



News Briefs

• Chiquita Meets Environmental Standards and Joins “Better Banana Project”

Chiquita Brands International, the world’s top banana producer, has met the environmental standards of the Better Banana Project, a certification program that sets rigorous environmental and working standards on banana farms. The Project’s guidelines call for firms to curtail use of toxic chemicals, control pollution, conserve soil and water, and protect the health and safety of workers. All of Chiquita’s 127 Latin American farms are now certified under those standards, and its operations in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region soon will be, according to the company. “In so doing, Chiquita officials say the company benefits by getting out from under the environmental protests that have besieged the industry in recent years, while also saving money through such steps as not having to use as many chemicals,” said an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (November 16, 2000). “Chiquita officials say production hasn’t suffered, and that the program has actually achieved cost savings by getting so many farms onto common practices,” including reducing herbicide use by as much as 80 percent.

• Negotiators Seek Global Treaty on Pesticides and Pollutants

Negotiators from 121 countries are meeting in South Africa this month to try to complete the first international treaty to restrict the production and use of 12 persistent organic pollutants, including eight pesticides, according to *The New York Times* (November 28, 2000). The eight pesticides are aldrin, chlordane, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, mirex, and toxaphene. This month’s meeting, the last of five run by the United Nations Environment Programme, focuses on 12 pollutants that were chosen “not because they were the most dangerous, but because they are the most widely studied,” according to the article. Two other families of chemicals—dioxins and furans—are still being considered, but “extending the restrictions to them is controversial because they are unintentionally produced in many industrial settings and in waste incineration,” the article said. “Negotiators from the United States say they expect the treaty to be signed and ratified. But they add that the process has been fraught with political and practical challenges because some chemicals are essential to profitable businesses and others are used to control the spread of diseases.”

• Final Plan to Reduce the Gulf of Mexico’s “Dead Zone” Is in the Works

The Clinton administration is “finalizing a plan to reduce by two-thirds the size of the ‘Dead Zone’ in the Gulf of Mexico by 2010 and is expected to call for significant funding increases almost immediately, in the FY’02 budget due in February,” according to Greenwire (November 20, 2000), an electronic news service. “And while the imminent change in administrations would seem to put the plan in doubt, the congressional call for such action two years ago suggests the issue will have staying power.” Scientists for years have detected seasonally low oxygen levels in the northern Gulf of Mexico, mainly around the mouth of the Mississippi River. High levels of phosphorus and nitrogen there have been attributed to agriculture, water treatment plants, and other human activities that have allowed increasing levels of chemicals into the entire Mississippi watershed.

A draft plan circulated during the summer laid out options for the ultimate goal of the final plan, according to Greenwire, which is to reduce the size of the Dead Zone from a five-year average expanse of 14,000 square kilometers to 5,000 square kilometers by 2010. The best science indicates this would require cutting nitrogen deposits to the Gulf by 30 percent from the 1980-1996 average. The plan suggests cutting nitrogen discharges from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers from about 1 million metric tons per year to 650,000 metric tons, a 20 percent to 40 percent reduction from the 1980-1996 average. The plan also speaks more generally of the goal “to pursue practical, cost-effective efforts by all states and tribes within the basin and all categories of sources to protect the ecological and fisheries resources of the northern Gulf of Mexico by reducing nutrient over-enrichment.” The plan could be sent to Congress early this month and finalized by the incoming administration and the 107th Congress.

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• **Biotech Companies Push for Looser Restrictions on Genetically Modified Seed Labeling**

The American Seed Trade Association, a trade group for seed producers and distributors, is pushing “to establish standards that would allow a small amount of genetically engineered materials in bags of seeds and still have those seeds considered free of modification,” according to *The New York Times* (November 28, 2000). The association asked for a “tolerance” at a U.S. Department of Agriculture meeting in response to last month’s discovery that the protein from genetically modified StarLink corn was also found in some seed corn not sold as StarLink. According to the trade group, “it is virtually impossible to ensure that a bag of non-modified seeds does not have a few genetically modified ones mixed in,” according to the article. “Insisting on absolute purity, it says, would bog down the world seed trade.” Earlier last month, USDA grain inspectors began testing U.S. railcars with yellow corn bound for export markets to detect any StarLink contamination, a USDA official told Reuters (November 16, 2000). The USDA began testing railcars and barges carrying export-bound U.S. yellow corn to satisfy Japanese concerns about contaminated corn. Japan is the single biggest buyer of American corn.

• **Fertilizers May Contribute to Global Warming, Indian Researchers Find**

The increasing use of fertilizers could be contributing to global warming by decreasing oxygen and raising levels of nitrous oxide gas in coastal waters, scientists at the National Institute of Oceanography in India have found. The research, published in *Nature* (November 16, 2000), found a concentration of nitrous oxide in the coastal Arabian Sea that was 100 times higher than normal levels. Nitrous oxide is known to be over 200 times more potent than carbon dioxide in absorbing infra-red radiation, which contributes to global warming. According to Reuters (November 17, 2000), primary researcher S.W.A. Naqvi said that “other oxygen-deficient areas of the world, such as the Chesapeake Bay and the Louisiana shelf off the Mississippi Delta in the United States [the ‘Dead Zone’], Tokyo Bay, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea had much higher concentrations of fertilizer influx to coastal waters than India, leading to the possibility of even higher levels of nitrous oxide.”

• **California’s Organic Farmers Enjoy Increasing Sales**

Gross sales of all California organic produce increased 38 percent between 1995 and 1998, according to a soon-to-be-published study by the University of California Agricultural Issues Center, as reported in *The Ventura County Star* (November 16, 2000). Sales in 1995 were \$113 million, and in 1998, increased to \$156 million, the study found. Total organic acreage in the state increased by 48 percent from 45,710 to 67,639. “While acreage and sales showed a notable increase, the number of California growers went up only 7 percent, from 1,425 to 1,526,” according to the story. Along California’s South Coast region, from Santa Barbara to San Diego, organic sales totaled \$24.6 million in 1998, an increase of 37 percent from 1997.

• **Kerr Center, Organic Farming Research Foundation Seek Grant Applications**

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Organic Farming Research Foundation are seeking grant applications for 2001 grants. The Kerr Center is soliciting proposals from Oklahoma farmers who are interested in testing the potential for alternative crops. To apply, a farmer must fill out the grant application which is available from the Kerr Center, P.O. Box 588, Poteau, OK 74953; (918) 647-9143; or on the Internet at www.kerrcenter.com. Applications must be received by February 7, 2001. The Organic Farming Research Foundation’s deadline for submitting a proposal is January 15, 2001. Application guidelines are available on the Internet at www.ofrf.org/grants/index.html.

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Wallace Center/Winrock News

• Small Core of Environmental Science on GE (Transgenic) Crops Limits Effective Regulation, Says New Report

The varieties and uses of genetically modified (transgenic) crops have grown much more rapidly than our ability to understand or appropriately regulate them, according to a report just released by the Wallace Center. Despite a large volume of popular literature, adequate scientific research into the benefits and risks these crops pose has not been done. The report recommends greater public research funding, revised research policies, and a better regulatory system to ensure that development and use of transgenic crops deliver public environmental benefits and avoid ecological hazards. *Transgenic Crops: An Environmental Assessment*, prepared by a team of researchers from the Wallace Center, Michigan State University, and Portland State University, includes a broad review and assessment of science and policy literature that leads to identification of important gaps in research and regulation.

The authors recommend a cautious approach to the use of transgenic crops, one designed to build scientific evidence on possible environmental effects and to reform the regulatory system so that it makes full use of the new scientific data. In addition to greater public research on the environmental aspects of transgenic crops, the report urges a change in priorities that will give greater attention to transgenic plant traits that are of potential long-term environmental benefit to the public. Examples include crops with greater tolerance of pest damage rather than tolerance to pesticides, and crops with lower water and irrigation needs.

Transgenic Crops: An Environmental Assessment was completed with partial funding support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and two USDA agencies: the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; and the Resource Economics Division of the Economic Research Service. It is available at www.winrock.org/transgenic.pdf, and will become available in printed form in January 2001. For more information, contact the Wallace Center, 1621 N. Kent St., Ste. 1200, Arlington, VA 22209-2134; (703) 525-9430 ext. 675; e-mail wallacecenter@winrock.org.

• John Doran Receives Onassis Prize for the Environment

USDA soil scientist John W. Doran last month received the Onassis Prize for the Environment from the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefits Foundation in Athens, Greece, for his research promoting soil health and environmentally sound agriculture. Doran works at the USDA Soil and Water Conservation Research Unit at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and is on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*, the Wallace Center's quarterly, peer-reviewed journal. Doran received the environmental award for his scientific achievements, including development of a practical test kit and other indicators to help farmers and other agricultural professionals monitor soil health.

• Chuck Francis Wins Seventh Generation Award for Agriculture Research

Charles (Chuck) Francis, Professor of Agronomy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and former director of the University's Center for Sustainable Agricultural Systems, has received the first national Seventh Generation Award, which highlights innovators in agriculture research whose work furthers sustainable food and farming systems that are practical, productive, and environmentally sound. The award is sponsored by the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, and the Consortium for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education in Madison, Wisconsin. Francis, a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*, has been called a "visionary" for moving his research results quickly to farmers and the classroom, according to the Center.

Positions

Appalachian Sustainable Development seeks a Manager of Sustainable Agriculture Programs, and a Marketer for its organic product line; send resumé and cover letter by December 20 to Anthony Flaccavento, Executive Director, P.O. Box 791, Abingdon, VA 24212; e-mail asd@naxs.net.

Center for Rural Affairs seeks applicants for three positions: senior leadership position in farm and community development, federal policy analyst, and federal policy organizer; for applications, contact CFRA, P.O. Box 406, Walthill, NE 68067; e-mail info@cfra.org; on the Internet, www.cfra.org.

Iowa State University is filling a new position to assist with Organic Agriculture Program research, extension, and education; contact Dr. Kathleen Delate, Iowa State University, e-mail kdelate@iastate.edu; or Dr. Cynthia Cambardella, USDA-ARS National Soil Tilth Lab, e-mail cambardella@nstl.gov.

Upcoming Events

January 12-13, 2001, "Farming for Profit and Stewardship" in the Mid-Atlantic region will be held in Hagerstown, MD; contact Bruce Mertz, Future Harvest, (410) 604-2681, e-mail fhcasa@umail.umd.edu.

January 12-13, 2001, Winter Workshops, sponsored by Practical Farmers of Iowa, will be held in Ames, IA; contact PFI, (515) 294-8512; on the Internet, www.pfi.iastate.edu.

January 15-22, 2001, 16th Annual North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show will be held in Mesa, AZ; contact Charlie Touchette, North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association, 1-888-884-9270; e-mail nafdma@map.com.

January 17-19, 2001, "Biotechnology: Progress or Problem; A Conference for Developing Community Leaders" will be held in Binghamton, NY; contact Natural Resource, Agriculture, and Engineering Service, (607) 255-7654; e-mail nraes@cornell.edu.

January 19-21, 2001, 10th annual conference of the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group will be held in Chattanooga, TN; contact Toni McLaughlin, (225) 654-2017; e-mail tonihawk@intersurf.com; on the Internet, www.attra.org/ssawg/.

January 23-24, 2001, Scientific Congress on Organic Agriculture Research will be held in Pacific Grove, CA (just prior to the 21st Eco-Farm Conference); contact Laura Ridenour, Organic Farming Research Foundation, (831) 426-6606; e-mail scoar@ofrf.org.

January 24-27, 2001, 21st Annual Ecological Farming Conference will be held in Pacific Grove, CA; contact Ecological Farming Association, 406 Main St., # 313, Watsonville, CA 95076; (831) 763-2111; on the Internet, www.eco-farm.org.

January 26-28, 2001, 20th Annual Organic Conference and Trade Show will be held at the University of Guelph, Canada; contact Tomas Nimmo, (705) 444-0923; e-mail organix@georgian.net.

February 4-13, 2001, Annual Sustainable Agriculture Delegation to Cuba will be organized by Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy; contact Kristina Canizares, (510) 654-4400; e-mail kcaniz@foodfirst.org; on the Internet, www.foodfirst.org/cuba/.

February 5, 2001, First Annual Meeting of Innovative Farmers of Michigan will be held in Frankenmuth, MI; contact IFM, 1460 S. Van Dyke, Bad Axe, MI 48413.

February 5-6, 2001, "Building a Farmers' Market Business," a workshop, will be held in conjunction with the New York State Farmers' Direct Marketing Conference in Owego, NY; contact New York State Direct Marketing Association, (315) 475-1101; on the Internet, www.nysfdma.com.

February 9-10, 2001, Virginia Biological Farming Conference and Trade Show will be held in Front Royal, VA; contact Andy Hankins, (804) 524-5962; e-mail ahankins@vsu.edu.

February 9-10, 2001, "Food Is Our Commonwealth: Beyond Business as Usual," the 10th annual Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture Farming for the Future Conference, will be held in State College, PA; contact PASA, (814) 349-9856; on the Internet, www.pasafarming.org.

February 9-10, 2001, Georgia Organics Annual Conference on Sustainable Agriculture will be held in Augusta, GA; contact Georgia Organics, (770) 621-4642; e-mail georgiaorganics@pd.org.

February 13-17, 2001, "Preserving Farm Diversity to Secure Our Future," workshops and joint conference of Sustaining People through Agriculture Network and Missouri Organic Association, will be held in Columbia, MO; contact Ardie Compton, SPAN, (417) 345-4157; Terry Durham, MOA, (573) 657-1177.

February 15-18, 2001, "Bio Fach 2001," the World Organic Trade Fair, will be held in Nuremberg, Germany; contact NurnbergMesse GmbH, Messezentrum, D-90471 Nurnberg; phone 49-0-9-1186-06-0; e-mail infor@nuernbergmesse.de; on the Internet, www.nuernbergmesse.de.

February 21-24, 2001, Mid-Atlantic Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show will be held in Virginia Beach, VA; contact Cathy Belcher, (804) 786-4046; e-mail cbelcher@vdacs.state.va.us; on the Internet at www.ext.vt.edu/madmc/.



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