

The Natural Farmer

Interstate Council Retreat Plans for NOFA's Future - Summer 2002

By Bill Duesing

In 2001, NOFA marked its 30th anniversary. Early in 2002, the NOFA Interstate Council held its first retreat.

The Interstate Council was formed when there were just two NOFA chapters — Vermont and New Hampshire. The Council oversaw joint NOFA activities — the Summer Conference and *The Natural Farmer (TNF)* — and it represented all NOFA members who didn't live in either of the two original NOFA states. In 1982, the Interstate Council awarded chapter status to Massachusetts and Connecticut, which each had over 50 NOFA members who requested it. In the next few years New York, Rhode Island and New Jersey each formed NOFA chapters, too.

The Council has had no staff. It has contracted with Jack Kittredge since 1988 to produce *TNF*, since 1987 with Massachusetts to produce the Summer Conference and with various NOFA members to oversee a fundraiser or produce a book proposal as needed. The only regular support the council receives is a \$1500 fee from the Summer Conference.

The Council is made up of two representatives from each chapter. It meets four times a year to oversee the Summer Conference and *TNF*, as well as an enlarging portfolio of publishing, fundraising and communications ventures. Because of this growth, as well as the changes brought about in some states by the National Organic Program, the Council felt the need for a retreat to consider the organization and the big picture. The Council hired Julie Rawson to plan a retreat.



photo courtesy Bill Duesing

The NOFA Interstate Council takes a break for a meal. Facing camera are John Cleary of Vermont, Tom Johnson of Massachusetts, Karen Anderson of New Jersey, Sarah Johnston of New York, Jonathan von Ranson of Massachusetts, and Kay Magilavy of New York.

Representatives from each of the seven state chapters were invited to spend the weekend of March 22, 23 and 24 at the Woolman Hill Retreat Center in Deerfield, Massachusetts, reviewing NOFA history, sharing information about chapter programs and administration and planning for future NOFA work that would benefit from collaboration among the chapters.

All chapters sent representatives except Rhode Island, which was sorely missed. Those attending and their reports of chapter activities provide a good picture of NOFA today.

Who was there and state reports

Vermont was represented by **Kirsten Bower**, financial manager, **John Cleary**, certification administrator and board member **Camilla Roberts**. Vermont has 750-800 members, certifies 23,000 acres on 230 farms (including 55 dairy farms) has a budget of \$350,000, four full time staff, five part time staff, a full time consultant and eight inspectors. The chapter's 11 programs include apprenticeship, bulk order, certification, loan fund for farmers, farm share, farmers market development, CSA support, ag education, dairy tech, social action, winter conference and summer workshops. Vermont NOFA is forming a limited liability corporation to take over certification.

New Hampshire was represented by board president **Dan Holmes**, council representative **Polly MacNicol**, and part-time staff person, **Elizabeth Obelenus**. NOFA NH has 276 members, a budget of about \$13,000, a bulk order, newsletter and holds workshops and summer farm tours. The state government runs the certification program in New Hampshire.

Massachusetts was represented by board president **Jonathan von Ranson**, by council representatives **Michael O'Bannon** and **Tom Johnson**, by *TNF* editor **Jack Kittredge** and by NOFA Mass coordinator and Summer Conference coordinator **Julie Rawson**. Massachusetts has 750 members and 60 certified farms, a budget of \$250,000 (including \$100,000 for the Summer Conference and \$65,000 for the bulk order program with CT and RI) and has many staff (from very part time to three at half time) to operate 22 programs. NOFA/Mass has spun off its certification program to Massachusetts Independent Certifiers, Inc. which will use the NOFA/Mass label.

Connecticut was represented by board president **Peter Rothenberg**, board members **Marion Griswold** and **Erin Amezzane** and staff person **Bill Duesing**. Connecticut has 350-400 members, 55 certified farms, an \$80,000 budget, one full time and three part time contractors for its certification, education, conference and membership programs. Connecticut works with Massachusetts on the very successful CT/Mass NOFA Organic Land Care Program. This year, CT NOFA will turn its certification program over to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

New York is a big state. It was represented by council rep **Steve Gilman**, executive director **Sarah Johnston**, **Dick DeGraff**, state council president, **Elizabeth Henderson**, who represents NOFA on various national and international organic organizations and **Kay Magilavy** who is the NOFA web site coordinator. NOFA NY has between 900 and 1300 members, 203 certified farms, a \$180,000 budget for certification (with 2.5 staff plus part-time inspectors) and a \$140,000 budget (with the director and a full-time farm educator) for the rest of the organization. NY's programs include a two-day winter conference, a Transitions conference, a seed growing and breeding project and a fund-raiser dinner. New York is creating a limited liability corporation to carry on certification.

New Jersey was represented by executive director **Karen Andersen** and board president **Stephanie Harris**. Currently the chapter has 350 members, 69 certified farms, a budget of \$160,000 for 2002 with

three full-time, two part-time staff and a few consultants. NOFA NJ will run the New Jersey State certification program with funds from the state.

On to the retreat...

We reviewed purposes of the corporation (see box) and the Council's history and current programs in addition to *TNF* and the Conference, now in its 28th year. The Council has published *The Real Dirt* (1994 and reprinted in 2002), four reports on the "Farmer to Farmer Information Exchange" and a "CSA Farm Network" directory. All of these resulted from an individual with an idea and funding from USDA's SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program.

The Council has also raised funds to support its work and to share with the chapters, including from 5% and coupon days at Bread and Circus/Whole Foods stores, from Margot Dilmaghani's "Gardens of the Heart" CD and from the "Tofu Tollbooth".

The Council has tried to encourage cooperation among the certifiers in the northeast through the Northeast Interstate Organic Certification Committee. It has supported some of Elizabeth Henderson's travel to national meetings regarding the NOP, and some state certifier travel to a national meeting.

That was all Friday night.

On Saturday we evaluated current projects, studied organizational development and strategic planning, discussed political and social action (what chapters are doing, what the council has and could do and our limitations as a non-profit educational organization). Before we stopped on Saturday we brainstormed future Council projects and set priorities.

On Sunday morning, the group worked to put a plan and funding in place to accomplish the priorities we'd discovered the day before.

But first, there were decisions to make on an immediate project. NOFA had just received a \$33,000 grant from SARE to create 8 more books in the Organic Principles and Practices Handbook Series started by NOFA/Mass and edited by Jonathan von Ransom. The Council has pledged \$8,000 toward the project and NOFA/Mass will contribute \$11,000.

Chelsea Green Publishing Company had already expressed interest in distributing the series, including reprints of the Soil and Weed Management volumes already published. Now they were offering to publish them, too, providing a larger print run and wider distribution. The assembled representatives chose to co-publish with Chelsea Green.

And, on to planning:

Website: Although the Council has had a web site with links to the state chapters for quite a while, it had no content. After reviewing a number of applications and viewing the web work of a number of applicants, the council contracted with Paul Kittredge to provide 20 hours per month of web content work. Check out the improved site at www.nofaic.org

Policy: A policy committee was created to coordinate the development of NOFA policies regarding national and international issues. Elizabeth Henderson will represent NOFA at the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) meeting in Vancouver in August with support

from the Council. Liz is very anxious to pass her knowledge on to a capable person interested in national and international policy and the meetings where they are hashed out. Call her at 315 331-9029 or email ehendrsn@redsuspenders.com if you are a budding organic policy wonk and want to train with one of the best in the country. New York and Vermont have passed policy resolutions at their annual meetings and will share them with the rest of the states.

Local Organic Campaign committee: There was a lot of interest in finding a way for the states to work together to promote local and organic food in the northeast. A committee was established to create a plan for the next council meeting.

Insurance: Tom Johnson has connections in the insurance industry and agreed to check out the possibility of the Council being able to help provide affordable group insurance for NOFA members or farms.

Whole Foods/Bread and Circus fundraiser and farmer relations: The retreat participants agreed that if we are to work with these stores to raise money, that we should also work with them to encourage more purchasing from local, organic farmers and work with other chains, too. Two thousand dollars was allocated for planning work on this project. Tom Johnson of Massachusetts will coordinate this job.

The Natural Farmer and the Summer Conference didn't need any attention at this time. They are in the hands of skilled staff people with adequate funding.

Strategic Planning: We agreed that this would be useful for our organization and that a committee should present a proposal at the next council meeting.

Internal communications: To encourage better communication, we agreed that each chapter should send its newsletter to five key people in the other chapters.

Farmer to Farmer conference: Although this wasn't high on our priority list, there are some intriguing funding possibilities with possible connections to creating the content for the Handbook Series.

Winter Conference Timing: The Council has long hoped to spread out the state winter conferences to avoid conflicts in getting speakers and attracting attendees. As of now, NY, NJ and MA all have their conferences on the 4th weekend in January. MA will try to move its conference to the 1st weekend in February. Vermont's conference is the 2nd weekend in February and CT's is the 1st weekend in March.

Leadership Training: We will investigate strategies for training a new generation of organic and sustainable agriculture leaders in the Northeast.

Chapter Support: It was agreed to allocate \$2,000 each to the RI and NH chapters for them to use to pay for training and consultants to help get over the organizational rough spots they are now in.

Part time staff: The assembled representatives felt that some paid coordination was critical to manage the many projects that the Council has going at this time. I was hired for 14 hours a month until November to keep all the balls in the air.

Certification coordination: A small committee was established to find ways for the certification programs to work together in helpful ways.

Other stuff: It was decided where to store the NOFA archives, important documents and what the chapters should share with each other.

That seems like quite a bit decided upon and started for one weekend. It was a lot of meeting. However, the weekend also provided a wonderful opportunity to meet more of the talented and dedicated people who are involved with NOFA and to enjoy delicious meals together. The early risers even got to walk on some of the many trails of the very hospitable and beautiful retreat center.

Many thanks go to Annie Hassett, who planned and prepared delicious meals, provided some great music and led a group Chi Gong exercise Sunday morning, to Juanita Nelson who talked to us about a principled life on Saturday evening and answered questions, as well as to Julie for organizing the weekend and to all those who gave up a spring weekend to plan for NOFA's future.

If you see the place where you could use your talents to advance NOFA's work, let me know at 203-888-5146, or bduesing@cs.com.

The council will meet next on Sunday morning at the Summer Conference. NOFA members are welcome. Since the meeting is just one workshop period long, the agenda is usually short. If you have something you think the council should consider, contact me or your council representative ahead of time.

From the NOFA Council's articles of incorporation:

The purposes for which the corporation is to be formed are:
to educate its membership and the public about the benefits of natural, organic, ecological agriculture, including the implications relating to the health of all life on the earth; to provide marketing and agricultural buying services for growers; to provide educational and informational services pertaining to the natural husbandry of the earth that is permanent, renewable, and sustainable; to promote the growth of local, cooperative farm organizations which emphasize ecologically sustainable agricultural principles; to demonstrate through pilot projects the feasibility and benefits of restoring local and regional agriculture. NOFA will provide these services in a non-discriminatory manner consistent with its not-for-profit status.