

A glimpse of the organic scene in Europe

by Allison Arkinstall

The organic sector is the only growth sector in European agriculture; so says Nicolas Lampkin, Development Director of Aberystwyth Centre for Organic Husbandry and Agroecology. Lampkin is also a lecturer on agricultural economics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth and he has just completed a book entitled Organic Farming, which is an extensive review of organic production and research in Europe.

Lampkin was featured at a one-day bilingual conference, "Sustainable Agricultural Policy - obstacle or catalyst", sponsored by the Conseil d'economie de gestion agricoles du Québec. It was held in Quebec City last November and Lampkin outlined several developments occurring in the European organic sector.

Proof that the organic movement in Europe has been expanding has been noted through major increases in the number of organic farms, the area of land in organic production, and the size of the organic food market. In the European Community (EC), the organic land base of 103,000 hectares in 1987 has risen to 161,000 hectares in 1990.

Other countries such as Sweden,, Norway and Finland have seen similar expansion, largely due to policies that support farmers who are converting from conventional to organic production systems. According to Lampkin, Finland's 2,000 hectares of organic landbase in 1987 has jumped to 11,000 hectares in 1990, and similarly, Sweden's organic landbase has swelled from 7,500 hectares in 1987 to 29,000 hectares in 1990.

The organic movement is catching on in Eastern Europe as well. Lithuania now has 100 organic farmers and in Hungary, 43 organic farms operate on a combined 3,000 hectares.

Policy Needs

Nevertheless, continued growth in the organic farm sector can only be supported by a sound policy framework. The over-production crisis that darkens European agriculture has made organic farming an attractive option to agricultural policy makers.

"Organic systems will not be able to maintain the high yields of conventional systems; hence, surplus production can be reduced" Lampkin said.

Current organic policy in the EC is structured to achieve a definitive 20 percent reduction in surplus output rather than to achieve environmental benefits garnered from organic farming. Organic agriculture is being viewed as the way to attack the glut of food in the

marketplace, just as the United States instigated a policy of systematically taking land out of production through the 1985 Farm Bill.

With marked enthusiasm, European communities are advocating programs that will support more farmers to convert from conventional to organic farming methods. By 1991, a legally-based organic certification scheme will be in place that is very close to organic farming standards in the United States. Organic farming research is already strong in countries such as Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden, and Lampkin announced that the United Kingdom is soon to step up its organic research program.

As part of its organic training commitment, Denmark is converting one of its agricultural colleges to educate farmers about organic practices. Germany has already established 3 professorships in organic farming.

Support payments are being offered to many farmers who are undergoing the conversion. According to Lampkin, Scandinavian farmers are being funded from \$300 to \$800 per hectare for a 3 to 5 year conversion program.

Savings from Organic

Lampkin outlined how policy options to support these organic farming initiatives are cheaper in the long term than public expenditure on other current agricultural legislation because organic farming reduces social and environmental costs significantly as well as physical costs associated with storing surplus production.

However, Lampkin says that in the EC, funding for organic programs is not collected through taxpayers, but rather from consumers based on higher food prices. Lampkin recognizes this inequitable relationship in many European farming communities. "The lower income groups are funding the farmers" he stated, as these people apportion more of their personal disposable income to food.

Lampkin cautioned that the incentives given to European farmers to convert cannot upset the balance of supply already provided by those organic farmers who were established before any support premiums were made available. So far, only Sweden has confronted this issue and offered grants to its existing organic producers.

The leadership and growth of the organic sector in the European community is to be commended; however, Lampkin projects that the overall policy objective will become dysfunctional in meeting an evolving organic farming system. "It is simply not enough to implement programs that are geared to reducing agricultural output without concern for the sustainability of the environment" stated Lampkin.

He cited new hope in legislation that is to be proposed by the EC at the end of July 1991. The new policy objective, under which conversion to organic farming is to be supported, will discourage the use of fertilizers, pesticides and other intensive agricultural inputs, and encourage farming practices that are less intensive and less harmful to the

environment. "We are paying farmers to think about the management of their systems rather than the end product" explained Lampkin.

With such objectives in mind for 1991, it will be interesting to watch what will follow in Europe and indeed, to see what the rest of the global organic community will do to answer the European call.

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