



News Briefs

- **2002 Farm Bill Agreement Reached by Conference Committee**

At the close of April, the U.S. House and Senate Conference Committee approved new federal farm legislation that reconciles the vastly different bills crafted separately by each legislative body. The negotiated bill would raise agricultural spending in the next decade by \$73.5 billion over existing programs. Key provisions include increased federal subsidies for producers of basic commodities. The new bill raises loan rates for major crops (thus guaranteeing minimum returns regardless of market prices) and revives the target price system that was abolished in the 1996 "Freedom to Farm Act." Conservation measures include a new \$2 billion Conservation Security Program (CSP); a large funding boost for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and expansions in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program, and Farmland Protection Program; plus additional funding for energy conservation. The bill also initiates country-of-origin labeling for meat and fish, and expands food stamp benefits for working families and legal immigrants.

Numerous groups have denounced the negotiated bill for its continued largesse to large corporate farms at the expense of smaller, family-held operations, including its rejection of the earlier Senate-passed ban on meatpacker ownership of cattle and hogs, and loopholes allowing EQIP payments to manage manure from large livestock operations. Continued high subsidy payments have been widely criticized; the European Union's Agriculture Commissioner called it "a backward step that will distort prices and threaten world trade rules" (AP Newswire, May 1). At the same time, expanded funding for new and existing programs that reward farmers for their stewardship practices has been praised. Ferd Hoefner of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition endorsed the new CSP, a voluntary program of incentives for farmers to improve water and soil quality, wildlife habitat, and energy conservation. The CSP would have entitlement status, putting it on par with existing commodity programs, and therefore be open to any farmer with an approved conservation plan. Hoefner called it "a milestone in the history and evolution of farm programs."

To become law, the conference bill must be approved by the full House and Senate, and then signed by President Bush. The "Farm Bill Conference Summary" (April 30) is available online at <http://agriculture.house.gov/farmbill.htm>.

- **U.S. Coastal Waters Are Rated "Fair to Poor" in EPA report**

The Environmental Protection Agency's first comprehensive report on the ecological health of the nation's coastal waters describes conditions as "fair to poor" and varying by region. The study focused on estuaries—"the productive transition areas between fresh water rivers and the oceans"—in six regions: the Northeast, Southeast, Gulf of Mexico, West Coast, and Great Lakes. Overall it found 44% of estuaries are impaired for human use or as habitat for aquatic life, by pollutants and habitat degradation. Commenting on the report, an EPA official cited "pollution from countless farm fields, lawns, construction sites, roads, and other sources" as the "biggest problem for coastal waters" (*USA Today*, April 2). Offshore waters in the Gulf of Mexico were the most damaged, with reduced wetlands, contaminated fish, and high levels of chemical runoff. Also apparent is a growing 'dead zone,' an area of oxygen-depleted water off the Louisiana and Texas coasts. The oxygen-starved (or hypoxic) area results from excess nutrients, primarily nitrogen, flowing into the Gulf from the vast land area drained by the Mississippi River, with "much of the loading coming from the drainage of agricultural lands," the report says. A federal task force has advised reducing the levels of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers used by farmers, and similar nutrients from industrial sources, along the Mississippi, "as a way of dealing with the low oxygen problem along [Louisiana's] shoreline," according to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* (April 3). *National Coastal Condition Report* is available at no cost by calling 1-800-490-9198, or online at www.epa.gov/owow/oceans/nccr.

- **Washington State, California Act To Protect Compost from Persistent Herbicide**

Responding to statewide contamination of commercial composting facilities, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) has proposed a ban on most lawn and turf uses of herbicides containing the active ingredient clopyralid. The permanent rule replaces draft emergency rules set in January, which had banned all uses of these products on lawns and turf. The new rule is intended to eliminate use of clopyralid herbicides on residential lawns by homeowners or lawn care services, to prevent treated grass clippings—thought to be the major source of contamination—from entering municipal green waste recycling systems. Under the proposed rule, licensed pesticide applicators may continue to use the

products on commercial properties, including golf courses and school grounds, provided they agree to keep treated grass clippings out of composting streams. The regulations would preserve existing farm uses of clopyralid-containing products to manage hard-to-control weeds.

Testing in 2000 and 2001 had identified trace levels of clopyralid in finished compost from every major facility in Washington State, according to *BioCycle* magazine (February 2002). Sold in a number of brand name products, the chemical survives the composting process at levels that harm a variety of broadleaf vegetables and ornamental plants. Many sensitive crops are affected at levels as low as 3 to 10 parts per billion (ppb). Crop damage had been confirmed in eastern Washington, according to the magazine's report.

Several environmental and organic farming groups have called for a complete statewide ban on clopyralid and other persistent herbicides. According to Washington Tilth, the proposed state regulations will continue to allow contamination of the raw materials used in making compost, including hay and animal manure. The U.S. Composting Council (USCC), in its "Clopyralid Position Paper" issued late last year, identified problems in product labeling and asked the herbicide manufacturer, Dow AgroSciences, to take corrective measures, citing the "significant threat to the composting industry and its customers." Further information on the clopyralid issue in Washington State is available online from WSDA (www.wa.gov/agr/clopyralid.htm), Washington Tilth Association (www.tilthproducers.org/wta.htm), *BioCycle* magazine (www.biocycle.net), and the USCC (www.compostingcouncil.org).

California's Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) announced in late March it would begin cancellation action against 15 clopyralid-containing herbicide products intended for use on residential lawns, after voluntary, industry-wide testing earlier this year found clopyralid residues at potentially damaging levels (*BioCycle*, April 2002). The move was precautionary, since no actual crop damage had yet been confirmed in the state. The measure would "protect compost while preserving beneficial uses of [the] herbicide," said an agency official. The cancellation notice does not affect similar products approved for use on farmland, rangeland, and forests. Clopyralid is a "low toxicity chemical that poses little hazard to people, animals, and most vegetation," according to the DPR. More information is available online at www.cdpr.ca.gov/cocs/pressrls/mar27.htm.

At the federal level, the EPA has established a work group to investigate the clopyralid problem. One of its principle tasks is to "to determine the extent of clopyralid contamination of composts—geographically and with regard to feedstocks" (*BioCycle*, February 2002). Comments from those who believe their compost or crops may have been affected by the herbicide may be sent to: Public Information and Records Integrity Branch, Information Resources and Services Division, Environmental Protection Agency, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20460, or e-mail, clopyralid.compost@epa.gov.

- **Gene Escape from GM Crops Is Inevitable, Finds EU Study**

Novel genes incorporated into several genetically modified (GM) crops will inevitably 'escape,' according to a report from the European Environment Agency. Among the six major GM crop types that are close to commercial release in the European Union, oilseed rape, sugar beet, and corn are three that pose "medium to high risk" of gene movement via pollen dispersed from crop to crop, or to related wild plants. Potatoes, wheat, and barley present lower risk of gene transfer. "[A]t present none of these crops has pollen which can be completely contained...[and] the movement of seed and pollen will have to be measured and managed much more in the future," the report finds. Several biological and physical methods of restricting the spread of introduced genes are described in the document. The possible implications of gene flow to wild plants are "unclear," the report states, since "it is difficult to predict how the genetically engineered genes will be expressed in a wild species." The study "confirms environmentalists' worst fears and will make it very difficult for the Government to approve the commercial planting of GM crops in Britain," according to *The Independent* (London) (March 24). Environmental groups say the findings fully justify use of the EU Treaty's Precautionary Principle, "in order to prevent irreversible damage to European agriculture and biodiversity" (European Report, March 29). *Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs): The Significance of Gene Flow through Pollen Transfer* is available online at www.ewindows.eu.org/Agriculture/GMOs/gmospollen.

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- **Mexican Government Confirms Pollution of Maize Gene Reservoir**

Mexico's National Commission on Biodiversity has verified contamination of native maize plants by genes from genetically modified (GM) varieties, in a report to the biodiversity convention meeting in The Hague, Netherlands (UK *Guardian*, April 19). The Mexican government has acknowledged "massive contamination of crops in areas that act as the gene bank for one of the world's staple crops," despite a 1998 ban on planting bioengineered maize crops. According to an official, sampling in the states of Oaxaca and Puebla yielded contamination "far worse than initially reported." The modified genes may have come from U.S. corn sold in the region for making tortillas, then used unknowingly by farmers for seed. The new information further fuels ongoing controversy sparked by the first evidence of the modified maize, which was published last year in the respected science journal *Nature* (November 29, 2001). The journal editors, responding to criticism from 100 leading biologists, later discredited the original *Nature* report, citing inadequacies in the testing methods used by the U.S. researchers (April 5). The "near-retraction" by the journal was welcomed by biotechnology proponents; for critics, however, the original findings, which had suggested that the introduced genes were unstable, "confirmed worries that the technology was spreading in uncontrolled and unapproved ways" (*Washington Post*, April 4). News articles and commentary on the maize contamination issue are available online at www.biotech-info.net.

Resources

"Clean Water Act Section 319 Success Stories" Volume III, non-technical reviews updating water quality improvements by U.S. states, is available at EPA's Nonpoint Source Web site, www.epa.gov/owow/nps/Section319III.

"Community Supported Agriculture Resources for Farmers or Producers" is available online at www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/csafarmer.htm; a printed version is free from Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, MD; (301) 504-6422; e-mail afsic@nal.usda.gov.

"Conservation Directory 2002: The Guide to Worldwide Environmental Organizations," a 700-page reference guide listing more than 4,000 organizations, is available from Island Press, 1-800-828-1302; orders@islandpress.com; the online version is available from National Wildlife Federation, www.nwf.org/conservationdirectory.

"The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems" by Dana L. Jackson and Laura L. Jackson, 250 pages, is \$25 (paperback) from Island Press, 1-800-828-1302; on the Internet, www.islandpress.com.

"Holding the Bag: How Toxic Waste in Fertilizer Fails Farmers and Gardeners," an 18-page report from Washington Toxics Coalition and Washington Public Interest Research Group, is online at www.watoxics.org; or \$3 from Washington Toxics Coalition, 4649 Sunnyside Ave. N, #540, Seattle, WA 98103; (206) 632-1545; info@watoxics.org.

"Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century: Renegotiating or Abandoning a Social Contract" by George R. McDowell, a 214-page book, is \$34.99 from Iowa State University Press, 1-800-862-6657; on the Internet, www.iowastatepress.com.

"Marketing on the Edge: A Marketing Guide for Progressive Farmers," a 162-page book, is \$19 plus \$6 shipping/handling from North American Farmers' Direct Marketing Association, 1-888-884-9270; e-mail nafdma@map.com; on the Internet, www.nafdma.com.

"National Center for Manure & Animal Waste Management White Papers, Searchable CD," containing 20 papers assessing the state of science for emerging issues in livestock waste management, is \$25 plus \$4.50 shipping from Midwest Plan Service, 1-800-562-3618; e-mail MWPS@iastate.edu; on the Internet, www.mwpsdq.org.

"National Steering Committee Meeting of the Scientific Congress on Organic Agricultural Research (SCOAR), Summary Report" from a meeting held January 20-22, 2002, in Pacific Grove, CA, is available online at www.ofrf.org/scoar/index.html; or contact SCOAR, c/o Organic Farming Research Foundation, P.O. Box 40, Santa Cruz, CA 95061; (831) 426-4006.

"The New Entrepreneurial Agriculture," a 19-page booklet on helping communities reap the many benefits of working farmland, is available online at www.mlui.org; the print version is free from Michigan Land Use Institute, 205 S. Benzie Blvd., P.O. Box 500, Beulah, MI 49617; (231) 882-4723; e-mail marye@mlui.org.

"Organic Agriculture Worldwide 2002: Statistics and Future Prospects," 4th Edition, is available online in both English and German at www.soel.de/inhalte/publikationen/s/s_74_04.pdf; for book availability, contact lead author Minou Yussefi, e-mail yussefi@soel.de, or Stiftung Okologie & Landbau, Weinstrasse Sud 51, D-67098 Bad Durkheim, Germany.

Organic farming research projects by agency scientists are featured in the cover story article in *Agricultural Research* magazine (February 2002) from USDA's Agricultural Research Service, and available on the Internet at www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/feb02.

"2002 Directory of Least-Toxic Pest Control Products," listing over 2000 items and commercial sources, is \$15 from Bio-Integral Resource Center, P.O. Box 7414, Berkeley, CA 94707; (510) 524-2567; on the Internet, www.birc.org.

Upcoming Events

May 20 is the deadline for submitting proposals for presentations at 2002 Future of Our Food and Farms Summit and 2002 Northeast SAWG Resource Harvest, a joint conference to be held **December 5-6** in Wilmington, DE; contact Meredith Stone, The Food Trust, (215) 568-0830 ext. 10; e-mail contact@thefoodtrust.org.

May 31 is the early registration deadline for two events: **August 20-21**, 7th International Congress on Organic Viticulture and Wine; and **August 21-28**, 14th international conference/exposition, "IFOAM 2002 Organic World Congress: Cultivating Communities," both hosted by Canadian Organic Growers in Victoria, BC, Canada; for conference and pre-Congress tour information, contact IFOAM 2002, (250) 655-5662; e-mail ifoam2002@cog.ca; on the Internet, www.cog.ca/ifoam.2002.

May 31 is the registration deadline for "Permaculture Design Workshop," an intensive, 10-day course to be held **July 25-August 3** at the George Jones Farmstead in Oberlin, OH; contact Ecological Design Innovation Center, MPO Box 357, Oberlin, OH 44074; (440) 775-8409; e-mail brad.masi@oberlin.edu.

June 1-2, "Building Profit through Greener Pastures," 4th annual workshop on sustainable livestock management, will be held in Warnerville, NY; contact Regional Farm & Food Project, (518) 427-6537, e-mail farmfood@capital.net.

June 2-4, "Fundamentals of Plant Improvement for Organic Agriculture," an intensive workshop on plant selection and breeding for seed growers, will be held in Port Townsend, WA; contact Abundant Life Seed Foundation, P.O. Box 772, Port Townsend, WA 98368; (360) 385-5660; e-mail abundant@olypen.com.

June 8-9, "Income Opportunities from Field & Forest," 4th Annual Landowner Conference held by Rural Action's Sustainable Forestry Team, and Sustainable Agriculture Program, with National Center for Preservation of Medicinal Herbs, will be held in Hocking County, OH; contact Cynthia Brunty, (740) 767-2090; e-mail forestry@ruralaction.org; on the Internet, www.ruralaction.org/conference.html.

June 10 is the deadline for pre-proposal submission for 2003 Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program competitive grants; for information on the new application process, and new grant categories, contact Western SARE office, Utah State University, (435) 797-2257; e-mail wsare@mendel.usu.edu; on the Internet, <http://wsare.usu.edu>.

June 14 is the deadline for pre-proposal submission for 2002-2003 Research and Education, and Professional Development grants from Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program; for information on the new application process for these grants, and NE SARE grants in general, contact Northeast SARE office, University of Vermont, (802) 656-0471; e-mail nesare@zoo.uvm.edu; on the Internet, www.uvm.edu/~nesare.

June 15 is the first stop for the Rolling Thunder Down Home Democracy Tour, this first "citizenship fair" to be held in Chicago, IL, features food and farm issues; more stops are planned in Tucson, AZ; Seattle, WA; and Minneapolis, MN; contact Darci Anderson, darci@rollingthundertour.org; on the Internet, www.rollingthunder.org, or www.jimhightower.com.

June 22-23, 7th Annual Family Farm Tour will be held in the Asheville area, NC; contact Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, P.O. Box 448, Pittsboro, NC 27312; (919) 542-2402; e-mail CFSA@carolinafarmstewards.org; or CFSA's Mountain Chapter, e-mail cfsa_mountains@main.nc.us; on the Internet, www.main.nc.us/cfsa_mountains.

June 24-28, September 23-27, and October 21-25, Maine Compost School offering training in medium- and large-scale composting operations will be held in Monmouth, ME; contact Neal Hallee, UMCE-Waste Management, 5741 Libby Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5741; (207) 581-2722; e-mail nhallee@umext.maine.edu; on the Internet, www.composting.org.

July 5-13, Permaculture Fundamentals Course will be held in Black Mountain, NC; contact Culture's Edge at Earthhaven Ecovillage, (828) 669-3937; e-mail culturesedge@earthhaven.org; on the Internet, www.earthaven.org.

July 15 is the deadline for poster submissions for the 3rd California Conference on Biological Control to be held **August 15-16** in Davis, CA; contact Brenda Nakamoto, Dean's Office, College of Agricultural and Environmental Science, University of California-Davis, (530) 752-1606; on the Internet, www.biocontrol.ucr.edu.



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