



THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITYSM

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If Perception is Reality, U.S. Ag Has Work To Do Earth Day Should be Engage Day

For those who farm, Earth Day is every day. And there's plenty to celebrate.

Consider that the carbon footprint of a gallon of milk decreased 63 percent from 1944 to 2007. From 1980 to 2011, U.S. corn growers cut greenhouse gas emissions by more than one-third. American farms used 12 percent less water in 2008 to harvest an acre of crops, on average, than they did in 1998, according to USDA data.

The land and its gifts are the lifeblood of agriculture no matter the size and scale, the crop grown or the livestock raised. But many of those on the outside looking in aren't particularly convinced.

Public Perceptions

In the latest trust research from The Center for Food Integrity, we asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with the following statement: "Do U.S. farmers take good care of the environment?" Only 30 percent strongly agree, more than half – 60 percent – are ambivalent. They're just not sure farmers are doing enough.

Yet, when we examine the data, the progress achieved in protecting the environment and consuming fewer natural resources is impressive.

Comparing 1980 to 2015, a study of corn, soybeans, wheat and other crops shows all primary environmental indicators for land use, soil conservation, irrigation water use, energy use and greenhouse gas emissions showed improved environmental performance. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, livestock production accounts for only 4.2 percent of greenhouse gas emissions compared to 27 percent by transportation and 31 percent by energy production.

So, why are so many doubtful?

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Big is Bad

First, the “big is bad” bias is likely at play.

As the size and scale of farming grows, the public doesn’t trust that large farms have their best interests at heart. One in five respondents believes small farms will put their interests ahead of the public good, but that number doubled when we asked about large farms. There’s a perception that profit is the overriding motive on large farms and that efficiencies simply make farmers more money at the expense of the earth.

Despite this bias, when we separate the farmer from the farm, it’s crystal clear that most Americans have a great deal of trust in farmers. In fact, the research shows that when it comes to food-related issues, farmers are trusted more than dietitians, university scientists, state and federal regulators and animal and environmental advocacy groups.

In CFI’s new [Street Talk](#) video series we asked if farmers protect the environment. Our research comes to life as affection for farmers is expressed, accompanied by clear skepticism about large farming operations. Among the comments:

“Farmers have done a great job of taking care of the environment for a lot longer than we’ve had regulations in place.”

“I think it’s about 50-50 probably. Some do, some don’t.”

“Those large commercial farms – I don’t think they’re doing anything to protect the environment and probably are a detriment to it.”

The Golden Opportunity

Agriculture has a golden opportunity to move the needle with the general public and those who influence the conversation and create policies that impact agriculture’s future. In fact, a majority of respondents in our survey (65 percent) say they are hungry for information about agriculture.

So, how do farmers demonstrate that they’re continually finding ways to do things better – incorporating the latest technology to produce food in a way that sustains the environment for generations to come? By engaging.

Consistent, long-term engagement – having values-based conversations either in-person or online – is what will make a meaningful difference. Our research tells us that connecting on what’s important to them – their values – is three-to-five

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times more important to earning trust than simply spewing facts and figures.

Also, demonstrating “practices” is impactful, according to CFI’s transparency research. Why? Because practices are *values* in action.

Show people what you’re doing. Tackle topics like pesticides and GM seeds, precision fertilizer application, tilling methods that prevent erosion, efficient water use and cover crops. Focus on continuous improvement and the “why.” Why does it matter to them and you?

The steps you take on your farm to keep Mother Earth happy and healthy may seem routine, but they likely are “aha!” moments for others. Options for engaging include:

- Taking advantage of local public speaking opportunities.
- Pitching stories to the media about seasonal milestones on the farm (planting, harvest, etc.) – and incorporating messages about environmental sustainability and the benefits of biotechnology
- Posting pictures with great captions and short videos that can simply be shot on your phone to social media. The simpler the video, the more authentic.
- Taking advantage of Facebook Live to give “on-the-spot” reports about what’s happening on your farm.
- Engaging in those critical day-to-day conversations to better understand what’s important to your neighbors and community, and having meaningful dialogue.
- Sharing good values-based content from others on your social channels. (CFI digital ethnography research details which audiences are influencing the online conversation and how to reach them.)

Millions participate in Earth Day in one way, shape or form by commemorating environmental successes, highlighting challenges and envisioning solutions. As the original stewards of the land, farmers are encouraged to get involved in the conversation, too, not just on Earth Day, but every day.

Download CFI’s latest research [here](#) and learn more about our [Engage](#) shared-values communication program and our “[A Clear View of Transparency](#)” workshop – both excellent tools to help you earn trust.

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Sources: National Milk Producers Federation, American Farm Bureau Federation, American Meat Institute, USDA (via Christian Science Monitor)

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