

## **Solve Hunger? Save Soil**

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Nearly 1 billion people worldwide lack adequate food. Our global food security ultimately depends on one thing: fertile, productive soils. At present, we are watching this resource erode away right in front of us, and we need long-term, market-based solutions complemented by revised policies and improved practices.

But change has been impeded by outdated tradition, short-termism, and market factors driven by bottom lines and balance sheets. Most soil erosion happens over many generations and cannot be measured by minute-to-minute trades or daily averages, so the consequences of our actions will not likely be felt anytime soon. As Franklin D. Roosevelt warned, “The nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself.”

Soil is poorly managed, and because it is a finite resource, the United States should be particularly concerned. Soil fertility has the single largest impact on production capacity, and the U.S. has lost 50 percent of its native soil organic matter over the past two centuries. Furthermore, U.S. farmers today feed 20 percent of the global population on 10 percent of the world’s land, creating a disproportionate reliance on our soil.

For centuries, soil was tilled because farmers had no alternative; but with advancements in technology and understanding, things have changed. Now more than ever, we must focus on soil preservation and encourage our farmers to adopt conservation based no-till practices. No-till farming dramatically reduces soil erosion, and can improve long-term yields. It brings significant cost-savings by reducing moisture application, fuel consumption, labor, and machinery use, and also promotes carbon sequestration. And while thirty-five percent of U.S. cropland already employs conservation based no-till practices, we need to do better: soil loss in the United States costs an estimated \$37 billion per year. Globally this amounts to \$400 billion a year.

Long ago, an early American farmer recognized this tragedy of the commons when he wrote that, “while the farmer holds the title to the land, actually it belongs to all the people because civilization itself rests upon the soil.” Like Roosevelt, Thomas Jefferson recognized the importance of this national asset. But even as the leaders of our past so clearly advocated for responsible stewardship in the future, our leaders today have yet to act.

If we truly care about feeding the billion people worldwide who lack adequate food, then we must focus on building the most productive, long-term agricultural system we can. Solving hunger in the future means saving our soil now. It won’t be simple and it certainly won’t be easy, but it must be done, and we must all play a part and invest in our future.

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