

Setting the stage for the sustainable agriculture campaign

Agriculture entered a new era following the Second World War. The widespread development and adoption of fertilizers and synthetic chemical pesticides, improvements in machinery and high yielding cultivars have allowed yields to increase 2% annually since 1948 (USDA, 1986). A diminishing rural population feeds more and more people and this high productivity has kept food prices low in North America. The average family spends between 15% and 16% of disposable income on food compared to Western Europeans who spend between 24% and 30%.

Agriculture plays an important role in Canada's economy. Approximately 300,000 farmers, or 1.2% of the population, provides food to 26 million people and exports almost \$10 billion worth of goods (about 10% of Canada's total commercial export trade). These advances in agricultural productivity have led to fewer and larger farm units, greater specialization and loss of crop and livestock diversity. As a consequence, farming practices such as monoculture, over-reliance on chemical inputs and unclear government agricultural policies have placed the food resource base in jeopardy.

It is critical that as a society we come to grips with the reality that the potential for self-sufficiency in food production is being lost. From 1966 to 1981, 57% of rural land converted to urban use was prime farmland. In Ontario alone, 39 square miles of agricultural land goes out of production every year. Canadian farmland once had an average of 25 to 45 cm of topsoil; now the average has dropped through degradation to only 15 cm. An overgrowing proportion of farmers variable costs come from pesticides and fertilizers, while facing at the same time an increasing trend of chemical resistance in both insect and weed populations. More than 440 insect and mite species and 70 fungal species are known to be resistant to some pesticides. Pest populations already resistant to one or more pesticides generally develop resistance to other chemicals more rapidly, especially when the compounds function in a similar way (National Research Council, 1986).

Farm productivity may have improved but the farmer is receiving an ever smaller piece of the food dollar. Immediate measures must be taken to stabilize farm incomes and halt the exodus of farm families from agriculture. The family farm system of food production has proven itself in its ability to adopt new technology. The self-ownership and pride farming people have for their agricultural lifestyles is the only foundation which can assure a sustainable food production industry in this country. Yet, farmers face an economic crisis unparalleled since the 1930's. Farm debt has increased from \$10.3 billion in 1977 to an estimated \$21 billion in 1988. Between 1979 and 1988 3,681 farmers went

bankrupt in Canada and many more border on insolvency. If farm incomes are measured in real terms (after adjustment for inflation) the level of return has been falling substantially. Net farm income of \$3.6 billion in 1988 is lower than the \$5 billion in 1973. What is more alarming is that the proportion of this income dependent on government assistance has risen from 21.5% in 1980 to 91% in 1988. Clearly if agriculture is to move to a more sustainable system both government and society must make a stronger commitment to support the farm population. Farm families can not plan for the future when placed under such short term economic constraints.

New initiatives have been undertaken to tackle these problems. The National Soil Conservation Program (a joint effort between federal and provincial governments and farm organizations to tackle soil erosion and salinization), the 2002 pesticide reduction program put forth by the Ontario government and Prince Edward Island's Sustainable Agriculture Assistance program are but a few joint farmer/government activities. Non-governmental initiatives such as the on farm research conducted by REAP-Canada are making major strides in developing alternative agricultural techniques. As well, farmers are adopting sustainable agricultural practices. Many have implemented the basics of integrated pest management while others develop farming practices which do not use any form of synthetic pesticides or fertilizers such as organic jamming. As a whole, these varied production methodologies can only be beneficial to agriculture, adding greater diversity and giving thought to new ideas.

All these programs represent a progressive start, but much more remains to be done. Friends of the Earth's Sustainable Agriculture and Food Campaign will be working with farm and conservation organizations, food processors and retailers, public interest groups, and government to develop policy and programs which will preserve and enhance the environmental quality of the food resource base while assuring a viable economic future for the farm family. The campaign will also focus on an extensive public education program designed to show the urban population how and from where their food comes to their table. Like all other industry, agriculture's economic growth and development must include sound environmental practices in order to survive in the long term. If the present initiatives are an example of what can be done, then they are a convincing sign for the development of a truly sustainable food production system that will be there for our children.

Jack Coulson is the Chair of REAP Canada's Board of Directors and is based in Ottawa as the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Campaign Coordinator for Friends of the Earth.

Copyright © 1990 *REAP Canada*