

● S U S T A I N A B L E A G R I C U L T U R E

PURSuing THE WIN-WIN STRATEGY WITH FARMERS

The simple principle behind a two-ox yoke is that two oxen moving together can accomplish far more than two oxen butting heads. As you can imagine, though, merely yoking the oxen together provides no guarantee of smooth plowing. The two must be trained to pull side by side. But once trained, the results are amazing.

Likewise, with a bit of illumination and effort, farmers and environmentalists can work together in amazing ways to reduce pesticide use while caring for the land. The truth is that farmers and environmentalists share far more values than they usually think.

Not only is it possible for the two groups to work together to reduce pesticide use; it's strategically imperative. In more situations than many might think, the most sensible strategy to reduce pesticide use involves farmers and environmentalists pulling the load together in pursuit of the win-win solution.

BY JEFF RAST

In our passion to nurture the health of the land and people, our focus frequently gravitates to the use of pesticides in agriculture. The scale of use is so vast and the connection to our food is so close that we desire to minimize, if not eliminate, the use of pesticides in farming. But in our zeal to nurture the planet, we often make costly strategic errors in our approach to farmers and the agribusiness sector. I'm convinced that we will not succeed in the long run unless we pursue the win-win strategy with farmers.

The turning point for me came on an interagency weed control tour in the summer of 1988. As a newly appointed Extension Educator with the University of Idaho, I joined the tour to learn more about controlling some of our most annoying weeds. On one particular stop, the Idaho Transportation Department was showing off their new computer controlled equipment used in roadside spraying. Suddenly, bullets started zipping by just a few feet above our heads.

Needless to say, all 40 of us dropped



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Jeff Rast and his family on their farm.

to the ground and hid under vehicles. Amid a flurry of expletives, the tour leader yelled, "Who's shooting at us?" Another fellow, with his face just inches from the gravel, shouted, "Ahhh, it's probably just some blankety-blank environmentalist."

Rest assured that the gun was not fired by an environmentalist. Rather, a local teenager, untrained in ricochet trajectories, was doing a little target practice. He had no idea of what was happening until a yelling neighbor got a hold of him.

With my new and welcome lease on

life, I reflected with considerable irritation on the accusation that some environmentalist might be shooting at us. Though I didn't consider myself an environmentalist at the time, I think I always have been one. Furthermore, I considered myself a farmer at heart, having worked on a farm for nine years prior to coming on board with the University of Idaho. Never once in either capacity did I consider myself at odds with the environmental community. Apparently, though, I was outnumbered.

Having had the opportunity to farm for an old Swede who loved the land and its wildlife more than nearly anyone I know, I learned to farm in a way that nurtured the land. Though not an organic farmer, my employer/mentor seldom saw any reason to use pesticides.

Naturally, then, I never saw any logic in the notion that farmers and environmentalists are mutually exclusive groups. Both groups love the land and do what they can to care for it. I feel now, as I felt then, that farmers and environmentalists have far more in common with each other than they are prone to recognize.

Over the years as an Extension Educator, that conviction of common ground enabled me to bring successful programs to a diverse audience. While it tended to create some tension between me and some of my colleagues, most of my clients recognized that common ground and preferred to build on it.

In addition to my work with NCAP and its wonderful staff and members, I am a farmer and an environmentalist. Not only am I at peace with that, I'm convinced that farmers and environmentalists make a great team when building on that common ground.

But how do you do it? How can farmers and environmentalists work together in such a way that both come out winners? Because when they both win, we all win. And the land wins, too.

In this article, I will explain what I consider to be key principles in working with farmers to reduce pesticide use.

Focus on Common Concerns

With a few irritating exceptions among all groups, farmers and environmentalists want an environment that is free of toxins and thriving with a diversity of life. We want food that is safe, and healthy enough to supply our nutritional needs while pleasing the palate. We want farms and forests, mountains and meadows, streams and lakes that are full of life and beauty. We want to earn a respectable return from our work so that we can provide lives of opportunity for our children. We want to live meaningful lives and



I find that I can build more bridges by listening than I ever can by talking.—Jeff Rast

enjoy peace and contentment.

With so many pressing concerns in common, there really is very little that divides us. In fact, most of the division arises from passion-fueled misinformation. Nevertheless, we find it easy to dwell on the 5 percent of our concerns that divide us rather than on the 95 percent which we hold in common.

How do we build on our common ground while dealing with the controversial issues? Well, contrary to my own impulses, I find that I can build more bridges by listening than I ever can by talking. I recently heard a psychologist say that the feeling one gets by being listened to and the feeling one gets by being loved are so similar that it's almost impossible to distinguish between the two. By listening to someone on the other end of the issue, we demonstrate concern for that person. In time, the walls of defensiveness come down enough that both sides can see their vast foundation of common ground.

It takes awhile to earn the right to be heard. But by approaching the other person knowing that you have enormous common ground with that person, you can listen patiently and eventually earn their trust and the right to have your concerns heard. By the way, you'll reach resolution sooner if you take the initiative to listen, preferably before conflict arises.

To Win the War, Pick Your Battles Carefully

Whenever you pursue something in keeping with your deepest values, every battle seems of utmost importance. However, it's possible to lose the war by trying to win every battle. Think strategically. Some battles are best left unchallenged. I've won more than one battle in my life in which my victory cost me the right to be heard any further. I had to learn that by foregoing a given battle, I wasn't sacrificing the truth. On the contrary, it was more valuable to just listen in order to more effectively promote

understanding at a later, more strategic time. As my favorite book says, there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak.” Pick your battles carefully.

Identify the Enemy

The first principle in effective pest control is to accurately identify the pest

in question. It isn't enough to say that you have an aphid problem. You need to know which species of aphid you're battling. Though they look similar, habitats and controls vary across species lines. For example, importing ladybugs to control the Russian wheat aphid will produce some very frustrated ladybugs. While

feeding on the flag leaf of the wheat plant, this particular aphid injects a substance, which causes the flag leaf to partially coil, forming a protective little tent for the aphid. In this particular scenario, the ladybugs are going to pack up and move to another area where the meals are easier to munch on.

In our battles to reduce the use of agricultural pesticides, it is so easy to misidentify the farmer as the problem. I assure you that the farmer is not the enemy. I've worked with hundreds of farmers who use pesticides. Every single farmer I've worked with would prefer not to use them. No, the farmer is not the enemy.

In our world of fast-paced music videos and thirty-second hamburgers, we want results and we want 'em now! Unfortunately, such impatience often leads to incorrect conclusions.

Step back from this picture a bit and analyze it carefully. Who, or what really is the enemy in this widespread use of agricultural pesticides? If it's not the farmer, then surely it must be the pest being sprayed! No. Those plants we call weeds and insects we call pests are quite innocent in and of themselves. If they're not the problem, what is? We need to step back even further. Much further!

Ah, ha! I see it, now. The enemy is Monsanto and Dow and all their little field reps who make money by convincing farmers they need these quick and easy poisons. Right? It would certainly be easy to think that. After all, I've talked to many field representatives about ecologically sound pest control. I've heard their scoffs and seen their blank stares. I've even been tempted to look for lobotomy scars. But I contend that they're not the enemies either. Seriously misguided and frequently shallow, perhaps. But, as individuals, they're not the enemy. Let's step back even farther because this is a big picture to behold.

Here comes the shocker. I've seen the enemy and the enemy is us, sort of. No, I'm not saying that environmentalists are the enemy. I'm saying that we, the collective American public, all groups together, are the enemy to one degree or



Dairy farmers, environmental activists, and community leaders tour a grass-based dairy.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND FARMERS, SIDE-BY-SIDE

Southern Idaho is now in the grips of a hotly contested proliferation of large-scale confinement dairy operations. In fact, this is the fastest growing dairy region in the nation. But as many contend, such confinement is detrimental to the cows, the land and the surrounding communities.

In response to this tension, NCAP's Magic Valley Farmer Network held a tour featuring grass-based dairies and local marketing of dairy products. The tour featured two dairies where the cows have free access to pastures during most of the year. This more natural system drastically reduces odor and waste problems while improving herd health and increasing the productive life of cows (from two lactations in conventional dairies to an average of six with some as high as twelve).

The tour brought together a diverse group of people including both conventional and alternative dairymen,

managers from an international milk processing company, environmentalists, university and agency people as well as the press and local community leaders.

Though the chemistry was there for emotionally explosive debates, the entire group networked comfortably in an enjoyable and educational setting. It was one of the few dairy dialogues in which such a diverse audience related to each other with such mutual appreciation.

Farmers and environmentalists, side-by-side, dwelling on common concerns and values. The dynamics were so positive that one veterinarian remarked that this tour set the standard for the kind of dialogue and focus needed to resolve the issue.

Farmers and environmentalists and all other stake holders collectively pursuing the win-win solutions is a model that really works.

U.S. Dept. of Agriculture



Your food buying habits impact the amount of pesticides that are used to grow food.

another. Some of us recognize that and are personally doing something about it. Nevertheless, our society has created this dependence on quick-fix rescue chemistry. How have we done that?

We have unwittingly promoted a profiteering industrial model of agriculture through our politically and economically popular devotion to cheap food. While I'm all for saving money, our desire to spend as little as possible on food has undermined our stewardship of the land. How does that happen?

As you can see by the diagram (right) illustrating the declining portion of the food dollar received by farmers, those responsible for nurturing the land are getting the smallest portion of the American food dollar. And when we insist on paying less for our foods, the input and marketing/distribution sectors ensure that the farmer bears the burden of reduced income.

Faced with the ongoing challenge of producing more for less, the farmer is forced to use what he perceives to be the "quickest and cheapest solutions" for pest control and fertility development. Since the budgeting techniques promoted by universities and farm advisors do not account for such factors as soil and water quality or biodiversity, the farmer reaches for the "quick-fix" of rescue chemistry (aka pesticides) in pursuit of financial efficiency. (If conventional farm budget

protocols would account for the environmental damage of pesticide use, then the farmer would better understand the true cost. Until then, pesticide use often makes a fair amount of financial sense for the farmer.)

Until society is willing to abandon the cheap food policy and start paying the full cost of food including the costs to implement more sustainable farming alternatives, the farmer has no chance to implement more intensive means of stewardship.

In addition to this serious environmental aspect, there is also a critical social consideration at stake. Our cheap food policy squeezes farmers to look for the lowest cost labor available. Usually, this is supplied by farmworkers who endure difficult working and living conditions. If we are to improve their situations, we need to start by making sure that family farmers receive a higher percentage of the consumer's food dollar.

Promote Understanding of the Full Costs of Producing Food

Odds are pretty high that you already spend a higher percentage of your grocery dollars on sustainably raised foods than the average consumer. That's a great

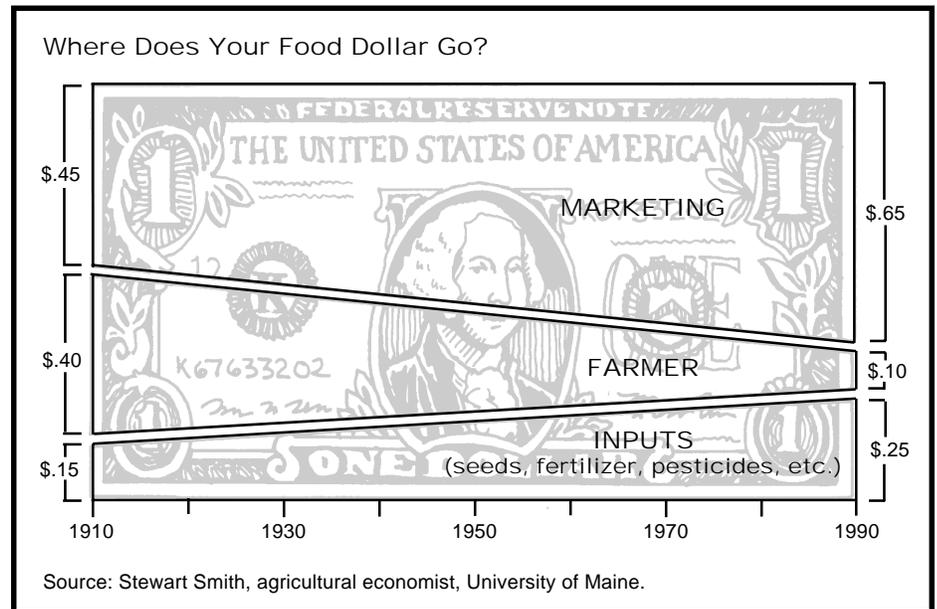
start. But we all need to talk it up. Stewardship always comes at a price. Until more people understand that their food buying habits actually have an effect on how widely agricultural pesticides are used, we are collectively refusing to play our trump card. People need to know that they should be buying foods raised sustainably and organically if we really want to make a dent in the amount of pesticides used.

Forge a Connection between Farmers and Consumers while Minimizing Corporate Domination

The more I think about our conventional food system, the more I hear the oppressive grinding of those dream-crushing wheels in an impersonal corporate machine. It's a machine concerned only about maximizing its profits by paying its suppliers (the farmers) as little as possible while increasing sales. And in our "cheap food" society, it increases sales largely by keeping food prices unrealistically cheap.

The farmer gets squeezed. The laborers get squeezed. And rural communities lose their economic and social vitality.

Voting with your dollars by purchasing



During the 1990s, the proportion of the American food dollar received by farmers shrunk dramatically.



Our devotion to cheap food unwittingly promotes industrial, chemical-intensive agriculture.

sustainably raised foods helps. But we need to mobilize for the kind of action that gets attention along the Potomac River. Add your voice to the growing chorus calling for policies and systems that bridge the gap between farmers and consumers. We need to modify or abolish policies that perpetually grease the corporate wheels and put humanity back into the food system.

Start surfing the internet to find groups already doing this and add your voice to theirs. Some good ones to start with include: the Organic Consumers Association at www.purefood.org. Also check out The Center for Food Safety at www.centerforfoodsafety.org.

One important qualification: The farmers I talk about working with are primarily family farmers. They may have large incorporated farms, but the corporation is owned and actively managed on site by family members. Large, corporate factory farms are a different critter altogether and the win-win strategy will seldom work with them. They are large corporations in which the owners and shareholders seldom walk the land and care little for the rural communities. They are unsustainable in every respect, even economically, as a major energy crisis will easily reveal. For more information about

dealing with factory farms, check out the website for the GRACE Factory Farm Project at www.factoryfarm.org.

If knowledge is power, then you couldn't empower yourself better on these issues than to check out the website for John Ikerd—one of the top thinkers in the world today on sustainable farms and food systems. He's a humble, insightful thinker and speaker who cares passionately for the land and people. The articles he has written will give you plenty to think about. You'll find this gold mine at www.hometown.aol.com/jeikerd.

Pursue the Win-Win Solutions

Recently, I spoke on organic farming at the University of Idaho Potato School, which is the largest potato production conference in the world. The room was packed with farmers, consultants and field men wanting to learn about organics. To hear that organic foods are the only ag market currently growing due to consumer-driven demand was an eye-opener for them. But then I shared something that made jaws drop.

I shared how we recently conducted an organic farm tour and an organic farm conference in which consumers actually joined us to learn how their preferred foods are raised. For the average

commodity farmer who doesn't think the consumer even cares about the farmer this was almost incredible. One farmer remarked, "They actually came to learn how farmers raise their food?" He just couldn't believe it!

Believe it or not, you can build productive networks with farmers by taking the initiative to show concern for them, their farms and their workers. This may be tough to swallow if you're facing farmers whose spray drifts onto your lawn or school. But it's an approach I've seen work well—not 100 percent of the time—but it does work.

The average farmer doesn't think you care about him or her and their survival on the farm. They think you just want your food as cheap as possible and you want to tie their hands when it comes to controlling pests.

Let them know you appreciate their efforts to raise foods. Let them know what kinds of foods you prefer and that you're willing to pay a fair price for foods raised with little to no pesticides. Help them connect with organic farmers and consultants who help farmers grow food more sustainably. And the more people you get involved, the better.

One other note: because my wife and I sell our foods directly to consumers, we know many of them by name. When we're out working our fields and controlling our pests, I assure you that we frequently think of our customers and their desire for healthy, delicious foods grown without pesticides. We highly value their trust in us and guard that trust well. We share a mutually high regard for our customers. They let us know they're willing to pay a respectable price for food raised the way they like it. And it thrills me even now to share this with you.

There really is far more that unites us than divides us. And, as a general rule, we can accomplish far more by working together for common goals than by generating conflict through antagonistic methods. We can all come out winners as we pursue win-win strategies with farmers to reduce pesticide use, care for people and nurture the land. ♣