

Alternative agriculture very very scary? (maybe less scary than chemical intensive agricultures)

Dave Wreford, editor of Country Guide magazine thinks chemical intensive agriculture is getting a lot of bad press these days and that governments shouldn't be embracing, or wasting money on research for, sustainable agriculture.

In his October editorial, he singles out a statement made by a senior government official in Washington after the allocation of money for sustainable agriculture research. He stated that such an allocation would "enhance the long-term sustainability, profitability and competitiveness of U.S. agriculture while reducing pollution of wafer supplies and hazards to human health associated with excessive use of synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers".

Wreford's contention was that this statement and others like it are "not only irresponsible but potentially dangerous" because (summarized points)

1. chemical pesticides and fertilizers do not cause great harm to human health or the environment
2. problems such as ground water pollution or chemical residues in food are the result of misuse of chemicals rather than their use.
3. in spite of the fact that pesticides and fertilizers cost money end some are dangerous, farmers can's farm without them, and "no amount of money spent on alternative agricultural research will make it possible in the foreseeable future".

Instead of frittering money away on sustainable frmming methods, his solution would be to correct the deficiencies of the production tools (agri-chemicals).

Mr. Wreford appears not to read his own magazine let alone his own writing. First he states agrichemicals do not cause great harm to human health or the environment then indicates that they can be dangerous for farmers to apply and can cause groundwater pollution.

In his second point, while admitting that ground and surface water get contaminated by chemicals, he maintains that soil management systems rather than chemicals are to blame. However an article in the same Country Guide reports on an Agriculture Canada research project which found that less tillage is no solution to chemical runoff. What's more the scientific specialist interviewed went as far as to suggest that conservation tillage may increase phosphorus loadings in the Great Lakes.

His third point was that alternative farming methods will never be possible, yet the cover story in this same issue was "in praise of mixed farming" the story of "a touch old fashioned, but not outdated" diversified dairy, beef and sheep farmer making big bucks off of low-cost pasture. Furthermore, in 1987 Country Guide ran two articles on our organization, REAP (Resource Efficient Agricultural Production), the first of which entitled "In with the old, out with the new" (July) detailed our high yield low input com system. The second piece concerned Harry Wilhelm, a REAP On-Farm Research co-operator, and his very successful non-chemical weed control system for white beans (November).

Like many others, Mr. Wreford needs to realize that we must dramatically cut consumption of inputs if we are going to reduce our environmental problems, let alone our economic ones. Sustainable farming systems deserve funding and should no longer be considered just alternatives. Our organization, and others like it, have already identified and developed more resource efficient farming methods for row crops and cereals. These systems not only reduce consumption of inputs and tillage but, in many cases, produce higher yields than those obtained using chemical intensive systems.

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