

Farmers Hear Call For High-Value Farming

STATE COLLEGE (Centre Co.) — The slide on the screen at the Nittany Lion Inn shows a combine harvesting a huge field of ripe grain.

"This guy is a bagel grower," said Sarah Vogel. He is not simply a grain farmer, but a pasta producer.

"Our goal is to change the way we look at ourselves," said Vogel, North Dakota's twice-elected agriculture commissioner. Farming in America, she said, will become more profitable only when farmers throughout the country begin bypassing the middlemen — selling directly to consumers — and turning low-priced cattle, milk, and grain into value-added products such as steaks, cheese, and pasta.

Such bold thinking and heavy emphasis on the bottom line is exactly what drew a record crowd of more than 600 farmers to the fifth annual conference of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) earlier this month in State College, said Tim Bowser, PASA executive director. Theme of the two-day conference was "Growing Markets, Adding Value, Sustaining Farms."

"We even had people here from

as far away as Michigan and signed up five new members from New York state, West Virginia, and Michigan," said Bowser.

Past PASA conferences drew only about 500. Why the big turnout this year?

"Sarah Vogel's keynote address was as inspiring a talk as I have heard in a long while. There was a lot of food for thought," said Bowser. "The topic of marketing probably had a lot to do with the record attendance. We've always had sessions dealing with marketing. This is the first time we have made it the theme. I think it really resonated with a lot of people. I heard a lot of discussion that it was probably the best conference we have had yet from a content standpoint.

"But we also pushed the dairy end of it a lot more. We always try to address issues which are clearly very important to Pennsylvania agriculture," Bowser said.

One of the dairy speakers, Bill Patterson of Crimona, Va., explained how he switched to a grass-based dairy system in the late '80s. "Although his total production declined, his profits more than doubled. He got everybody's attention," Bowser said. A dairy mini-conference on the second

day of the meeting focused on "Balancing Profitability and the Environment" with heavy emphasis on low-cost grazing systems and innovations in managing wastewater and manure.

Other standout speakers included Eliot Coleman, author of the bestselling "Four Season Harvest" and "The New Organic Grower," who raises vegetables commercially for eight months of the year on his small farm in coastal Maine, and "guerilla marketer" Robert J. Matarazzo whose 200-acre fruit and vegetable farm in Belvidere, N.J., is said to be the most diversified farm on the East Coast.

"My farm is 90 minutes from New York and Philadelphia . . . so I have to do a lot of crazy things to attract people," said Matarazzo. "I'm a strong believer in trying to develop a proprietary relationship with customers so that they feel the farm is their own."

To help do that, he sends out hundreds of press releases every week of the year to media in four states, publishes his own newsletter and stages up to 15 festivals a year on the farm, including spring and summer powwows that feature native American dancers and

artists from throughout North America. Those festivals produce nearly 75 percent of his farm income in just 30 days.

Other PASA workshops covered commercial herb and flower gardening, selling specialty vegetables directly to chefs, pastured poultry production and marketing, cash grain rotations for soil improvement and weed control, developing business and marketing plans, winter grazing, forming grower cooperatives and Community Supported Agriculture marketing programs.

They all echoed Commissioner Vogel's keynote call for "Development Economics Through Cooperative Efforts." Vogel, who sued the federal government in the early '80s to stop 78,000 unlawful farm foreclosures, said, "We need to create new wealth and jobs through the development of new and expanded uses of agricultural products." She is doing just that in

North Dakota with state programs that encourage more producer-cooperatives to bypass profit-draining middlemen and sell value-added products directly to consumers. "When farmers win, we all win," she said. "There can be no return to economic prosperity that doesn't begin with farmers."

PASA has a wide variety of on-farm production and marketing demonstrations, field days and other activities planned throughout the summer, including its second annual Harvest Festival on Aug. 10 at Walnut Acres in Penns Creek, Pa. Last year's festival drew a crowd of 1,800. The festival is likely to be even bigger this year because Walnut Acres is celebrating its 50th year of organic farming.

For details on PASA membership, field days and the Harvests Festival, write PASA, PO Box 419, Millheim, PA 16854.



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