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A New Spin on “Stakeholder Society”

Kevin Carson

February 26, 2006

I missed this the first time around, but it’s definitely worth reading if you haven’t seen it. Tom Philpott of Bitter Greens Journal provides another infuriating example of how the government-agribusiness complex rigs the game against organic farming.

The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, controlled by Iowa State’s College of Agriculture, was a lonely organic island in the vast chemical sea of government-funded agriculture research and education. It maintained a precarious existence at the Mecca of federally subsidized industrial hog farming and roundup-marinated corn.

But late last October, everything changed. A press release by the College of Agriculture announced that Fred Kirschenmann, the Leopold Center’s director, had “accepted a new leadership role as a distinguished fellow of the center,” with an interim director appointed in his place.

As it turns out, he was kicked upstairs. According to Kirschenmann’s account, the “new leadership role” was sprung on him without warning.

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Retrieved on 4th September 2021 from mutualist.blogspot.com

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“On Wednesday [Oct. 26] I received a letter from the interim dean asking me to resign by Friday and decide by then if I would accept the position of distinguished fellow at the center,” Kirschenmann told me yesterday.

“I wrote her [the interim dean] back telling her I thought she was moving too fast, that there wouldn’t be time for a smooth transition. She wrote back that it was a done deal — she had already named a new director.”

And the motives of the interim dean, Wendy Wintersteen, were pretty clear. It seems corporate agribusiness interests were gunning for Kirschenmann. He’d been on their shit list for a long time.

Although Wintersteen was on the search committee that hired Kirschenmann in 2000, and was initially supportive, her attitude took a dramatic change for the worse.

“She was always very supportive of what we were doing,” Kirschenmann says. “Until about two years ago. Then she became very critical.”

Her critique centered on the idea that in its work the Leopold Center was neglecting “key stakeholders,” Kirschenmann adds. “But she never really clarified who those stakeholders were.”

It’s pretty obvious, though. The College of Agriculture is awash in corporate money from John Deere and Cargill, and the bulk of the research it churns out is along the lines of pleas for stronger “intellectual property” [sic] protection for GM seeds.

It’s hard to understand how such companies could be “key stakeholders” in the Leopold Center, since they already owned the rest of the College lock, stock, and barrel, and the Leopold

Center was set up to challenge that model of industrial agriculture. As the man says, “I *am* equal time.”

Why did Wintersteen suddenly develop such a zeal for the interests of those “key stakeholders,” to the point of sabotaging the Leopold Center’s mission? I don’t know how much thirty pieces of silver comes to in today’s market, but I suspect it would look pretty good even to someone on an interim dean’s salary.