have land capable of providing a livelihood. Extensive studies done by both Mason Gaffney and Gene Wunderlich indicate that smaller farms are the more efficient producers, getting much more product value in relation to land value than large farms do.

So how does tax policy relate to helping agriculture be more sustainable? Smaller farms are more efficient, largely because their operators have been better stewards of their soil, by growing a greater diversity of crops in smaller fields, thus reducing the ill effects of monoculture. The tax policy of shifting taxes off of both farm income and off of building values and on to farm land value and all natural resource values would have several benefits to a sustainable agriculture:

One, the price of farm land would come down, making farm land affordable for family sized farmers. When the annual rental value of land is not taken by the community who created it, but rather is allowed to be claimed by the landowner, who did not create it, then the more land value that the owner holds, the larger his unearned benefit is. And therefore the larger farm has an advantage over the small farm.

Two, money currently invested in site costs would be available for new technologies and practices which could improve soil retention and quality.

Three, it would eliminate Tax Loss Farming. Income tax payers can now reduce their taxable income from other sources by deducting their losses from farming. A 1996 study in New York state found that farm losses exceeded farm income by about $10 million a year. Nearly all the households with over $100,000 in non-farm income showed farm losses, while only 20% of households with less than $5,000 of non-farm income showed farm losses. These pseudo-farmers do not have any incentive to use soil-enhancing practices. Many who live near a metropolis are simply holding the land in speculation to sell it later for development purposes. By eliminating the income tax completely on farming, Tax Loss Farming would be eliminated, and efficient profitable operations would be encouraged.

By shifting the property tax from a tax on both improvement values and land values to land values only, small family sized farms would benefit, since they have a higher ratio of improvements to land than do large corporate farms.

This tax shift principle applies to the relationship between agricultural land and non-agricultural land, also. The genuine farmers in Queensland, Australia, for example, many years ago wanted to shift to a two-rate property tax higher on land value and lower on improvement value because they found they were paying more than their share of the municipal costs to make up for the token payments by the owners of vast undeveloped acreages. Site value rating, as they call it, has now become the dominant system in Australia, being used in 92% of their municipalized areas. Their farmers pay less with land value taxation than with other tax systems.

As population increases and technology advances, our need to utilize our natural resources in an environmentally sustainable way becomes more and more critical. A 3300 head confinement hog farm here in NE Iowa, for example, which pollutes French Creek with its manure, is economically feasible because of federal crop subsidies making feed cheap and because of an absence of a tax on the water. Charging for the use and abuse of our common heritage would render this operation uneconomical. The inefficiencies of transporting food thousands of miles would become apparent if all the costs of the environmental deprivation involved were included in the price of the product. Collecting the land rent from the owner of every natural resource used in the production and transportation of a product to the ultimate consumer would result in higher prices for products that use fossil fuels to transport them long distances.

To summarize, I would draw the following conclusions. One, preserving our soils and the many life forms in it and over it is essential to our continued human existence on this planet. Two, large scale farms growing huge acreages of a single crop must use chemicals for pest control and fertilizers which threaten the soil's biological life. Three, small scale farms tend to grow a diversity of crops for local markets. Crop diversity provides the pest control from the balance of hosts and predators found in nature. Four, land value taxation will reduce the incentives to concentrate farm ownership into larger units and

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larger units and to lower the land prices making it more affordable for entry level farmers. Five, land value taxation will, therefore, have the positive effect of making our agriculture more sustainable.

(editor's note: Artie Yeatman is a retired farmer and Community Supported Agriculture gardener, and is office manager for the School of Living which was established in 1934 by Ralph Borsodi. School of Living's Community Land Trust holds seven parcels of rural land in three states. The School of Living aims to foster self-governing communities which are democratic, humane, globally conscious and ecologically sound. All of its resources, especially the land it holds in trust, are held in responsible stewardship for all living creatures. Email S.o.L. at GreenRev@S-o-L.org or artiey@epix.net. Write to S.o.L. at 432 Leaman Rd., Cochranville, PA 19330.

Both the land trust movement and the land value tax movement historically came out of Henry George's work. The land trust movement became developed as a way to implement collecting community created land rent on a smaller scale because land value taxation was sometimes difficult and challenging to implement politically.)