SERIES INTRODUCTION
In the year 2050 there will be 9 billion people. How do we feed them safely, fairly and well? And make sure very mouth is fed.

COMMENTARY
Big skies, big farms, big country. Nebraska – heartland of the USA. But is ‘Big’ the best way to feed the world?

In Nebraska - three cows for every human. Beef here - a six billion dollar a year business. In Nebraska, you’d expect everyone to think ‘Big’… it’s the American Dream.

Now meet Ron Meyer. He’s the kind of guy you might expect to support big agro-business – or big-capitalism.

But Ron is an angry man.

Ron Meyers
Big Ag is squeezing the smaller farmers out all the time. They have been for my whole lifetime - it’s just kind of accelerated more in the last ten or twenty years. At least in this country and in this part of the nation that’s happened, there’s no coexistence anymore - I mean, the big farmers are looking to buy the small farmer out right now.

COMMENTARY
Ron believes small farmers like him can feed America. And feed the world.

Ron Meyers
If there's a profitability in whatever you're raising, you can feed the world with smaller farmers

COMMENTARY
But is Ron right? He’s part of a global debate.

Here in the American heartland the battle against Big Ag is being fought not by slow food hippies - but a Vietnam Vet – Ron Meyer.

Ron has just four hundred acres – that’s small round here - and forty cattle.

Ron Meyer
Oh for me is, I guess, it’s just being…and knowing your animals, and knowing the land that you’re farming. Big scale – I mean, they hardly ever walk their land, they don't know the animals as individuals, they're just numbers.

Now she’s just had a calf, that's the one that had a calf yesterday. Her calf’s just laying there and if you walked towards her calf she’d probably charge you. They’re very maternalistic, they don’t like people around their calves.

Small Ag would tend to focus on a family sized operation where the family provided all the labour and reaped all the benefits. Where Big Ag is the survival of the fittest. It's not in everyone's self interest to just have a few people monopolise the food industry.
COMMENTARY
Ron’s turned himself into an investigative journalist, writing on the dangers of small farms becoming like serfs to Big Ag’s “feudal lords” whose domination of the land is unsustainable.

Ron Meyers
You have to become more politically engaged. You have to be more aware of the people who are in charge now…the big banks and the corporations.

COMMENTARY
Ron’s arguments against Big Ag and the way its run echoed by some globally known writers on food and social justice.

Patel
When you look at the United States, you’ll see that it’s an industrial agricultural powerhouse. It’s one of the world’s largest exporters of commodity crops. And that has been bought by a range of things. I mean you have huge farms, massive farms, that stretch as far as the eye can see. And the way that those farms are economically viable is because of a mixture of government support and subsidy and the kind of outsourcing of the environmental costs of farming in that particular way.

So you’re creating a model of agriculture that, that’s driven by an export economy, that depends on vast amounts of cheap fossil fuels, and on predictable rainfall, and on a soil base and soil fertility that’s being plundered at the moment. And as the drought in the Midwest and the United States has shown, that model of farming is pretty precarious. When it works well, it seems to work very well indeed. But it has significant environmental costs and it’s fragile.

COMMENTARY
So now say hello to Big Ag. The annual get together of the Nebraska beef industry - the Cuming County banquet.

Man
Last year at this time, about – what do you think, Joe? – ten or fifteen minutes before we were supposed to cut meat, we didn't have any knives… Everybody forgot to give the knives, and for the first two seconds it was total chaos.

Tyler Weborg
We are set up to have about six hundred people, but with the weather I have a feeling there’s gonna be... We’re hoping still to get four- to five hundred, I still think... We might have ten to twenty percent no-shows, but – the die-hards will still show up.

Off camera man
[That's a knife I tell ya. That's a good knife.]

COMMENTARY
These are the Big Ag diehards - some of the biggest players in the meat industry in Nebraska - from ranchers through to meat packers and distributors.

The big topic at their annual get-together - how to deal with the lobby for government intervention from small-scale farmers.

JD Alexander
We’re all in this together – we’re a big industry, but there’s not a lot of us, and that includes the ranchers, the feed lot operators, the packagers, the processors, the purveyors, the retailers – We’ve got to work together because we’ve got a lot of people out there working against us.
COMMENTARY
Big Ag on the defensive - though round here they believe it's Small Ag whose glory days are over.

JD Alexander
Things have changed. You just can't do things like you used to do 'em. I can give you numerous examples – I used to have a neighbour that used to have a quarter section of land, and that's what he and his wife lived on, made all their living on. Now, you just can't do it that way. The prices, the cost of things – the equipment, the machinery – it's just not feasible.

COMMENTARY
The Weborgs are now among the biggest cattle ranchers in Nebraska, with over two and a half thousand acres and seventeen thousand cattle.

Kent Weborg
My great-grandparents and my grandparents, when they were young, ah, came over here as immigrants and then they came to Nebraska and homesteaded in an area just a couple of miles away from the feed lot here, and our family has been in this area ever since.

COMMENTARY
Using Big Ag economies of scale, the Weborgs are now able to invest in state of the art technology.

Kent Weborg
Each truck has the ingredients in the pounds for several pens of cattle that are loaded on it and the feed truck driver weighs out specific pounds to each pen, and that is wirelessly transmitted to our office, where it goes into our cattle programme and billing system.

COMMENTARY
Small versus big - it is a global debate. And Kent reckons he knows whose side history's on.

Kent Weborg
I think the trend is for more farms, and the farms to be larger.

COMMENTARY
This tension between Big and Small Ag - in America and across the world - was investigated in a special UN report on the right to food.

De Schutter
There is a tension between small scale farming and large-scale agro-industrial farming. Large scale farms are more competitive, they are able to sell food at lower prices on markets because they do achieve economies of scale which are difficult to achieve when you're a small farm. But small farms deliver a number of services for which they should be rewarded.

They are better at managing the ecosystems. They are usually more efficient in using natural resources and there are many studies showing the smaller the farm, the more productive it is per hectare. They need to be better organized in order to achieve some of the benefits of the large scale enterprises but small scale farming is quite essential in a world of scarce resources.

COMMENTARY
It's in Washington DC where the Big v Small Ag battle's fought politically. John Hansen organizes small-scale farmers in Nebraska and represents them to Congress.
John Hansen
My goal is to try to help create a level playing field for family farmers and ranchers. We’re not asking for special treatment, we’re just asking for fair treatment.

Oh, we have to go to the North door.

COMMENTARY
It’s politicians who mediate between Big and Small Ag. In the USA, that’s via a Farm Bill passed every five years – like this year. John wants better protection for small farmers. He says Big Ag monopolies are distorting markets across the world.

John Hansen
I’m going to talk to my representative about the farm bill, when he’s hearing about it, and we’ll kind of break apart all the different pieces of it and see if there’s any of those pieces that he might be able to help us to get moved forward.

John and reception exchange

Receptionist: What’s your first name?
John: John

Receptionist: Last name?
John: Hansen

John Hansen
I’ve been doing farm bills ever since 1972. I never give up. I never quit. And I never take a hard no. I just keep working. It’s what I do.

The farmer’s share of the food dollar has shrunk, significantly, in the last thirty years, as we’ve seen the proliferation of less competition. And as we get fewer and fewer corporations we see more and more marketplace manipulation, and we see any economies of scale being offset by just good old plain price gouging and profit-taking that goes on when you have a non-competitive marketing system.

[Yes, let me out, let me out - so you can go in]

I met with his staff, with his legislative assistant and we went over all of the particulars of both policy and process. It was a very positive meeting.

Governmental regulation is the key to competition because, if truth be told, companies don’t really want competition – they want to get rid of competition, develop market share, and milk the advantages of a non-competitive market with their few remaining partners.

The biggest single problem that we have now in hunger, is poverty. It is not the amount of food production. And so let’s not hide behind different kinds of fears or phobias, let’s talk about how we develop a economically beneficial and sustainable food production system in the world.

COMMENTARY
In a Washington café, a chance for Nebraska’s small farmers’ leader to globalize his arguments. Nobel Laureate, Mohan Munasinghe has researched whether Big or Small farms are best-placed to feed the world.
**Mohan and John exchange**

**Mohan**: Shall we order first, yes?

**John**: Iced tea for me, please

**Mohan**: Err, just water.

**Mohan Munasinghe**
The pendulum should not swing too far in favour of the large farms.

They have certain advantages, but the large agribusinesses are using world conditions – the price volatility, the economic collapse, climate change, and all the problems that are squeezing out small farmers - are being used by large agribusinesses to expand their role.

I mean, this is a natural thing; any large business would do that, so I think it is very important for governments to find the right balance, which will vary from country to country.

You have a general problem, which is global, but the solutions have to be local. And this is where the Big and the Small have to be brought into balance. Because you need bigger entities – maybe it would be governments, it could be big companies – who have a bigger perspective from a global point of view. But you need the small businesses and the small operators and the small communities who have to act locally in terms of the local conditions.

**COMMENTARY**
But Big Ag fears regulations that help small farmers can interfere with the free market that’s helped US become the world’s biggest cattle and grain exporter.

It’s interfering government, says Big Ag, which will stop us feeding the future.

**J D Alexander**
You know, I believe in capitalism, you cannot manipulate the markets. That’s what true capitalism is. The thing we’ve got to watch out is overregulation by our government – that would stifle our productivity.

The government should not prevent you from being successful, and it should not prevent you from failing either. I think a lot of people have a government that prevents some people from failing. I don’t believe in that. It’s a matter of keeping up and changing and being more productive. It’s evolution.

**COMMENTARY**
Big Ag employs lobbyists like Justin Wilson. He’s from a small mid-west farm himself. But he says the days of small farms feeding the world are limited.

**Justin Wilson**
The number of farmers in the United States is shrinking drastically. We’re getting more efficient we’re keeping food affordable and we’re doing that through innovation and continuing a long trend of research and so I think people are going to have to understand that in order for us to keep feeling the world. ’cos its important obviously that we’re going to have to come to terms with the idea that not everything that we eat is going to be you know every morning the farmer wake up and pet it and give it a hug and touch it and make it feel good because we don’t have enough people don’t have enough land.
COMMENTARY
But for small farmers like Ron, Big Ag offers the consumer less choice – putting corporate profit before consumer interests.

Ron Meyer
Big Ag will say well… consumers have a choice: they can either buy from the small producer… But a lot of the people who don't have the money, they buy the food the cheapest way they can - but it’s not always the healthiest food. So that's what leads to the obesity and diabetes and all those issues.

COMMENTARY
In a globalized world, Ron knows the Big versus Small Ag debate echoes way beyond Nebraska. He’s offering a new piece to the Lincoln Star.

Gordon Winters
If Ron Meyer were to write a letter, and it was about globalisation and agriculture, we’d certainly consider it. I mean, global markets are… that’s just agriculture today, what farmers in other countries are doing affects what farmers in Nebraska are doing.

COMMENTARY
Ron’s discovering the world’s small farms are more important than he’d thought. Over two and a half billion people – or forty per cent – of the world’s population work on small farms. Most working on farms far smaller than Ron’s four hundred acres.

Ron’s contacting IFAD, the UN agency assisting small-scale farmers, at their offices in Cameroon, West Africa.

Skype exchange between Nadine and Valentine

Valentine: Are you seeing us?

Ron: I am now, yes.

Valentine: Can you see us? Can you see us very well?

Ron: Yes I can. I can see you very well now yes.

Nadine: This is Nadine. This is Valentine… From Cameroon

Valentine: My name is Valentine.

Ron: OK, this is Ron. I was wondering… in a growing global population of nine billion… can the small farmer - do you feel that the small farmer is the best way to feed that growing population?

Valentine: Oh yes. I think you may understand - we small farmers can really feed the population. Because you know that big farms, they always do on what we call cash crops that are used to export products. But if you look at small farms, they are there to feed the population. You know our country is not very different from what you people have in USA, because farmers are the same all over.

In our country, you know, most of the time especially these middle men that they call buy ‘em, sell ‘em - that is two people come and buy from the farm and sell … they make a lot of money because small farmers are not informed about the price, small farmers don't have the means for transportation, so they rely totally on middle men.
COMMENETARY
Ron learns Cameroon still relies on small farmers. But he’s surprised to hear they’re just as concerned they get a raw deal from the system.

Nadine
Ron…it’s a challenge: the main issue we are facing is basically most of the production doesn’t go to the market… it gets wasted. Basically they have issues of storage, infrastructure, they have issues of marketing infrastructure, they have issues of roads to get to the main markets so it is a big issue. And it’s defeating for farmers not to be able to get their production to the market. So this requires a government policy - government investment - because it goes beyond the farmers and we are talking of community and national investment.

Ron
Yes, I think what you said earlier about the middle men taking a lot of the profits away and trying to direct market, that’s the same problem we face here in the United States too, so I think we have very similar problems, I guess…

After talking to these small farmers in the Cameroon, I can see that the whole concept of globalisation that American farmers are indoctrinated with is a myth, because we cannot feed the world. The only people who can feed the world is the small farmers in their own countries who produce food that global people eat.

And I guess, my article – I would like to reiterate that, and somehow try to convince our own farmers that it’s in everyone’s best interests to produce locally and not always think about globally.

De Schutter
If we leave it to the market forces - if states do not make it a priority to support small farms - small farms will be gradually wiped out, simply because they are less competitive. They are less good at capturing markets because they produce at a higher cost - whatever they can produce for the markets.

And so it’s very important they are aware of the positive externalities, the benefits, that small farms have and produce and that we support them for the services that they deliver.

COMMENETARY
Studies show that between fifty and seventy per cent of the world’s population are fed by small farmers. So who does the research suggest should be feeding the future?

Tim Beach
One of the big questions in the world is how much indigenous or local farmers can feed broader populations. There’s been a lot of research on this and there’s open debate about it.

Some companies and some other individuals in agricultural research think that it’s only the large-scale farming that can feed the world. But there are a number of studies that show that smaller-scale farming can feed a larger area.

COMMENETARY
If small farms do offer an alternative, some experts say they’ll have to develop new techniques and values of their own. It’s what small farmers in the agro-ecology movement are trying to do.

Tim Beach
Agro-ecology is an attempt to use ecological methods to produce food products. It uses multiple inputs, but they’re natural inputs. It uses not mono-crops but poly-crops.
The future of farming has a number of trajectories. One of those would be this more holistic attempt, and interest by people to become part of a community that is bio-diverse, that produces complicated foods, that produces good foods.

**News Reporter:** From London to central Nebraska, international film crew shines a spotlight on a local rancher.

**COMMENTARY**

Nebraska farmer Kevin Fulton didn’t always cuddle chickens. He’s a former heavyweight wrestler now a medium size farmer. He and Ron are coming to grips with…. agro-ecology. Like Vietnam vet Ron, Kevin’s hardly a hippy - but he’s proving a successful “alternative” farmer.

**Kevin**

People think of big industrial agriculture as intensive agriculture, but what we’re doing here is way more intensive. We can produce just as much livestock running them on pasture systems as we can in these huge confinement systems – it’s gonna take more land, it’s gonna take a different mindset of course, but we produce an incredible amount of food right here on my farm and we don’t put animals in cages or crates.

On our farm we don't bring in manures from outside sources, we don't bring in chemical fertilizers at all. We found out that we could actually produce more!

We’ve had to learn how to farm again, had to learn how to understand the biology of the soil, how to understand animal behaviour, how to manage multiple groups of different species of animals working together. But once you master that, you realise you can produce way more than you ever could conventionally, using the sustainable and organic methods that we’re now using.

I apologise for this mess, been awful busy. I started it cleaning it last night and my kids were helping me, but we didn't get very far. My grandfather came here to farm in 1900 from Northern Ireland and they came from Belfast.

We use a lot of the same concepts that maybe my grandfather used. We can use those concepts, but we can apply them using modern technology, and that allows us to get the best of both worlds, and I have interns that are on the internet every night looking at different things and trying to figure out problems – it's a problem-solving type of environment and that's very stimulating really.

**Intern**

If we had put as much money into research into eco-agriculture as we have into Big Ag commodity agriculture, well, we’d be in a whole other ball game right now.

**Kevin**

We are looking hard at what’s going on around the world and trying to borrow concepts from other people. We’ve taken grazing techniques and stuff that are used in Australia and New Zealand and those kinds of things, so, ah – it’s a big world out there, and we’ve got a long way to go.

**Patel**

Government has a role to play here in moving away from industrial agriculture and fostering the kind of farming environment that is about sustainable agriculture.

I think that with the right kind of policy environment, with an investment in, you know, first rate science that is agro-ecological and that pays attention to the environment and labour concerns, and sustainability concerns, we can feed the world absolutely by working with small farmers to improve the kinds of agriculture they’re doing at the moment.
COMMENTARY
With some support from the government - and imaginative new ways of farming - maybe Small Ag won’t be overwhelmed by Big Ag after all.

Munasinghe
If you give up hope and you say, ‘Oh, we have to leave it to the big players’, it will never happen, because the big players continue to maintain the status quo. That is in their Nature – you can’t blame them, because - if things are good for them - why would they want to change?

So it is the people at the bottom who are feeling the pinch, who have to organise themselves and say, ‘Look, hey, we have to have some changes.’ They have to put pressure on their elected representatives to make the kinds of change that they want.

COMMENTARY
Meantime Ron’s not just farming and campaigning, he’s also helping distribute food parcels to Nebraska’s poor.

COMMENTARY
Even in the heartland of Big Ag, there are still hungry mouths to feed – and there’ll be plenty more in the future.

Ron
We like to think we’re feeding the world, but that’s a myth. It’s not happening. With all the technology we still have hungry people in the world.
Future Food travels to the American mid-west to meet Vietnam veteran and farmer, Ron Meyer. When he isn’t farming his 400 acres and 40 cattle, he is battling big agribusiness, which is squeezing small farmers out of the Nebraska Plains. Ron fears that if the small farms disappear, so will the diversity of food and consumer choice along with it. So is industrial farming, with its economies of scale, the only way to feed the world, or can the small-scale farmer offer a feasible alternative?

Series information: Future Food

tve.org/series/future-food/

A series of 6 x 25-min films exploring key questions around global food security.

In discussions of feeding the planet, many now argue for a new way of thinking about food technology, food policy and food science. Since the days of the “Green Revolution”, which promised enough food for all but which ultimately reduced crop varieties, created a dependency on fossil fuels and depleted the land, studies have shown that “agroecology” – the application of ecological principles to the production of food – could double food production in the next 10 years sustainably. But can low-yield sustainable farming methods feed 9.5 billion people by 2050? Without GM crops or synthetic fertilizers, can farmers increase food production by 70 percent?

tve information:

tve.org

tve works with filmmakers and partners worldwide to make and distribute films that put the environment and sustainability on the global agenda. From aspiring filmmakers documenting the change of e-waste disposal to major corporations showcasing innovation, we help to give a voice and a platform to a new generation of filmmakers who want to see a greener and fairer world.

tve films are broadcast to hundreds of millions of viewers, screened to audiences ranging from policymakers to rickshaw drivers, and viewed online worldwide. Our films inspire change.

Our aim
To make people think. We inform. We spark debate. We inspire change. And we’ve been inspiring change for more than 30 years

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