Perilous Bounty
The Looming Collapse of American Farming and How We Can Prevent It

By Tom Philpott
368 pages
Bloomsbury Press
www.bloomsbury.com

Reviewed by Ken Meter

Tom Philpott, who morphed from a career as a respected business reporter to covering agribusiness for Mother Jones magazine, provides plenty of reasons to read his new book, Perilous Bounty. It is worth reading for his coverage of the environmental dilemmas facing California agriculture alone, but it also offers a compelling and thoroughly documented overview of the dilemmas inherent to Big Ag in general. These harm all of us.

Philpott directs a bright spotlight on the catastrophic water issues that threaten the state that grows much of the produce the U.S. eats. He highlights California’s importance: “Why must just a few clusters of water-stressed counties in a single state provide 81 percent of U.S.-grown carrots, 95 percent of broccoli, 78 percent of cauliflower, 74 percent of raspberries, 91 percent of strawberries, 66 percent of lettuce, 63 percent of tomatoes, and on and on?" Furthermore, he notes that one single firm, called the Wonderful Company, controls 80 percent of the state’s $1.5 billion pistachio crop, and a “substantial but undisclosed share” of the state’s $5 billion almond crop, on its 50,000 acres of nut orchards. The firm also commands significant holdings in pomegranates and mandarin oranges. These crops consume large quantities of water, requiring "a gallon of water to grow a single almond." Thus, the fact that a handful of companies dominate produce markets threatens the resource most precious to life itself.

This centralized industrial engine is endangered, however, because it turns a blind eye to the very water cycles that sustain it. Philpott notes that California’s rivers have experienced massive floods at sporadic intervals for centuries — erupting in 1235, 1395, 1555, 1750, 1810, and 1862, spanning as many as 10 to 125 years during each event. These floods deposit nutrients on the land, making agriculture possible, but also refashion the landscape in ways that threaten industrial agriculture itself. Worse, scientists estimate that the risk of such massive flood-detritus that occupy the valley, U.S. Geological Survey researchers warn that a toxic soup of “petroleum, mercury, asbestos, persistent organic pollutants, molds, and soil-borne or sewage-borne pathogens” could spread across much of the Central Valley, along with manure, fertilizer, and pesticides.

Honoring in on the farm of Joe del Bosque, Philpott encapsulates the dilemmas faced by a farmer who is wondering if he will be able to continue in his profession. “Melons are a relatively water-efficient crop that faces increasingly high labor costs, and almonds are an extremely labor-efficient crop that takes a huge gulp out of an increasingly scarce water supply,” Philpott concludes.

To compound these dilemmas, as the Sierra Nevada snowpack recedes, California simultaneously faces a future of declining water resources. This amplifies a horrific legacy that pushed the surface of the Central Valley 29 feet lower than its original elevation. Beginning in the 1920s, when irrigation first pumped water out of the ground, subterranean water pockets collapsed. These potential water storage channels won’t come back, Philpott argues, because the geologic structure of those open channels is gone. This would, I assume, make the destructive potential of future floods all the more fierce.

Having lived in California for nine years, Philpott harvests a wealth of stories from his reporting, and he shows a seasoned grasp of the state. His account of the agricultural situation in Iowa is solid, but less compelling, since it relies more heavily on secondary information. Land Stewardship Project members who are familiar with the state may learn less in this section, but will still find useful analysis here. He writes about the stark erosion of soil in Iowa, with losses more than six times the soil’s rate of replenishment. He cites research showing that the farms of this single state cause 29% of the Mississippi River’s nitrogen load. Philpott adds that 60% of Iowa’s farms have been lost since industrial agriculture took hold, with the biggest victims being mid-sized diversified operations. But Philpott essentially uses “Iowa” as a narrative frame for the corn-soy-meat complex that has harmed large swaths of the U.S. He looks far beyond this one Midwestern state to draw some of his key conclusions. He shows that in many regions corn and soybean growers frequently lose money producing these essential crops, and much of the research data and corporate influence Philpott cites is national or international.

One additional chapter that is well worth the price of admission features Philpott’s visit to the Monsanto corporate headquarters in St. Louis. He expects to encounter a bold defense of the Roundup herbicide system, but in fact participates in a very gentle discussion of how the firm — which is now a subsidiary of Bayer — is repositioning itself for a future beyond the chemical. Philpott does an elegant job of relaying this story with gentility, while not overlooking the damage Roundup has caused.

For all of us who care about the soil and farm communities, it is always easier to describe the dilemmas we encounter than to celebrate positive motion forward. Philpott’s book is no exception. He offers surface treatment of “how we can prevent" the collapse of agriculture, only partially fulfilling the promise of his book’s subtitle. He does report from Tom and Irene Franzen's farm in northeastern Iowa to showcase these particular sustainable ag pioneers' efforts to build soil organic matter. Philpott also calls

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食品安全和农业组织必须将这项提案注入佛蒙特参议员近期的总统竞选活动。这不是最好的框架，用于开启关于农场政策的对话，该政策需要农民领导和两党合作来赢得胜利。值得注意的是，Philpott没有提到全球市场条件和世界贸易组织的即将到来的影响。这使得供应链管理变得更加困难，也更加昂贵，而这种模式已经成为过去。这是一场我们需要的策略，但需要重新发明为新的时代。

对我来说，Perilous Bounty强调了农业政策必须能够适应快速变化的时代。我们需要对整个食品系统的复杂性进行关注，并采纳能够适应快速变化时代的政策。食品企业和官员需要合作来建立市场力量，为农民服务。低收入居民必须参与进来，才能找到答案。我希望我即将出版的书，Building Community Food Webs，能够补充Philpott的卓著工作。她在41个州与144个社区合作伙伴一起工作。他的工作可以在www.crcworks.org上找到。他的书，《Building Community Food Webs》，将在三月由Island Press出版。