NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Wendell Berry says large-scale farms are killing lands and towns

Rich Heffern | Dec. 7, 2009 NCR Today

By Ted Strong

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA -- A passive populace obsessed with easy answers has led to an economy that is destroying America's land, author Wendell Berry told a packed-in crowd at the University of Virginia on Thursday evening.

"Simple solutions will always lead to complex problems, surprising simple minds," he said.

In a lecture in the full auditorium of the Mary and David Harrison Institute for American History, Literature and Culture/Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, Berry outlined the need for small-scale landholders engaging in forestry and farming, as opposed to the industrial-scale operations now in place.

The talk was so popular that seats in the auditorium ran out long before the 5:30 speech began. Eventually, a pair of university police officers shooed away the overflow crowd waiting outside.

Even some of those who made it inside were left without seats, and Berry invited them to sit on the stage near him.

Large-scale and corporate operations cause long-term damage to the environment and to rural cultures, he told the crowd.

Farm and timber economies that simply export raw materials for processing elsewhere kill towns because they also export jobs, he said.

"And then you will be exporting your young people to take those jobs," he said.

He added, "Our tendency has been to fasten upon one product and allow that one to determine the local land economy."

Berry, a poet, novelist and essayist, is part of a movement that is trying to spark high-level discussion by proposing a 50-year farm bill that calls for, among other things, a switch to majority perennial crops.

"It would take cattle, hogs and poultry out of the animal factory and put them back on farms, where they belong," he said.

He also advocated a more integrated approach to forestry and agriculture as part of what he called a vision for the future.

"Like you all, I hope, I am skeptical of visions," he said. "So I hasten to point out that it is a modest vision."

And he said it's not in high-level political discussion that most of his hope lies.

Instead, he cited "leadership from the bottom" as a trend that could take his ideas forward.

He praised moves such as farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture programs, wherein residents buy "shares" in local farms and reap regular installments of produce in return.

He said the movement's not about nostalgia, but learning lessons from the past.

"I think we have to go back to our old agrarian ideals," he said.

To do that, he said, will require a cultural shift.

"Good and responsible use of family-sized holdings cannot be expected of people with the subservient mindset of corporate employees," he said.

Berry's talk was the kickoff of the Brown College Visiting Environmental Writers and Scholars Lecture Series, which will continue through the spring.

Sean Borton, the Sally Brown fellow at Brown College, said he was ecstatic to have Berry as the first speaker.

"It's the thrill of a lifetime, honestly," he said.

The talk was well-received by the audience, though some expressed more interest in Berry the writer than in the importance of small-scale, non-industrial farming.

"It wasn't a disappointment. The man only has so much time and he has so many things to offer," said Bahlmann Abbot, of Charlottesville.

Linda Winecoff, another Charlottesville resident, was very excited about the topic.

"The thing that really resonated with me ... was that he really puts his hope in the people who are doing things at the lowest level without permission," she said.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/09/2013 - 01:16*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/wendell-berry-says-large-scale-farms-are-killing-lands-and-towns