

Sustainable Farming and Eating

The word sustainable means the use of resources to maintain our standard of living that does not preclude the ability of future generations to have a similar standard of living and does not affect the health of the next generations.

Industrial livestock factories¹ clearly are not the idyllic picture of farming you might imagine where animals are outside grazing on pasture and the farmer gets to know his animals and lovingly cares for them. And these are not the small-scale family farms where a few animals are raised sustainably. These are definitely not the types of farms that one would see in the Iowa countryside in the 1950s or 1960s. These industrial livestock factories are large-scale operations of animals housed in buildings or confined in open feedlots. Alternatively thousands of animals, particularly beef cattle, are raised in open feedlots that are pens with no grass growing.

In the case of confinement buildings, the animals never go outside and never see sunlight from the time they are put in the building until the time they are removed from the building and transported to the slaughterhouse. Thousands of animals are crammed into one building.

Industrial food production of meat, eggs and milk is not sustainable since the massive amounts of manure foul the air and pollute our rivers and streams. The administration of sub-therapeutic amounts of antibiotics threatens the long-term, viable use of those antibiotics and risks creating bacteria that are antibiotic resistant.



Photo by Neila Seaman

Additionally industrial-scale production of fruit and vegetables is accomplished through the use of pesticides, fungicides and synthetic fertilizers. These chemicals pose a risk of polluting our rivers and streams.

Consumer Choice

As a consumer, you can purchase products from farmers who sustainably produce meat, eggs, milk, fruits and vegetables. Organically grown fruits and vegetables are produced without the use of herbicides, pesticides and fungicides. Animals that are raised organically eat food that is grown without herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. Additionally organically raised animals are not given hormones and are not given sub-therapeutic amounts of antibiotics.

If a farmer lives near you, check to see if you can buy fruits, vegetables and animal products directly from the farmer. Farmers markets feature locally grown products. Another option is to take advantage of community-supported agriculture where a group of farmers sell subscriptions to consumers, the farmer raises the produce and then the farmer delivers boxes of produce to the consumers who purchased the subscriptions.

Additionally, when you buy meat products, fruits and vegetables from a farmer or from a community-supported agriculture program, more of your food dollars are given to the farmer

¹ Industrial livestock factories are also called concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) or factory farms.

because the middleman is cut out of the process. That money stays in the local economy and supports local businesses and jobs.

When you purchase foods from a local farmer, you have an opportunity to get to know the farmer. That increases the sense of community which makes our state more livable.

If you do not have access to a local farmer, farmers market or community-supported agriculture programs, consider looking for sources of food grown by specialty or niche producers who raise foods sustainably. These include hormone-free meat, antibiotic-free meat, grass-fed beef, organic meat.

When you support a farmer who uses sustainable farming practices, you help improve the environment.

Eating lower on the food chain

Another way to eat sustainably is to eat lower on the food chain. To produce:

1 pound of:	Pounds of feed or grain needed ² :
Broiler chicken	2.3
Hogs	5.9
Cattle	13 or more

By reducing the number of meat meals that you eat, you are more efficiently using the grains that are grown. That helps the environment by keeping less productive land out of production. It reduces the pollution of the streams and rivers from runoff of manure. It reduces air pollution from manure.

Vegans eat no meat, no dairy products and no eggs. Vegetarians eat no meat, but do consume dairy products and eggs.

Policy Recommendations

The Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club supports raising animals for food, milk and eggs in a sustainable manner. The Chapter believes that a two-pronged approach is needed to move the production of meat, milk and eggs into more sustainable methods and practices:

1. Proactive support of sustainable farming
2. Enhanced regulation of the industrial livestock industry

The Iowa Chapter supports policies that promote sustainable agricultural practices, including:

- Encouraging young farmers, women and minorities to adopt sustainable farming practices.
- Supporting programs that assist in building small, community-scale processing plants for fruits and vegetables.
- Providing access to slaughterhouses for small-scale farmers who sustainably raise animals.



Photo by Francis Thicke

² CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation): *The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories*, edited by Daniel Imhoff, published by Foundation for Deep Ecology, 2010, page 35.

- Creating local farmer-seller cooperatives so groups of farmers can collectively move their products to market, including storage, processing, transportation and marketing services.
- Creating regular local farmers markets where locally grown, sustainable products can be sold and purchased.
- Providing preferences for local, sustainable foods when government institutions, such as schools and hospitals, purchase foods.
- Encouraging a review and the subsequent revision of state and federal laws that are barriers to the expansion of sustainable farming practices.
- Improving the federal farm bill to support and encourage sustainable farming practices.
- Mandatory labeling of produce grown from genetically modified seeds and cloned animals.
- Opposing the use of irradiation, also known as cold pasteurization, of meat.
- Banning genetically altering fruit, vegetables and animals to produce biopharmaceuticals.
- Developing programs to provide improved and non-discriminatory access to credit that can be used to farm sustainably.
- Supporting the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. The Leopold Center is dedicated to researching and developing, agricultural practices that are sustainable, profitable and protective of the soil, air, and water.

Comparison of Sustainable Food Production and Industrial Food Production

<i>Sustainable food production</i>	<i>Industrial food production</i>
Sustainable food production methods include growing organic fruits, vegetables and animal products.	Most of the animals are fed sub-therapeutic doses of antibiotics to promote growth and to keep the animals healthy, a practice that threatens the long-term effectiveness of antibiotics.
Pesticides, fungicides and synthetic fertilizers are not used on organically grown food.	Beef animals are given hormones to help them gain weight.
Animals are not given sub-therapeutic antibiotics and are not given hormones.	Animals raised in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are not allowed outdoors.
Animals are allowed outdoors. Chickens allowed to be outside are called free-range.	Cage-free chickens are allowed to roam inside a building and are not cooped up in cages all day long.
Farmers offer their meat products, fruits and vegetables for sale at farmers markets, through community-supported agriculture, and through one-on-one sale to customers. Thus, the food is sold relatively close to where it is raised.	Industrial food producing methods use pesticides, fungicides and synthetic fertilizers.
Sustainable food does not include genetically modified fruits, vegetables or animals.	Much of the food in a grocery store is shipped long distances.
Sustainable farming practices include raising fruits, vegetables and animals from a wide variety of breeds, including heirloom plant varieties and traditional animal breeds.	Industrial food can include genetically modified fruits, vegetables or animals.
	Few breeds are produced, such as the White Cornish Cross broiler chicken, Broad Breasted White turkey, Holstein-Friesian dairy cattle, Large White pig, and White Leghorn and Rhode Island Red egg-layers.