In conclusion, let me suggest some ideas about a holistic future for S&S Homestead Farm, and about farming and the food system in America in general.

First a few remarks about Holistic Planning and Management as a methodology. Quite a few years ago, I got involved in a two-year training course offered by Alan Savory’s “Center for Holistic Resource Management.” Broadly speaking, Savory’s model for testing and managing ideas during planning and implementation was developed when he farmed in Africa, but later grew into a methodology that could be applied to any field or resource base. Savory’s ideas and methods seemed strangely familiar to me, because I had thought along similar lines for a long time, but it supplied me with a new and precise language to organize my goals on the farm. The approach of considering the “whole” under management (people, resource base and money) by relating it to an overarching goal involving quality of life values, forms of production and a vision of what the resource base – the farm – should look like in the future, seemed intuitively right and helpful. “Holistic Resource Management” taught me to identify the building blocks of the farm ecosystem, the water and mineral cycles, and energy flows on and through the farm, as well as the social dynamics of the surrounding island community. I learned to think of
human creativity, money, and labor as tools to achieve larger holistic goals, and learned methods of making, testing and re-testing plans, looking for weak links, cause and effect, and impacts both on the biological and the social environment.

The benefit of this method for any farmer is not only to help maximize efficiency of resource use and increased profitability, but to help answer the ultimate question of why he or she is farming at all and to what purpose, and to let the answer to that question shape everything that happens on the farm on a daily basis. For me, the answer to that question has to do with the future of agriculture in America, with public health and environmental stewardship, and with the survival of a democratic society. All of these concerns are intimately connected and have direct consequences for how we imagine the future of this farm.

America is now importing more than fifty percent of all foodstuffs and, if current trends continue, in the near future will import most of the food consumed in this country. At the same time, we hear from agricultural economists that large-scale American agriculture soon will no longer be able to compete in the world market for labor, land, water and other resources and likely will be phased out within a generation or so, except for the production of certain commodity crops such as soy, corn and wheat. The consequences of this trend for large-scale agriculture to focus on commodity markets far away rather than feeding folks at home, are manifested right now in the fact that in the state of Washington, for example, one of the largest food-producing states in America, more than 100,000 children are going to bed hungry every night, and many more families can feed themselves only with the help of food banks. Between 2001 and 2003 an astonishing two million visits were made by hungry families to food banks in King County alone, among them 386,000 children who came on their own (Building a Sustainable Community Food System in Seattle and King County: Concept for Developing a Local Food Policy Council, 2005, 1). Add to that the declining nutritional quality of foodstuffs provided by the global markets, causing more than sixty percent of the population of my home state to be overweight, if not clinically obese, and add, finally, the looming threat of bio-terrorism to which large-scale production and distribution systems are particularly vulnerable, and you are led to the inescapable conclusion that our current food system is fundamentally and chronically insecure.

It seems apparent that the remedy to these problems is to strengthen small-scale, local agriculture and community food systems. However, the remedy can be implemented only if we think and plan holistically beyond the profit motive to embrace nutritional, environmental and community health as farm goals. Small, local farms must become resource self-sufficient and community-interdependent, and farmers must think beyond their own lifetimes and make the training of the next generation of farmers an integral part of their own production goals.

Over the years, S&S Homestead Farm has tried to meet this challenge through the development of an educational outreach and research program organized through a self-supporting, state-registered non-profit organization, S&S Center for Sustainable Agriculture (SSCSA). Educational programs include classes in ecological food production for high school students offered in collaboration with Lopez Island Schools, a curriculum-based internship program offered in collaboration with WSU’s Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources (CSANR), where I hold an adjunct faculty position, as well as on-farm workshops, farm tours, and public presentations organized mostly through conservation districts and WSU Cooperative Extension in San Juan County and on the near mainland.

On-farm research has mostly focused on demonstrating the technical and economic feasibility of small-scale production methods that are environmentally sustainable, enhance farm self-sufficiency and support local food security. We have been able to attract grants to support these efforts. In 2001–2002 we received a small grant from SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, a program funded under the Congressional Farm Bill) to grow barley on small acreage using appropriately scaled equipment. The successful experiment demonstrated how to prevent nutrient run-off in winter sacrifice areas, while providing the farm with animal feed and meet the need of local farmers for organic grain.

Another grant we received from SARE linked the ecological food production class with a farm-to-school project that supplies the local school cafeteria with fresh greens for their lunch menu. We hope that the success of this project will lead to a permanent school curriculum in environmental and nutritional health.

A third SARE grant supports on-going replicated field trials comparing farm-produced biodynamic soil stimulants with lime applications to balance soil pH, increase availability of N, P, K, micronutrients and soil organic matter in small-scale forage and hay production.

A fourth project supported by a grant from EQUIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program offered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, NRCS) allowed us to research and develop a solar-powered irrigation system that collects rain water off the barn roofs, stores the water in a 750,000 gallon pond from where it is returned to irri-
gated the orchard and vegetable production sites during the
typical summer drought, thus minimizing demand on lim-
ited groundwater resources, while at the same time bene-
fitting plant health through irrigation with soft rainwater in-
stead of hard groundwater.

While these grants are typically small, they benefit both
the production side of the farm and its educational outreach
programs by focusing our energies on finding solutions to
specific problems and by bringing research expertise from
the land grant university to our small farm. During the last
few years we have benefited enormously from collaboration
with university and extension agents and researchers bring-
ing their know-how in engineering, soil science, microbi-
ology, plant, and forage systems, and agricultural econom-
ics. We have also been able to write modest support for our
interns into these grants, so that students pursuing gradu-
ate degrees in various fields have opportunities to integrate
their research interests with on-farm training. This year, for
example, we will be hosting three interns pursuing M.S. de-
grees in soil science, nutritional science and agricultural eco-
nomics at Washington State University and Bastyr Uni-
versity in Seattle.

One of these interns will be dividing his time between
work and study on the farm and on developing our Future
Farm Project through the Lopez Community Land Trust
(LCLT). My wife and I feel strongly that the production
capacity, cumulative experience and research-based knowl-
edge accruing over the years on a holistically managed, small
farm should not be allowed to vanish once the current own-
gers get too old to carry on the work. The Future Farm Pro-
ject envisions collaboration between the land trust which
would own the farm, the Lopez Public Schools, and WSU’s
CSANR which would develop a region-wide training pro-
gram on the farm. Together with CSANR, we have applied
for an implementation grant from SARE and are waiting to
hear this spring whether the application has been successful.

Elizabeth and I hope that the project will go forward. We
share Thomas Jefferson’s view famously expressed in a let-
ter to John Jay in 1785, that the “cultivators of the earth” were
the surest guarantee of a free society because a citizenry
whose livelihood was independent of distant markets was
free to vote their minds instead of their pocketbooks. Up-
dated to the urgent concerns of the twenty-first century, a
self-sufficient small family farm also offers other, equally im-
portant, solutions to the problems of nutritional and envi-
ronmental health, local food security and protection against
bio-terrorism, as well as economic viability.

I want to end with another compelling piece of data
gleaned from the seminar on “Agricultural Systems and Nu-
trition” I mentioned before. Adam Drewnowski, Professor
of Medicine and Epidemiology who organized the seminar,
presented what he called epidemiological maps of New
York City and Seattle to show the correlation between zip
codes and obesity rates. The connection seems absurd be-
cause we tend to believe that obesity reflects personal choice
in foods, but the maps provided overwhelming evidence
that obesity is directly related to affordability. The house-
holds clustered around the perimeter of Central Park com-
manded median incomes of $180,000, while the households
just north of the park had incomes of less than $10,000.
Obesity rates among the well-to-do Central Park residents
were between 4–7%, those of the working poor just north
ranged between 23.5–28.3%. These data show that the claim
that American households on average spend 13.2% of their
income on food is misleading. Surely a family that com-
mands a six-figure income has access to the very best, i.e.
nutritionally vital, fresh and flavorful food, while a family
with an average income just over five percent of the Cen-
tral Park incomes will have to choose the cheapest and nu-
tritionally deficient foods. This does not mean, of course,
that the well-to-do always make wise food choices, nor
that the working poor necessarily have to be obese. Rather,
it seems that in this age of advertising the nation as a whole
is addicted to much traveled and nutritionally depleted
foods whose principal virtue is that they are abundant and
cheap. For example, former president Bill Clinton, surely
a man of large appetites, was known for his love of the Big
Mac, a love that probably contributed to his massive car-
diovascular problems that forced him into radical heart
surgery to save his life. On the other hand, both in New
York City and Seattle, Drewnowski found community
neighborhoods where median incomes were low, but so
were obesity rates. Interestingly, these neighborhoods are
mostly populated by recent immigrants who grow sub-
stantial amounts of food in urban gardens, and whose na-
tive food traditions probably help them choose and prepare
foods in healthful ways.

In sum, holistic health and holistic economics go hand
in hand. It would seem that everyone could enjoy the holis-
tic high-life if we strengthened community-based, local
food production. For the sake of a healthy environment,
healthy communities, and healthy people, food growers and
food consumers need to re-establish the local connection.

Henning Sehmsdorf and his wife Elizabeth farm and teach at the S&S
Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Homestead Farm on Lopez
Island in the San Juan Islands of Washington. They recently hosted a workshop entitled “Real Food
On The Farm: A Workshop Presenting Nutritionally Vital Foods that Promote Health and Healing.” Photograph of cattle courtesy of Stephen
Bramwell.

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