

More evidence that the agricultural system is a mess

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Critics of the food movement's emphasis on organic, smaller-scale and local/regional agriculture tend to point out that feeding the world requires large-scale, conventional farming. But we're already producing more food than we need. The problem is drastic inequalities of access.

A [new report from Oxfam](#) (pdf) highlights one particularly egregious force behind these inequalities: foreign speculators buying up farmland in poor countries. From the intro:

In the past decade an area of land eight times the size of the UK has been sold off globally as land sales rapidly accelerate. This land could feed a billion people, equivalent to the number of people who go to bed hungry each night. In poor countries, foreign investors have been buying an area of land the size of London every six days. With food prices spiking for the third time in four years, interest in land could accelerate again as rich countries try to secure their food supplies and investors see land as a good long-term bet. All too often, forced evictions of poor farmers are a consequence of these rapidly increasing land deals in developing countries.

Oxfam goes on to call on the World Bank to take action on behalf of just lending and investment practices, as it has before. (Via [Tom Philpott](#).)

Elsewhere, a recent study calls into question the idea that the only options are conventional, chemical-heavy monocropping on the one hand and pristine sustainable practices on the other. Researchers at Iowa State University took the standard mode of midwestern commodity growers--one year corn, one year soybeans, repeat--and tested it alongside a three-year cycle that added oats and a four-year cycle that included alfalfa as well. The longer rotations also added livestock for fertilization, though they still used chemical fertilizer as needed. Here's [Mark Bittman's summary of what they found](#):

The results were stunning: The longer rotations produced better yields of both corn and soy, reduced the need for nitrogen fertilizer and herbicides by up to 88 percent, reduced the amounts of toxins in groundwater 200-fold and didn't reduce profits by a single cent.

In short, there was only upside — and no downside at all — associated with the longer rotations. There was an increase in labor costs, but remember that profits were stable. So this is a matter of paying people for their knowledge and smart work instead of paying chemical companies for poisons.

The kicker: the USDA cosponsored the Iowa State study, but it isn't promoting its results and wouldn't comment for Bittman's article. Just another reminder that the status quo of American farming is entrenched because of powerful interests, not scientific evidence that we have to do it this way to keep people from starving.