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Bill Gates is the biggest private owner of farmland in the United States. Why?

Nick Estes

Gates has been buying land like it's going out of style. He now owns more farmland than my entire Native American nation

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Bill Gates has never been a farmer. So why did the Land Report [dub](#) him “Farmer Bill” this year? The third richest man on the planet doesn’t have a green thumb. Nor does he put in the back-breaking labor humble people do to grow our food and who get far less praise for it. That kind of hard work isn’t what made him rich. Gates’ achievement, according to the report, is that he’s largest private owner of farmland in the US. A 2018 purchase of 14,500 acres of prime eastern Washington farmland - which is traditional Yakama territory - for \$171m helped him get that title.

In total, Gates owns approximately 242,000 acres of farmland with [assets totaling](#) more than \$690m. To put that into perspective, that’s nearly the size of Hong Kong and twice the acreage of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, where I’m an enrolled member. A white man owns more farmland than my entire Native nation!

The United States is defined by the excesses of its ruling class. But why do a handful of people own so much land?

Land is power, land is wealth, and, more importantly, land is about race and class. The relationship to land - who owns it, who works it and who cares for it - reflects obscene levels of inequality and legacies of colonialism and white supremacy in the United States, and also the world. Wealth accumulation always goes hand-in-hand with exploitation and dispossession. In this country, enslaved Black labor first built US wealth atop stolen Native land. The 1862 Homestead Act opened up 270m acres of Indigenous territory - which amounts to 10% of US land - for white settlement. Black, Mexican, Asian, and Native people, of course, were categorically excluded from the benefits of a federal program that subsidized and protected generations of white wealth.

The billionaire media mogul Ted Turner epitomizes such disparities. He owns 2m acres and has the world’s largest privately owned buffalo herd. Those animals, which are sacred to my people and were nearly hunted to extinction by settlers, are preserved today on nearly [200,000 acres of Turner’s ranchland](#) within the boundaries of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty territory in the western half of what is now the state of South Dakota, land that was once guaranteed by the US government to be a [“permanent home”](#) for Lakota people.

The gun and the whip may not accompany land acquisitions this time around. But billionaire class assertions that they are philosopher kings and climate-conscious investors who know better than the original caretakers are little more than ruses for what amounts to a 21st century land grab - with big payouts in a for-profit economy

what amounts to a 21st century land grab - with big payouts in a not-profit economy seeking “green” solutions.

Our era is dominated by the ultra-rich, the climate crisis and a burgeoning green capitalism. And Bill Gates’ new book *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* positions himself as a thought leader in how to stop putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and how to fund what he has [called elsewhere](#) a “global green revolution” to help poor farmers mitigate climate change. What expertise in climate science or agriculture Gates possesses beyond being filthy rich is anyone’s guess.

When pressed during a book discussion on Reddit about why he’s gobbling up so much farmland, Gates [claimed](#), “It is not connected to climate [change].” The decision, he said, came from his “investment group.” Cascade Investment, the firm making these acquisitions, is [controlled](#) by Gates. And the firm [said](#) it’s “very supportive of sustainable farming”. It also is a shareholder in the plant-based protein companies Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods as well as the farming equipment manufacturer John Deere. His firm’s largest farmland acquisition happened in 2017, when it acquired 61 farming properties from a Canadian investment firm to the tune of [\\$500m](#).

Arable land is not just profitable. There’s a more cynical calculation. Investment firms are making the argument farmlands will meet [“carbon-neutral”](#) targets for sustainable investment portfolios while anticipating an increase of agricultural productivity and revenue. And while Bill Gates frets about eating cheeseburgers in his book - for the amount of greenhouse gases the meat industry produces largely for the consumption of rich countries - his massive carbon footprint has little to do with his personal diet and is not forgivable by simply buying more land to sequester more carbon.

The world’s richest 1% emit double the carbon of the poorest 50%, an 2020 [Oxfam study](#) found. According to Forbes, the world’s billionaires saw their wealth swell by [\\$1.9tn in 2020](#), while more than [22 million US workers](#) (mostly women) lost their jobs.

Like wealth, land ownership is becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, resulting in a greater push for monocultures and more intensive industrial farming techniques to generate greater returns. One per cent of the world’s farms control 70% of the world’s farmlands, [one report found](#). The biggest shift in recent years from small to big farms was in the US.

The land we all live on should not be the sole property of a few

The principal danger of private farmland owners like [Bill Gates](#) is not their professed support of sustainable agriculture often found in philanthropic work – it's the monopolistic role they play in determining our food systems and land use patterns.

Small farmers and Indigenous people are more cautious with the use of land. For Indigenous caretakers, land use isn't premised on a return of investments; it's about maintaining the land for the next generation, meeting the needs of the present, and a respect for the diversity of life. That's why lands still managed by Indigenous peoples worldwide protect and sustain [80% of the world's biodiversity](#), practices anathema to industrial agriculture.

The average person has nothing in common with mega-landowners like Bill Gates or Ted Turner. The land we all live on should not be the sole property of a few. The extensive tax avoidance by these titans of industry will always far exceed their supposed charitable donations to the public. The “billionaire knows best” mentality detracts from the deep-seated realities of colonialism and white supremacy, and it ignores those who actually know best how to use and live with the land. These billionaires have nothing to offer us in terms of saving the planet – unless it's our land back.

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