



By Robert Gronski

# ADVOCATE for Family Farmers

**D**oug Peterson is president of the Minnesota Farmers Union where he has served seven consecutive terms since 2002. Prior to that, Peterson was a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives for twelve years. He has gained recognition across the state as a strong advocate and leader for rural communities. Peterson also serves as secretary of the National Farmers Union, a voting delegate of the World Farmers Organization, and board chair of Farmers Union Enterprises, which is

a principal sponsor of the Faith, Food and the Environment project.

**Catholic Rural Life [CRL]:** Mr. Peterson, thank you for your untiring efforts in advocating for the well-being of family farms and their communities. We also appreciate the time and effort you have given to the Faith, Food & the Environment project, which has led to the forthcoming publication, *The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*. This faith-based reflection expresses our

gratitude to those who speak up for agriculture as a dignified way of life. In today's global agri-food system, however, many farmers and producers are beset by many challenges: economically, socially and ecologically. How do you speak about these concerns?

**PETERSON:** Let there be no mistake. There is a real and present threat to family farms throughout the nation. At conferences and meetings around the country, farmers brought



Doug Peterson, President of the Minnesota Farmers Union.

their concerns before us. The reality of the aging farmer population raises questions about who will farm in the future. Aligned with this is undercapitalization, by which I mean farm input prices and produc-

tion costs are outpacing crop and livestock prices. These factors will lead to more concentration of farms into fewer hands. For future farmers, we need to be concerned about the high cost of land and machinery for those who are just beginning and will have little capital or limited access to credit.

Let me be clear about family farms. I'm referring to farm operations managed by families who are also the main laborers. When I criticize corporate operations, I mean the giant agribusiness conglomerates, the multinational corporations. They are pushing smaller farms to the margins and make it difficult for family farmers to receive a fair price. And by the way, along with the loss of family farms, we will continue to see dwindling numbers of churches, schools and main street shops. Rural communities also become the victims of corporate power in agriculture and agribusiness.

**CRL:** So it sounds like the structure of agriculture needs to change. Is it possible to talk about the ethics of agricultural production?

**PETERSON:** Yes, it certainly is. The ethics of food production needs to confront the ethic of the market. As it is now, the farmer is constantly pushed up against the margin between production costs and farmgate prices. For example, dairy farmers are again suffering from tight margins, unable to stay above production costs despite protections in market prices.

A greater understanding of what's happening now in agriculture is needed by policymakers. Agriculture is not just about farms and farmers; it is about national security and political stability. When food shortages appear, we know there will be serious social problems and unrest. We already see in some places around the world, and history knows it as well. We need a new attitude about agriculture when it comes to policy, one that recognizes how far it extends beyond the livelihoods of farm communities to the food security in cities and peace around the world.

We need to ask hard questions to our policymakers and find out where they stand on these concerns. We need to push them to greater awareness of what family farmers are experiencing. Only then can they create fair policies.

I'll say it again, family farms are part of the solution for greater national security and political stability. They cannot be treated as cheap labor, nor should they be under the control of anyone but themselves. They know their land the best.

**CRL:** This is a clear call to save family farms. You have also touched on their relationship to the land. This is all part of a sustainable food system, so please tell us more about that.

**PETERSON:** Farming is a noble profession because we are food producers, yes, but also stewards of the land. Family farmers are advocates of sustainability not only for themselves, but for the land, water, wildlife, biodiversity, and the list goes on. Farmers understand the holding capacities of the Earth, what their land and what nature can withstand, and we must take care not to infringe or go beyond those natural limits.

But economic pressures are put on farmers, especially smaller family farms, who are asked to produce a bounty for the market while sustaining natural resources as best they can. There are two ways help farmers in their endeavors. One is through technological improvements and the other is public policy.

**CRL:** Let's look at both of these. First, what is important to know about technology?

**PETERSON:** Technology is clearly essential to farmers and food producers. Yields need to continually improve as populations grow. But the high price of new technology cannot solely be the burden of the farmer. They are not able to extract from the market fair prices to cover those high tech costs. On top of that, government regulations (environmental, worker safety, food safety) can also add costs or otherwise limit production. Policymakers need to understand those impacts and burdens on smaller operations.

Regarding agricultural research & technology, I want to say a word about plant technology and patenting rights. This runs up against long-established practices by commodity farmers to bag seeds from their crops for future use. Some of this research on plant technology takes place in Land Grant universities, which use to mean it was carried out for the common good of the people, not for corporate patent holders. What happens after we allow control of seeds into the hands of a few multinational corporations? Will we begin to see the control of dirt by these same firms? When that happens, then that's the end of farming as we know it. When farmland becomes a commodity that can be traded like other commodities, just imagine what that means for our landscape in this country, not to mention all countries.



Peterson stands on the balcony of an old railway car to address a group of farmers in Fulda, Minn.

**CRL:** So that leads us to public policy. What are the challenges that family farms and their advocates face?

**PETERSON:** Policy advocacy is uncomfortable for some, but there is no way around it. Both farmers and many others concerned about food security need to be engaged in this political action. The importance of the forthcoming *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* publication is to call for more public involvement by ag leaders, faith groups and society in general in the sticky politics of setting fair and just policies. This is not just for the sake of family farms, but for the environment and for our infrastructure. We all want to keep the environment clean; that's becoming more and more evident. We also need to advocate for improved infrastructure in our rural areas so that farm products can move from farm to markets, and also to serve rural communities in their economic development. All of this swirls around in the arena of agricultural policy, so we need to be aware of that.

**CRL:** You and other state presidents of Farmers Union had the opportunity to travel to Rome and meet with officials of the Holy See's Secretary of State about agriculture and food security. What is the importance of faith groups in your endeavors?

**PETERSON:** When we met with Vatican officials, they assured us that Pope Francis believes family farms should be a concern of all people, of all faiths. They agreed that family farmers can sustainably feed the world, even as

pestilence and wars are direct threats to food security. Pope Francis, along with other faith leaders around the world, recognizes climate change as a clear and present danger as well. Their voices need to be heard by leaders in our country.

It is important that our efforts for family farms and food security be ecumenical. All faiths must be part of this endeavor.

This is a wonderful opportunity to examine the crossroads of faith, food production and the environment and to look for better ways to ensure nutrition for the world's people while managing our environmental footprint.

Needless to say, we still have further along the path to go. Talk must now lead to action, and action means determining and advocating the right policies, and then advocating strongly for these. We need to get our message right. We can take strength in the fact that we share the same values, farmers and people of faith alike.

These are values of food for all, fairness for all, and peace for all. If we can show others our intensity, and what the future holds if we don't make changes now, then the die has been cast for the end of American farming as we know it. We cannot stand by idly and allow that to happen.

*Farmers Union works to protect and enhance the economic interests and quality of life of family farmers and ranchers and rural communities. State Farmers Union are nonprofit membership-based organizations, open to farmers and non-farmers.*