
MICHAEL FIELDS
AGRICULTURAL INSTITUTE



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Introduction

In 2008, half of the world's population will live in urban areas, marking the first time in history the world's inhabitants are majority urban and not rural. This major shift in the world's population, combined with rising food and fuel costs and a changing climate, calls for innovations in how we organize our communities to feed ourselves sustainably.

In our latest newsletter, we highlight one of those innovations - urban agriculture - which has grown in practice and popularity in the U.S. and internationally. Next, Nikki Check, policy program intern, highlights the needs for public breeding programs that support a diverse, sustainable agriculture in a changing climate. And finally, we give you the latest on farm bill politics and the good news that farmers once again will have access to the Conservation Security Program. Please read on for details.

Have a wonderful spring,

Jeanne Merrill
Associate Policy Director
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute

1. Urban Agriculture: A Feast for Our Cities

By Susan Gravelle, MFAI consultant

Over 250 urban agriculture practitioners and enthusiasts gathered recently in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for the country's first-ever urban agriculture conference. The *Pollinating Our Future: Urban Agriculture Conference* brought together urban farmers, city planners, health officials, academic researchers, food and justice activists, neighborhood leaders and more.

Conference themes showcased the scope of urban agriculture in practice today with equal parts information sharing, skill-building, and story-telling mixed with frank discussions about what's working and what's not. The aroma of possibility wafted throughout the conference and local, organic meals and snacks supplied the fuel to turn inspiration into opportunity.

Co-hosted by Michael Fields Agricultural Institute and Slow Food Wisconsin Southeast, the conference attracted urban agriculture advocates from Europe, Africa, Canada and across the United States. Sessions, featuring urban livestock, eco-cities, earthen classrooms, community health issues and more, drew an enthusiastic crowd of urban agriculture advocates. As one University of Maine agriculture student said, "I want to bring agriculture back to the city and people back to agriculture!"

"Our aim was for conference participants to make new connections, get motivated by new ideas and to pollinate their learning in the communities they live in," said Martha Davis Kipcak, a leader of Slow Food Wisconsin Southeast. Urban agriculture is being adopted in major cities across the United States and is a strategy on the United Nations agenda addressing poverty and food insecurity internationally.

The conference opening celebration featured Slow Food chefs presenting tantalizing, regionally sourced food and spirits at Milwaukee's Mitchell Parks Botanical Domes. A Small Plot Intensive (SPIN) Farming Workshop, Urban Green Tours, Food Policy Council Training and a Composting/Vermiculture Workshop provided additional opportunities to educate, motivate and pollinate the future of urban agriculture. (Read on for details on the SPIN Farming workshop).

"Urban agriculture provides a huge opportunity to unite residents, city policy-makers and planners, entrepreneurs, community organizations and urban activists, educators, municipal utilities and health professionals in meaningful solutions to city needs, what we see as the critical process of social healing," states Ron Doetch, Executive Director, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute.

Attendees reported that following the conference they will continue to engage in these issues, doing everything from extending home garden as a source of income, creating local food councils, developing school gardens and more!

What's next? The members of the Milwaukee Urban Agriculture Network (www.mkeurbanag.org) are hosting monthly meetings to network and learn more about local urban agriculture initiatives. Conference organizers are also following up by creating an online bookstore featuring urban agriculture and food systems titles along with updates on Pollinating Our Future 2009. Check out our website: www.growurban.org

Join us and let's spice up the stew of urban agriculture in our cities.

2. SPIN-tastic Farming Goes to the Domes

By Janet Gamble, Farm and Food Program Director

The Michael Fields Agricultural Institute and Mitchell Park Conservancy co-hosted the 2nd annual SPIN (Small Plot Intensive) Farming Workshop at the Mitchell Park Domes Pavilion in Milwaukee in February, as part of the Urban Agriculture Conference. SPIN farming is an agricultural enterprise model for urban and peri-urban areas complete with its own lexicon, planning and planting techniques, and marketing strategies. Workshop participants were from across the country and abroad.

SPIN farming is a part of the urban agriculture phenomenon that's sweeping the globe. Many cities are attempting to make their communities green by addressing a variety of concerns including food security, climate change, waning economies, water conservation, and a litany of other issues coming down the pike. Urban agriculture is a central component of this green city movement and SPIN farming is one model of urban agriculture that is working for farmers and eaters alike.

A key principle of SPIN farming is its focus on economic viability. Farmers, Wally Satzwich and Gail Vandersteen, from Saskatoon, Canada have taken their 20 plus years of rural farming technology and expertise and miniaturized it to urban backyards: they shrank the bed sizes, intensified the plantings, and moved closer to their markets. They have succeeded in growing more in less space with fewer inputs, thus reducing their environmental impact. In their SPIN workshop, they focused on such issues as selecting crops that give the most economic return, developing effective marketing strategies, and avoiding the price wars on the farmers' market battlefield.

Wally and Gail farm in 20 backyards throughout the season, supplying them with enough produce to sell nine months out of the year. They produce everything from fresh vegetables, cut flowers and garlic, to an indoor operation of pea, corn, and sunflower shoots. All together, they grow intensively on 1 acre of land and gross about \$70,000 a year. Their initial investment was approximately \$12,000 for small equipment purchase, including a walk-in cooler, irrigation lines and seeds.

In the U.S., Sommerton Tanks Farm in Philadelphia is demonstrating a successful SPIN farming model. The farm increased gross sales from \$50,000 to \$65,000 annually over the first two years of operation. In year two, they added a season extension hoop house giving them the ability to increase their gross income, and a CSA (community supported agriculture) option, increasing their markets.

SPIN farming is working in urban areas; it offers young entrepreneurs a model of environmentally sound and economically viable urban agriculture. For many beginning farmers who lack access to traditional farmland and the capital it takes to start a rural farm, SPIN farming is an alternative that makes sense.

Curious about SPIN farming? Contact us for details, janetgamble@michaelfieldsagainst.org, or go to: www.spinfarming.com

3. Seeds and Breeds

By Nikki Check, Policy Program Intern

In March, I attended the Seeds and Breeds National Summit, hosted by the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA). My interest in this conference, and the issue of public planting breeding, started with a plant breeding course I had at Prescott College in Arizona this past summer. As a current Michael Fields policy intern, I was curious to know what fellow farmers, researchers, and policy advocates had to say about public planting breeding and how it relates the upcoming farm bill.

The Summit addressed the increasing trends of consolidation and dwindling public resources for planting and livestock breeding. The seed industry is undergoing massive market concentration with large, multinational corporations buying up small, independent seed companies. These large seed companies are securing patents on seeds that have gone far beyond reasonable plant variety protection efforts, extending intellectual property rights to future generations of seeds. Moreover, funding has largely dropped off for classical plant and animal breeding programs at our universities in favor of private breeding that directly benefits large seed companies such as Monsanto, Syngenta, and DuPont.

Considering a changing climate and the need for reduced-input agricultural systems, we are in need of public breeding initiatives that address these issues. However, regional breeding efforts at public universities that work to adapt crops and build more stable, multi-gene resistance to pests and disease are being phased out in favor of profit-driven, industrially-gearred crop development.

With vast amounts of private and public funding funneling into genomic crop development, there are very few universities supporting public, in-situ plant and animal breeding. These diminishing funds have resulted in diminishing numbers of classically trained plant breeders. Virginia Tech, for example, hasn't hired a corn breeder since 1980, and former Virginia Tech plant pathologist Herman Warren has since retired -- a

story of a dwindling knowledge base familiar to most Universities — one that leaves a gaping hole in American crop security.

Within the Summit's lively discussion, the participants worked to develop farm bill language to address classical plant breeding within USDA research initiatives, which participants later advocated for in visits to Capitol Hill. The Summit also included briefs on issues of concern to breeders such as diminishing equipment availability, market concentration, organic seed standards, and plant/gene patenting.

The lack of next-generation plant breeders surfaced repeatedly as an issue of great concern for Summit participants. Current demand for locally grown, high quality vegetables has created a demand for organic seed that is not being adequately addressed by private research efforts, making a compelling argument for reviving the public animal and plant breeding sector through USDA applied research, universities, non-profits and small seed growers. Also, it was a compelling argument for me on why I should become a plant breeder!

Perhaps in the future I will find myself working in this field, or perhaps I will remain a life long, backyard seed saver. Either way, it is clear to me that defending and strengthening our agricultural biodiversity should be an essential goal in the sustainable agricultural movement. The Seeds and Breeds National Summit did a great job convincing me of this – and hopefully Congress as well.

4. Farm Bill Deal on the Horizon May Hurt Conservation and Rural Development Funding

By Jeanne Merrill, Associate Policy Director

Farm bill negotiations have heated up after months of delays. Congress passed an extension on the current farm bill, giving legislators until April 18th to pass a new bill. And they may just get there, but what the final bill looks like remains uncertain. **If you are in Minnesota, Michigan or Iowa, now is a critical time to contact your representatives.** Click here for details. <http://www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org/> (Wisconsin does not have a member on the farm bill conference committee.)

Senate Agriculture Committee chair, Tom Harkin, is leading efforts to expand funding for conservation programs, including much-needed funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program (formerly the Conservation Security Program). However, an alternative proposal by Senators Max Baucus (D-MT) and Kent Conrad (D-ND) would cut conservation funding by \$1 billion and zero-out funding for rural development programs, including eliminating funding for the Value Added Producer Grant Program, to fund a permanent disaster fund.

A permanent disaster fund for agriculture, paid in large part with conservation and rural development dollars, would be a major setback for sustainable agriculture. A permanent disaster fund will likely encourage plantings of corn and soybeans on marginal lands while reducing conservation funding to mitigate the soil and water quality impacts of

expanded production. Additionally, the total elimination of rural development funding would hurt innovation and diversification of markets for agriculture and rural communities, which are crucial to rural economic well-being.

There is still time to let the farm bill conference committee members of Congress know that conservation and rural development should be cornerstones of the new farm bill. Click here the latest on farm bill negotiations.

<http://www.sustainableagriculturecoalition.org/>

5. Conservation Security Program Opens in Milwaukee River Watershed, 52 Watersheds Nationwide

By Jeanne Merrill, Associate Policy Director

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that the long awaited signup for the Conservation Security Program will begin on April 18, 2008 in 52 watersheds, including the Milwaukee River Watershed in Wisconsin. The Conservation Security Program is the country's only green payments program, which rewards farmers for their practices that promote clean water, air and wildlife habitat on their farms. The deadline for applications is May 16th.

The Conservation Security Program helps farmers maximize good conservation on their working agricultural lands. The program rewards sustainable farming practices that promote clean water, energy conservation, wildlife habitat and other natural resource protection. Some 16 million acres nationwide have already been enrolled since the program was created in the 2002 Farm Bill. Between 2004 and 2006, 649 farms in Wisconsin were enrolled in the program, totaling more than 188,400 acres.

This may be the last program signup restricted to just a few watersheds throughout the country. Congress is currently negotiating a new farm bill that prominently features a streamlined and expanded Conservation Security Program. If ultimately passed, the new law would allow all farmers nationwide to compete on a continuous basis to enroll in the program, totally 13 million acres to be enrolled each year. Farmers who practice good conservation on their farms and who aspire to the best environmental performance would compete to receive five year contracts paying up to \$40,000 each. (Existing contracts, including the new signup, would be continued.)

Click here for more on CSP. <http://www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp.html>

6. MFAI Farm and Food Workshops

Check out our workshop listings. Our upcoming workshop offerings include chicken tractor building, post-harvest handling and an introduction to biodynamic agriculture.

Click here for more information:

<http://www.michaelfieldsagainst.org/programs/garden/workshops.html>

Since 1984, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute has been devoted to developing an agriculture that can sustain the land and its resources. As a non-profit learning center, we seek to revitalize farming with research, education, technical assistance and public policy.

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