

The Natural Farmer

News Notes, Spring 2002

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Local food purchases generate almost twice the local income. A survey by the British New Economics Foundation found that every £10 spent on local food generates £25 in local income before leaving the area. In contrast, the same £10 spent in a supermarket would generate about £14 in local income. *source: Organic Farming, Autumn, 2001*

U. S. Forest ownership: more people own smaller woodlots. Private ownership of forests has grown by more than 50% in the last generation, while forest size has decreased (particularly among middle size holdings (100 to 500 acres). *source: Tree Farmer, July/August 2001*

Potato industry implements GMO testing. The National Potato Promotion Board has invested \$600,000 to test for genetically modified seed. "We've got to make sure the spuds we grow are certified to be GMO free," said board chairman Jon Brownell. Pressure on the industry has come from GMO labeling laws to be implemented in Japan and Korea this spring, as well as increased concern from European buyers. Sales of US dehydrated potatoes in Japan have fallen 37% since last May, when snacks made with them tested positive for GMO potatoes. *source: The Vegetable Grower News, December, 2001*

Vermont towns to vote on GMOs. In 30 some town meetings in Vermont this spring, voters will be considering anti-GMO votes. In Vermont, all towns meet on the same day — March 5 this year. That has given organizers a focus for implementing a state-wide campaign around genetic engineering in agriculture. Some towns will consider outright bans on planting of GE crops, others will consider resolutions putting the town on notice seeking further safety testing, labeling, and planting moratoria. Proponents hope to create some GE-free zones in the Green Mountain state by planting time. *source: personal communications and NOFA Notes, Winter 2001-2002*

Familiar ag company names disappearing. Last September the Burpee Holding Company, publisher of the Burpee Seed catalog, filed for bankruptcy. Prior to that, in July, Foster & Gallagher, parent of Spring Hill nurseries, Breck's, Stark Brothers Nurseries and Orchards, The Vermont Wildflower Farm, Michigan Bulb, Gurney Seed, and Henry Field Company went under. Their mail order business has been picked up by Garden's Alive, an Indiana company. Also in September Garden Way, the Troy-bilt people, went out of business. Their roto-tillers will now be produced by MTD Products of Cleveland, Ohio. *source: Boston Globe, December 27, 2001*

Supreme Court backs seed patents. On December 11 the US Supreme Court upheld extending the protection of utility patents to seeds. In the 1970 Plant Variety Protection Act, Congress had specifically allowed farmers to save seed for their own use and limited research and plant breeding programs. However, title 35, section 101 of the U.S. Code (part of the Patent Act) granted patent protection to

"seeds and seed grown plants." Critics of the ruling feel it circumvents the clear will of Congress.

source: The Germinator, January, 2002

Two thirds of US farm subsidy payments go to largest 10% of producers. According to an analysis by the Environmental Working Group, 2/3 of America's farmers get no subsidies, and among those who do, the bottom four-fifths get an average check of \$1000. But some 'farmer' recipients include Fortune 500 companies, members of Congress and celebrities. The net result of paying such largesse to the few big farmers is that overproduction is increased, prices fall, and smaller farmers continue to sell out to the larger ones who benefit from the subsidies. *source: Stewardship News, January-February, 2002 and Alternative Agriculture News, February, 2002*

Monsanto and Aventis Sued. A group of Canadian farmers has sued the two companies for damages caused by genetic pollution from modified canola. The class action suit is on behalf of Saskatchewan's 1000 organic growers raising over one million acres of the oil seed. About 60% of the province's canola crop is genetically modified. For details, see www.saskorganic.com. *source: Alternative Agriculture News, February, 2002*

GE crops contained? A biotech industry review shows that 99% of 2001 genetically engineered crop acreage was in one of 4 countries: America (68%), Argentina (22%), Canada (6%) and China (3%). Herbicide resistance was the dominant trait (77% of acreage) with Bt following (15%). Soy accounted for 63% of the acreage and corn 11%. *source: Crop Biotech Net press release, January 10, 2002*

Oregon Tilth excludes certified farmers from board. One of the oldest and most respected organic farming groups in the country has decided to exclude farmers it certifies from service on its board of directors in order to be in compliance with the "conflict of interest" provisions of the National Organic Program. Like the NOFAs, organic farming groups around the country have been varied in their response to these challenging provisions. Some have gotten out of certification, some have set up independent corporations to conduct their certification business, some have set up Limited Liability Corporations under the main organization for this purpose. In the case of Oregon Tilth, certified board members are resigning and recruiting to fill their seats faculty from Oregon State University's ag department and the University of Oregon Business School, as well as environmental lawyers and organic retailers. We wish them well! *source: In Good Tilth, February 15, 2002*

Mail irradiation and seeds. The United States Postal Service (USPS) is using electronic beam irradiation on a limited amount of mail to kill anthrax bacteria. The equipment irradiates mail for 3 to 5 minutes with a dosage of 55 kilo-Gray. A study was conducted of this treatment on seeds, and the Federal Seed Laboratory study reports: "The irradiated portions of the samples all had zero percent germination with zero percent abnormal seedlings and 100 percent dead seed." Representatives of the American Seed Trade Association met with the USPS in January to discuss the normal shipment of seed in commerce. Currently, only mail that was at the Brentwood and Trenton NJ facilities at the time of the anthrax scare has been irradiated, and such mail is placed in a plastic bag with an accompanying letter advising the recipient that it has been irradiated. In order to minimize the chance of irradiation in the future, seed shippers are designing mailers that include safety seals, transparent envelopes, clear company logo with return address and phone and website, metered postage instead of stamps and premiums like pens or magnets which make the mailpiece lumpy. Currently private shippers use no irradiation. *source: In Good Tilth, February 15, 2002*

Northeast leads in direct marketing. Six of the seven NOFA states are among the top ten states in average per farm value of products sold directly for human consumption. Four NOFA states lead the list.

Direct marketing is one way to maximize farm income per product. In 1999, for example, a dozen eggs sold retail for 96¢, but the average farm income per dozen was only 45¢. For apples the margin is even greater, 90¢ per pound versus 19¢. Farmers who can sell direct can keep the margin. *source: Network 01, December, 2001*

Study says organic food higher in nutrition. A study by Nutrikinetics found that organic foods were higher than conventional foods in various nutrients: magnesium (29.3% higher), vitamin C (27% higher), iron (21% higher), and phosphorus (13.6% higher). [Ed. Note: It was not clear from my source who financed the study, nor how objective Nutrikinetics is. Studies of this nature are usually conducted by partisan groups and rarely objective, in my experience.] For more info visit www.foodisyourbestmedicine.com. *source: Stewardship News, January-February, 2002*

Half of US grain elevators segregate GMO varieties. Giving the lie to industry claims that such measures are impossibly difficult, a survey by the American Corn Growers Association of 1149 elevators in 11 states reports that over half of US elevators require segregation of genetically modified varieties from non-modified varieties. Almost 20 percent of them offer premiums for non-GMO corn or soybeans. *source: In Good Tilt, February 15, 2002*

Limits on corporate farm ownership benefit rural communities. Counties in states protecting family farming by some measure of restriction on corporate farm ownership have fewer families in poverty, lower unemployment and a higher percentage of farms realizing cash gains, according to a study by researchers from Cornell and Clarkson Universities. For more information contact Risk Welsh at welshjr@clarkson.edu. *source: Alternative Agriculture News, February, 2002*

NAFTA bites owner. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was pressed upon the rest of the continent by the US. Like the WTO, the idea was to keep governments from imposing protectionist restrictions on imports, thus assuring free trade. So when the gasoline additive MTBE began turning up in California wells and the state ordered that the chemical be phased out, its manufacturer – a Canadian company called Methanex – sued the state seeking \$970 million in compensation for loss of market share and lost future profits. The case will be decided in a closed NAFTA tribunal. California taxpayers await the decision with interest! *source: Bill Moyers Reports*

Demeter spins off "Stellar Certification Services". The well established name "Demeter" on food is the mark of Biodynamic certification. But Demeter has also certified organic food, under the "Aurora" mark, produced on farms considering Biodynamics. Now the provisions of the National Organic Program, which require that the name of the organic certifier be on product labels, have forced Demeter to set up a separate certification service for organic products. Demeter and Stellar will be affiliated under the same board, and products may have one or both labels, depending on the certification earned. *source: Demeter press release, February 4, 2002*

"Green" forest management labels not equal. Forest owners wishing to tout their management practices may be certified under two different labels – the Sustainable Forest Initiative (SFI) of the American Forest and Paper Association, or the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). A study by the Meridian Institute concludes, however, that the SFI fails to meet basic environmental expectations such as protecting old growth, not harming endangered species and minimizing use of toxic chemicals. The study was sponsored by both groups and is available at www.merid.org. *source: Environmental News Service, October 17, 2001*

Maori council opposes GE. A "hui" or community gathering of the Maori people, the indigenous New Zealanders, has declared war on genetic engineering (GE) protagonists such as the "Life Sciences Network, Multi and TransNational Chemical and Fertiliser companies, and scientists at Universities and Research Institutes experimenting with GE on Agricultural, Horticulture, Aquaculture, Flora and Fauna". The hui continued: "These GE protagonist's threaten our whakapapa [heritage as a people], threaten our plant whakapapa and threaten our animal whakapapa. We have a responsibility to protect the existing environment for the future of our mokopuna." The Maori have some sharp legal teeth because they ceded sovereignty to Britain under a treaty which guarantees their "full, exclusive and undisturbed possession" of their "lands, forests, fisheries and other treasured possessions." *source: Maori press release, December 12, 2001*

Clopyralid herbicide contaminates compost. The Dow AgroSciences herbicide Clopyralid, used to kill dandelions and thistles but toxic to vegetables such as potatoes, peppers, tomatoes and beans, has been found to survive commercial composting at rates hundreds of times that needed to kill sensitive plants. The discovery threatens the entire composting/recycling industry. "You cannot have a system that mandates recycling of green waste, and license a garden chemical that makes the waste unrecyclable," said Gabriella Uhlar-Heffner, solid waste manager for Seattle's public utility company. *source: Los Angeles Times, December 28, 2001*

Sludge safety being questioned. The inspector general of the Environmental Protection Agency has cited "gaps in the science" used to approve sludge recycling in the 1990s and the agency has asked the National Research Council to study possible health concerns related to the sludge recycling. The inspector general report comes amid growing concerns among some states, communities and federal scientists that recycling of solidified sewage - known as sludge or biosolids - may not be as safe as thought when the government approved it in the mid-1990s. A number of anecdotal reports of human health problems have been percolating up from local authorities. *source: Associated Press, February 7, 2002*

Brazil GE-free exports at record levels. Brazil's net corn exports were a record 6.2 million tons compared with net imports of 1.8 million tons last year. International buyers have been looking to Brazil for corn preferentially and also have been paying a \$6 to \$7 dollar premium per ton over U.S. corn because Brazil's crops are not genetically modified. Brazil is one of the last major agricultural producers in the world that forbids the sale of genetically modified foods or materials. *source: Reuters, December 21, 2001*

GE doesn't pay farmers, says study. An Iowa State University economist has found that farmers who plant genetically engineered soy or corn fare no better financially for that choice than farmers who plant conventional varieties. Researcher Michael Duffy concludes that reasons other than farmer profitability are behind the increase in GE crop acreage. *source: Des Moines Register, January 13, 2001*

US aids Afghan farmers with GE seed. As part of US reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, the Agency for International Development (USAID) have been giving genetically engineered seed to farmers for replanting. Agency administrator Andrew Natsios defended the use of the seed: "One of the only ways we are going to be able to feed the developing world and upgrade the agricultural system in the third world is through genetically modified material." *source: Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, January 28, 2002*

Corn biodiversity threatened by spread of GE. Mexican authorities became alarmed last fall at the spread of GE corn throughout the state of Oaxaca. Mexico is the original home of corn and it's

progenitor, teosinte. Over 20,000 varieties of the crop exist in Mexico and experts fear that the spread of GE corn's pollen will contaminate these relatives and wipe out the plant's natural biodiversity. The effect of such a disaster on humans was made clear during 1970 when 50% of the US corn crop in some areas failed because it was not resistant to a leaf blight. Only the availability of natural varieties from which resistance can be crossed into a crop will alleviate such problems. Worried Mexican officials have declared a moratorium on planting of GE corn, but are not forbidding the import of modified varieties for food. The unfortunate result is that poor peasants are diverting the cheaper, modified corn and using it for seed, not food. *source: BioDemocracy News, January/February 2002*