The policies of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) have had a tremendous affect on farming in our country. Their funding go to further the research at land grant colleges (like UT), and the advice is disseminated through the county extension programs. The way most farms are run is a direct result of this information.

Agriculture before the 20th century depended upon healthy soil. Farmers knew how to keep their soils light and fluffy, rich in humus and capable of long-term production. All farms had animals for power and food, and the waste products were composted to keep the land fertile.

Crops were grown in rotation so they didn't wear out the soil, cover crops were grown to enrich the land. Everyone the needed a job had one. Gardening was common and putting food up was simply a part of life. Our nation became strong and independent through agriculture.

Great improvements occurred in agriculture during this period. People were anxious to learn all they could about how plants grew. Leibigs early experiments were practically exciting. He demonstrated the plant's need for nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, and found that materials used for gunpowder supplied these nutrients. He also confirmed the need for soil to have adequate humus.

During the first half of the 20th century two world wars happened which further strengthened the power of the United States. Most of the weapons used in these wars, by both sides, were madeand sold by the same manufacturers. After the first world war, the weapons industry started selling their wares for fertilizer rather than weapons.

It was hard to sell it. Farmers didn't need it, because years of wise care had kept their farms fertile. Although it did increase yields, fertilizer was only used in conjunction with manure. It was even called "artificial manure." The USDA started recommending it. Those who refused to use it were branded "organic." These chemicals destroyed soil humus.

After World War II there was a huge increase in the industry's push to sell fertilizer. When the soil's humus became depleted, the same companies sold pesticides for the inevitable insect and disease pressure that attends crops grown without humus. These

chemical/weapon/fertilizer companies fund the land grant colleges now, who do research on their products. They are the giant grain cartels and food processors.

By the 1970's the USDA's official standpoint was "get big or get out" "take out fences and hedgerows" and to separate animal husbandry from crop production. Through their incentive programs, most farm animals are now raised in confinement operations, and most cropland is inundated with chemicals.

At this time about 4000 farmers, calling themselves "organic," began doing their own research. They discovered pre-chemical era techniques that built soil humus and allowed for continuous crop production. This handful of farmers, of which I was one, also formed sustainable agriculture group across the country and held conferences and workshops. More importantly, they developed markets for organic food and consequently the whole organic food movement. All of the time during the next 20 years the USDA totally ignored organics and continued promoting chemical use in agriculture.

In 1990, Congress passed an act demanding that the USDA fund organic research, marketing and conferences. We thought this was great, finally getting recognition for our efforts. Little did we know how tricky these corporations can be. The USDA and the major agricultural are the same people, simply switching jobs occasionally.

What did the USDA do with the millions entrusted to them to promote organics? They formed groups, called Sustainable Agriculture Working Groups (SAWG). I recently attended the Southern SAWG meeting on Jan. 23rd, along with 1500 other people interested in organic agriculture. For 20 years now the USDA has pumped millions of dollars into organics and the result is t his: organic agriculture is minimalized and stuck in a corner.

The conference was a joke. Held in a Marriot Hotel, all of the meals, except one, featured food produced by chemical farming. USDA speakers dominated the lectures. And a farmer like me is patted on the back because I feed 200 people. The conference marginalized organics underneath a surface façade of helping. It was an eye opener for me.

Cows, pigs and chickens are able to keep farms independent of fertilizers and pesticides. No wonder the USDA, i.e. the chemical companies, want "organics" to be about "cut flowers" "hoop

houses” and “getting grants.” The real issue in America is building soil humus with animals and the crops they graze on, and this is exactly what will hurt sales of agricultural chemicals, relieve unemployment and create a healthy food system. Only by strengthening the small farms and small businesses of our country, which are the basis for democracy, can the American people regain their independence from large, multinational corporations.