

Out to Pasture Discussion Guide

Each discussion prompt is followed by one or more possible responses.

Chickens

Why does Virgil Shockley (the first chicken farmer interviewed) not want to own a “mega-farm”?

He is concerned that a disease on a farm that big would result in a greater economic loss than it would for someone producing at a smaller scale.

All animals produce manure. Why do some people consider the chicken waste produced on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to be a problem?

In some cases, so much manure is concentrated in an area that it cannot be absorbed by nearby cropland (as fertilizer), so it ends up running off into waterways, contributing to nutrient pollution, algal blooms and dead zones.

Why does John Ikerd say he wouldn’t call contract growers “farmers” but calls them “producers” instead?

Many of the decisions that were once made by farmers are now made by large companies called integrators. He thinks of farmers as having more autonomy than this industrial system allows.

Cows

What can farmers learn from cows?

By observing what cows on pasture eat, farmers can get an idea of what nutrients are lacking in their animals’ diet.

What does Kim Seeley mean when he says, “If we could value food on its true merits...”

Prices of many foods are artificially low because they do not account for the health, environmental and social costs of producing it, and because they do not adequately compensate farmers and farm workers.

Why are animals an important part of sustainable agriculture? Why does raising them on pasture create more fertile soil?

Animals help recycle nutrients when their manure ends up in the soil and becomes a fertilizer for crops. Cows are important because they convert grass into foods that humans can digest (meat and milk). Well-managed grazing animals can also increase plant biodiversity.

Hogs

Why did Jeremiah Jones not want to raise hogs in a hog house, or confinement facility?

Integrators would make the decisions about how he would raise his hogs. He would lose a lot of autonomy, which is something he values.

Why did Jeremiah and his friend from college not want to “go around each other’s farms”?

His friend’s family raises hogs in confinement houses and neither farmer wants to spread any diseases from one farm to the other.

What does humane treatment mean? What would some people consider to be inhumane about confinement facilities for hogs?

Hog farmer David Whitman refers to things he believes are components of humane treatment of animals, as spelled out in guidelines from two organizations that certify his farm:

- He must not physically mistreat his hogs in any way.
- He must provide a certain amount of living space for each animal.
- He must give them regular access to the outdoors, where they can forage.
- He cannot routinely feed antibiotics to his hogs, and only uses these medicines when a hog is sick. In those cases, he cannot sell that hog to certain buyers who demand antibiotic-free meat.