

US Farms Define the American Dream

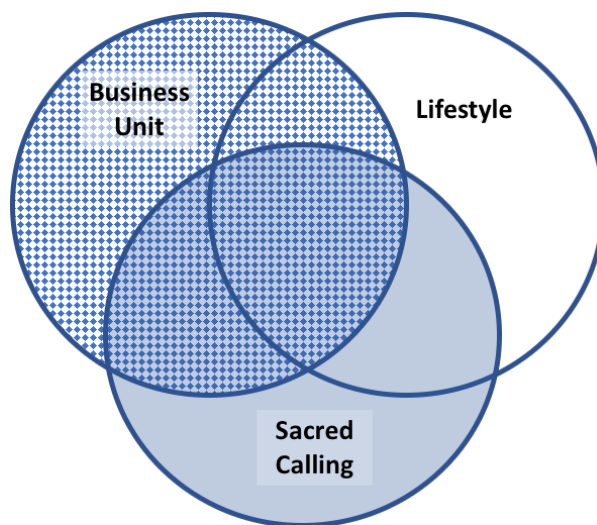
Mark Jenner, PhD
September 30, 2019

- US farms feed millions for profit.
- US farms define a lifestyle.
- US farms are a sacred institution.
- US farms are all these, but in developing efficient policies related to farms, it is best to define a farm as a business unit.

US farms and farmers resonate with most Americans. Every US citizen, at some point, forms an image of what a farm is and does. These unrelated impressions create a host of different ‘farm’ definitions. Three broad categories are a farm as a business unit, a farm as a lifestyle, and farm as a sacred calling. As intelligent and compassionate humans, we get to choose our own definition. In the context of establishing policies with legal boundaries, US farms are best defined as business units.

US farmers and farm families take great pride that the US farming sector is only one percent of the US population. The farming industry of 3.4 million farmers produce the basic feedstuffs that are transformed into food and other products for the US and much of the world.¹ These numbers are based on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Census of Agriculture defines a farm as a basic business unit that produces, “\$1,000 worth of sales annually.”² In this data, a US farm can document production each year of at least \$1,000 sales. A \$1,000 threshold of sales is a very small number for production. At current prices, \$1,000 of sales would be less than 2 acres of corn production or the sale of 1 fattened steer.³

The USDA, Economic Research Service reports that in 2017, the eleven percent of the nation’s largest farms produced nearly 80 percent of the total value of production.⁴ This indicates that while the 2 million US farms defined and counted by USDA are all based on requisite sale, they are highly diverse in the way they operate as a business.



¹ 3.4 million farmers (on 2 million farms)/327 million US population indicates that 1 percent are farmers.

² Appendix A. 2017 Census of Agriculture Methodology. For the census of agriculture, that goal is to account for “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year.”

www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usappxa.pdf

³ Two acres of corn yielding 175 bushels/acre of corn at \$3.60/bushel has a value of \$1,260. A 1,300-pound heifer or steer sold at \$1 per pound has a value of \$1,300.

⁴ Distribution of US Farms www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=58288

For fewer than 100 years, the United States has been more an industrialized society than agrarian. Before steam and internal combustion engines, biotechnology and farming with satellites, a large sector of our US economy was engaged in food production. Industrialization has allowed a very small segment to produce all our food. A review of nations in the US CIA World Factbook database shows that over 40 countries still have an economy with more than 20 percent engaged in agriculture, relative to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁵ Although since World War II the number of US farms has steadily declined, many Americans have roots in farming families and have grown up listening their family farm lore histories.

There is more to our culture's attachment with farming than ancestral connections. Young farm family children that grow up in the rigor of a family farm business, learn the discipline of caring for both plants and animals. The cycle of the seasons does not permit chores to be postponed for a later time. Farm kids learn the benefits sacrificing together as a family because in doing so there are triumphs over the elements. Growing up on a farm may not be common criterion of a resume. However, young adults that are comfortable with the rigor of a family farming enterprise rise quickly to leadership roles when they are employed off the farm.

The third context by which farms are defined is sacred. Our sacred texts were written at a time when most of the society was engaged in food production. Therefore, many lessons in the Christian faith are based on sheep, goats, wheat flour, vineyards and wine. Many parables and lessons deal with seeds, planting, harvesting of crops, and shepherding flocks. Providing food is primal to human existence. The seasonal cycle of life is a tremendous metaphor for Easter, or new life after death. In the temperate northern hemisphere, everything dies in the fall of the year and rises again in the spring of the year. It is new life after death over and over. Even the cycle of a 24-hour day, has a new beginning and end. On the farm, caring for a new-born calf or a sick pig, or an infestation of insects on a new crop; all demand attention. Farm success depends on navigating surprises and reaching deeper for more energy. The indomitable spirit of both entrepreneurship and farming is captured in the book of James:⁶

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Enduring and coping with death is simply a part of life on a farm. The miracle of birth of a new-born animal is just as divinely inspired. Rewards come in breath-taking vistas and moments that seem staged by God simply for the benefit of the human observer (the farmer). For those who have walked-the-walk in production agriculture, farming is a sacred vocation.

US farms are business units, a way of life, and sacred callings. These different descriptors are not separated by distinctly bright lines but overlap in many ways. As a culture, this is as it should be. We all get to define our passions as our needs demand. From a public policy standpoint this is a disaster. In law and legal regulation effective execution requires concise and interlocking definition and boundaries. The implicit definitions of property rights found in market transactions, make the business unit definition of farms the most efficient for implementation of our laws and policies.

⁵ CIA World Fact Book, GDP - COMPOSITION, BY SECTOR OF ORIGIN,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/index.html>

⁶ James 1:2-4, NRSV, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+1&version=NRSV>