

# Cuba: Sustainable Agriculture As National Defense?

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For 18 months now, agricultural specialists across the U.S. have vigorously debated the level of terrorism threat faced by our nation's farmers and food supply. At the recent annual conference of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), we heard from scientists who argued persuasively that the threat of accidental contamination of food is as great, if not greater than the risk of intentional sabotage.

Incidents occurring since Sep-

tember 11, 2001 involving widespread distribution of contaminated food, here in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, have confirmed the correctness of this more complex description of the problem.

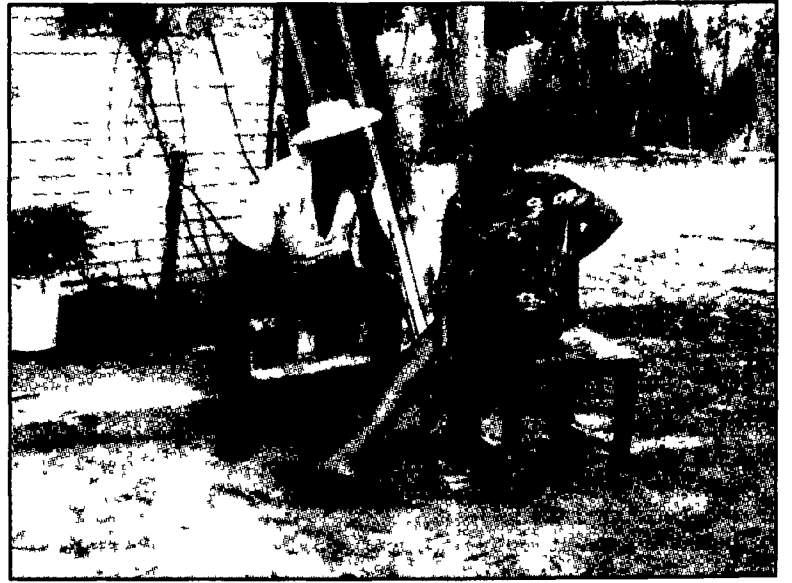
But the question remains, "What would happen in the United States if our food supply was suddenly interrupted, whether by accidental or intentional causes, requiring an extended period of recovery?"

Fortunately for us in this country, we have a very close neighbor that has faced such a situation, and from whom we might learn some important lessons.

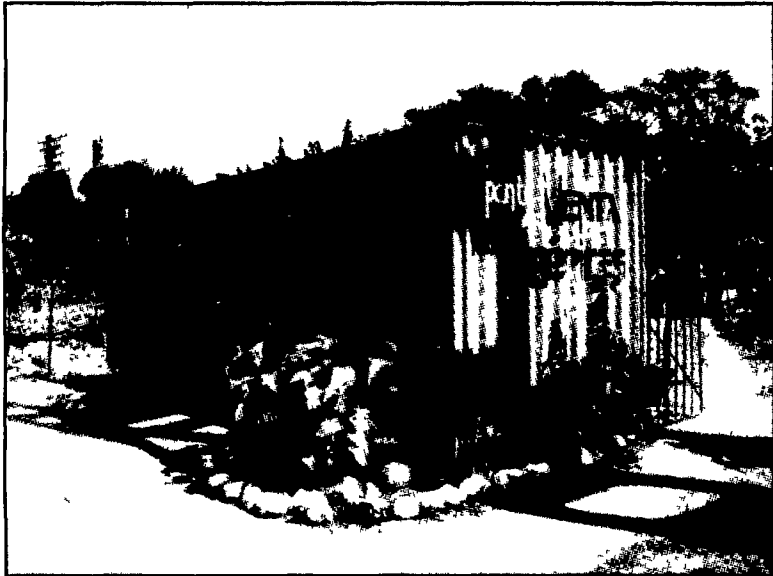
Over a two-week period bridging February and March of this year, I was fortunate to be a part of what has been called the "largest ever fact-finding delegation destined for Cuba." As a delegation of three from Pennsylvania, I was joined by Penn State IPM specialist Lyn Garling and Tim Bowser, executive director of the FoodRoutes Network (Millheim), as part of a dynamic group of about 90 food and farming specialists from all over the United States, Latin America, and those living in the Caribbean on a study tour of Cuban agriculture. The trip was organized by the Oakland California based Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy.

Following the 1959 revolution in Cuba, the socialist regime that emerged was forced into a mostly exclusive trading relationship with the Soviet Union, in large part because of the U.S. trade embargo, which is now more than 40 years old. Cuba traded sugar, tobacco, nickel and other products for fuel, food and medicine, as well as the feedstuffs, chemicals, and equipment necessary to maintain widespread conventional agriculture throughout this island nation.

This close trading partnership worked pretty well, helping Cuba to resist the U.S. embargo, or "blockade" as Cubans refer to it, for 30 years, until the sudden fall of the Soviet Union beginning in 1989. Almost overnight, Cuban society lost access not only to



A Cuban fruit farmer and his wife, who hosted a group from the delegation for a visit at their home. Everywhere it was clear how proud these folks are of what they had achieved and how glad they were to receive us. Departing comments were often mingled with tears.



Curbside farm stand in Havana belonging to a farmer named "America." Design using an old railroad car shows necessary resourcefulness of Cuban farmers. Urban farmers produce over 350 thousand tons of fruits and vegetables within the city limits of Havana each year.

much of its food supply, but also to the conventional means of producing their own food. Suddenly, there were no chemicals or fertilizers, no new tractors or spare parts to repair the old ones, and no veterinary medicines or feed concentrates to support their concentrated dairy, poultry, and pork production facilities.

The situation for Cuban citizens worsened when the U.S., sensing perhaps an opportunity to bring about a new capitalist counterrevolution, tightened the embargo with legislation in 1992 (Torricelli) and again in 1996 (Helms-Burton). And this legislative one-two punch might have achieved its intended result were it not for the ongoing revolutionary spirit of the Cuban people in the face of tremendous adversity.

In fact, the seeds of agricultural change were present throughout the first 30 years following the Revolution. We were reminded on the trip that agrarian reform had always been a priority of the current regime. From the beginning, the socialist gov-

ernment had sought to guarantee adequate food for every man, woman, and child in Cuba as a birthright.

Furthermore, the desire had been to supply as much of this food as possible through production using fewer chemicals on smaller farms or farm cooperatives located close to where people actually live. This effort, referred to as "sustainable agriculture" long before any crisis occurred, is defined in Cuba, much the same as in our own country, as a widespread network of carefully managed farms that are economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially responsible.

In response to the crisis of 1989 and afterwards the Cuban government instituted economic reforms as part of what they euphemistically called the "Special Period in Peacetime." The Special Period, as it is more commonly known, includes incentives for farmers to profit directly from

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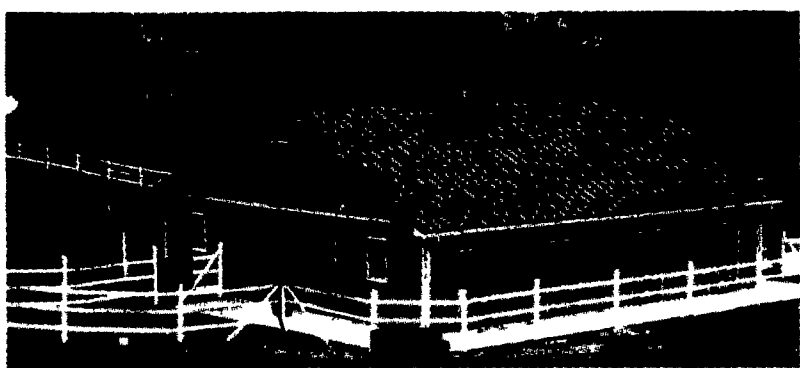
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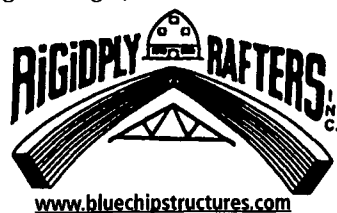
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