

Northeastern Sustainable Ag Advocates Meet

WILLIAMSBURG, Mass. — How can a declining agriculture in the Northeast be revitalized and a more sustainable system of food production and distribution be established that is ecologically sound, economically profitable for farmers, and makes affordable, safe food accessible to everyone?

About 85 farmers, environmentalists, hunger, and safe food activists and representatives of federal and state agencies and universities considered this question at a Western Massachusetts conference November 14-15.

The newly-formed Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG) convened the working seminar to chart the course for future activities in prompting sustainable agriculture in the region that includes the New England states, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The network consists of sustainable and family farm, environmental, and safe food/consumer advocacy organizations from throughout the Northeast. Representatives of several land grant universities and state agriculture agencies have

been actively supporting the effort as well.

Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) Pennsylvania Farmers Union, and Rodale Institute have been instrumental in helping to organize the broad-based network. Tim Bowser, director of PASA, spoke at one of the conference workshops.

"As farmers, we know how important it is to farm sustainably," he said. We need to protect the soil and water resources as well as the economic stability of the farmer. We also need to bring farmers, consumers, and environmentalists together to work for the common goal of a sustainable food system that will take us into the future."

During the two-day conference, a regional sustainable food system was offered as an alternative to the existing system that is currently dominated by large agribusiness and has caused the loss of family farms and decline of rural economies, as well as pollution and depletion of topsoil and water by excessive use of agricultural chemicals. Chemical-intensive

agricultural practices have also led to increasing consumer concern about the possible harmful affects of pesticide residues in food. In addition to Bowser, who serves as co-chair of the NESAWG Policy and Farm Bill Committee, Pennsylvania was represented by Rochelle Kelvin of the Rodale Institute. Kelvin serves on the NESAWG Marketing Committee.

Gregory Watson, Massachusetts Commissioner of Food and Agriculture, advocated a holistic approach as he addressed the conference. He suggested incorporating traditional and innovative techniques that, besides being ecologically sound and economically viable, would foster a sense of community and empowerment of both farmers and consumers.

"There is no single formula, no magic bullet," said Watson. "The key is diversity at all levels in the system." He described some sustainable strategies used to revitalize his state's agricultural economy, including programs to preserve existing farmlands and to help farmers with new marketing

methods.

The keynote speaker, Mark Ritchie, director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis, Minn., asserted that U.S. farm policies have encouraged resource-depleting agriculture by rewarding chemical and capital intensive agribusiness and penalizing small and mid-sized family farms and farmers that would like to switch to sustainable practices.

Ritchie said, "We need policies that offer incentives as well as prohibitions, based on respect for the land, people and other animals, present and future, and that are decided through democratic processes." He advocated policies that would promote more stability between supply and demand, balancing the need for adequate food reserves for times of crisis and the need to control overproduction. These policies should

provide fair prices to farmers and incentives to farm smaller parcels of land which are more efficient and can be farmed more sustainably.

Ritchie cautioned that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the pending General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) would preempt or undermine U.S. policies and state laws that now protect farmers, consumers, and the environment.

The diverse group wrestled with creating a vision of a sustainable food system and discussed how federal farm and trade policies and research at land grant universities could promote such a system. Another major topic of discussion was alternative marketing systems which would encourage more food self-sufficiency in the region and would provide fair prices to farmers for food grown in a sustainable manner.

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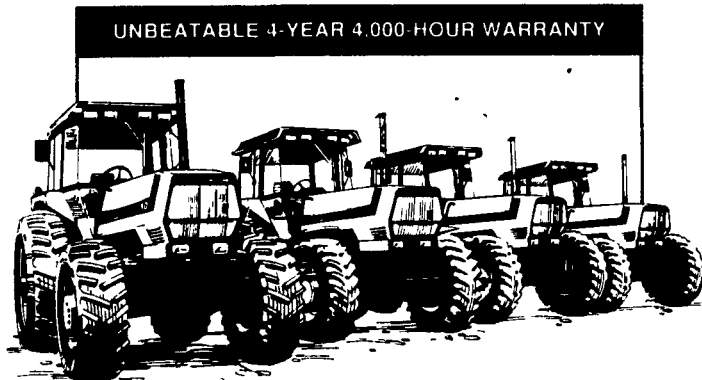
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