



NEWS BRIEFS

USDA Issues Recommendations for Programs Serving Small Farms and Ranches

The USDA has issued a series of recommendations from its Advisory Committee on Small Farms for improving and expanding federal programs to better serve small farms and ranches. Noting that “current USDA programs and policies are designed for one-size-fits-all” and are “slanted towards larger farm and agricultural operations,” the report “is directed towards leveling the playing field” to make the agency “more responsive to America’s small farms, ranches, and woodlot owners” who comprise 93 percent of the 2 million existing operations. It identifies specific challenges and proposes specific actions in six priority areas: conservation and environmental enhancement; lending and income supplements; marketing and labeling; working conditions for farmers and farm workers; assistance for beginning and returning farmers; and policies to help small farmers. “Building On A Time to Act” is online at www.usda.gov/oce/smallfarm/reptmenu.htm. Report cards issued by the Time to Act Campaign, an independent group working to promote prior recommendations from the USDA National Commission on Small Farms, coordinated by the Center for Rural Affairs, is online at www.cfra.org/issues/agriculture.htm#Campaign, or phone (402) 846-5428.

Studies Showing Perchlorate in Lettuce Raise Concern About Food and Water Contamination

Two studies, one released last month by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) and one from a U.S. EPA lab in Georgia, show that lettuce sold in U.S. supermarkets “appears to absorb and concentrate perchlorate from polluted drinking water in significant amounts,” according to the *Wall Street Journal* (April 28). The studies address a “crucial question” in the current process to set a federal drinking water standard for perchlorate: “whether Americans are ingesting the chemical from food sources in addition to drinking water.” The Bush Administration has delayed regulatory action on the chemical, referring the health debate to the National Academies for review, and has issued a gag order on EPA to halt public discussion of perchlorate pollution, the *Journal* wrote. A toxic component of rocket fuel that leaches from defense industry sites, the chemical impairs thyroid function and causes other health problems at levels higher than 1 part per billion, EPA’s provisional safety level for drinking water. Perchlorate taints more than 500 drinking water sources in 20 states, including the Colorado River, which irrigates 70 percent of the nation’s lettuce and other winter crops grown in California and Arizona. The EWG-sponsored study (conducted by Texas Tech University researchers) found that 4 of 22 lettuce samples from northern California stores contained perchlorate at levels 30 or more times higher than EPA’s draft safety level. While EWG concedes that its analysis was too small to draw scientific conclusions, it said the results showing contamination of a common food item are alarming enough to warrant a broad analysis of perchlorate in irrigation and drinking water sources, as well as foods (*Los Angeles Times*, April 28). “Suspect Salads” (37 pages) from EWG is online at www.ewg.org/reports/suspectsalads/es.php.

Five State and Federal Agencies in Minnesota Sign Agreement to Enhance Organic Agriculture

Recognizing that “organics are a choice preferred by a growing number of farmers and consumers,” five state and federal agencies in Minnesota signed a landmark agreement last month to work together to enhance the state’s organic agriculture sector. “This organic partnership is the first of its kind in the nation,” according to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, which has joined with the University of Minnesota and its Extension Service and state offices of USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency to enhance coordination of programs to help growers improve profitability, identify new markets, and conserve natural resources, and to improve consumer protection and labeling enforcement. The agencies’ activities will include developing and implementing conservation farm plans; providing staff support for outreach and other efforts; sharing information on innovative programs with other states; and encouraging demonstrations to showcase organic operations. With 103,000 certified acres in 2001, Minnesota ranks first in organic acreage for corn, soybeans, and rye, and sixth in the nation for all crops. The agreement is available online at www.mda.state.mn.us/esap/organic/mou.htm.

Federal Agencies Are Not Prepared for Post-Market Oversight of Gene-Altered Crops and Foods, Says Pew Report

The three federal agencies charged with regulating genetically engineered crops are not prepared to handle problems that arise once they enter the environment or reach the market, says a new report commissioned by the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology. "Post-Market Oversight of Biotech Foods: Is the System Prepared?" argues that the current regulatory system, consisting of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the Food and Drug Administration, and the EPA, focuses on permitting and approval processes that occur before a crop is planted or marketed. Yet several contamination mishaps, including the nationwide recall of StarLink corn products in 2000 and last year's ProdiGene incident (in which soybeans contaminated with a pig vaccine nearly entered the food supply), show that federal oversight is still needed once a crop is approved for the marketplace. Michael Taylor of Resources for the Future, who led the study, cited biopharm (drug-containing) and nutritionally enhanced crops, and crops grown outside the U.S., as examples of the "regulatory challenges" ahead (Greenwire, April 25). The 128-page report is online at www.pewagbiotech.org/research/postmarket; for a free print copy, phone (202) 347-9044.

USDA Withdraws Proposed Meat Label Claims to Allow More Input

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service has withdrawn five proposed meat marketing label claims from the rule-making process to allow more time for review and additional input from farmers and others affected by the claims. The production standards, issued last December, refer to grass-fed, free-range, and breed claims, and to livestock raised without growth-promoting antibiotics or supplemental hormones. According to the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (April 3), the decision by AMS "is in response to a flood of concern from farmers and consumers that the standards as written would mislead consumers and undercut the market for value-added meat products developed by innovative family farmers and ranchers." In a letter to USDA last March, the Coalition joined with 10 other groups to urge the agency to postpone finalizing the controversial meat label standards and to devise "a more extensive and inclusive process" to allow more input from family farm, consumer, humane, and environmental groups. Public comments received by USDA are online at www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/stand/claim.htm.

Lobbying Effort Restores Organic Feed Standard, Though Seafood Amendment Dismays Organic Proponents

Following an intense lobbying effort by mainstream farming organizations, organic farm groups, consumers, and environmentalists to preserve the integrity of the national organic standards, Congress approved a bill last month to repeal legislation passed in January (as the FY 2003 omnibus spending bill) that allowed livestock producers to use the "USDA Organic" label even if the animals were not fed 100 percent organic feed (Greenwire, April 21). Supplemental legislation that repealed the offending language was signed by President Bush on April 16. Also included in the supplemental bill, however, is a rider sponsored by Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) that requires USDA to devise a plan for certifying wild fish and shellfish as organic. Attaching the organic label to wild seafood, a goal long-sought by Stevens and California's fishing industry for its marketing value, was opposed previously by the National Organic Standards Board (*San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15). Arguing against the seafood label, Katherine DiMatteo of the Organic Trade Association said that the term 'organic' on a food product "describes a complete system of production that begins on a farm" and the standards "do not translate readily to a water-based system" (April 12, www.ota.com/news2003.htm#fishy). She urges instead the use of existing labeling programs for wild fisheries that operate in an environmentally sustainable way.

California Soils Maintain Nutrient Levels Since 1950s, But Increased Erosion Likely

California soils have maintained nutrient levels since the 1950s, although higher clay content suggests increased erosion, says a study published in *California Agriculture* (April-June 2003). University of California soil scientists compared soil quality properties for samples from 125 soils archived in the 1940s-1950s to recent samples from the same field sites, for four land uses: tree crops, row crops, rangeland, and viticulture. Statewide they found significant increases in plant-available phosphorus, total carbon, total nitrogen, and percent silt, all indicators of soil quality, while average clay content increased from 10 percent to 27 percent statewide. Based on their study, "California's soil chemical quality has not decreased significantly over the past 60 years. However, increased clay percentages may be interpreted as a sign of accelerated erosion," the authors wrote. Both water and root penetration decrease in dense clay-rich subsoil, they noted. The report is online at <http://danr.ucop.edu/calag/0302AMJ/abstracts.html>.

WALLACE CENTER/WINROCK NEWS

Specialists Look at Agriculture as Tool for Rural Development—Proceedings Released

The proceedings from a one-day workshop convened by the Wallace Center and the USDA's National Rural Development Partnership were released last month. The report contains more than 100 opportunities and recommendations for utilizing agriculture as a tool for rural development. To contribute to more effective rural development policies and programs, agricultural and rural development specialists from across the U.S. met last August to discuss existing barriers, as well as opportunities, in supporting agricultural activities as an intentional rural development strategy. Their ideas and recommendations focus on collaboration and coordination issues, as well as financing, technical assistance, and marketing. The 40-page proceedings volume includes presentations by the workshop's speakers on sustainable agriculture and rural development; rural schools; entrepreneurship and agriculture; and community-led entrepreneurial development. "Agriculture as a Tool for Rural Development: Workshop Proceedings" is online at www.winrock.org/wallace; a print copy is \$10 from the Wallace Center, (703) 525-9430, ext. 675, wallacecenter@winrock.org.

RESOURCES

■ **Affordable Opportunities for Precision Farming: A Practical Way to Support Sustainable Agriculture** (19-pg technical note) is online at www.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/watershed/pdf/files/Precision_Farming-Affordable_Opportunities.pdf; for print availability, contact Stefanie Aschmann, NRCS Watershed Science Institute, (402) 437-5178 ext. 43.

■ **Assisting America's Small Farmers and Ranchers in the 21st Century: Meeting the Challenge of A Time to Act** (115 pgs), from USDA Small Farm Coordinators, is online at www.usda.gov/oce/smallfarm/index.htm.

■ **Cultivating Biodiversity: Understanding, Analyzing and Using Agricultural Diversity** (292 pgs) with 11 case studies from South America, Africa, and Asia, from People, Land Management, and Environmental Change (PLEC) project and published by Intermediate Technology Development Group, is \$22.50 plus S/H from Stylus Publishing, 1-800-232-0223; www.styluspub.com.

■ **Farming with the Wild: Enhancing Biodiversity on Farms and Ranches** (184 pgs) is \$29.95 plus S/H from Watershed Media/Sierra Club Books, wildfarms@earthlink.net; www.watershedmedia.org.

■ **Organic and Sustainable Practices Workbook & Resource Guides, for Livestock Systems** (81 pgs) and **for Cropping Systems** (70 pgs), each consistent with U.S. National Organic Program standards, are free from Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, 1-800-346-9140, or online at <http://attra.ncat.org>.

■ **People Sustaining the Land** (116 pgs), a collection of photos and profiles by Cynthia Vagnetti and Jerry DeWitt, is \$16 plus \$3.95 S/H from Sustainable Agriculture Publications, 210 Hills Bldg., 105 Carrigan Dr., University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405; (802) 656-0484; sanpubs@uvm.edu; for a preview visit www.uvm.edu/~nesare/news_peoplesustaining.html.

■ **Recycling Agricultural Plastics in New York State** (30 pgs) is online at

www.cfe.cornell.edu/erap/C&ER; for print availability, contact Environmental Risk Analysis Program, 213 Rice Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853; (607) 255-4765; envrisk@cornell.edu.

■ **Technical Service Provider Registry (TechReg)** for registry and certification of USDA technical service providers, and source directory for conservation program participants, as authorized by 2002 Farm Bill, is online at <http://techreg.usda.gov> or contact USDA-NRCS, techreg@nrcs.usda.gov.

■ **U.S. Organic Farming in 2000–2001: Adoption of Certified Systems** (55 pgs, #AIB780) is online at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib780; a print copy is \$27 plus \$5 S/H from USDA Order Desk, 1-800-999-6779 or (703) 605-6220.

■ **Vital Signs 2003: The Trends That Are Shaping Our Future** (153 pgs) from Worldwatch Institute in cooperation with United Nations Environment Programme, is \$14.95 plus S/H; phone 1-888-544-2303; www.worldwatch.org.

CALENDAR

June

2 or 4, June 24 or 25, and July 8 or 9 (3 sessions): "Tilling the Soil of Opportunity," practical training using NxLevel Training Network for agricultural entrepreneurs on starting an agriculture-based venture, in Millbrook, NY; contact Cheryl Leach, Extension Support Specialist, Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship, Cornell University, West North St., Geneva, NY 14456; 1-888-624-6785; <http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/necfe>.

6: Proposal submission deadline for presentations to 5th Annual "Future of Our Food and Farms Summit," December 4–5, 2003, in Wilmington, DE; contact Maria van Hekken, Mid-Atlantic Food & Farm Coalition, (610) 530-2584; mariavhm@aol.com.

6–7: "Creating Meaningful Solutions," 3rd Annual Sustainable Hog Farming Summit, co-sponsored by Delaware Riverkeeper Network, Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, and Animal Welfare Institute, in Gettysburg, PA; (914) 674-0622 ext. 204; jodefey@waterkeeper.org; www.waterkeeper.org/mainevent.aspx.

7–8: 5th Annual Landowners Conference on "income opportunities from field and forest," in Hocking County, OH; contact Cynthia Brunty, Sustainable Forestry Program, Rural Action, (740) 767-2090; cynthiab@ruralaction.org; www.ruralaction.org.

12–15: "Local Democracy: Sustaining Healthy Community through Ethical, Sustainable Food Systems," Joint 2003 Annual Meetings of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society and the Association for the Study of Food and Society, in Austin, TX; www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/NextMeeting.htm.

14–18: 2003 Chapman Conference on Ecosystem Interactions with Land Use Change, in Santa Fe, NM; contact Martez Taylor, (202) 777-7332; mtaylor@agu.org; www.agu.org/meetings/cc03acall.html.

19–21: "Building Community through Heritage Connections," Regional Rural and Agri-Tourism Conference, in Shepherdstown, WV; contact Potomac Heritage Partnership, 1623 28th St. NW, Washington, DC 20007; (202) 333-4478; conference@potomacheritage.org; www.potomacheritage.org.

18–20: American Society for Enology and Viticulture 54th Annual Meeting, including June 20 session on "Science of Sustainable Viticulture," in Reno, NV; contact ASEV, (530) 753-3142, society@asev.org; www.asev.org.

21–22: Carolina Farm Stewardship Association's 8th Annual Family Farm Tour of organic and sustainable farms in western North Carolina (near Asheville); contact Karen Vizzina, CFSA, earthstarnc@earthlink.net or CFSA@carolinafarmstewards.org; http://main.nc.us/cfsa_mountains/farmtour/index.htm.

22–25: "Agroforestry and Riparian Buffers for Land Productivity and Environmental Stability," 8th North American Agroforestry Conference, in Corvallis, OR; contact S. Sharrow, Dept. of Rangeland Resources, OSU, Steven.H.Sharrow@oregonstate.edu; www.missouri.edu/~afta/Whats_New/2003call4papers.htm.

23–24 or October 27–31, Maine Compost School training on medium- and large-scale composting operations, in Monmouth, ME; contact Bill Seekins, Maine Dept. of Agriculture, Food & Rural Resources, (207) 287-7531; bill.seekins@state.me.us; www.composting.org/CompostInformation.htm#top.

July

11–12, "International Aquaculture Workshop: Low-Food-Chain Candidate Species" including first annual Organic Seafood Tasting Tour, convened by University of Minnesota's Institute for Social, Economic and Ecological Sustainability, in Minneapolis, MN; contact D. Brister, Sustainable Aquaculture Program Mgr., (612) 624-7723; www.fw.umn.edu/isees/OrganicAquaculture/orgaqua.htm.

11–12 or July 25–26: "Polyface Farm Intensive Discovery Seminar," series of two-day events at Joel Salatin family farm in Swoope, VA; contact Acres U.S.A., 1-800-355-5313; meetings@acresusa.com; www.acresusa.com/events/events.htm.

13–25: "International Short Course on Agroecology 2003," with special focus on interactions between human and ecological communities in rural landscapes, in Santa Cruz, CA; contact Joji Muramoto, UC Santa Cruz, shortcourse@agroecology.org; www.agroecology.org/shortcourse.htm.



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