Energy, Weather, Theme, Speakers --
41st NOFA Summer Conference Great Success

On August 14-16, 2015 over 1100 people from across the northeast gathered at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst for the 41st annual NOFA Summer Conference. NOFA/Massachusetts coordinates the conference on behalf of the seven-state NOFA Interstate Council. Conference coordinator Ben Grosscup has the complex job of choosing and scheduling 140+ workshops. “When I make decisions I read the evaluations that we got about presenters from previous years and I speak with people who I consider to be leaders in specific areas to get their input.”

As diverse as the workshops offered, attendees ran the gamut from farmers to consumers to educators to urban agriculture advocates, not to mention those interested in policy, food justice, land access, health and the environment.

“The kind of farmer that we attract to the Summer Conference is the farmer who is interested in learning something new,” said Grosscup. “We have that on offer here. We have beginner and expert skill levels to give a space for conversations to happen under one big tent. I think the kind of consumer that we attract is someone who thinks it’s incumbent upon them to take a role in food production; it may mean cooking, fermentation, a window sill garden, a raised bed outside, a full homestead, a five acre farm or more. It’s about people who want to get involved in food production and want to use practices that advance personal and ecological health.”

This year’s theme

Woven through this year’s conference was the theme “Healing the Climate, Healing Ourselves: Regeneration Through Microbiology”. The theme connected ongoing conversations within NOFA that aren’t always considered together: personal health, environmental health and microbiology. “We can solve these problems through the same solution -- organic farming. The theme gets the mission clear,” said Ben Grosscup. “We understand now that when we consider to be leaders in specific areas to get their input.”

Activist and organic agriculture advocate Ronnie Cummins keynoted on Saturday evening. Cummins pushed for the organic food community to go beyond the USDA’s organic standards to support and advocate for climate friendly, relocalized farming practices. “We have to move to the next stage of organic, which is regeneration,” said Cummins. “The biggest obstacle standing in our way? It’s not GMOs. It’s factory farms. Americans go into a grocery store or restaurant and they forget their ethics.”

Children’s parade one of many memorable highlights of conference. More pictures inside!

According to NOFA IC Co-President Jack Mastroianni, “[Restorative agriculture] is a connection that our organization can rally around. If we do some pretty basic things to the soil that can restore soil carbon, if everyone could do just those few things differently, collectively we could make a difference in helping the planet heal from greenhouse gas emission excesses.”

Sean Grenier, of Wilder, VT, recently left the chef industry to become a farmer. His wife Angela works as a pastry chef. It was their first time at a NOFA Summer Conference. “We’re interested in changing the way we look at food, the way everybody looks at food,” said Angela. “So we thought this would be a good way to start.”

“For me as a chef I got really tired of working in a sick corporate food system,” said Sean. “That’s one of the reasons why I stepped out to learn about growing organic food -- so evenu-

(continued on page A-9)
The Natural Farmer is a quarterly membership journal of the Northeast Organic Farming Assoc. You may join NOFA through one of the seven state chapters linked at www.nofa.org. We plan a year in advance so those who want to write on a topic can have a lot of lead time. The next 3 issues will be:

- **Winter 2015-16:** Worms
- **Spring 2016:** Public Land
- **Summer 2016:** Humane Livestock Care

If you can help us on any of these topics, or have ideas for new ones, please get in touch. We need your help! The deadline for the issues are: Spring - January 31, Summer - April 30, Fall - July 31, Winter - October 31.

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Moving? The Natural Farmer will not be forwarded by the post office, so those who subscribe directly should send address changes to us. Most readers, however, get this as a NOFA member benefit and should send address updates to their local NOFA chapter.

Archived issues from Summer 1999 through Fall 2005 are available at http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/digital/tnf/. More recent issues are downloadable (starting 3 months after paper publication) at www.nofa.org as pdf files. We also have many issues archived in convenient downloadable form at www.theNaturalfarmer.org.

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The Natural Farmer
Idaho’s Ag Gag Law Ruled Unconstitutional

Ag Gag laws are the laws passed by states to try to keep animal rights activists from filming or recording events and conditions on farms, in CAFOs, slaughterhouses, and other places where the practices of industrial food production might upset consumers, were they widely known. On August 3 federal judge B. Lynn Winmill found that Idaho’s ban on secret filming of animal abuse at agricultural facilities was unconstitutional, based of the First Amendment guarantee of Free Speech.

“Audio and visual evidence is a uniquely persuasive means of conveying a message, and it can vindicate an undercover investigator or whistleblower who is otherwise disbelieved or ignored,” Winmill wrote in his 29-page ruling. “Prohibiting undercover investigators or whistleblowers from recording an agricultural facility’s operations inevitably suppresses a key type of speech because it limits the information that might later be published or broadcast.”

source: Cornucopia, August 15, 2015
Farms Without Wildlife Don’t Produce Safer Food

In 2006, an E. coli outbreak that killed three people and sickened about 200 more was traced to the spinach growing along California’s Central Coast. Despite the fact that federal and state investigators claimed it was not possible to determine exactly how the dangerous E. coli strain spread to the farm, cattle and wild pig manure were implicated as the sources of the bacteria. The following year, the state’s farming industry pushed out the California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, a set of recommended practices based on previous guidelines issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to promote food safety on farms. One of these suggestions the agreement made was to clear areas near fields of any vegetation. As a result, the farm fields along the California coast changed radically after the outbreak, as farmers did away with wooded areas, medians, and hedgerows, and most farms became relatively sterile landscapes, aside from the crops.

Now a new study is calling the efficacy of that practice into question. “The bottom line is that removing habitat around farm fields is ineffective at making food safer from pathogens,” said Daniel Karp, a U.C. Berkeley post-doctoral researcher whose work is funded by The Nature Conservancy. “It has been shown in this region that there are a lot of benefits to surrounding vegetation as a means of providing a home for pollinators, which are declining across the nation.” Karp and his collaborators found that among 57 farms in Salinas, Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz counties—the source of three-quarters of the country’s leafy greens—the overall frequency of disease-causing strains of E. coli increased in the six-year period. But it turned out the prevalence increased the most where surrounding wildlife vegetation had been cleared away. In areas that had kept some natural vegetation intact—a fact the researchers verified via Google Earth—the overall frequency of disease-causing strains of E. coli remained consistent over the six-year period. Now a new study is calling the efficacy of that practice into question. “The bottom line is that removing habitat around farm fields is ineffective at making food safer from pathogens,” said Daniel Karp, a U.C. Berkeley post-doctoral researcher whose work is funded by The Nature Conservancy. “It has been shown in this region that there are a lot of benefits to surrounding vegetation as a means of providing a home for pollinators, which are declining across the nation.” Karp and his collaborators found that among 57 farms in Salinas, Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz counties—the source of three-quarters of the country’s leafy greens—the overall frequency of disease-causing strains of E. coli increased in the six-year period. But it turned out the prevalence increased the most where surrounding wildlife vegetation had been cleared away. In areas that had kept some natural vegetation intact—a fact the researchers verified via Google Earth—the overall frequency of disease-causing strains of E. coli remained consistent over the six-year period.

Neonicotinoids Found in Half of US Streams

The United States Geological Survey discovered insecticides known as neonicotinoids in a little more than half of both urban and agricultural streams sampled across 24 states in the United States, according to a study by the agency published in Environmental Chemistry. This study, conducted from 2011 to 2014, represents the first national-scale investigation of the environmental occurrence of neonicotinoid insecticides in agricultural and urban settings. Neonicotinoids have been implicated in the widespread decline of honey bee and native bee populations due to the phenomenon called “colony collapse disorder”. In May, the White House reissued the Strategy to Promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators, which includes a Pollinator Research Action Plan.

“This research will support the overall goals of the Strategy, by helping to understand whether these water-borne pesticides, particularly at the low levels shown in this study, pose a risk for pollinators,” said Mike Focazio, program coordinator for the USGS Toxic Substances Hydrology Program.

US Non-GMO Sales Reach $200B


USDA Sued for Withholding Information on GMO Crops

The Center for Food Safety has sued the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, saying it illegally withheld public information on genetically engineered crops. The lawsuit accuses the agency of violating the Freedom of Information Act dozens of times, unlawfully withholding information for more than 13 years. APHIS had no immediate response.

source: Reuters.com 8/25/2015

Denmark to Become 100% Organic Country

The Danish government is investing more than 53 million euros in 2015 to convert the entire country’s agriculture into organic farming. The government is working on two different fronts: one is to give a boost to turning traditional farmland into organic, while the other is to stimulate increased demand for organic products. Regarding the former, the aim is to double the agricultural land cultivated with organic methods by 2020. Not only will land belonging to the government be cultivated using organic and biodynamic methods, but the government will support and finance those working and investing in this sector, to develop new technologies and ideas that help promote growth.

The second aspect is promotion. The ministry, regions and cities have joined forces and all institutions must lead by example: the first organic target is 60% of food served to the public. Schools—starting from nursery schools—as well as hospitals and non-privatized cafeterias must respect it. National public institutions serve approximately 800,000 meals a day that will be increasingly “green”.

The Defense department has said that it will move to adjust the 1.1 million kilograms of food each year served at bases and in the other related cafeterias (whether in the western part of the country, 40% of the food that the military eats are already organic). The Ministry of the Environment is committed to converting many of the areas that it manages into organic farming, which means working proactively to seek out organic producers who will rent land, making it easier for farmers and ranchers to make the transition to organic. Children and teens will learn about the importance of organic farming in school, and the reform of the educational system looks to invigorate nutrition-based education.

source: Center for Food Safety Email, August 7, 2015

Sub-Lethal Doses of Glyphosate Impair Honeybee Navigation

A study has found that doses of glyphosate that are comparable to those found in agricultural settings—and that are too low to kill bees outright—adversely affect their ability to find their way back to their hives. This team performed an experiment in...
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which forager honeybees were trained to an artificial feeder, and then captured, fed with sugar solution containing glyphosate traces and released from a novel site either once or twice. Their homeward trajectories were tracked using harmonic radar technology. The team found that honeybees that had been fed with a solution containing 10 mg/l of glyphosate spent more time performing homeward flights than control bees or bees treated with lower glyphosate concentrations. They also performed more indirect homing flights. The conclusion: honeybee navigation is affected by ingesting traces of the most widely used herbicide worldwide, with potential long-term negative consequences for colony foraging success.

source: Journal of Experimental Biology, July 2015

Whole Foods Rating System Changes Under Pressure
Whole Foods Market (WFM) and CCOF (California Certified Organic Growers) jointly announced new changes to WFM’s Responsibly Grown rating program and its enrollment process for certified organic flower and produce farmers. These changes include allowing current organic vendors to suspend enrollment efforts until the end of this year, immediately relieving pressure for many small and medium sized producers. WFM also announced its intention to positively alter both the scoring and presentation of certified organic products, while committing to expanded dialogue about the program with vendors and other stakeholders.

CCOF’s leadership facilitated several weeks of exchange between a group of long-time, prominent organic producers and WFM’s management. Many organic farmers objected to how the rating system deals with organic products: the scoring is too low, the presentation is confusing, and the Responsibly Grown “on-boarding” process is too rushed and unfair to small operators. WFM has responded to each of those areas, with some changes effective immediately and others that will evolve over the rest of this year and beyond. Grower meetings and perhaps other forums are expected to be part of the continuing process.


Who is Supplying the US With Organic Corn?
A growing demand for organics, and the near-total reliance by U.S. farmers on genetically modified corn and soybeans, is driving a surge in imports from other nations where crops largely are free of bioengineering. Imports such as corn from Romania and soybeans from India are booming, according to an analysis of U.S. trade data released Wednesday by the Organic Trade Association and Pennsylvania State University. The report is “a help-wanted sign” for U.S. farmers, said Laura Batcha, association chief executive officer. “There are market distortions that are pretty striking.”

Most of the corn and soybean shipments become feed for chickens and cows so they can be certified organic under U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines. Imports to the U.S. of Romanian corn rose to $11.6 million in 2014 and soybean imports from India more than doubled to $73.8 million. Sales of foods certified by the U.S. as free of synthetic chemicals or genetic engineering reached $35.9 billion in 2014, an 11 percent increase over 2013 and about 5.1 percent of U.S. grocery spending. The organic sector’s average annual growth of about 10 percent is triple that of overall food sales, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture and trade association data.

source: Bloomberg.com, April 15, 2015

Pyrolysis Turns Oily Soil into Fertile Ground
Rice Univ. scientists are cleaning soil contaminated by oil spills in a way that saves energy and reclaims the soil’s fertility. They use a process known as pyrolysis, which involves heating contaminated soils in the absence of oxygen. This approach is much better for the environment than standard incineration techniques for fast remediation, said Rice environmental engineer Pedro Alvarez. Off-shore oil spills tend to get the most attention, Alvarez said, but 98% of spills—more than 25,000 per year—occur on land. Industry and governments worldwide spend more than $10 billion annually to clean up oil spills. The Rice team found that pyrolyzing contaminated soil for three hours not only reduced the amount of petroleum hydrocarbons left to well below regulatory standards (typically less than 0.1% by weight),
but also enhanced the soil’s fertility. “We initially thought we could turn the hydrocarbons into biochar,” Alvarez said. “We turned out to be partly wrong: We didn’t get biochar, but [we got] a carbonaceous material that we call char and resembles coke.” Where biochar is a particle unto itself, the coke-like char appears to coat existing soil particles. The researchers successfully grew lettuce in the reclaimed soil in the lab.

source: Rice Univ. press release, Aug. 20, 2015

Scotland to Prohibit GM Crops.
Growing genetically modified (GM) crops will not be permitted in Scotland. Rural Affairs Secretary Richard Lochhead has confirmed that the Scottish Government intends to take advantage of new EU rules allowing countries to opt out of growing EU-authorised GM crops. The Cabinet Secretary said: “There is no evidence of significant demand for GM products by Scottish consumers and I am concerned that allowing GM crops to be grown in Scotland would damage our clean and green brand, thereby gambling with the future of our £14 billion food and drink sector.”

source: [http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Agri-vision-1ba6.aspx](http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Agri-vision-1ba6.aspx)

Monsanto hires industry consultancy firm to review WHO verdict on glyphosate
Monsanto has commissioned industry consultancy firm Intertek, formerly known as Cantox, to review the report of the World Health Organization’s cancer agency IARC, which said glyphosate is a probable carcinogen.

In 2000 Intertek/Cantox’s executive vice president Ian C. Munro co-authored a reassuring paper, in collaboration with Monsanto employees, that defended the safety of glyphosate herbicides. The paper claims that “glyphosate is non-carcinogenic” and does not cause birth defects or other developmental toxicity. It concludes, unsurprisingly, that “under present and expected conditions of use, Roundup herbicide does not pose a health risk to humans”.

source: Ecofarm Email, July 16, 2015

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ally I can help people learn how to cook real food again, to bridge the gap between the consumer and their understanding of health.”

“We definitely believe in climate change, we see it in our daily lives,” said Angela. “Living in New England the amount of snow we get in the winter and where it’s happening these years has changed as compared to a decade or two ago. There are lots of things that are changing and we realize the human piece of that and want to be a part of the solution instead of the problem. I have a lot of digestive problems and a lot of them come from eating wheat and being surrounded by wheat all the time. A lot of people in my industry don’t even believe that there’s any link between gut health and earth health; they just don’t see it. There still needs to be a lot of information put out there.”

Ample workshop choices and variety

From the Campus Center Auditorium with several hundred attendees to smaller rooms with 10 or 30 people, there were workshops for all interests and skill levels. Production scale farmers learned about farm mechanization, hand-held tools, fertility, marketing, economics, land acquisition, apprentice- ship models and much more. Ecological housing and practical skills workshops offered participants examples of ways these tools and techniques can be implemented. Herbs, policy, gardens, livestock, and workshops on other topics were also available. Tours were offered during each session, ranging from farms in Amherst and gardens affiliated with UMass to draft-animals powered operations, mushroom cultivation facilities, and others within relatively close proximity. The children and teen conferences were also well attended with an infusion of new classes, some of which were offered by students at the University.

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The business of NOFA’s Interstate Council

The NOFA Interstate Council’s annual meeting took place before the Friday evening keynote speech, a nice touchstone connecting members and chapters dispersed across a large region.

Interstate Council Policy Coordinator Steve Gilman also spoke about what the IC has been doing with funds provided from Farm Aid to cultivate better working relations with members of Congress. Gilman noted the depth of the impact of NOFA’s lobbying on issues about which its members are very knowledgeable. As working farmers and consumers, NOFA has an authenticity that gets noticed very quickly. “On the Hill in D.C., they’re really used to smooth lobbyists coming in with their whole sets of agendas,” said Gilman. “We can have people show up who are well versed, very articulate and know what we’re looking for and what we want. And we come from a whole different place and that becomes very evident. That’s our strength here.”

On Saturday evening, the first Bill Duesing Lifetime Achievement Award was give to its namesake, Bill Duesing. Not intended to be an annual award, this will honor those people who have had decades of service to NOFA and have had a profound, transformational effect on the organization. Duesing was recognized for his 40 years of work to promote local agriculture and greater local food sufficiency in Connecticut and the northeast.

NOFA/Mass debuted its “Put carbon where it belongs… back in the soil” video before Saturday’s keynote. The 6.5-minute video is one piece of NOFA/Mass’ campaign to educate the public about the impact fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial agriculture have in releasing dangerous amounts of carbon into the atmosphere and how farming and land management techniques can be used to store large amounts of carbon where it belongs – in the soil. The video, white paper, and other resources are available at www.nofamass.org/carbon.

Crowds of attendees visited vendors at tables under the tent during workshop breaks.

Camille Miller presents NOFA Person of the Year Al Johnson with his award and shovel.

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New in 2015

There were some changes this year, namely the return of the exhibitor/registration tent, outdoor workshops and fair to the Campus Pond Lawn. “I think it’s a positive move,” said Mastrianni. “I feel that there’s a lot more energy flowing this year here.”

“I think the vendors are very happy,” said conference Marketing Director Bob Minnocci. “There are a wide variety of vendors, everybody from soil amendment producers to equipment manufacturers to educational institutions and political policy organizations.”

The 2015 conference also returned to its traditional three-day format, having shifted to two-days in 2014. Saturday’s fair benefited from the extended format, with three generous hours of festive outdoor activities like games, food, a market, meet ups, music and demonstrations on sauerkraut making, wool spinning and rug hooking, and preserving the wild food harvest. “This is a great place to meet new people and get connected to people who are like-minded. Everybody here is a kindred spirit, there are no strangers. All are welcome,” said Mastrianni.

The 2016 conference will take place in August 2016 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. NOFA/Massachusetts, the host chapter, is still negotiating an exact date with the school. Dr. Christine Jones, Australian soil scientist and consultant, will deliver one of the keynote speeches.

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A number of attendees turned out to learn about managing rabbits organically.

Photo by Isabella Strong

Aaron Englander runs a workshop on on-farm produced innoculants and nutrients.

Photo by Isabella Strong

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