



News Briefs

- **U.S. and Canadian Firms Adopt Moratorium on Crops Bioengineered to Make Drugs, Chemicals**

Responding to growing concerns that drugs or chemicals made in genetically engineered crops will taint the food supply, the North American biotechnology industry is adopting a broad moratorium on planting certain types of crops in major food-producing regions. The precautionary ban is intended to prevent the spread of exotic genes, through pollen transfer via wind or insects, into nearby field crops used for food or animal feed. The most immediate impact of the geographic ban, which goes beyond any proposed government regulation, will be to bar companies from growing certain types of transgenic corn in the midwestern U.S., or transgenic rape plants (from which canola oil is made) in the Canadian prairie, “though the ban could eventually apply to numerous crops and regions” (*Washington Post*, October 22). Made public by the Washington, DC-based Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), the policy has been endorsed by a dozen U.S. and Canadian companies that are using gene-splicing techniques to develop a variety of crops containing pharmaceuticals, medically important proteins, or industrial compounds. The industry hopes to avert any food contamination episode that resembles the StarLink ‘debacle’ two years ago, in which a corn variety genetically engineered to resist insects, and approved only as animal feed, ended up in taco shells and other foods. Recalling the tainted products cost U.S. food companies hundreds of millions of dollars, according to the *Post* article. A related news story from Reuters (October 23) is online at www.planetark.org; BIO’s directive is available at www.bio.org/pmp/georest.asp.

- **Groups Petition USDA to Establish Oversight Panel for Organic Certifiers**

Arguing that the national ‘organic’ label is in danger of losing its integrity, the Center for Food Safety (CFS) and four other nonprofit, activist groups petitioned the USDA last month to “immediately establish a peer review panel to oversee the agency’s accrediting of organic certifiers” in the National Organic Program. A key concern is the failure of the USDA to establish, as legally mandated in the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, an independent panel of consumer and organic groups to ensure that applicants wanting to certify organic foods meet the new federal standards, which became fully effective on October 21. A related issue is the emergence of a large number of previously unknown groups applying for certified organic accreditation. Since 2000, the number of applicants jumped from 49 to 122, and according to the Associated Press (October 17), the National Organic Program has accredited 58 of the total. CFS spokesman Andrew Kimball said that organic groups have more trust in the long-established and well-known certifiers, both private groups and state agencies, which were approved before applications flooded the organic program. Groups joining in the legal action are Beyond Pesticides, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA, and the Union of Concerned Scientists. Their petition is online at www.centerforfoodsafety.org; the USDA’s October 16 listing of certifying group applicants is posted at www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

- **U.S. Water Quality Fails to Improve; Agricultural Runoff Still Dominates As Major Pollutant Source**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s latest national summary of water quality found no decline in the number of waterways considered “impaired” for swimming, fishing, or other uses. The biennial survey indicated a small increase in the number of impaired waters from 1998 to 2000, although the gain is thought to result from higher-quality monitoring data from the states and other jurisdictions, rather than actual changes in the nation’s water quality. Covering about one-third of U.S. waters, the survey showed that 39 percent of river and stream miles, 45 percent of lake acres, and 51 percent of estuary miles “were not clean enough” to support one or more uses. The leading causes of impairment include bacteria, nutrients, metals (primarily mercury), and siltation. EPA assistant administrator G. Tracy Mehan said that the results demonstrate the need for more effective controls to address water quality problems, especially those stemming from diffuse, non-permitted sources such as runoff from agricultural and urban areas, and air deposition, which continue to dominate as sources of water pollution. “National Water Quality Inventory: 2000 Report” is available on the Web at www.epa.gov/305b/2000report; a print copy is free from EPA’s National Service Center, 1-800-490-9198.

- **Rising Carbon Dioxide Levels May Boost Crop Productivity, But Reduce Nutritional Quality**

Rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels may boost crop productivity in some areas, but the nutritional value of many crops may decrease, says a new study reported in the journal *New Phytologist* (October 2002). Although the plants produce more seeds under CO₂ enrichment, nutritional quality declines since the seeds contain less nitrogen. The study team reviewed data from 159 published studies on crop and wild plant species’ reproductive responses to higher CO₂ levels, which are expected to nearly double by the end of the century. The crops grown at higher CO₂ levels averaged

19 percent more flowers, 16 percent more seeds, and 25 percent greater total seed weight, but contained lower levels of nitrogen in their seeds, compared to plants grown at existing CO₂ levels. The wild species, on average, showed no increase in reproductive traits with higher levels of the greenhouse gas. Among the crop plants, rice increased its seed number by 42 percent, soybeans by 20 percent, wheat by 15 percent, and corn by 5 percent, while nitrogen concentrations decreased by 14 percent, on average, for all crops. The exceptions were N-fixing legumes, including soybeans and peas, which were able to increase their nitrogen uptake along with rising CO₂ levels, and thus maintain their seed nutritional value. According to research leader Peter Curtis, “[n]itrogen is a critical component for building protein in animals, and much of the grain grown in the [U.S.] is fed to livestock; under the rising CO₂ scenario, livestock—and humans—would have to increase their intake of plants to compensate for the loss” (Reuters, September 10, www.planetark.org). For a reprint of the journal article, contact P.S. Curtis, Dept. of Evolution, Ohio State University, (614) 292-0835; curtis.7@osu.edu.

- **America Is Losing Its Best Farmland to Sprawling Development, Says AFT Study**

The rate of conversion of rural farmland to housing and commercial development rose dramatically in the U.S. during the mid-1990s, according to a new study by American Farmland Trust. The report finds that between 1992 and 1997 the nation lost more than 6 million acres of farmland, an area about the size of Maryland. Sprawling development near small and large cities, rather than economic growth itself, consumed farmland at an annual rate of 1.2 million acres during this period, a 51 percent increase over the previous 10 years. Prime farmland—the land most suited for growing food—is being developed about 30 percent faster than less-productive farmland, and more than half of the lost acreage is being converted to 10-plus acre housing lots on the outer edges of suburbia. Texas is losing the most high-quality land, followed by Ohio, North Carolina, Georgia, and Illinois, although “every state is losing some of its best farm and ranchland, along with the agricultural economy, wildlife habitat and water recharge that the land supports,” says AFT president Ralph Grossi. While acknowledging important gains in farmland preservation made by state and local programs, the report recommends more funding for agricultural conservation easements at all government levels; targeting conservation funds to the best, most threatened agricultural areas; and supporting effective planning and ‘smart growth’ strategies to counter wasteful development. The “Farming on the Edge” report, with national and state maps, is online at www.farmland.org; for print availability, contact AFT, (202) 331-7300; info@farmland.org.

- **Pesticide Chemical Use in California Dropped to Record Low in 2001**

Overall pesticide chemical use in California reached a record low last year, says a preliminary report issued last month by the state Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR). Pesticide applications across the state totaled 151 million pounds in 2001 compared with 188 million pounds in 2000, the third straight year of reduced usage statewide and the lowest total since data collection began more than a decade ago. Production agriculture accounts for most of the reported pesticide use statewide; California producers applied 137 million pounds of chemical pesticides in 2001, down 35 million pounds from the previous year. Nearly all of the state’s top 10 agricultural-producing counties reported pesticide declines, according to the *Los Angeles Times* (October 16). DPR officials cited a number of factors for the chemical reduction, including less insect and disease pressure because of favorable weather; a tighter farm economy with lower commodity prices, forcing farmers to cut pesticide and other expenses; a state-sponsored push toward reduced-risk pesticides and non-chemical alternatives; and stricter health-based regulations. The *Times* article noted that several organizations seeking reduced pesticide use are encouraged by the overall pesticide decline, but caution that high levels of pesticides, some highly toxic, continue to risk the health of farmworkers and those who live near farms. Data summaries for 2001 are online at www.cdpr.ca.gov; a print copy is \$10 from CDP, P.O. Box 4015, Sacramento, CA 95812; (916) 324-4046.

- **Federal Actions Will Increase Imports of Irradiated Produce, Ease Food Labeling Rules**

A new USDA ruling allowing the importation of irradiated fruits and vegetables will “open the field to growers all over the world” and yield “a big jump in the amount of irradiated foods available to U.S. consumers (*San Francisco Chronicle*, October 22, www.sfgate.com). Accounting for 40 percent of produce consumed nationwide, fruits and vegetables from abroad are typically treated in some way—such as high heat or extended cold, or with chemicals such as methyl bromide—to protect domestic crops from foreign pests, including fruit flies. Many fruit sellers favor the use of low-dose ionizing irradiation, consisting of electron beams or gamma rays, because it stops natural ripening and extends shelf-life. Federal regulators have approved irradiation for limited uses, including killing disease-causing bacteria in raw

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beef and chicken and dried spices and seasonings, but food companies have been slow to adopt it because of concerns over consumer acceptance and high equipment costs. Irradiation critics, including some environmental and consumer groups, fear the technology will have negative effects. Public Citizen opposes the recent USDA ruling on the grounds that it advances agricultural industrialization at the expense of food quality and sanitation, consumer health, and small, independent farmers (October 23 statement, www.citizen.org). In a separate action, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is currently easing its rules on labeling irradiation-treated foods by accepting applications from companies that want to use 'cold pasteurization' or similar labeling language (Reuters, October 10, www.planetark.org.) Existing federal law requires that permitted foods sold in U.S. markets are labeled as 'irradiated' and bear the radura logo (green petals within a broken circle), although restaurants are exempt from the labeling criteria.

Resources

"Bad Taste: The Disturbing Truth about the World Health Organization's Endorsement of Food Irradiation" (44 pgs), from Public Citizen and Global Resource Action Center for the Environment, is online at www.citizen.org/documents/BadTaste.pdf; for print availability, contact Public Citizen, (202) 588-1000.

"A Bountiful Harvest: Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Manage Pests" (50 pgs), profiling producers using IPM or organic practices, is free from Jeanne Ciborowski, IPM Program Coordinator, Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture, 90 W. Plato Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55107-2094; (651) 297-3217; jeanne.ciborowski@state.mn.us.

"Clean Water at Risk: A 30th Anniversary Assessment of the Bush Administration's Rollback of Clean Water Protections" (38 pgs), from Natural Resources Defense Council and Clean Water Network, is online at www.nrdc.org; for print availability, contact NRDC, 40 W. 20th St., New York, NY 10011; (212) 727-2700; nrdcinfo@nrdc.org.

"Community Supported Agriculture: Small Farm Success/Profiles of Rural Innovation," a pamphlet on the successes and challenges of CSA for marketing small farms in the mid-Atlantic region, from the Small Farms Success Project, is free from the Wallace Center/Winrock International, (703) 525-9430, ext. 675; wallacecenter@winrock.org.

"Directory of State Small Farm Program Coordinators 2002" is free from USDA-CSREES Small Farm Program, (202) 720-7948; gblyther@reeusda.gov; contact information is also online at www.reeusda.gov/smallfarm/sfdirect.htm.

"Farmers Markets: Trends and Prospects" in California and the U.S., featured in *Small Farm News* (Vol. III, 2002), is online at www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/pubs/SFNews/; for a free print copy, contact Small Farm Center, University of California, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616; (530) 752-8136; sfcenter@ucdavis.edu.

"Fruits of Progress: Growing Sustainable Farming and Food Systems" (96 pgs), on the growing 'green' sector in U.S. food and agriculture, is \$20 plus S/H from World Resources Institute, (202) 729-7600; valeriev@wri.org.

"Generic Environmental Impact Statement on Animal Agriculture," a set of documents on environmental, social, and economic issues in large-scale livestock production in Minnesota, is online at www.mnplan.state.mn.us/eqb/geis/; for hardcopy or CD availability, contact Minnesota Planning Agency, (651) 296-2888; george.johnson@state.mn.us.

"Greenbook 2002: Sustaining People, Land and Communities," from Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture's Sustainable Agriculture On-Farm Demonstration Grant Program, is online at www.mda.state.mn.us/esap/greenbook.html; a print copy is free from Energy & Sustainable Agriculture Program, MDA, (651) 296-7673; Alison.Fish@state.mn.us.

"Growing Home: A Guide to Reconnecting Agriculture, Food and Communities" (151 pgs) is \$25 plus S/H from Community, Food and Agriculture Program, Cornell University, (607) 255-9832; gcg4@cornell.edu; www.cfap.org.

"The Local Organic Source: NYS Organic Food Guide," 2002-2003 directory of certified organic farms and sustainable farm members, is \$2 (or free with membership) from Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, P.O. Box 880, Cobleskill, NY 12043-0880, (518) 734-5495; www.nofany.org.

"Mugged: Poverty in Your Coffee Cup" (59 pgs), on coffee-market failure and Oxfam's 'Coffee Rescue Plan', is online at www.maketradefair.com/; or contact Oxfam America, (617) 728-2454; vrateau@oxfamamerica.org.

Prairie Writers Circle essays on sustainability in agriculture and community are online at www.landinstitute.org; or contact The Land Institute, (785) 823-5376; theland@landinstitute.org.

"Seed to Seed: Seed Saving and Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners," 2nd edition (2002), 228 pgs, is \$24.95 from Seed Savers Exchange, 3076 North Winn Rd., Decorah, IA 52101; (563) 382-5990; www.seedsavers.org.

"Sustainable Agriculture and Common Assets: Stewardship Success Stories" (48 pgs) is online at www.redefiningprogress.org; for print availability, contact Redefining Progress, (510) 444-3041; info@rprogress.org.

"Town Meets Country: Farm-City Forums on Land and Community" (28 pgs), from American Farmland Trust and U.S. Conference of Mayors, is online at www.farmland.org/farm_city_forum; or contact AFT, 1200 18th St. NW, Suite 800, Washington DC 20036; (202) 331-7300; info@farmland.org.

"U.S. Farmers Markets—2000: A Study of Emerging Trends" (48 pgs) is online at www.ams.usda.gov/directmarketing/FarmMark.pdf; a print copy is free from USDA Marketing Services Branch, (202) 720-8317.

Upcoming Events

November 19-20, 4th Biennial Conference on Agriculture and Water Quality in the Pacific Northwest will be held in Yakima, WA; contact (509) 465-5055; tami@fwaa.org; www.agwaterqualitynw.org.

November 30 is the submission deadline for presentations to "For a Sustainable and Ecological Agriculture in Harmony with Nature and Society," Cuban Association of Agricultural and Forestry Technician's 5th Conference on Organic Agriculture, **May 27-30, 2003**, in Havana, Cuba; for exhibits, contact V. Rodriguez, violeta@palco.cu; for program information, actafejec@minag.gov.cu.

December 1 is the abstract submission deadline for proposals for "International Forum on Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health," **May 18-23, 2003**, in Montreal, Canada; contact IDRC Research Network, forum2003@idrc.ca; <http://network.idrc.ca>.

December 1 is the submission deadline for proposals for "The Columbia, Conserving a Legacy of Life," Soil & Water Conservation Society 2003 Annual Conference, **July 26-30, 2003**, in Spokane, WA; contact pubs@swcs.org; www.swcs.org.

December 1 is the title submission deadline for abstracts or papers for American Forage & Grassland Council's meeting to be held **April 27-29, 2003**, in Lafayette, LA; contact Kim Cassida, Southwest Research & Extension Center, (870) 777-9702; kcassida@uaex.edu; www.afgc.org/afgcall2003.htm.

December 4-5, Integrated Crop Management conference will be held in Ames, IA; for program information, contact Richard Larson, rwlanson@iastate.edu; for registration, Continuing Education and Communication Services, confreg@iastate.edu.

December 5-6, 4th Annual "Future of Our Food and Farms Summit" and 2002 Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group 10th Anniversary Resource Harvest will be held jointly in Wilmington, DE; contact The Food Trust, (215) 568-0830 ext. 10; contact@thefoodtrust.org; or NESAWG, (413) 323-4531; nesawg@smallfarm.org; www.foodfarm.org.

December 6-7, "Strength through Diversity," 8th Annual Iowa Local Food System Conference will be held in Ames, IA; contact Jan Libbey, (641) 495-6367, libland@frontiernet.net; or Gary Guthrie, (515) 382-3117, ghfguthrie@hotmail.com.

December 7, "Farming for Real Sustainability: Transitioning Oregon's Agriculture," 17th Oregon Tilth Annual Meeting, will be held in Eugene, OR; contact Oregon Tilth, (503) 378-0690; organic@tilth.org; www.tilth.org.

December 12-14, "Retooling your Eco-Farm," Acres USA Annual Conference, plus pre-conference workshops, "Improving Soil & Foliar Foodwebs" and "Soil Fertility Balancing," **December 9-11**, in Indianapolis, IN; 1-800-355-5313; www.acresusa.com.

January 8, 2003, is the submission deadline for proposals for Graduate Student Award in Sustainable Agriculture, for research projects by full-time graduate students at accredited colleges/universities in the Southern Region; contact Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, (770) 412-4787; ppatton@griffin.peachnet.edu; www.griffin.peachnet.edu/sare.

January 8-10, 2003, Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Cropping Systems Conference & Trade Show, co-organized by Pacific Northwest STEEP and Pacific Northwest Direct Seed Association, will be held in Pasco, WA; contact STEEP, (208) 885-6386; www.pnwsteep.wsu.edu/directseed/conf2K3/index.htm.

January 10-12, 2003, "Ecological Cut Flower Growing and Marketing," Sixth Annual Farmer-to-Farmer Workshop Series, will be held in Ballston Spa, NY; contact Regional Farm & Food Project, (518) 427-6537; farmfood@capital.net.

January 14-16, 2003, Organic Vegetable Production Workshops will be held in Geneva, NY; contact Abby Seaman, Cornell Cooperative Extension, (315) 787-2422; ajs32@cornell.edu.

January 21-23 and 28-29, 2003, NOFA/Massachusetts Chapter's 2nd annual course in organic land care will be held in Boylston, MA; contact M. Castriotta, (617) 576-0810; castriotta@aol.com; www.massorganic.org/programs/landcare/index.html.

January 22-25, 2003, "Planting Local Values in a Global Environment," 22nd Annual Eco-Farm Conference, will be held in Pacific Grove, CA; contact Ecological Farming Association, (831) 763-2111; info@eco-farm.org; www.eco-farm.org.



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