



Grown primarily for animal feed, a soybean field can cover hundreds of acres.



Industrial animal feeding operations create water pollution.

Reaping What We Sow

How the Practices of Industrial Agriculture Put Our Health and Environment at Risk

Damage to the Environment and Public Health

Agriculture in the U.S. is dominated by large, specialized crop and animal farms. These industrial farms focus on short-term productivity, often at the cost of creating environmental and public health problems.

- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has repeatedly identified agriculture as the industry with the largest negative impact on water quality in U.S. rivers and lakes, responsible for dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico and Chesapeake Bay.
- Livestock are often fed daily doses of antibiotics to promote growth or prevent the spread of disease among animals kept in crowded and unsanitary conditions. This practice results in antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can affect human health.
- Some of the most commonly used agricultural pesticides in the U.S. have been linked to cancer and lower IQ in children.

A Threat to Future Productivity

Common practices used on industrial farms also threaten the long-term viability of American agriculture.

- Current crop farming practices are contributing to the loss of topsoil, which will reduce long-term agricultural production.
- Regions in the High Plains, where large industrial farms have been drawing water from underground reservoirs many times faster than these sources can be naturally replenished, may only be able to support irrigated agriculture for the next 30 years.
- The overuse of herbicides has created herbicide-resistant weeds, which have infected 60 million acres of crops and will make future farming more difficult.
- Improper soil management and methane from liquid manure storage facilities contribute to global warming, which will negatively affect farming.

Wrong Incentives in Federal Policy

Federal farm policies encourage damaging industrial agricultural practices.

- Subsidized crop insurance encourages specialization in commodity crops and incentivizes farmers to grow on unsuitable or environmentally vulnerable land.
- Agricultural conservation policies are inconsistently enforced, and some treat the symptoms rather than the causes of farming-related environmental problems.
- The federal Renewable Fuel Standard, which seeks to replace a portion of fossil fuel usage in the U.S. with ethanol and biodiesel, has provided an incentive for farmers to convert wetlands and grasslands to crop fields.



Conservation buffers help prevent sediment and chemicals from contaminating water.

A Better Vision for Farm and Food Policy

Federal food and farm policy can be changed to better protect public health and the environment.

- The federal government should end crop insurance subsidies that increase farm specialization.
- Farmers participating in subsidized crop insurance should be required to adopt best practices that reduce soil loss and prevent water pollution.
- The Food and Drug Administration should restrict the use of antibiotics in livestock production to treating animals diagnosed with an illness or for use if needed to control an identified disease outbreak. The routine use of antibiotics on factory farms should be banned.
- Federal agricultural policies should better match dietary recommendations that call for greater consumption of fruits and vegetables.



A newly sprouted cover crop will help protect the soil of this wheat field.

For citations and the full report, please visit www.uspirgedfund.org

FRONTIER GROUP

U.S. PIRG
Education Fund

Photo credits

Front: Soy field: Stephen Kirkpatrick, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Cows and water pollution: Tim McCabe, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.
Back: Conservation buffers: Lynn Betts, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; Cover crop: Colette Kessler, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, South Dakota.