

From the Manor to Agribusiness

Today, Canadians do not have to depend on local farmers for their food, the way they did in the past. We can buy food that is grown in countries and regions throughout the world. In winter, for example, Canadians can buy fresh fruit and vegetables from the United States, Mexico, and from countries in the southern hemisphere where the seasons are the reverse of ours.

Canadian farmers must now compete with farmers in other countries, where the cost of growing and producing food is often less than in Canada. One way farmers compete is by having bigger farms. With a bigger farm, farmers can grow more crops more cheaply. However, many small family-run farms cannot compete with larger farms. As a result, the number of small family-run farms has decreased. The reduction in the number of family farms has led to a reduction in the population of rural areas, particularly in Western Canada.

Farming today is also more of a business than it used to be. Farming is often referred to as an agribusiness because many large farms are owned by large corporations, instead of by individual farmers. Heinz Foods, for example, has farms in southern Ontario that grow tomatoes for making ketchup. Other trends in agribusiness include using herbicides and pesticides to control weeds and pests. Without these controls, insects and disease could destroy certain crops. Some farmers also grow crops that have been genetically modified. Corn, soybeans, cotton, and canola that have been genetically modified can be more resistant to disease and insects.

The trend to larger, more technically advanced farms has raised concerns about health and the environment. Some people are concerned that genetically modified foods may not be healthy. These people want foods that have been modified genetically to be labelled. Labelling such foods would allow people to decide whether they want to buy these foods or not. The effects of pesticides and herbicides on soil, water, plant and animal life has also led many people to question the impact of agribusiness on the environment.

Yet today's farmers still face many of the same problems that bothered farmers in medieval times. They must sustain their crops by keeping the land fertile and hope the weather will allow for good harvests. Droughts and other natural disasters continue to be a concern for today's farmers, despite advances in science and technology.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Make a list of foods in your home that come from another country. From which countries do the foods come? Visit a supermarket and make a list of imported fruits and vegetables. Note the country of origin.
2. What impact would a declining rural population have on a province such as Saskatchewan, that is mainly agricultural and has a small population?
3. In a two-column organizer, list the benefits and drawbacks of the trend toward agribusiness in Canada.