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MESAS Newsletter

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

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2002 Farm Bill Initiatives for Sustainable Agriculture

Ed. note: The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture has proposed six major initiatives for inclusion in the 2002 Farm Bill. We will present as many of these as time and space permit. All are available on the Nebraska-based Center for Rural Affairs web-site at www.cfra.org.

Stop Subsidizing Family Farm Decline: Target Payments to Small- and Medium-Size Farms

Additional farm program benefits will do nothing to reverse family farm decline and little to improve farm income as long as they are distributed according to a policy that says the bigger you grow the more money you get from the government. Current programs provide multi-million dollar payments to the nation's largest farms and wealthiest landowners to subsidize them to grow larger by bidding land away from their neighbors. As long as farm programs pay farmers to operate more acres, the benefits they provide will be bid directly into higher cash rental rates and land purchase prices. So structured, farm programs serve little public purpose.

This problem has grown worse under recent emergency legislation. First the effective limit on total farm program payments was increased to \$460,000 — enough to cover a 5,000 to 10,000 acre corn/soybean operation and double that for a father and son. Allowing mega-producers to receive generic commodity certificates not subject to the payment limitation then effectively eliminated the limit.

Farm programs should be designed to serve public purposes — raising low farm incomes and increasing opportunity in farm communities. To achieve those objectives, farm programs must support a volume of production that is sufficient to operate efficiently and provide a reasonable family living, but not continually pay more without limit just because a farm grows bigger.

Under our proposal, farms of all sizes — small, medium and large — would have access to support on up to \$250,000 worth of production. But they would not get more for growing beyond that. Unlike current programs, this approach would ultimately increase the incomes of farm operators, help maintain a base of efficient family-size farms and strengthen rural communities.

We propose a targeting of any new payments beyond those authorized by the 1996 FAIR Act to small- and medium-size farms:

- Provide new payments on no more than \$250,000 worth of commodities per active farm operator, enough for a 1,000 acre corn and soybean operation.
- Preclude the use of legal devices such as subdividing farms into multiple legal entities or between spouses to exceed this limit.
- To focus this payment on economic units rather than "hobby" farms, reduce the \$250,000 limit by \$5 dollars for every \$1 dollar by which the producer's household family income exceeds the national median income. ▲

FARM PROFILE

(The farm profiles appearing here are drawn from interviews conducted as part of a SARE grant project in the summer of 2000.)



*Goranson Farm, Dresden, Maine
Jan Goranson and Rob Johanson*

In 1984 Jan Goranson and Rob Johanson (who is now president of MESAS) began transitioning the 160-acre Goranson family farm from commercial potato production to diversified vegetables and berries. The farm has 36 acres of stone-free, fine sandy loam suitable for vegetables, 20 acres in hay and 18 rented acres. It now produces eight acres of potatoes, six of sweet corn, two of peas, an acre each of pumpkin, winter squash, beans, greens and strawberries, 4.5 acres of mixed vegetables, and 1/2 acre of melons. The sugar house produces 250 gallons of syrup from 800 taps on roadside trees. The 20 pigs were added to the system to recycle produce "seconds" which saves "a tremendous amount" on the grain bill. The rotational grazing system for 600 meat birds raised in portable pens also saves on feed costs and gives "a better tasting bird."

"We recognized," says Jan, "that [potato production] wasn't something we needed to abandon, but we needed to change it... the wholesale potato market wasn't a safe place for us to be." Last year's drought-caused "disastrous potato crop" was a reminder that mono-culture is not safe either. "If we'd had nothing but potatoes in the ground on all 36 acres," says Rob, "we'd have been thrashed severely."

"We're trying," says Rob, "to reduce farm inputs...reduce our dependency on petroleum products and garner the nutrients we require through green manure and legume crops.... We're trying to put more of the food dollar in our pocket."

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President's Message

By Rob Johanson

First I want to thank Stewart, Andrew, and Richard for the terrific job they did with the Stewards of Sustainability awards banquet. A special thanks goes to Andrew for putting together all that great tasting Maine-grown food for us to enjoy.

As demonstrated by each farm represented at the banquet, sustainability is complex. Each farm, unique in its approach yet recognizable as a system, is by its very makeup, insulated from the vagaries of weather, markets and supply costs. It is this complexity that gives a system more resilience, more give, more sustainability. As we observe in Nature, complex systems are less likely to crash or fail completely, and so it should be with our farms.

This same complexity impacts upon MESAS's mission. How to proceed? MESAS as an organization is bonded together by an idea, a paradigm shift away from the factory-farm model of inputs, thruputs, and outputs. The shift is toward a more biological, life-oriented system of farming, a system of growing food that allows us and those generations that follow to continue farming.

With these thoughts in mind, I see MESAS as a kind of Johnny Appleseed organization, planting the seeds of sustainable agriculture in the minds of other farmers, researchers and policy makers. I ask all of you as members and supporters of MESAS to help our officers and directors get the word out about our organization and mission. Any and all suggestions will be most appreciated. ▲

History of MESAS

In 1993 MESAS began meeting as an informal group to share information about integrated farming systems. Since 1995 we have sponsored programs at the Maine Agricultural Trade Show. In 1998 we were granted 501 c-3 nonprofit status with the IRS. Our nine-member board of directors consists of farmers committed to the mission of exploring, developing and promoting agricultural systems and practices that allow Maine farmers to retain a greater share of consumer expenditures for farm products by reducing purchased inputs and by adding value to farm production.

In 1999 the University of Maine and MESAS were awarded \$56,000 in federal Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE) funds for a \$115,000 3-year project. The project is designed to strengthen MESAS and to learn more about sustainable farming systems directly from Maine farmers. 225 farmers were surveyed, 30 were selected for in-depth interviews (from which case studies are being written) and 19 of those were videotaped for a production which Maine Public Television is considering. The MESAS newsletter and mentoring program also received startup funding from SARE.

Last year we received a second SARE grant award for a professional development project. This project will use the video footage from the farmer interviews to produce several additional videos focusing on specific aspects of sustainable farming in Maine; 1) start-up financing, 2) risk management, 3) cropping & livestock practices, 4) transitioning, and 5) the use of sustainable practices on conventional farms. These will be shown and discussed at workshops for students and professional agricultural support personnel and will also be of interest to other farmers, small business promoters, and farm lenders. When completed they will be available from MESAS on loan. ▲

MESAS Mentoring Program Ready to Go

This year marks the founding of the MESAS mentoring program. Approximately 20 established sustainable farmers in Maine have already signed on as mentors and 2000 brochures are available for recruiting mentors and farmers who want to learn. Anyone interested in participating should contact Mentoring Program, MESAS, 5782 Winslow Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5782, phone: (207) 581-3135, e-mail: stewart.smith@umit.maine.edu, or the MESAS web-site at www.mesas.org. ▲

MESAS Farm Tour Day

Tuesday, August 7 is the third annual MESAS farm tour day. This year's tour begins at 1:00 PM and will stop at three showcase farms in the Blue Hill area. We will begin at King Hill Farm where Dennis King and Jo Barrett raise sheep, beef, small grains, mixed vegetables and winter root crops marketed through the Hancock Organic Growers Coop farmstand. Then it's on to Horsepower Farm which raises sheep, mixed vegetables and lowbush blueberries, and it really is powered by horses. At one of these two farms visitors will see the jointly-owned self-propelled compost turner at work. Under Hill Farm in Blue Hill is our last stop where mixed vegetables (including greenhouse tomatoes), raspberries and apples are the main crops. The day will end back at King Hill Farm for a barbecue supper. Food and transportation by vans are provided so be sure to let MESAS program director, Andrew Files, know if you plan to come. You can reach Andrew at 581-3108 or andrew_files@umit.maine.edu. ▲

Marketing

Goranson Farm sells 85 percent of their products retail—half through the farm-stand, which is open seven days a week, and half through four farmers' markets. The remaining 15 percent is sold wholesale to restaurants. Their community supported agriculture program (CSA) is one of the largest in Maine with 175 family members during the growing season and another 55 families in the winter storage crop CSA. "It helps us a great deal," says Jan. "It provides us with funds so that we don't have to go to the bank every spring for operating money."

Four greenhouses—one for seedlings, another for hardening transplants and two for tomatoes—help the farm get top dollar at market. One 30 by 90-foot structure houses tomatoes started in January which are ready for market during strawberry season and bring as much as \$3 a pound. The tunnel house brings a second high-value crop in early July before field tomatoes come in.

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Financing

Financing in general has been done "little by little," says Rob, "we've basically financed the transition ourselves.... So we didn't put ourselves in a lot of debt.... To learn all that we've learned in the past 15 years in one or two growing seasons [with a bank on their back], I don't know that we could have done it that way." Jan's mother has been helpful in charging low rent. Without that support, says Rob, "we probably would have gone to the bank."

Production Methods

Goranson Farm switched from herbicides to cultivation because grouping crops together according to which herbicide could be used, rather than according to harvest and cover crop schedules, proved an inefficient

"management nightmare," says Jan. "The chemical approach wasn't working for a farm our size." The tine weeder, one of the few pieces of equipment purchased new, along with "timing, timing, timing," now keeps large-seeded crops "clean as a whistle" and frees workers to focus on picking and the market.

The farm has participated in Extension's sweet corn IPM program since it began in 1985. Though they do sustain some damage it's usually not severe—except for the year the corn ear worm arrived two weeks early. That year 90 percent of the crop was damaged, but they explained to their customers what had happened, cut the tops off the infested ears, and "people bought it anyway."

On-farm research studies with the University of Massachusetts and the University of Maine are helping the farm find biological controls for corn ear worm and Colorado potato beetle. Potato beetles, which had been "eating the plants down as fast as they were coming up out of the ground" are now controlled with *Bacillus thuringiensis* and *Beauveria bassiana* fungus, and in some years flaming with a propane burner gives adequate control.

With their potato-worn soil, raising soil organic matter with cover crops like sorghum/sudan grass and producing sufficient nitrogen (100 pounds per acre) for heavy feeders using nitrogen-fixing green manures is the final step in establishing the kind of "complex systems" which "we find in Nature," says Rob. "Complex systems are less likely to crash ... and have greater long-term survivability."

Labor Problem

Labor has been a "huge problem" and is the "least sustainable" aspect of their farm operation. "There's a lot of hand labor involved with doing a market presentation like Jan does," says Rob, "and farm laborers are not abundant." When student apprentices leave in August, during peak marketing season, the resulting labor crunch means some field operations don't get done in a timely fashion. Of their two employees who are "professionals in the field of agriculture"—a Cambodian woman and a Mexican man—one has family willing to come work on the farm but they can't get work papers. Rob thinks migrant labor policies ought to be adjusted for small farms. The current program has "too much paper work" and "is prohibitively expensive," says Rob. "It costs \$800 per worker ... up front, and if the guy doesn't work out you

don't get your money back.... We don't have that kind of money to fool around with."

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Information

"Probably the biggest challenge" in learning to run a diversified sustainable farm, says Rob, "is to find out who's out there and who knows what." Though there is a "whole raft of information" available through research and conferences, applying the results to 35 acres of diverse crops "leaves a lot of questions," says Rob, "and that's where I think the [Extension] system falls down. We just don't have enough hands-on people that can help the farmer work out those details," or link farmers up with others who are doing it. Diversified or transitioning farmers also could use some help with infrastructure, Rob thinks, such as grain storage for farms like his to link into a grain market like Borealis Breads with a marketable crop that is also a valuable source of high-carbon residue for the soil.

Except for MOFGA's Farmer-to-Farmer conferences, which are "consistently helpful" because they allow discussions among growers, Rob prefers to read conference proceedings and then "find someone who's doing it and call them on the phone."

Future and Advice

"Our mission," says Rob, "is to keep farming, to keep the land productive." At age 52 his pie-in-the-sky hope for the future is that the value of food will go up so he can pay decent wages for good help. If that fails, he says, "my thought is that we'll get smaller, do more for ourselves, sell more at the farm stand and less at the farmers' markets.... The bottom line is that we still want to be able to farm."

Their advice to new or transitioning farmers is to start small, concentrate on high-value crops, set up a CSA to get that "guaranteed market," and don't go deep in debt. ▲

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The Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society is a nonprofit organization of farmers and others who support the sustainable agriculture concept and its application to the production of food and other agricultural products. Our mission is to explore, develop and promote agricultural systems and practices that allow Maine farmers to retain a greater share of consumer expenditures for farm products.

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Grant Programs for Farmers

The Maine Rural Rehabilitation Fund Scholarship Program offers 20 scholarships each year averaging \$1,000 to students enrolled in full-time educational programs that lead to an on-farm agricultural career. Programs may be 2-year, 4-year or advanced and applicants must have a minimum 2.7 GPA and demonstrate financial need. Contact: Rod McCormick, Maine Rural Rehab Fund, 28 State House Station, Augusta 04333-0028, (207) 287-7628, rod.mccormick@state.me.us.

Farmer/Grower grants from Northeast SARE—You'll see people you know among those who have received these grants and the competition is not unreasonably stiff—nearly one-third of those who apply receive awards ranging from \$500 to \$8000 for projects that "help farmers shift to sustainable and innovative production and

marketing practices that are profitable, environmentally sound and beneficial to the community." Proposals are due in December. The application package includes a simple seven-page form, a winning sample proposal, and a list of previously funded projects and project summaries. You can also get summaries of projects of special interest to you as well as contact info so you can talk directly to the farmer. Contact: Northeast SARE, 10 Hills Building, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405-0082, phone: (802) 656-0471, fax: (802) 656-4656, e-mail: nesare@zoo.uvm.edu. ▲

Some Effects of Free Trade Agreements on U.S. Farmers

While most sustainable ag farmers recognize that globalization affects almost all of us in negative ways (except large corporations), those who are marketing locally generally feel that they are pretty well insulated, at least for a while. The following facts are gleaned from a comprehensive 1999 assessment of the results of five years under the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

- The number of small U.S. farmers declined by 9 percent. (Source: USDA)

- The percentage of U.S. farm households at or near the federal poverty level skyrocketed to 93 percent. (Source: USDA.)
- Mexican tomato imports increased 63 percent, 100 Florida tomato farmers went out of business and 24 packing houses closed. (Sources: U.S. International Trade Commission and Florida Tomato Growers Association.)
- Canadian agricultural exports to the U.S. grew 57 percent but net farm income in Canada hasn't caught up to 1986 levels. (Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce.)

The following are some effects of the 1988 Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the U.S. which has left U.S. farmers with little defense against the Canadian dollar decline.

- U.S. imports of Canadian wheat increased 2000 percent from pre-1988 levels of next to zero.
- Imports of Canadian hogs increased from 670,000 head in 1992 to 5 million in 1998.

Equally damaging to rural communities and the ability of U.S. farmers to compete globally—especially small- and medium-size farms—is the fact that agricultural workers in Mexico are paid \$6 a day. ▲