



# The Changing Scale of American Agriculture

*John Fraser Hart*

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## **The Changing Scale of American Agriculture** John Fraser Hart

Few Americans know much about contemporary farming, which has evolved dramatically over the past few decades. In *The Changing Scale of American Agriculture*, the award-winning geographer and landscape historian John Fraser Hart describes the transformation of farming from the mid-twentieth century, when small family farms were still viable, to the present, when a farm must sell at least \$250,000 of farm products each year to provide an acceptable level of living for a family.

The increased scale of agriculture has outmoded the Jeffersonian ideal of small, self-sufficient farms. In the past farmers kept a variety of livestock and grew several crops, but modern family farms have become highly specialized in producing a single type of livestock or one or two crops. As farms have become larger and more specialized, their number has declined.

Hart contends that modern family farms need to become integrated into tightly orchestrated food-supply chains in order to thrive, and these complex new organizations of large-scale production require managerial skills of the highest order. According to Hart, this trend is not only inevitable, but it is beneficial, because it produces the food American consumers want to buy at prices they can afford.

Although Hart provides the statistics and clear analysis such a study requires, his book focuses on interviews with farmers: those who have shifted from mixed crop-and-livestock farming to cash-grain farming in the Midwest agricultural heartland; beef, dairy, chicken, egg, turkey, and hog producers around the periphery of the heartland; and specialty crop producers on the East and West Coasts. These invaluable case studies bring the reader into direct personal contact with the entrepreneurs who are changing American agriculture. Hart believes that modern large-scale farmers have been criticized unfairly, and *The Changing Scale of American Agriculture*, the result of decades of research, is his attempt to tell their side of the story.

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