

Rich farmland, poor farmers / more crops, less healthy food

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: Approximately 90 minutes (plus extra time for research and extended discussion)

Business topics: agriculture, farming methods, supply and demand, the consequences of not updating historical and out-dated food production policies

Business language: useful business vocabulary, phrases and expressions

Activities: providing opinions, key words, understanding the text, business language, research and discussion

Groups: whole class, one-to-one, small groups

Overview: This article discusses the way food is produced on a large scale in the US, why this is no longer sustainable, and what difficulties farmers and farming communities are currently facing.

1. Warmer

- a. Students talk about what they think the business practice of 'Pile it high, sell it cheap' involves. Then give students time to find the expression in the article (paragraph 11) to check their answers.
- b. Students briefly discuss the two questions and, if relevant, talk about whether the practice is used in their type of business and, if so, what the consequences are.

2. Key words

Key:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. source | 7. subsidised |
| 2. consolidation | 8. dumping |
| 3. commodity | 9. reserves |
| 4. fertiliser | 10. domestic |
| 5. testimony | 11. shrug |
| 6. grain | 12. discrepancy |

3. Understanding the article

- a. Students answer the questions using information from the article. You could turn this into a 'closed book' task by asking students not to look at the article again but, instead, to simply discuss their answers with a partner and come up with as much information as possible between them, only looking at the article when they think they've forgotten something.

Key: (suggested)

1. commercial farming on a massive scale / mass farming / monoculture in which only one crop is grown for maximum profit rather than for health benefits
2. In order to farm this way, farmers need vast areas of land (without trees, rocks, etc), large amounts of fertilisers, fuel, cheap grain, and machinery and presumably lots of water too. All of these things, especially on this scale, have a negative environmental impact.
3. The crops are unvaried and mostly grain or soyabeans, which are used for cattle feed. Fresh fruit and vegetables for human consumption are not part of this type of farming. Hence, most of the food sold in supermarkets in the farmland areas is calorie-rich but nutritionally poor and does not contribute to a healthy diet.
4. High fuel costs, customers who are used to cheap food, higher-than-inflation price increases on herbicides and fertiliser, and having to rely on just a few trading giants and multinationals – who are able to dictate terms – for their grain.
5. Despite often being victims of corporate greed, poorer, white farming communities struggling to survive in a failing agricultural system feel disenchanting and are ready to vote for those they think will look after their particular needs.
6. A hundred or so years ago, during the Great Depression, farmers were encouraged to grow food stuffs that could provide a starving population with as many calories as possible. This style of farming carries negative health consequences.

The New Deal (a series of programmes under President Roosevelt's government in the 1930s) encouraged farmers to grow large amounts of food stuffs not for starving people but for the increasing numbers moving to urban areas.

Under President Reagan, the industry was consolidated so that large players were able to control much of the market.

President Clinton passed the 'Freedom to Farm' act which removed restrictions on production, leading to over-production and dumping.

4. Business language

Key:

1. *price gouging (idiomatic) / price spike*
2. *trading giants (idiomatic)*
3. *urban dwellers*
4. *fertile ground (idiomatic)*
5. *corporate greed*
6. *disenchanted population*
7. *empty promises (idiomatic)*
8. *labour force*
9. *agricultural sector*
10. *input costs*
11. *raw commodity*
12. *price gouging (idiomatic) / price spike*

5. Business language

Key:

1. *overfed yet undernourished*
2. *in the black*
3. *hedge and hoard*
4. *supply and demand*
5. *boom and bust*

6. Discussion questions

- a. Put the students in pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the questions. When students have covered all the questions, bring the whole class back together so that they can share their answers and any interesting information that arose from their discussions.

7. Wider business theme – food production

- a. Divide the farming styles up among (pairs of) students so that all of them get researched. Set a time limit for the research and then bring the group back together for a class discussion and debate about farming and food production.