



NEWS BRIEFS

Poor Oversight, Weak Enforcement by USDA Impedes Conservation, Says GAO Study

Despite rules barring farmers from receiving federal payments if they fail to use conservation practices to reduce soil erosion or preserve wetlands, many escape enforcement due to poor oversight by USDA, concludes a study by the U.S. General Accounting Office. Nearly half of NRCS field offices have failed to implement the 'conservation compliance' provisions of the 1985 Food Security Act because they lack staff, do not emphasize the importance of the rules, or are uncomfortable with their enforcement role. While the report notes progress since 1985, lax enforcement remains a problem since a billion tons of soil are lost from U.S. croplands each year, reducing land productivity and water quality, and since converted wetlands reduce flood control. The GAO urges improved oversight by NRCS field offices, better sampling of cropland tracts likely to be in violation, and action by the Farm Service Agency to ensure that waivers are justified. The report (GAO-03-418) is online at www.gao.gov/new.items/d03418.pdf, or free by phone, (202) 512-6000.

U.S.–EU Debate over GM Foods: Bush Administration Files WTO Suit to Challenge European Ban

The Bush Administration filed a World Trade Organization case last month against the European Union over its "illegal five-year moratorium on approving agricultural biotech products," citing legal, economic, scientific, and humanitarian grounds (www.ustr.gov/new/biotech.htm). "At the center of the debate ... if not the suit [itself], is a growing disagreement ... over what steps are necessary to protect public health and the environment," wrote the *New York Times* (May 14). The EU is demanding labeling of gene-altered foods and systems to trace the origins of food ingredients, and is nearing completion of legislation to allow both, while the U.S. opposes labeling and tracing mechanisms as too costly and impractical. EU officials say the U.S. has misrepresented its position on biotech foods and its approval system is in line with WTO rules (May 14, <http://ens-news.com>); the European Commission "regrets [the] move as legally unwarranted, economically unfounded, and politically unhelpful" (May 13, http://europa.eu.int/comm/agriculture/index_en.htm).

Philippine Rice Farmers Benefit from IPM Strategies: Insecticide Use Reaches "Historic Low"

Philippine rice growers in Central Luzon use less insecticide than farmers in other major rice-growing regions, making the region "one of the greenest rice bowls" in Asia (*Philippine Daily Enquirer*, May 24). Insecticide use in the region has reached an "historic low" since peaking in the mid-1980s, yet with higher rice yields and lower farmer costs, according to the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and Philippine Rice Research Institute. IRRI's director general credited the farmers' adoption of integrated pest management (IPM) strategies and noted that the "mistakes of the Green Revolution—where too much emphasis was sometimes put on the use of chemicals for pest control—have clearly been recognized and corrected" (February 14, www.irri.org/media/press/). The return of fish and other wildlife to farm fields, confirming the positive environmental impact of IPM methods, was cited as a key factor influencing the Philippine farmers' practices.

Exposure to Certain Agricultural Pesticides Raises Prostate Cancer Risk in Farmers

On-the-job exposure to certain agricultural pesticides may be linked to increased prostate cancer rates, suggests data from a large, collaborative study looking into the causes of cancer and other diseases in farming communities. The latest report from the federal Agricultural Health Study (AHS) evaluated the role of 45 pesticides and found "only a few showed evidence of a possible association with prostate cancer"; the fumigant methyl bromide was linked to the disease in the entire study group, while exposure to six other chemicals raised the risk only in men with a family history of the disease (May 1, www.niehs.nih.gov/oc/news/aghlstst.htm). Among more than 55,000 men who work as farmers, nursery workers, or commercial pesticide applicators in either Iowa or North Carolina, there was a 14 percent higher risk overall of developing prostate cancer compared to the general population. More information on the AHS, with a link to the newest report in *American Journal of Epidemiology* (May 1), is online at www.aghealth.org.

Farms and Ranches Operated by Women Are National Growth Trend

At a time when overall numbers of farms and ranches are declining, operations run by women are one of the few growth trends in U.S. agriculture, according to federal data and agricultural experts (*Washington Post*, May 20). The reasons are varied and include farm wives outliving their husbands or running the farm while he works off-site, and women inheriting from parents or retiring from established careers. The number of female operators rose steadily to 165,000 in 1997 and is expected to “dramatically increase” when the 2002 agricultural census, the first to identify more than one person as primary farm operator, is released next year; in comparison, full-time male operators dropped to 886,000 from nearly one million. “Women are the largest and fastest growing group of small farm buyers”; they “prefer to sell directly to customers and are more likely to branch out into alternative forms of agriculture, such as organic farming,” the article notes. New England leads the nation in female farmers per state due to its “profusion of small farms and the appeal of its strong alternative agriculture market.”

Environmental Groups, State Officials Object to Proposal Exempting CAFOs from Environmental Laws

Environmental groups and state officials have criticized a proposal that would temporarily exempt confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) from environmental laws to allow regulators to improve tracking of the types and sources of air pollutants emitted (*New York Times*, May 6). Under a plan being discussed by the U.S. EPA and industry lobbyists, the agency would monitor gases and dust from about 30 large hog and poultry farms, in lieu of enforcing Clean Air Act and Superfund laws. Farms that enroll in the \$11 million program would receive a ‘safe harbor’ from prosecution for emissions released before or during the 2-year monitoring period. In a protest letter sent to EPA, a coalition of environmental and citizen groups charges that the plan is too lenient since the agency already has the authority to order many farms to measure air pollutants; it excludes public input; and it will be too small to yield useful data (May 5, www.sierraclub.org/pressroom/). State and local air-quality officials walked out on initial talks between EPA and industry last December; a spokesman said the policy would create “huge loopholes” for CAFOs that will “wreak havoc with state and local enforcement authorities” (*Washington Post*, April 15).

Organic Practices Result in Equal Net Returns on Midwestern Corn, Soybeans

Corn and soybean yields were only minimally reduced when organic practices were used, according to a 10-year study in Minnesota. After factoring in production costs (though without taking organic price premiums into account), the net returns compared to conventional systems were equivalent. Researchers compared the conventional 2-year corn–soybean rotation that relies on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides with an extended 4-year certified organic rotation incorporating oats and alfalfa. The results were consistent with several other studies done by land-grant institutions in the Midwest and “suggest that organic production systems can be competitive with conventional production systems.” Issues including “heightened concern over water quality, increased reliance on government subsidies, and a continued decline in rural populations” in the U.S. have prompted interest in developing alternatives to the continuous corn–soybean rotation practiced on over 100 million acres, the researchers noted. For a copy of the report in *Agronomy Journal* (March-April 2003), contact Paul Porter, University of Minnesota, pporter@umn.edu.

Gene-Altered Crops May Pass Helpful Traits to Weeds, Research in Bt Sunflower Shows

Weedy relatives can take up bioengineered genes from nearby cultivated plants, making them more fertile and more resistant to insects, according to research published in *Ecological Applications* (Vol. 13, No. 2, 2003). The study offers the “first example of what might happen if a beneficial transgene accidentally spread to a wild population and then proliferated in subsequent generations,” said Allison Snow, an Ohio State University ecologist who made a preliminary report on her team’s work to a scientific meeting last year (August 8, www.acs.ohio-state.edu/units/research). The study showed that the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) gene spliced into cultivated sunflowers could be transferred in crosses with their weedy cousins; the hybrid offspring then passed the alien gene to wild sunflowers under field conditions, yielding plants with up to 55 percent more seeds and far less insect damage compared to unmodified sunflowers. The finding that transgenes carrying beneficial traits may spread inadvertently from cultivated plants is especially relevant to gene-altered crops with wild or weedy close relatives, which are currently limited to canola and squash in the U.S., Snow said. To request a copy of the journal article, contact Allison Snow, snow.1@osu.edu.

RESOURCES

■ **Direct Marketing with Value-Added Products**, case study of 5 small farm businesses in California, part of a collaborative study on farmers' markets and rural development, is online at www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/CDPP/valueadded.htm; or contact Jeri Ohmart, (530) 752-7556; jlohmart@ucdavis.edu.

■ **Ecolabels and the Greening of the Food Market** (212 pgs), proceedings from international conference held in November 2002, <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/conferences/ecolabels/order.html>; print copy is \$20 (plus S/H outside U.S.) from Ecolabels Conference, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, 150 Harrison Ave., Boston, MA 02111; additional conference abstracts are linked from "Detailed Program" at the website.

■ **Ecological Impacts of GMO Dissemination in Agro-Ecosystems** (218 pgs), proceedings from International OECD Workshop held in September 2002, www.ifa-tulln.ac.at/pdf/proceedings.pdf; for a copy via e-mail, contact Institute for Agrobiotechnology, Konrad Lorenz Strasse 20, A-3430 Tulln, Austria; e-mail gmo@ifa-tulln.ac.at.

■ **4th National Organic Farmers Survey**, partial results including impacts of GMOs on U.S. organic farmers, www.ofrf.org/publications/survey/; or contact Organic Farming Research Foundation, (831) 426-6606.

■ **The New Science of Food: Facing Up to Our Biotechnology Choices** (32 pgs) comparing approaches, core values, and consequences of biotechnology

use in food production, from Farm Foundation and National Issues Forums Institute, is \$3.90 plus S/H from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1-800-228-0810; www.kendallhunt.com.

■ **New York Agricultural Landowner Guide to Tax, Conservation and Management Programs** (12 pgs), www.farmland.org/northeast/newyork.htm; print copy is free from American Farmland Trust, Northeast Regional Office, (518) 581-0078 ext. 205, neaft@farmland.org.

■ **Secondhand Pesticides: Airborne Pesticide Drift in California** (83 pgs), from Pesticide Action Network North America and Californians for Pesticide Reform, is online at www.panna.org; print copy is free to California addresses (or \$5 to other U.S. states) from PANNA, (415) 981-1771.

■ **Seeds for the Future: A Farmer-Researcher Dialogue on On-Farm Plant Breeding**, 55-minute video from Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society's Farm Breeding Club, is \$20 (nonmembers) from NPSAS, 9824 79th St. SE, Fullerton, ND 58441; (701) 883-4304; information on On-Farm Breeding Project is online at www.npsas.org.

■ **Seeds of Change: Food and Agriculture Policy for Oklahoma's Future** is online at www.kerrcenter.com/kerrweb/HTML/policy_report.html; print copy is free from Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, (918) 647-9123; mailbox@kerrcenter.com.

■ **Strong Roots, Fragile Farms**, 58-minute video exploring impacts of

globalization on farm families in the U.S., Philippines, and Mexico, premiered on ABC-TV, is \$19.95 plus S/H from United Church Resources, 230 Sheldon Rd., Berea, OH 44017; 1-800-537-3394; www.ucc.org/fragilefarms/order.htm.

■ **Texas Rural Lands: Trends and Conservation Implications for the 21st Century** (28 pgs), from American Farmland Trust and Texas A&M University, <http://landinfo.tamu.edu/projects/aft/rldocl.pdf>; a print copy is \$10 from Texas Cooperative Extension, 1-888-900-2577; **Going, Going, Gone: The Impact of Land Fragmentation on Texas Agriculture and Wildlife**, 12-pg summary report, www.farmland.org/texas/fragmentation.pdf; or contact AFT Texas Regional Office, (512) 396-5517.

■ **Training Manual for Organic Agriculture in the Tropics**, from Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL), is online at www.fibl.ch/english/publications/training-manual/index.php; CD-ROM version is 10 Euro (plus S/H) from International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, fax (+49) 6853-919899; HeadOffice@ifoam.org.

■ **UK Organic Research 2002**, proceedings from first COR (Colloquium of Organic Agriculture) research conference in the UK, is £12 (plus S/H outside UK) from Organic Centre Wales, University of Wales, Aberystwyth SY23 3AL; organic@aber.ac.uk; individual papers are online at www.organic.aber.ac.uk/conference/proceedings.shtml; for information on COR, contact Elm Farm Research Centre, research@efrc.com.

CALENDAR

July

19 through October 4: Practical Farmers of Iowa 2003 Field Days, across Iowa; contact Rick Exner, PFI Farming Systems Coordinator, Iowa State University, (515) 294-5486; www.pfi.iastate.edu.

7–19: “Biotechnology: Legal and Ethical Issues,” graduate-level seminar taught by Margaret Mellon of Union of Concerned Scientists, in South Royalton, VT; contact Connie Button, Environmental Law Center, 1-800-227-1395 x2217.

9–11: “Fundamentals of Plant Improvement for Organic Agriculture,” a workshop for seed growers, in Port Townsend, WA; contact Matthew Dillon, (360) 385-5660; alsf@olypen.com.

14, August 12 & 19, September 10, October 20: Sustainable Agriculture 2003 Tours, sponsored by University of Illinois’ Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program, across Illinois; (217) 968-5512; <https://webs.aces.uiuc.edu/asap/index.html>.

15: Proposal submission deadline for research grants on organic farming and food systems; contact Organic Farming Research Foundation, (831) 426-6606; www.ofrf.org/research/application.html.

18: Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society’s Summer Symposium 2003, co-hosted by NDSU Research Extension Center, in Richardton, ND; contact Teresa Podoll, NPSAS, (701) 883-4304; tpnpsas@drtel.net; www.npsas.org/Upcoming.html.

16–18: Workshop on transitioning to organic grape growing, organized by Fetzer Vineyards and University of California’s Mendocino Extension Office and UC SAREP, in Hopland, CA; contact Ann Thrupp, Fetzer Vineyards, (707) 272-1152; or G. McGourty, UC Extension Mendocino County, gmcgourty@ucdavis.edu.

18–20: Sustainable Agriculture Workshop on “turning marginal mountainside soils into sustainable agricultural lands,” in Black Mountain, NC; contact Culture’s Edge, (828) 669-3937; e-mail

culturesedge@earthhaven.org; <http://earthhaven.org>.

20–23: National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils National Conference, in San Antonio, TX; contact NARC&D, (202) 434-4780; www.narcdconference.org.

24–25 (Oklahoma City, OK), August 5–6 (Memphis, TN) and 12–13 (Atlanta, GA): “Train the Trainer” Farmland Preservation Workshops; contact Anita Poole, Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, (918) 647-9123; apoole@kerrcenter.com.

26–30: “The Columbia: Conserving a Legacy of Life,” Soil and Water Conservation Society Annual Conference, in Spokane, WA; contact SWCS, (515) 289-2331 ext. 17; www.swcs.org.

26–30: “Food Choice: Why We Eat What We Eat,” Society for Nutrition Education’s 36th Annual Meeting, in Philadelphia, PA; www.sne.org/conference/general.htm.

28–30: “National Biosolids Research Summit” to include public participation, focusing on July 2002 NRC report on health and environmental aspects of land application of biosolids; for location and details, contact Jami Montgomery, WERF Research Program, (703) 684-2470 x7146; www.werf.org/press/release_051203.cfm.

29–31: Upper Midwest Grazing Conference, sponsored by 4-State Extension, in Lacsrose, WI; contact Larry Tranel, Iowa State University Extension, (563) 583-6496; tranel@iastate.edu.

31: Abstract submission deadline for “Conference on Soil Erosion under Climate Change: Rates, Implications, and Feedbacks,” GCTE Soil Erosion Network meeting, November 16–23, 2003, in Tucson, AZ; contact Mark Nearing, mnearing@tucson.ars.ag.gov; <http://soilerosion.net/tucson2003/>.

31–August 3: “Easy Being Green?,” American Community Gardening Association’s 24th Annual Conference, in Chicago, IL; contact Marti Ross Bjornson, mbjornson@nwu.edu; or ACGA, (540) 552-5550; www.communitygarden.org/conf/index.html.



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