



News Briefs

• Conservation Security Act Would Expand USDA Conservation Programs

Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) is expected this month to introduce the Conservation Security Act, a proposal that would pay farmers up to \$50,000 a year for protecting water quality and preventing soil erosion, according to a story by Reuters (February 11, 2001). The Act “would be a vast expansion of U.S. Agriculture Department soil and water programs, which are now tied mostly to paying farmers to idle environmentally fragile land and total around \$2 billion a year. But it also could be the next step along a path opened by Congress in 1985, when farmers were required to be good stewards of the land to qualify for subsidies.” Payments of \$20,000 a year would be made to farmers who take steps such as using cover crops to prevent erosion or conserving irrigation water; \$35,000 would be paid to farmers who use crop rotations to preserve soil fertility or restore wetlands; \$50,000 would be paid to farmers who use conservation practices everywhere on their land. According to Ferd Hoefner of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the proposal “spans the boundary” of traditional farm subsidies and environmental programs.

• Genetically Modified Wheat Stirs Controversy Before It Goes on the Market

The first genetically engineered variety of wheat is “stirring intense controversy around the globe years before it is expected to come onto the market,” according to *The Washington Post* (February 27, 2001). Monsanto, the producer of the wheat, says it will be ready for farmers within two to four years. “As news of Monsanto’s wheat has spread, buyers from Japan to Europe have told U.S. exporters that their consumers will not accept genetically modified wheat because of general fears about possible harm to the environment and human health from engineered crops,” the article said. “Some have said that the wheat’s very presence on American farms could threaten future purchases of all U.S. wheat. Half of all American wheat is exported, accounting for \$3.7 billion in sales.... Unlike the American corn and soybean industries, which quickly embraced biotech products in the 1990s, many in the wheat industry are approaching biotechnology now more as a challenge to surmount than an immediate opportunity to exploit.”

• Veneman Cites Success of Small Organic Farmers in Responding to Changing Market

USDA Secretary Ann Veneman last month cited the success of small organic farmers as she described how “producers are finding ways to participate in the changing market for food products, while improving their bottom lines.” These farmers are “taking the lead in more efficiently synchronizing farm production with market demand by recognizing higher value production and value-added processing businesses,” she said in a speech at the Agricultural Outlook Forum. “Small farm operators all over the country are successfully producing organic and specialty crops for niche markets, up-scale restaurants and farmer’s markets.” The full text of Veneman’s speech is available on the Internet at <http://www.usda.gov/news/releases/2001/02/0031.htm>.

• New Computer Model Will Help Farmers Manage Carbon

A new computer model developed by the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service will help farmers choose practices that will store carbon in the soil, where it plays a vital role in soil fertility and stability, and is prevented from becoming a greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, according to an article in *Agricultural Research* (February 2001). The model, called CQESTR, takes user-defined tillage practices and time periods, and computes how much organic matter would be stored in, or lost from, the soil under certain conditions. Using the model, farmers could determine what impact changing management practices would have on carbon storage. “In the future, quantifying carbon storage may have economic benefits” because of its global warming value, according to the article. USDA is performing final testing of the model, which runs on a personal computer. For more information, contact Ronald Rickman, ARS, Pendleton, OR; (541) 278-4380; e-mail Ronald.Rickman@orst.edu.

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• **Consumers Express “Outrage” About Prevalence of Biotech Foods, Prefer Labeling**

Consumers interviewed in 12 focus groups by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration expressed “outrage” that genetically engineered food could be so prevalent without them knowing about it, according to an FDA report. “Most participants expressed great surprise that food biotechnology has become so pervasive in the U.S. food supply.” Consumers last spring said they wanted labeling of genetically engineered products “to make more informed decisions about whether or not to buy a product,” said the report, which was just made public last month. “This desire to be informed did not imply any specific health and safety concerns about the labeled product, but rather concerns about unknown long-term consequences of food biotechnology.” The FDA’s report is available on the Internet at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~comm/biorpt.html>. Public comments on the FDA’s proposed rules on genetically engineered food, which were announced in January, will be accepted until April 3. Comments can be sent by e-mail to the FDA at fdadockets@oc.fda.gov. More information is available from the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture’s Web site at <http://www.SustainableAgriculture.net>.

• **European Union Passes Strict Rules Governing Genetically Modified Products**

The European Union Parliament last month passed strict rules governing the testing, planting, and sale of genetically modified food products, crops, seeds, and pharmaceutical products. The rules include phasing out over eight years the use of marker genes for antibiotic resistance, first in products and then in the laboratory, and setting up a public registry where consumers can trace genetically modified foods. It may take up to 18 months for European Union governments to endorse the rules, which will eventually replace Europe’s three-year moratorium on licensing genetically engineered food products. “The overwhelming 338-to-52 vote was cast despite intense suspicions about genetically modified foods,” according to *The New York Times* (February 15, 2001).

• **Consumers Union Gives EPA a “C+” for Pesticide Regulation**

The Consumers Union has published a “Report Card for the EPA,” awarding the agency a grade of C+ for its progress to date on assessing 9,000 agricultural pesticide uses, and when needed, restricting or banning them to make sure that exposure levels are safe, especially for children. EPA’s assessments, part of the Food Quality Protection Act, have reduced dietary pesticide risk by about 37 percent, leaving 63 percent still to be addressed, according to the report. “EPA still needs to address 100 or so uses of about 26 key chemicals, and to address the cumulative risks of chemical families with a common toxic mechanism” to achieve a 95 to 98 percent reduction of dietary exposure and risk, according to the report. An article about the report is in *Consumer Reports* (March 2001); the report is available on the Internet at <http://www.ecologic-ipm.com>.

• **Product Development Is Key to Organic Farming Gains in Europe**

Product development is the key to future growth for organic farming in Europe, according to Johannes Michelsen, an agricultural economist at the University of Esbjerg in Denmark who was interviewed by Reuters (February 22, 2001) following a speech at a European organic food industry conference. “Organic farming has to continuously develop both products and standards so it can maintain the distance to conventional farming,” he told Reuters. “Before we start marketing organic products, collection and information flow has to be improved, so when demand increases for certain products, they can be found and delivered.” He said that organic farming groups, the food industry, and retailers need to follow the example of conventional producers, working closely to develop and market new products. According to Reuters, organic farmland in the European Union rose to 2.7 million hectares (6.7 million acres) in 1998, from 700,000 hectares (1.7 million acres) in 1993.

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• **New Issue of Journal Highlights Effects of Mulches on Crop Yield and Labor**

The latest issue (Volume 15, Number 4) of *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture* features an article about the effects on crop yield and labor of fabric and compost mulches for vegetable production in a low tillage, permanent bed system. The *Journal*, the Wallace Center's quarterly, peer-reviewed journal of research on alternative agriculture, also includes articles about contributing factors and strategies for amelioration of soil salinity, a major constraint to irrigated agriculture in the Punjab region of Pakistan; a Geographic Information System for identification of potential alternative crops utilizing soil and climatic variables in the Bighorn Basin, Wyoming; information dissemination in alternative agriculture research—an analysis of researchers in the North Central region; factors affecting the adoption of conservation tillage on clay soil in southwestern Ontario, Canada; and the effect on vegetable seedling survival and weed cover of corn gluten meal, a natural pre-emergence herbicide. For U.S. subscribers of *AJAA*, one volume (four issues) costs US\$36 for individuals, US\$70 for libraries, and US\$18 for students; foreign rates are also available. 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.

Positions

University of Maine Cooperative Extension seeks a Sustainable Agriculture Specialist and Assistant Professor of Sustainable Agriculture to develop educational programs through the state; for full description, contact Sandy Vaillancourt, 5741 Libby Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5741; (207) 581-3191; e-mail sandyv@umext.maine.edu.

University of Vermont Center for Sustainable Agriculture seeks a program coordinator; send resumé, list of three references, and letter to UVM Employment Office, Waterman Bldg., University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405; for information, call (802) 656-5459, or on the Internet, <http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/>.

“Educational and Training Opportunities in Sustainable Agriculture” (13th edition, December 2000), a directory of internships in organic, alternative, or sustainable agriculture, is available from Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, National Agricultural Library, ARS/USDA, 10301 Baltimore Ave., Rm. 304, Beltsville, MD 20705-2351; (301) 504-6559; e-mail afsic@nal.usda.gov; on the Internet, <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/>.

Resources

“Transgenic Crops: An Environmental Assessment” is \$15, from the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agricultural and Environmental Policy, Winrock International, 1621 N Kent St., Ste. 1200, Arlington, VA 22209-2134; (703) 525-9430, ext. 675; e-mail wallacecenter@winrock.org; on the Internet at <http://www.winrock.org/transgenic.pdf>.

“USDA-ERS Briefing Room on Organic Farming and Marketing,” which contains ERS articles, reports, research information, government links, and other material, is available on the Internet at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/Organic/>.

“Geographic Information Systems and Agriculture: Environmental Applications,” selected books, papers, and journal articles; and **“Sustainable Agricultural Resources for Teachers, K-12,”** are available from Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, National Agricultural Library, ARS/USDA, 10301 Baltimore Ave., Rm. 304, Beltsville, MD 20705-2351; (301) 504-6559; e-mail afsic@nal.usda.gov; on the Internet at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/>.

“Life Cycle-Based Sustainability Indicators for Assessment of the U.S. Food System” is \$20 from the Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, 430 E University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1115; e-mail css.info@umich.edu; on the Internet at <http://www.css.snre.umich.edu>.

“Building Better Rural Places,” a 2001 resource guide to federal assistance programs, is available from Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, P.O. Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702; (800) 346-9140; on the Internet at <http://www.attra.org/guide/index.htm>.

“2001 Organic Export Directory” is available from the Organic Trade Association, 74 Fairview St., P.O. Box 547, Greenfield, MA 01302; (413) 774-7511; e-mail info@ota.com; on the Internet at <http://www.ota.com>.

Upcoming Events

March 20 is the deadline for submitting proposals for presentations for the 2001 Future of Our Food and Farms Summit to be held November 29-30, 2001, in Philadelphia, PA; focal areas are food, farming, hunger, policy, regional issues, and youth; for more information, contact Maria van Hekken, Farmers' Market Trust, 1201 Chestnut St., 4th Fl., Philadelphia, PA 19107; (610) 530-2584; e-mail mariavhm@aol.com.

March 21-23, "Small Farms: A Renewed Opportunity" will be held in Springfield, IL; contact Debi Kelly, Missouri Alternatives Center, (573) 882-1905; e-mail kellyd@umsystem.edu.

March 27-28, "Partnerships for Sustaining California Agriculture: Profit, Environment and Community" will be held in Davis, CA; contact University of California-Davis, (800) 752-0881; David Chaney by e-mail dechaney@ucdavis.edu; on the Internet, <http://www.universityextension.ucdavis.edu/>.

April 19-22, Intern Orientation Workshops will be held for interns and beginning farm workers; contact Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, W2493 County Rd. ES, East Troy, WI 53120; (262) 642-3303; e-mail mfai@mfai.org; on the Internet, <http://www.mfai.org>.

April 30-May 1, 24th Annual National Food Policy Conference of the Consumer Federation of America will be held in Washington, DC; contact CFA, (202) 387-6121.

May 18-20, "Beyond Pesticides: Healthy Ecosystems, Healthy Children," the 19th National Pesticide Forum, will be held in Boulder, CO; contact National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, (202) 543-5450; on the Internet, <http://www.beyondpesticides.org>.

May 21-23, "Composting and Organics Recycling—Unleash the Power," the 31st Annual BioCycle National Conference, will be held in St. Paul, MN; contact BioCycle, 419 State Ave., Emmaus, PA 18049; (610) 967-4135; or register on the Internet, <http://www.biocycle.net>.

May 22-24, "High Anxiety and Biotechnology: Who's Buying, Who's Not, and Why?," the National Agricultural Biotechnology Council Conference, will be held in Chicago, IL; contact National Soybean Research Laboratory, University of Illinois, 1101 W Peabody, Urbana, IL 61801; (217) 244-1706; e-mail nsrl@uiuc.edu; on the Internet, <http://www.aces.uiuc.edu/research/nabc2001/index.html>.

July 10-12, 2001, International Occasional Symposium on Organic Grassland Farming, organized by the Universities of Gottingen and Kassel, will be held in Witzenhausen, Germany; more information is on the Internet at <http://www.wiz.uni-kassel.de/egf2001/start0.html>.

July 12-14, "Higher Education and Research for Agriculture and Food Systems in the 21st Century" will be held in San Francisco, CA; contact Global Consortium of Higher Education and Research for Agriculture, e-mail GCHERA@iastate.edu; on the Internet, www.gchera.iastate.edu/.

August 4-8, Soil and Water Conservation Society's Annual Conference will be held in Myrtle Beach, SC; contact Charlie Persinger, (515) 289-2331, ext. 12; on the Internet, http://www.swcs.org/f_what_calendar.htm.

August 10-12, "Growing Community," the Northeast Organic Farming Association's 27th Annual Summer Conference and Celebration of Rural Life, will be held in Amherst, MA; contact Julie Rawson, NOFA, (978) 355-2853; e-mail jackkitt@aol.com.

August 10-20, "Keyline Water Management: A Whole Systems Approach," an advanced permaculture course, will be held in Williams, OR; contact Seven Seeds Farm, 3220 E Fork Rd., Williams, OR 97544; (541) 846-9233; e-mail sevenseeds7@hotmail.com.

September 4-6, "Sustainable Food Security for All by 2020: From Dialogue to Action" will be held in Bonn, Germany; contact International Food Policy Research Institute, 2033 K St. NW, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 862-5652; e-mail s.hill-lee@cgiar.org; on the Internet, <http://www.ifpri.org/2020conference/>.

October 14-18, "Optimizing Nitrogen Management in Food and Energy Production and Environmental Protection" will be held in Potomac, MD; contact Rhonda Kranz, Ecological Society of America, 1707 H St. NW, Ste. 400, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 833-8773, ext. 212; e-mail nitrogen@esa.org; on the Internet, <http://esa.sdsc.edu/n2001/>.

August 21-27, 2002, "Cultivating Communities," the Organic World Congress of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, will be held in Victoria, British Columbia; contact IFOAM, e-mail ifoam2002@cog.ca; on the Internet, <http://www.cog.ca/ifoam2002>.



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