



About Jim Harkness

Jim Harkness joined IATP as president in July 2006. Previously he served as Executive Director of the World Wildlife Fund in China from 1999–2005. He has written and spoken frequently on China and sustainable development, and has served as an adviser for the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

Farmers' new normal

MINNEAPOLIS, SEPTEMBER 29, 2010* — The Minnesota River near Jordan is expected to reach its fifth-highest crest at 32.7 feet on Tuesday. Jordan and much of the rest of southern Minnesota were hit with some 10 inches of rain last week—flooding houses, farm fields, and shutting down highways and bridges. People are calling the storms “freakish” and “extraordinarily unusual”—the same words they used to describe the record floods that hit the region just three years ago in August 2007.

I flew into Mexico City two weeks ago for a meeting of the country’s largest farmers’ association, and was surprised to look down from the air and see that the arid northern part of the country was emerald green. Mexican farmers explained that there has been “freakishly” heavy rainfall there and across Central America all summer, improving harvests in some areas but devastating many more with floods and landslides. “The only way my cattle will get to market is if they learn to swim,” one rancher told me.

Extreme weather is on the rise around the globe. Massive flooding has displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Pakistan and southern China in recent months. And fires caused by record heat waves in Russia this summer destroyed a quarter of that country’s wheat crop. The last decade was the hottest on record, and 2010 is projected to be the hottest year ever.

When floods that are supposed to occur once in a century and rainfalls that are the highest on record happen twice in three years, we can no longer pretend that these are highly unusual events. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reasserted recently that the dramatic increase in “extreme weather events” we’ve experienced since the 1970s is the result of climate change.

Not everyone agrees with the IPCC. The scientific community and environmentalists have done a poor job convincing U.S. farmers and rural communities, on the whole, about man-made climate change. They’ve largely ignored the fact that rural residents are more dependent on fossil fuels (driving distances are much longer in rural areas, and public transit almost non-existent) and thus have higher fuel costs and a greater sensitivity to rising oil prices. In the run-up to a climate bill earlier this year, the environmental movement essentially wrote off rural America as too conservative and hence not worth trying to engage with. Corporate-funded climate deniers were more than happy to fill the hole, making it no surprise, then, that farm state legislators voted en masse against climate legislation.

But if the messages to farmers from the fossil fuel industry are deceptive, the message from nature is clear: The weather is out of whack. And farming—always a risky undertaking—will only get riskier. In Minnesota, this means livelihoods are at stake. Globally it is destabilizing food security.

Rather than writing them off, we should be focusing our attention on—and more importantly, listening to—farmers. Farmers know their land, know the weather and have forever been the ones figuring out how to adapt to changes—not just over one season, but in the long run, too. We will depend on their wisdom to keep us fed as extreme storms become the new normal and on their good practices—like planting buffers along waterways and using cover crops—to hold the soil, filter our water and help keep flooding at bay when we're hit with the next round of torrential rains.

But farmers will need our help, too. Even the most skilled ones will struggle to grow enough food if a changing climate makes Minnesota look more like Oklahoma. We need to support policies for greenhouse gas emissions reductions and mitigation, including on the farm. Farmers should be rewarded in stable, predictable ways for practices that sequester carbon, like growing more perennials, or using less fossil fuel-derived fertilizer. And we need to address the challenges farmers and other rural Americans will face as energy costs rise. I've met very few farmers who don't care about the land, air and water. But to partner in averting climate disaster, they'll need their concerns listened to and addressed. We can't keep talking *about* farmers and climate change; we need to start talking *with* them.

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