

5 Landwirtschaft und Ernährungssicherung

From family farms to agribusiness

59-year-old Bill Miller owns a 600-acre-farm in Kansas in the Midwest, the American heartland. He was born on the farm which has belonged to his family for more than a hundred years. His great grandfather turned the untouched prairie into productive farmland. Today he has one full-time employee and raises cattle and chicken. But due to the competition with large corporations it is very hard to succeed in the market. One chance to survive is to raise high-quality beef cattle according to very strict guidelines, e. g. healthy grassfed beef. However, the farm is always in trouble financially as the costs for machines, tools, equipment, energy, pesticides, fertiliser (if used), irrigation and labour force steadily increase. Especially the rising energy prices worry Bill Miller since they influence diesel and gas prices and irrigation and fertiliser costs. For some years he has also been hit by a weaker U.S. economy. The biggest problem in operating the farm is the availability of water which either comes from precipitation which varies heavily from year to year or the groundwater. So farming for Bill Miller has become more and more challenging as he tries to remain independent in a period of commercialisation.

Agricultural changes

The plains in Kansas have good soil but they are often dry because of the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Whenever massive irrigation was possible the grain fields were irrigated and the cattle feedlots developed nearby. However, there have been basic changes in the last three decades. Beef processing plants have expanded, **Garden City** for example has been one of the fastest growing cities in Kansas, slaughter houses have been built and even the meatpacking industry has grown rapidly.

Agricultural business

Nowadays there are feedlots with more than 100,000 heads of cattle on the whole feedlot. Most of the cattle raised there supplies much of the beef preferred by the fast food industry. Density on the farm is very high which means a lot of meat is produced and consequently the costs are low. This concentrating production is mainly in the hands of a few large companies. This type of business including slaughter houses, meatpacking, marketing and trade is called **agribusiness**. The negative aspect is that a lot of waste is produced. In some cases the groundwater is contaminated and/or pollutant gases are emitted.

Family income and expenses 2001 and 2006 (average of all farms in US-\$)		
Value of farm production	214,664	298,754
Total farm expenses	186,669	252,161
Total family expenses	36,332	45,752

M1

Net farm income (average of all farms in US-\$)	
1991	22,887
1994	28,652
1997	59,352
2001	27,995
2006	46,593

M2

Net farm income by farm size 2006 (in US-\$)	
Acres	
181–499	6,827
500–999	27,140
1,000–1,999	48,162
2,000–4,999	65,342
> 5,000	79,070

Source: Kansas State University Manhattan/KS, Agricultural Economics

M3

- 1 Make a list and compare the two pictures in your working book and the information from the texts.
- 2 Use your atlas and explain why the Midwest is relatively dry. The following words may help you: windward side, leeward side, moist air, warm dry air, upward, downward.

- 3 Do you see a chance for Bill Miller to survive in the "competition"?