

Biggest barrier broken with critical self-assessment

"Organic agriculture: breaking the barriers" was the theme of the annual alternative farming conference at the University of Guelph, February 1, 1992. Sponsored by Canadian Organic Growers, Guelph Agricultural Alternatives, Ecological Farmers of Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, the conference attracted over 300 people to the plenary session on perspectives of organic farming, workshops on weed control, nutrient management, crop rotation and marketing, as well as an impressive variety of participants in the trade show. Hugh Maynard reports on some of the conference highlights.

Organic agriculture - however it is defined - has made big strides in recent years. More farmers adopting organic techniques, more organic produce available for consumers and more acceptance of organic ideas within the agricultural professional milieu.

Barriers remain, however, and fundamental change is still required to overcome these blocks, according to Dr. Stuart Hill of the Ecological Agriculture Project at McGill University. Hill is a leading proponent of the philosophy of agricultural change as a precursor to practical adoption. "We are still at the stage that reflects a belief that sustainability can be achieved by fine-tuning our present system without having to really rethink and re-design our values and programs of action," says Hill.

Hill's contention is that values and philosophy do not just change overnight, they require a varied background of political action to bring about support for the transition process to sustainability - education, rewards (tax incentives, subsidies) and penalties (monitoring programs, legislation).

Priorities should include special training for farmers, greater participation by farmers in government programs, funding for farmer and long-term research, government approved organic standards and consumer access to information on methods of food production.

Hill's philosophy of change was a good ice-breaker for the following presentation by Ted Zettel. Zettel, a member of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, has a wealth of practical knowledge as a certified organic farmer that he brought forward in a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the movement by the farming community towards sustainable agricultural practices.

World's agenda

"Self-sustaining agriculture is a very attractive idea, and once I saw it work I thought everyone else would see it too," Zettel reflected. "But there are barriers and the vast majority of farmers are still farming in a conventional manner and it's just not sustainable."

Zettel said that the biggest strength behind change in agriculture is that sustainability is the number one issue in all aspects of human affairs. "My farm is not completely sustainable, one thing that bothers me is energy consumption. But it's safe to say we're on the road to sustainability," he says.

Food quality is an extension of sustainability, according to Zettel, but a difficult one to prove scientifically. His assumption is that a healthy ecosystem produces healthy food. "I can't prove it but it can't be refuted either. I find it hard to believe that a dying ecosystem produces a healthy product," Zettel emphasized, adding that demand for quality food will turn agriculture towards sustainability.

Working together

As much as the present system of agricultural production needs to make changes, so does the movement that embraces ecological practices. In technical matters, Zettel says that there are variable levels of experience that even among organic farmers result in lively productive farmers and those who struggle."

Zettel believes that there needs to be even greater collaboration between farmers to help one another -networks, linkage and one-on-one help. He adds that there has been too much emphasis on efficiency (over yield) in promoting ecological agriculture and that a return from the extreme is required by re-focusing on yield.

The drive for organic certification has been valuable from a consumer perspective, according to Zettel. "It's a designation that the consumer can vote for, a support for sustainable agriculture," he says. But it's also an impediment to bringing conventional farms on board.

"Organic standards exclude some farmers who are doing a good job ecologically and includes some who are not," Zettel remarked to the obvious consternation of many conference participants. He gave as an example the use of vacuums to remove insects from crops, which he termed as a substitute for pesticides but not an answer as to why there needs to be bugs removed? "It's organic but it's not necessarily ecological, it's no guarantee of a sustainable agriculture," he said.

Saying no to "O"

Zettel then broke all the barriers by suggesting that the "O" word should go. "This should be the last conference with "organic" in the title," he said. The organic designation could stay for food marketing purposes, but he maintained that conventional farmers have such

a poor perception of the term that marketing the message of sustainability becomes almost impossible. Organic, he said, had become the victim of bad publicity.

"We need to include, not exclude," Zettel said, and to that end there were many other words less threatening which could be used instead: alternative, sustainable, ecological, holistic, regenerative and resource efficient.

"We, as farmers, deal with the very essence of life and therefore have a very large responsibility. We need to encompass more of mainstream agriculture so that we come to the stage when we don't need a separate designation for quality food," Zettel concluded.

Confessions of a certifier

Gary Lean has seen it all in terms of Ontario's organic farms, from less than a hectare all the way up to mixed farms based on 400 hectares of cropland. Across that spectrum, he has witnessed both the good and the bad as farmers put their lives and operations through some of the biggest changes since the land was cleared by the original settlers.

Positive results on organic farms appears based on the fulfillment of the larger goals and objectives that would apply to any farm or business. Lean said that those farmers who had been able to manage the diversity of operations that often become necessary as part of an organic farm were more likely to succeed. Of particular note was the right mix of operations to suit the people who have to work with them and the farm's capability to produce.

Stability and cash flow had a strong link to direct marketing efforts, said Lean, reflecting the need for organic farmers to get out and sell. "Direct marketers are in a better position versus those with last year's grain on hand," he commented.

Good interpersonal skills with family, governments, agencies and in sales were prerequisites for success, again reflecting the comprehensive nature of responsibilities necessary in the management of an organic operation.

Brave face

In contrast, the challenges that Lean saw in organic farms tended to be more specific; the variety and extent of challenges differed from farm to farm, making the use of the word "failure" (as compared to success) unfair, even though he said the range of the management expertise challenge as "simple as getting out of bed in the morning."

He noted that some farmers get too wrapped in the short-term economic view of chasing dollars (premium prices for organic foodstuffs) and not working on building a long-term market. Others simply had not sorted out how to market their products at all.

Farm management questions were also common challenges, according to Lean. What inputs could (or should) be used was one that had not always been resolved satisfactorily?

Broad concepts such as a rotation had been embraced but with as little consideration for the consequences of weeds, nutrient requirements and erosion as in a mono-culture crop operation.

There's often a good reason as to why land is cheap, often relating to low fertility and/or poor drainage. Organic practices are no magical solution for land that shouldn't be cultivated in the first place, says Lean.

Commonly, the managed diversity of the successful organic farm gives way to chaotic diversity in the less successful ones, with too much unfocused activity and too many unfinished projects hanging around.

Lean also says that new crop and livestock alternatives, such as permaculture and agro-forestry, need to be explored and developed to take the supply of food the next step beyond organic production towards an improved ecological balance.

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