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Sustainable Agriculture A Complex Challenge Not a Simplistic Choice

Choice is often essential in personal life and public affairs. Choosing among desirable alternatives is a necessity in daily living and public life. Yet choice becomes unacceptable in complex, compound, cases where each of the options is not just desirable, but also critical to success. They demand an approach that achieves the advantages of all options, but also allays their omissions. Achieving *sustainable agriculture* represents a classic case of a complex challenge, not a simplistic choice.

Unfortunately, as individuals and groups, we often prefer easy choices to difficult challenges. The 24/7 News Cycle, with its—she said, he said—format, favors the conflict of stark choices, not the complexities of tough challenges. Too often, the electronic media presents the clashing views of partisans, without attempting objective analysis of the issue or problem. As a result, sustainable agriculture is—all too often—viewed as a battle between warring camps. One side champions small, organic, farms that produce locally for villages, towns, and cities, as the best way to ensure safe food and save the environment. Their opponents often insist that only large, specialized, agricultural units can produce the abundant food that the burgeoning world population demands at affordable prices. The answer to sustainable agriculture lies not in choosing argument sides or farm sizes.

Agricultural sustainability is much too important to our country and our world to leave this critical topic to partisan wrangling. Rational discussion requires that we must determine the overarching goals of true agricultural sustainability. As a start, I propose that they must include: producing abundant, affordable, and safe food; promoting profitable farms and agricultural industries, and protecting the environment, our land, water, and air.

Groups may differ on the relative weights of these goals and suggest others, yet few could deny their necessity for achieving lasting agricultural sustainability. Surely, no one should judge an agricultural system sustainable for long, which failed to produce safe and abundant food at reasonable costs to consumers, provide adequate profit for the farming industry, and protect our environment. We just might turn angry debates over sustainable agriculture into useful discussions by asking all participants to address the above goals, as well as adding others of their own. It is time to search for solutions, not slogans.

Sustainable agriculture is too complex and critical for ourselves and our world to rely on either/or thinking. The challenge is too great and the time is too short to listen to those who would pick food safety but abandon abundance and affordability, or favor farm profitability but forget environmental protection. The search for true agricultural sustainability presents a complex challenge, not a simplistic choice—a task not for partisans, but a challenge for us all. It is time to end the debate and begin the discussion.

Surely, the North Country, with its flourishing mix of small organic farms and large dairy operations, shows that the answer to the complex challenge of sustainable agriculture is not simplistic choice.

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