

# MERCY EARTH CHALLENGE



## Turning Food into a Commodity

*The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.* -- Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium #56, November 4, 2013.



Where does our food come from? We sometimes hear terms like *farm fresh* or *straight from farm to table* in food advertisements and picture something like this farm graphic. However, the iconic family farm as it existed for decades in the U.S. has all but disappeared. Today, only 1.3 percent of the U.S. workforce is employed in farming and ranching, and the number of farms has decreased from about seven million in 1935 to about two million in 2019. Globally, about 26 percent of the world's population is engaged in agriculture.

Most food today is produced on [large factory farms](#) and in industrial livestock operations known as CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) which can house more than a thousand animals in a relatively small area. The rise of the fast food industry, with its need for huge quantities of cheap, uniform food, contributed to the development of industrial food production.

Industrial agriculture has fundamentally changed our relationship to food and the natural world from which it comes. Here are just a few examples:

## **CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations)**

There are questions about [CAFOS](#) as many animals are kept in very close quarters with no access to sunlight and fresh air. Beaks are cut off to prevent chickens from pecking each other and the birds are fed growth hormones to bring them to market weight quickly. They are also given antibiotics to stem infection in the crowded CAFOs. About eighty percent of the antibiotics consumed in the U.S. is given to animals. Unfortunately, this use of antibiotics creates an ideal environment for the development of *superbugs*, bacteria which are resistant to antibiotics.

CAFOs have serious environmental impacts. They produce massive volumes of animal waste that is often stored in open lagoons. During storms, these lagoons can overflow onto croplands where the runoff pollutes streams and rivers. The 1972 Clean Water Act recognized CAFOs as industrial polluters, but the Environmental Protection Agency has been lax in holding them accountable.

## **Monocultures and GMOs**

Large factory farms where one crop (monoculture) is planted on thousands of acres presents new challenges. To assure uniformity, seeds are genetically modified by altering their DNA or introducing genetic material from another species to produce desired characteristics such as resistance to a specific herbicide. The best known example here is *Roundup*. Most of the corn and soybeans grown in the world today are GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms) that are resistant to *Roundup*.

Nevertheless, some weeds develop a resistance to [Roundup](#) and other herbicides so that even greater concentrations have to be sprayed on crops. This poses a threat to human health because *Roundup* (known chemically as Glyphosate) has been linked to cancer. Monarch butterflies have also been harmed by the use of herbicides.

### Reflection questions

- How has industrial farming upset our relationship with creation?
- Who is most harmed by the practices that now dominate food production?
- What can I do to become more aware of the hidden costs (at least from me) of the foods I consume?

**ACTION:** Visit a local farmers' market this week and talk with some of the farmers about how they grow their produce and raise their livestock, or read about their practices on their websites. Identify how you might adjust your food budget to purchase some of your food from smaller-scale operations that use practices that align with your values.