

Field Notes



Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture

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Healthy Farms, Food and Communities

—Maura McDermott

With an invitation for speakers and participants to “elevate and broaden the discussion” of food issues, Kerr Center president Jim Horne kicked off the *Bringing in the Sheaves* symposium October 16 at the Westin Hotel in Oklahoma City. About 250 people attended.

The symposium was ground-breaking in that it placed agriculture in the context of a larger food system of “stakeholders,” which includes consumers. Several speakers discussed the ways that the current food system is failing both producers and consumers, and the negative impact the system too often has on rural communities and the natural environment. Speakers also presented efforts by individuals, groups and government to make a food system that is “healthier,” and more equitable for all.

For many the high point of the symposium was when Oklahoma Agriculture Commissioner Dennis V. Howard announced the establishment of the Oklahoma Food Policy Council. The Council is a new effort by the state of Oklahoma to create more opportunities for Oklahoma family farmers and ranchers.

“We must foster the survival of family farms,” Howard said, a task given new urgency by the ever-increasing corporate control of farming.

Howard named the Kerr Center’s Jim Horne, and



l-r, Dennis Howard, Geni Thomas and Jim Horne

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The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture offers progressive leadership and educational programs to all those interested in making farming and ranching environmentally friendly, socially equitable, and economically viable over the long term.

The Kerr Center is a non-profit foundation located on 4,000 acres near the south-eastern Oklahoma town of Poteau. It was established in 1985.

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Geni Thomas, executive chef at Cassady School in Oklahoma City to co-chair the council.

Horne has been president of the center since its inception in 1985, and before that led the agricultural division of the Kerr Foundation. He has a M.S. in agricultural economics and a PhD. in biology. He is a popular speaker nationally and is a well-known advocate for family farms and a sustainable agriculture.

Horne said the group's first task will be to determine the strengths and weaknesses of Oklahoma's food systems, and then design solutions to problems.

Thomas is 2000 National Chef of the Year. She commented on the need to connect farmers with chefs and restaurants. Nationally, chefs have led the way in the promotion of locally-grown, high quality food. (Alice Waters, owner of Chez Panisse restaurant in San Francisco, is the most prominent and was featured in *Newsweek* last August)

The council will be made up of a diverse group of Oklahomans coming from all sectors of the food system and from government.

Oklahoma is one of the first states to appoint such a council, joining Connecticut and Iowa. Utah and North Carolina are in the process of creating them.

According to the Iowa Food Council information sheet "a food policy is any decision made or not made by a government or institution which shapes the type of foods used or available, as well as their cost; or which influences the opportunities for farmers... or affects the food choices available to consumers."

An example would be the regulatory requirement placed on someone desiring to open a food-based business.

A food policy council brings to the table a broad array of interests and voices, many of whom are not typically asked to be involved when farm and agricultural policy is discussed, and it can examine a broader array of issues and employ a more comprehensive approach to analyzing issues.

Commissioner Howard also charged the group with addressing the safety of the public's food supply, in jeopardy because of recent cases of contamination and bioterrorism concerns. The outbreaks of hoof-and-mouth and mad cow diseases in Europe are all causes for concern, he said, as is the continued use in other countries of chemicals banned in the U.S. for food production. He urged participants to "Buy American" and more specifically to "Buy Oklahoma."

More on the symposium on pages 3-9. Photos by Ken Biddle of the ODA.

Just Published!

The new book, *The Next Green Revolution: Essential Steps to a Healthy, Sustainable Agriculture*, by the Kerr Center's Jim Horne and Maura McDermott can be purchased from the Kerr Center. 918.647.9123



Hunger *in the* Heartland

One topic that generally isn't addressed at traditional agriculture conferences is hunger, especially in rural areas. Doug O'Brien, director of public policy for America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest food relief organization, addressed what he called the "persistent poverty in rural America."

In rural America "food insecurity is higher than in the rest of America." (Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods...; households that experience food insecurity have reduced quality or variety of meals and may have irregular food intake)

He noted the irony of people going to a food bank for a box of cornflakes to feed their children in a community where thousands of acres are devoted to growing the corn for the cornflakes or even more ironically, for "feeding the world." He said that while hunger is the same everywhere— "the hunger in Chicago is similar to hunger in Cordell"— perhaps the hunger in Chicago is easier to solve.

He pointed to the fact that the rural economy did not grow with the rest of America in the 1990s and that in one-quarter of all rural counties, poverty rates

exceed 20%. The rates have stayed the same for thirty years.

O'Brien cautioned the audience that perhaps their notions of who is hungry may be mistaken. "Today in a soup line you are as likely to find a single mother with a family as you are a homeless man," he said. He also pointed out that 2/3 of the rural poor are working.

"Working people, children, the elderly— they are often the faces of the hungry," he added. The problem of hunger in the elderly population is especially acute in rural areas, where the population is aging.

While in the long term "a sustainable agriculture translates to sustainable communities," he cautioned that the problem of hunger must be solved first if people are to have the energy and resources to tackle the deeper problems. Bureaucratic barriers to alleviating hunger must be removed, he said. He used the example of a federal gun permit which requires an application of two pages. One must fill out a 12 page application in order to get food stamps. (In Oklahoma, only 55-68% of those eligible for food stamps participate in the program).

While the problems of rural poverty and hunger may seem intractable, he concluded on a positive note. The success of lunch and breakfast programs in all viating hunger in children, both urban and rural, shows that "the problem is solvable."

If we choose to solve it.



Doug O'Brien

...hunger is a form of violence that is inflicted by society. Some people have not enough food; others have too much, and the waste is violence."

Gandhi

- ▶ In South Dakota, 17% of individual farming operations were eliminated in the last five years.
- ▶ 11.9% of all households in Oklahoma are food insecure.
- ▶ 23% of rural children live in poverty.
- ▶ More than 33 percent of households in agriculturally-based communities have annual incomes below \$15,000.

Putting People First:

The New Agriculture

An increased appreciation of local food; the desire of consumers to connect with farmers and the land; the search for a new sustainable agriculture; the rapid growth of farmer's markets: all are signs of a "new agriculture" that is emerging in the United States, said Neil Hamilton, chairman of the Iowa Food Policy Council and professor of law and director of the Agriculture Law Center at Drake University in Des Moines.



Neil Hamilton

He said the pendulum is "swinging back to a farming and food system that places people, not corporations, first." This system is based on "sustainable agriculture, healthy farms and quality food."

Hamilton described the increasing strength in Iowa of the local food movement in his speech and in the paper "Putting a Face on our Food: How State and Local Food Policies Can Promote the New Agriculture," which he made available to conference-goers and is excerpted below.

"Five years ago, a person would have been hard-pressed to find "Iowa grown" food on a menu or in a store. But that is changing as the proliferation of farmers' markets and producers diversifying what they raise and how they sell it changes Iowa's food system. Menus featuring Iowa grown food and institutions

promoting 'all-Iowa meals' are important signs of this trend.

"Slowly but steadily the food culture of Iowa and other states is changing. The local foods movement is nationwide and it is helping consumers and communities consider where food is grown and how food buying decisions can support local farmers and businesses. Many consumers and communities are coming to recognize local is better in many ways— better taste and quality, but also better for the producers and businesses. And better for the environment since the food does not travel the 1500 miles it is estimated a typical U.S. food may move before being consumed.

"But the local food movement would not have so much energy if the food didn't taste great and if consumers didn't benefit as well as producers. The quality of food that ends up on the plate is key and locally

grown food, served fresh and in season, has a definite advantage.

"A challenge for many farmers and states is finding ways to support the institutional and attitudinal changes needed to build local food systems. Research will play a role, such as on lengthening growing seasons to produce and market local food. But an important part will be putting in place the laws and policies designed to support community food systems and expand the opportunities for farmers and consumers."

The full paper is available online at www.kerrcenter.com. It contains information on the initial achievements and limitations of the Iowa Food Policy Council, a model state and local food policy improvement act, a rationale for state and local food policy, and a discussion of some of the principal aims of such policy.

The number of farmers' markets in the U.S. increased 63 per cent from 1994 to 2000, with 19,000 farmers now selling at about 2,800 markets, according to the USDA.



Brother David Andrews

Eating is a Moral Act

Brother David Andrews is the executive director of National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) based in Des Moines. Brother David was the symposium luncheon speaker. After regaling the crowd with a series of chicken jokes, he challenged the attendees to think about the moral implications of their food choices. Following is an excerpt from his speech. The complete text is available online at www.kerrcenter.com.

Think about your tables, family tables, community tables, faith tables. Who eats? How is food prepared? How is it shared? And who gets to talk? What do they say? Tables are for eating and tables are for talking. Eating is a moral act. We shape each other and our world at our tables: family tables, community tables, faith tables. The Heartland hungers like all hunger, for family food, for civic participation, for justice, peace and love. Our choices create our tables, our food, our talk. Our choices feed our hungers, our physical, communal, spiritual hungers.

At the National Catholic Rural Life Conference we have a campaign directed at eaters, those who shape the structure of agriculture and the structure of our food system. By our choices we shape the world.

Do you purchase food from

retailers who support family farmers?

Do you eat food that was grown by farmers who treated their animals with dignity and respect, who raised the animals humanely?

Are there farm workers, mushroom pickers, apple warehouse workers, chicken catchers, vegetable pickers, processing plant workers, immigrant laborers involved in your food preferences?

Does your food habit contribute to global climate change?

Is the food you eat part of a sustainable food system that contributes to the well being of unknown future generations, to a healthy environment, to a local community in a rural or urban area which has a great deal of vitality? Or will the food you eat come from a system which depopulates the countryside and demeans farmers, farm workers, food process workers, corporate executives and

their families?

These choices create or negate a healthy rural America, yes, a healthy America, a healthy world as well. Think before you eat!

Eating is a moral act. We are what we eat! And we can ask ourselves who is at the table? What are they saying about the food system?

Eating is a moral act. Our tables need to include those who've been excluded. Our talk needs to include our farmers, their families, the rural communities, our environment, our landscape, our countryside, religious and moral values.

We are what we eat. By our choices we shape our world. By our conversations, our talking, our praying, our justice, our spirituality, we shape the future of rural America. We need to shape one that is healthy, that encourages biodiversity, community, spirituality.

Let us pray together to forge a world of justice, ecological harmony and peace. A world where the hungers for food, justice, community, ecological harmony are satisfied, in a holistic spirituality. These are the elements of a healthy rural America, and I suspect, a more healthy world too.

The food service at the University of Wisconsin at Madison recently added Wisconsin-grown, organic food items to its menu: tortilla chips made from blue corn, apples, potatoes and "natural beef" hamburger.

Voting with your Fork

- Maura McDermott



Dan Nagengast

What does it mean to “vote with your fork”?

According to Dan Nagengast, director of the Kansas Rural Center, it means that we can shape our food system by what we choose to buy.

He should know. Since 1994, the Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance has been giving people in eastern Kansas an opportunity to vote with their forks. Nagengast is a founding member of the group, which numbers eight small, organic, family farms in eastern Kansas.

The alliance has been very successful. Rolling Prairie began with 135 customers. After three years they had over 300, gained through word of mouth, flyers, and newspaper articles, and sales had increased from \$28,000 to \$91,000. In 2001 they had 330 customers.

Rolling Prairie is a one version of community-supported agriculture (CSA). In a classic type of CSA, customers or subscribers pay the farm a large lump sum (perhaps a few hundred dollars) at the beginning of the growing season in anticipation of the produce they will receive later. Subscribers often contribute labor on the farm and distribute produce. In essence, the members form a partnership with the farmer. The subscriber shares with the farmer the bounty of the soil, as well as at least some of the risks inherent in farming.

The Rolling Prairie farmers doubted they could get their customers to gamble that much.

So they modified the CSA concept. Rolling Prairie is “a

vegetable subscription service,” though herbs and fruits are also part of the offerings. They ask a \$50 deposit when subscribers sign on and weekly payments of \$12 once deliveries begin. The deposit provides working capital to cover early-on expenses.

For growers, Nagengast sees many advantages to a subscription service. “You get the retail price, you can’t get rained out (as happens at farmers’ markets), there is no August slump, and you can sell earlier and later in the season,” he says.

The reality is, with this marketing approach, “it’s harder to grow the produce than to sell it,” he says. “You can move an amazing amount of produce.”

The fact that there is more than one farm providing produce gives customers a greater variety and provides the group a bit of insurance against crop failures. Because the farms are at different locales within the region, they experience some differences in weather and also can take advantage of microclimates. One year, for example, one farmer harvested his raspberries three weeks after another alliance farmer. The Rolling Prairie farmers are experienced growers— they need to be in order to deliver quality produce 25 weeks a year to expectant customers.

Each week produce is delivered to three outlets— two in Kansas City and one in Lawrence. The Community Mercantile in Lawrence, a natural foods market, has found that their sales, even produce sales, increase substantially when Rolling Prairie subscribers come in for their produce.

Customers assemble their own bags from the produce the farmers have weighed and packaged. Grass-fed beef, organic chicken, eggs, and cut flowers are also available for sale from alliance farmers, but these items are not included as part of the subscription service.

Subscribers get more than fresh, locally-grown produce from Rolling Prairie – they get a weekly newsletter updating them on farm news, farm picnics and tours, and a book of recipes. This is part of the an effort to make Rolling Prairie more than a money-for-vegetables exchange. The cookbook is particularly popular. It has sections for each fruit, vegetable and herb offered by the alliance throughout the season. “You have to grow as many customers as vegetables,” says Nagengast.

Nagengast says there are seven or eight CSAs in Kansas; the CSA in Salina, with a population of 40,000, has 100 subscribers. He suggests that in addition to Oklahoma City and Tulsa, smaller cities such as Stillwater, Norman, Enid, and Muskogee might be candidates for CSAs.

Nagengast doesn’t downplay the difficulties of attracting and keeping customers. It is less convenient to get produce from Rolling Prairie than it is

to buy it at Wal-mart, and it is more expensive. Customers have to have a desire for flavor and quality, says Nagengast.

While buying from Rolling Prairie is not the cheapest way to buy food, it is one of the cheapest ways to buy local, seasonal food, he says. The alternatives to buying local are sometimes mind-boggling: for example, hot house tomatoes from British Columbia for sale in Kansas grocery stores in the summer.

Just as it takes effort to go to a polling place and vote on election day, so it takes effort on the part of both producers and subscribers to make this local food system work. And if customers of the Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance are indeed voting with their fork, what are they voting for? Since the alliance farms are organic, subscribers are voting for organic farming practices over conventional, and all that implies for the environment.

They are also voting for regionally grown food, supporting small family farms, and eating as much seasonal produce as possible. In short, says Nagengast, “trying to develop a local economy is what it’s all about.”

Competition = Fairness

Michael Stumo, general counsel of the Organization for Competitive Markets, gave conference participants a primer on the legal issues surrounding competition and concentration in the agriculture industry. He asserted that increased concentration in major sectors of the agricultural industry makes it more tempting and more likely, that illegal conduct such as price fixing, price manipulation, price discrimination, control of information, predatory pricing, retaliation, and exclusive dealing will occur.

“Undue market power is the explanation for why the prices of milk and meat are going up, while what

the farmers are getting is going down,” he said.

He called for corporate welfare to be redirected to support promotion of local and regional food systems and creation of new, niche markets where competition may flourish. He also called for universities to redirect their research and extension efforts toward supporting these new systems.



Michael Stumo

Prices Received by Farmers/Ranchers

(courtesy Oklahoma Farmers Union)

Lettuce (one head)	Retail: \$1.29	Farmer: 9 cents
Loaf of Bread	Retail: \$1.39	Farmer: 5 cents
Milk (one gallon)	Retail: \$2.89	Farmer: \$1
Boneless Ham (5 pounds)	Retail: \$8.95	Farmer: \$2
Wheaties (14.75 oz box)	Retail: \$3.71	Farmer: 4.6 cents
Fresh Potatoes (one pound)	Retail: 59 cents	Farmer: 6 cents

RESOURCES

Subscribing to Change: Starting and Sustaining a Vegetable Subscription Service: The Story of Rolling Prairie Farmers Alliance is a 73-page booklet available for \$5, \$2 shipping and handling from Kansas Rural Center. It is a great resource, covering in depth the farms making up the alliance and how the subscription service works— everything from pricing, to incorporation, to promotion, to getting along and dividing the labor. Includes examples of surveys, newsletters, newspaper articles, sales summaries. It is easy to read and comprehensive.

Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit organization working for “family farming and stewardship of soil and water.” Contributors get their excellent newsletter *Rural Papers* which is also available by subscription for \$25 per year. The center also

offer a series of sustainable agriculture management guides. PO Box 133 Whiting, KS 66552. 785.873.3431, www.kansasruralcenter.org, ksrc@rainbowtel.net

Growing for Market is a nationally-circulated monthly newsletter edited and published by Rolling Prairie grower Lyn Byczynski. Loaded with practical, timely advice. \$30 per year growing4market@earthlink.net, PO Box 3747, Lawrence, KS 66046, 800-307-8949, www.growingformarket.com

Rolling Prairie Cookbook can be ordered from Growing for Market (see above) for \$14.95 plus \$3 postage. It includes storage instructions for produce and directions for simple preparation as well as “a cornucopia of original recipes.”



Chief Chad Smith



Sister Christine Pratt

"You mean french fries are potatoes?"

"I really don't care what happens to dairy farmers. I get my milk at the grocery store."

"Everyone knows it's no damn good if it doesn't come in cellophane."

"I don't know why farmers complain—they only work in April and October."

Humility

"If you take something from creation, you put something back, so the thing you took can sustain itself." So Chief Chad Smith described a principle that the Cherokees have traditionally lived by, a principle that underlies modern sustainable agriculture. What fosters this principle? Humility, he believes, is at the center of the Cherokee relationship to land and nature. "If you abuse nature, it will defend itself," he said.

Native Americans have a long and

important agricultural history. Native farmers domesticated and cultivated our modern crops of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, varieties of beans, and squash.

For modern day Cherokees, farming and gardening provide opportunities to be self-sufficient and to eat in a healthy way. Smith said the Cherokees' long range community plan, which promotes self reliance, a strong cultural identity and strong tribal government, will incorporate agriculture.

Reconciliation

The gap between farmer and city dweller might seem insurmountable if judged by the preceding comments. But Sister Christine Pratt takes such misunderstanding as a challenge. Under her leadership, the Rural Life Ministry of the Roman Catholic diocese of Toledo, Ohio, has initiated a number of activities that connect people in Toledo to people in largely rural northwest Ohio. The activities of Project FarmHands have also served to reconcile urbanites with the soil and the joys and challenges of growing food, and helped to feed the hungry in both rural and urban areas

Perhaps the most successful project so far has been ToledoGrows, which has brought rural, suburban and urban people together to develop 33 community gardens in Toledo's low income central city.

The Children's Project has also been a success. It educates school children and their parents about the rural/urban food connection. The children and teachers have found many creative ways to help area food kitchens, from simple food collection to baking bread.

WormWorks is part of The Children's

Project and also helps Toledo Grows. Each of the participating classes (K-8) handles the feeding and maintenance of a worm box in their classroom. The worms recycle kitchen scraps and other waste into compost. "The children are learning to care for the earth and the least of God's creatures," said Sister Christine. The children also start plants for ToledoGrows in the vermicompost, and later plant them in the community gardens. The children learn how to give, she added.

Another interesting project is The Steer Project which encourages schools and organization to purchase steers from area farmers. The meat is then donated to food kitchens in Toledo and in smaller rural towns.

In addition, the Rural Life Ministry gives Century Farm Awards to families who have maintained the farm in the same family for over 100 years.

Sister Christine believes the current food system is unjust, and serves to divide and alienate people. The key to change is to bring people together to share stories, make connections and honor those who work the land.

Action

The final session of *Bringing in the Sheaves* was a panel discussion including Paul Muegge, Kate Clancy, and Miles Tolbert. Each spoke about policy on the state and federal level and how it can affect agriculture and rural communities.

Tolbert is chief of the environmental protection unit in the Oklahoma Attorney General's office. He spoke about the recent rulings by the attorney general that may shift responsibility for pollution away from the contract chicken farmer who often has few assets, towards the company which contracts with him.

State Senator Muegge spoke passionately of the need to ensure fair markets and competition for farmers. Muegge is the chair of the Oklahoma Senate Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and he is active in the Organization for Competitive Markets.

Clancy is managing director of the Henry A. Wallace Center for Agricultural and Environmental Policy at the non-profit Winrock International. She also directed the center's agriculture policy project which recently published *Making Changes: Turning Local Visions into National Solutions*, ninety-five grass-roots policy recommendations for agriculture and rural development. The report was released in May.

It was the culmination of a unique five-year project involving 350 farmers, ranchers, rural business people and civic leaders who met in local meetings in eleven states across the country, as well as at three regional and one national



Senator Paul Muegge

meeting.

Participants came together to identify agriculture or economic development issues facing their communities. For example, local people in Knox County, Nebraska, took up the barriers small farmers face in accessing local marketing and distribution systems. Those in Deaf Smith County, Texas, focused on water and air quality problems, while those in south coastal Massachusetts wrestled with access to capital and credit, and farmland preservation.

While many of the speakers at the symposium emphasized local and state solutions, Clancy pointed out the importance of good policy at the national level. The recommendations made in the report are specific, addressing legislative, oversight, appropriations, regulatory and administrative actions that should be taken. The report also outlines several recommendations for states and the private sector. The recommendations are unique in that they are truly from the grass roots— not national down, but local up.

Making Changes is available online or for \$15 from the Wallace Center for Agricultural & Environmental Policy.

More Information

For more pictures and information about conference participants, go to www.kerrcenter.com Presentations by Bro. David Andrews and Neil Hamilton are available there.

America's Second Harvest
800.771.2303
www.secondharvest.org

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918.456.0671 • www.cherokee.org

Iowa Food Policy Council
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