

Farmers' strength lies in organization, says NFU President

Farmers can't afford to rely on technological fixes to improve their economic situation, says the new President of the National Farmers Union. In his closing address to the NFU national convention in Ottawa, Terry Boehm said the only realistic, and proven, solution is for farmers to work together collectively to increase their market power.

“Technological innovation provides an initial advantage to a few players, but in the long run, the benefits are very quickly captured by those corporate players that are able to consolidate control over the technology, and use that power to extract greater wealth from farmers,” he stated. “There's always some new technological solution – some magic bullet. For farmers, the end result is an accelerating treadmill that leaves us struggling to keep up. The problems just get bigger.”

Boehm pointed to the increasing consolidation of the seed industry, where only 3 seed companies control over 50% of the global market. The largest of those companies, Monsanto, exercises tremendous control through intellectual property rights on plant genetic material. Biotechnology and genetic engineering are being superseded by nanotechnology – the reconstruction of matter at the molecular level. The potential for profit by corporations that control these new technologies is huge, he stated.

But the most disturbing aspect of this unconditional faith in technology, he added, is the notion that natural resources like soil, water, and air are seen as mere raw materials to be exploited. “Proponents of this faith promote the concept of ‘technological singularity’ – the point where computers gain, and then surpass, the intelligence and subtlety of the human mind. The result, they suggest, would be a ‘technological jump’ that would make the industrial revolution look like a hiccup in historical terms.”

Boehm said this “faith in computers to move beyond human capabilities, and faith in nanotechnology to manufacture any object from cheap raw materials – basically dirt – is a technical perspective that looks at land and soil as the ultimate cheap raw material, rather than as the fundamental basis for the survival of our species, and everything else on this planet.” As the climate change situation and the economic crisis become more desperate, there will be increasing emphasis by politicians and corporations on these “pie-in-the-sky” technological fixes.

It is crucial for farmers to restore people's perspective, concluded the NFU President. “Farmers need to bring to the table the reality of what life is, of what soil is, and what community is all about. We need to rebuild farmers' political and economic power – and the way to do that is to work together, and also to work with our coalition partners. Farmers represent less than 1% of the population, but when we're organized, we can always achieve much more than our numbers suggest.”