



NEWS BRIEFS

Senators Urge USDA to Expand Its Vision for Conservation Security Program

A bipartisan group of 56 senators called on the USDA last month to expand its vision for the pending Conservation Security Program (CSP), to allow more farmers and ranchers to participate and receive larger payments (Greenwire, March 16). Led by Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Gordon Smith (R-OR), the group wrote to Secretary Ann Veneman asking her to revise the proposed rule, released in December 2003, because it does not measure up to their intent for the program, as written into the 2002 Farm Bill. The senators urged the agency to open CSP to all agricultural producers nationwide, rather than only in a few watersheds, and to allow producers to choose from the array of 185 conservation practices approved by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. According to the March 12 letter, the limited CSP would not capture the \$62 billion in public benefits, over its costs, which USDA estimated for a fully operational program. An initial posting of public comments received on the draft rule is online at www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/comments.html.

Decline in Plant Species Diversity in British Grasslands Is Linked to Nitrogen Pollution

A decline in the richness of plant species, an important component of biodiversity, is linked to nitrogen deposition from the atmosphere, in a study of grasslands across Great Britain. Reporting in the journal *Science* (March 19), British and U.S. researchers led by Carly Stevens sampled 68 sites from a type of grassland that is common throughout Europe, Australia, and North America and makes up economically valuable pastureland. They found that native plant species adapted to lower nitrogen conditions are “systematically reduced”; at average current rates of nitrogen deposition for central Europe and other industrialized areas, there was a 23 percent species reduction compared to the lowest nitrogen levels. Intensive agriculture (mainly through volatilized animal wastes) and fossil fuel combustion are the main sources of increased global levels of atmospheric nitrogen, which deposits on the soil, favoring plant species that thrive with higher fertility.

Spread of Oxygen-Starved Waters from Nutrient Overload Is “Key Emerging Issue,” Says United Nations

In a growing number of the world’s oceans and seas, nearly 150 oxygen-starved ‘dead zones’ threaten fish stocks and people who depend on marine ecosystems for their food and livelihood, finds a new report from the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). “Continued ‘fertilization’ of the planet” and the spread of oxygen-starved waters is a “key emerging issue that governments need to urgently address,” UNEP stated (March 29, www.unep.org/newscentre/). While marine scientists have watched this trend since the 1970s, the new report emphasizes the spread of dead zones to new and larger areas, including waters off Europe, North America, South America, China, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The dead zones are caused mainly by nutrient runoff from nitrogen-containing fertilizers, which combines with nutrients from municipal wastes and fossil fuel emissions to trigger blooms of oxygen-depleting phytoplankton. The UNEP report, “Global Environment Outlook Yearbook 2003,” is online at www.unep.org/geo/yearbook.

Stream-Side Conservation Buffers Yield Water-Quality Gains in Iowa, Georgia

Stream-side (or riparian) forest buffers can yield major reductions in streambank erosion and sediment flow into waterways, according to a recent study in the Bear Creek watershed in central Iowa, where extensive buffer research has been conducted over the past decade. A team from Iowa State University found that 66-foot wide buffer zones (consisting of trees, shrubs, and native grass strips) installed on a 7-mile stretch, alongside row-crop fields or continuously grazed pastures, would reduce erosion by about 72 percent. (The full report appears in *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, Jan./Feb. 2004, and a summary in *BufferNotes*, Feb. 2004, <http://nacdn.org/buffers/04Feb/>.) A 9-year study of riparian buffers by USDA’s Agricultural Research Service and the University of Georgia also shows important gains in water quality: Restored grass-forest buffers can be highly effective in removing excess nitrogen and phosphorus from the surface runoff from adjacent fields where manure is applied, and in lowering herbicide levels from treated sites (*Agricultural Research*, Dec. 2003, www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/).

**Scientists Debate Merits
of Innovative Rice
Production System**

Scientific debate on the merits of an innovative system to boost rice yields was reported last month in a news feature in the journal *Nature* (March 25). The “System of Rice Intensification” (SRI), which uses more sparsely planted and drier fields than typical rice production, was developed in the 1980s in Madagascar. Since the mid-1990s, the system has been adopted by farmers and increasingly studied by research institutions in 17 additional countries in Asia and Africa. SRI proponents contend that, with skilled management, rice yields can increase by 50 to 100 percent or more, with less fertilizer, pesticides, and seed; less land; and substantial water savings. However, “many eminent agronomists” dismiss claims of high yields as resulting from “poor record keeping and unscientific thinking,” *Nature* wrote. Norman Uphoff of Cornell University, who has actively promoted research on SRI and its benefits for resource-poor farmers, believes that the synergies that result from its agroecological approach are key to the dramatic gains seen with SRI. Cornell’s SRI home page is available at <http://ciifad.cornell.edu/sri>.

**Opposition in Global
Markets to Herbicide-
Resistant GM Wheat Is
Widespread, Media
Reports**

World wheat buyers are increasingly opposed to Monsanto’s herbicide-resistant GM wheat, the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) announced last month. According to media reports (Resource News International, March 18; Reuters, March 19), Board chair Ken Ritter told a meeting of farmers and industry officials that 87 percent of the customers who purchase wheat from western Canadian farmers require guarantees that the crop is non-GM, up from 82 percent two years ago. The CWB has asked the Canadian government to assess the impact the wheat would have on markets before it approves Monsanto’s ‘Roundup Ready’ wheat, a step currently not required by law. In the U.S., a survey by USDA of global attitudes toward genetically modified wheat also shows widespread opposition, or uncertainty about wheat imports, if the GM variety gains commercial approval (Reuters, March 15). The survey of USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service offices around the world, asking about host countries’ stances to GM wheat, “mostly backed up widely held views that European and Asian countries have serious concerns about biotech wheat, including fears about its impact on the environment and human health,” Reuters reported.

**Biotech Company Drops
UK Market for
Genetically Modified
Corn, Citing
Government’s Strict
Conditions**

Genetically modified crops are unlikely to be grown by British farmers before 2008, following a decision by Bayer CropScience last month to halt efforts to license its GM corn in UK markets (BBC News, March 31, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>). Three weeks earlier the company’s ‘Chardon LL’ variety, an herbicide-resistant corn intended for cattle feed, gained provisional approval as the first commercial GM crop allowed in the UK. Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett said on March 9 that farmers would be able to grow Bayer’s GM corn under strict conditions used in the government’s farm-scale studies, which suggested less environmental impact from the GM variety, compared to conventionally grown corn, provided the herbicide use was carefully controlled. Bayer blamed the government’s stringent rules for making the GM variety “economically non-viable,” since several regulatory hurdles still needed to be overcome. The approval included also a warning that GM companies or GM farmers would be liable for commercial losses from GM contamination; Beckett stressed that neither taxpayers nor non-GM farmers should compensate farmers who lose their non-GM status through contamination (London *Financial Times*, March 10).

**New Threats Renew
Calls for Independent
Food Safety Agency,
Overhaul of U.S. Laws**

The potential for spread of mad cow disease and terrorist attacks on the food supply reaffirms the need to overhaul federal food safety laws and create a single, independent food safety agency, congressional auditors said last month (AP, March 30). Although the food supply is “generally safe,” the current “patchwork structure” of 30 federal laws, enforced by the Food and Drug Administration, USDA, and 10 other federal agencies, isn’t fully up to the job of protecting against the new threats, Lawrence Dyckman of the non-partisan General Accounting Office (GAO) told a Senate hearing. Some lawmakers, and many consumer and public interest groups, believe that a single food agency would have sharply expanded testing for mad cow disease after the first U.S. case was discovered last December, according to a March 22 article in *Chemical & Engineering News* that reviews problems with federal food safety oversight. Senator Richard Durbin and Rep. Rosa DeLauro plan to reintroduce bills, which they sponsored in the last two Congresses, to create an independent agency, the article said. “Federal Food Safety and Security System: Fundamental Restructuring Is Needed” (#GAO-04-588T) is online at www.gao.gov.

RESOURCES

■ **Alternative and Herbal Livestock Health Sourcebook** (164 pgs), including proceedings from October 2000 conference co-sponsored by Northeast SARE, www.canr.uconn.edu/plsci/AHLH%20SB-Web.pdf; print copy (limited supply) is \$8 for S/H, (860) 486-6271; rochelle.syme@uconn.edu.

■ **Biotechnology: Science and Society at a Crossroad** (292 pgs), NABC Report 15 from June 2003 conference, www.cals.cornell.edu/extension/nabc/; print copy is \$5 from National Agricultural Biotechnology Council, (607) 254-4856; NABC@cornell.edu.

■ **Building Farm Resilience: Challenges and Prospects for Organic Farming** (52 pgs), doctoral thesis from Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, linked from <http://diss-epsilon.slu.se/archive/00000170/>, or contact Rebecka Milestad, Dept. of Rural Development Studies (Uppsala), Rebecka.Milestad@lbtv.slu.se.

■ **California Certified Organic Farmers 2004 Organic Directory** (168 pgs) including certified operations and services, websites, apprenticeships, and more, \$10 from CCOF, (831) 423-2263.

■ **City Farms Toolkit**, guide to urban agriculture in New York City with 70 tipsheets and resource information, \$35 plus \$2.55 S/H from Just Food, PO Box 20444, Greeley Square Station, New York, NY 10001-0008; (212) 645-9880.

■ **Enhancing Commercial Food Service Sales by Small Meat Processing Firms**, 85-pg market research report from USDA and Texas A&M University, www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/

[MSB/enhancing_commercial%20f.pdf](#); for print copy, contact Debra Tropp, (202) 720-8326; debra.tropp@usda.gov.

■ **Farms and Land in Farms 2003**, 19-pg report from USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/reports/nassr/other/zfl-bb/fmno0204.pdf>.

■ **Genetically Engineered Organisms and the Environment: Current Status and Recommendations**, position paper from Ecological Society of America, www.esa.org/pao/esaPositions/Papers/geo_position.htm; or contact ESA, 1707 H St. NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 833-8773.

■ **List of Alternative Crops & Enterprises for Small Farm Diversification** (Feb. 2004 update), www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/AFSIC_pubs/altlist.htm, or contact Alternative Farming Systems Info. Center, National Agricultural Library, (301) 504-6559; afsic@nal.usda.gov.

■ **Organic Produce, Price Premiums, and Eco-Labeling in U.S. Farmers' Markets**, 12-pg report from USDA Economic Research Service, www.ers.usda.gov/publications/VGS/Apr04/vgs30101, or contact co-author Catherine Greene, cgreene@ers.usda.gov.

■ **Selling Directly to Restaurants and Retailers**, 5-pg leaflet on successful direct marketing strategies, www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/cdpp/farmersmkt.htm; or contact University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616; (530) 752-7556.

■ **Small-Scale Food Processing: A Directory of Equipment and Methods**

(248 pgs, 2nd edition), reference guide for food processing businesses, business advisors, and development workers, £29.95 from ITDG Publishing (London), phone +44(0)20 7436 9761; www.developmentbookshop.com.

■ **Sustainable Agriculture and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Resource & Information Directory** (5th edition, 34 pgs), www.mda.state.mn.us; print copy is free from Sustainable Agriculture & IPM Program, Minnesota Dept of Agriculture, (651) 296-7686; alison.fish@state.mn.us.

■ **Western Profiles of Innovative Agricultural Marketing: Examples from Direct Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Enterprises** (128 pgs), <http://cals.arizona.edu/AREC/wemc/westernprofiles.html>; print copy is \$10 from CALSmart, Univ. of Arizona College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, 4042 N. Campbell Ave., Tucson, AZ 85719; (520) 318-7275.

■ **World Agriculture and the Environment: A Commodity-by-Commodity Guide to Impacts and Practices** (282 pgs), sponsored by World Wildlife Fund, is \$35 from Island Press, 1-800-828-1302; www.islandpress.com.

■ **Young Agrarians: Changing the Face of Agriculture**, 26-minute video, and 9-pg **Resource Guide** aimed to high school and college-age students, free to vocational agriculture and related programs; contact Johanna Divine, Northern Arizona University, Box 22188, Flagstaff, AZ 86002; johanna.divine@nau.edu.

CALENDAR

May 2004

7-8 and 21-22, June 11-12, July 30-31, Aug. 13, Sept. 10 and 24-25, and Oct. 15-16: 2004 Workshop Series on riparian management and restoration topics, 1- and 2-day events sponsored by Quivira Coalition, around New Mexico; contact Tamara Gadzia, Quivira Coalition, (505) 820-2544; projects@quiviracoalition.org.

8, June 12, July 17, Aug. 7, Sept. 11, and Oct. 9: 2004 farm tour series sponsored by Missouri Organic Association; for locations and details, contact MOA, (417) 258-2394; rdhopkins@missouriorganic.org; www.missouriorganic.org/calendar.htm.

21: Submission deadline for pre-proposals for Research and Education, and Professional Development grants from USDA's Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program; for eligibility and details, (802) 656-0471; nesare@uvm.edu; www.uvm.edu/~nesare/grants_prepro05.html.

25-26: "Applied EMS in Agriculture Conference," on Environmental Management Systems and food production and processing, in Kansas City, KS; contact Frank Bryant, SES Inc., 1-800-897-1163; or J. Anderson, EPA Region 7, anderson.jennifer@epa.gov.

30: Nomination deadline for William L. Brown Award for Excellence in Genetic Resource Conservation; contact William L. Brown Award Committee, WLB Center for Economic Botany, Missouri Botanical Garden, PO Box 299, St. Louis, MO 63166-0299; www.mobot.org/MOBOT/research/applied_research/award.shtml.

June 2004

5-6: "Conserving Forests, Creating Livelihoods," 6th Annual Landowners Conference on income opportunities, small business development, and value-added enterprises, in Hocking Hills, OH; contact C. Brunty, Sustainable Forestry Program, Rural Action, PO Box 21, 85-1/2 High St., Glouster, OH 45732; (740) 767-2090.

10-11: "Taking Back the Food System: Organizing for Food Justice in California," Second California Community Food Security

Summit, in Los Angeles, CA; contact Maggie Haase, Center for Food and Justice, (323) 341-5096; mhmasch@oxy.edu.

10-13: "Agriculture to Culture: The Social Transformation of Food," Joint 2004 Annual Meetings of the Association for the Study of Food and Society and the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, in Hyde Park, NY; contact Krishnendu Ray, Culinary Institute of America, k_ray@culinary.edu; www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/NextMeeting.htm.

12-16: 2004 Conference of the American Forage and Grassland Council, in Roanoke, VA; contact Kim Cassida, USDA/ARS/AFSRC, (304) 256-2956; kcassida@afsrc.ars.usda.gov; www.conted.vt.edu/afgc/papers.html.

13-15: "Agricultural Biotechnology: Finding Common International Goals," 16th annual public meeting held by National Agricultural Biotechnology Council, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada; contact NABC, Cornell University, (607) 254-4856; nabc@cornell.edu.

15: Submission deadline for pre-proposals for Research and Education grants from North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program; contact NCR SARE, Univ. of Nebraska, (402) 472-7081; www.sare.org/ncrsare/cfp.htm.

24-25: "Agriculture as a Producer and Consumer of Energy," conference organized by Farm Foundation and USDA Office of Energy Policy and New Uses, in Arlington, VA; contact Steve Halbrook, steve@farmfoundation.org; or Joe Outlaw, (979) 845-3062.

27-July 2: "Working Together for Sustainable Land-Use Systems," 1st World Congress of Agroforestry, in Orlando, FL; contact P.K. Nair, Center for Subtropical Agroforestry, Univ. of Florida/IFAS, (352) 846-0880; <http://conference.ifas.ufl.edu/WCA/>.

28-30: "Riparian Ecosystems and Buffers: Multi-Scale Structure, Function, and Management," summer specialty conference of American Water Resources Association, in Olympic Valley, CA; www.awra.org/meetings/Olympic2004/abstracts.html.



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