





Economic Survival and New Technologies in Farming

A Second Dialogue with Family Farmers
November 17, 1989

Sponsored by
Mohonk Consultations, Inc.
and
Cooperative Extension Service Offices
of the Hudson Valley

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CHALLENGES TO BE ADDRESSED

Agriculture throughout the United States and, indeed the world, is undergoing one of the most fundamental transitions since prehistoric women knowingly planted the first seed for food. While the old ways and ideas are under assault on all fronts, that does not mean that agriculture in the Hudson Valley or any similar area is doomed.

- Traditional crops — corn and beans, beef cattle and dairy, hay and potatoes — just aren't profitable enough anymore.
- Taxes on farmhouses alone are higher than what a lot of family farmers originally paid for their entire farms.
- Farmland prices are so high that young people can't afford to get into farming these days. Only doctors, lawyers and other non-farmers can afford to buy farmland today.
- New houses are popping up all over. The transplanted city folks love being in the country, but they hate the clattering of tractors early on a Saturday morning, or the rich aroma of freshly spread manure.

The scene could be Des Moines, Iowa, Palm Beach County, Florida, or Sonoma County, California. But it's not. Those and other problems are confronting family farmers right here in the Hudson Valley.

CHANGE MANAGED FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Farmers can be sure of one thing in the 21st century. They are not going to have many sprays. The sprays that are available are going to be dramatically different from what we have today. Now is the time to start looking for new methods to solve our production problems.

The 1990s is going to be the decade of the environment. Health and safety regulations will continue to reduce the number of farm chemicals available to farmers. There is growing concern throughout the nation about groundwater pollution from agricultural pesticides and fertilizers. We do not want to repeat the same mistakes made in other parts of the country. It is necessary to look seriously at alternatives to conventional pest controls, as the Geneva Experiment Station is doing.

In today's world we are looking to technology for ways to protect our environment. We are concerned more and more about a **sustainable** agriculture. Looking into the future, we see finite sources of inputs such as phosphorus, potassium and nitrogen. We have to start getting concerned about how such needs are going to be filled fifty years hence. A lot of new technology is and will be aimed at addressing these kinds of problems, as well as assuring that farms will be productive on a continuing basis and able to feed our population at affordable prices.

CHECK POINTS FOR SURVIVAL

The Geneva Experiment Station is investing a large portion of its annual budget in the development of better and safer pest control agents because this is an issue that is going to control the future of agriculture in the Northeast areas of this country. There are two reasons why this is of such great importance in the Northeast. One is that our generally moist climate makes it much harder to do without certain pesticides here than in any place in the world. If we lose pesticides, we are going to lose agriculture, **unless we have alternative methods for dealing with pest problems.** The second reason is that separation between rural and urban areas is decreasing. We want agriculture to continue to be viable, and so the Experiment Station is doing everything possible through technology to provide safe and **perceived as safe** means of pest control.

Scientists at the Experiment Station believe that unless the results of new and innovative experiments are implemented, agriculture will die out in this region. In that case, we will get our vegetables and fruits from other parts of the world and have even less control over what we are eating. Also, there will be the resulting tendency to lose our rural ambiance.

Agriculture has not been a perfect husband of the rural environment, but it has been better than any other we've found so far. Research should continue to play its part in helping it stay that way.

NEW CROPS AND NEW SAVINGS IN PRODUCTION

Farmers need to explore high-value specialty crops — everything from Italian greens to hydroponic lettuce and specialty cheeses. Diversification holds much promise. The vegetable industry is not a get-rich business, but it has been very stable. Small fruit farming has been doing well.

The owner of Taft Farms shared his past experiences with control of insect pests: "Our chemical bill was getting higher and higher, while the treatments were becoming less effective. Sales representatives said to us, 'You weren't able to control the Colorado potato beetle with what you used last year. Since a lot of growers had the same problem, we've developed a new chemical that will do the job now, only it costs four times as much.'

"It didn't take a brilliant mind to figure out that something was wrong. We decided that we were not going to follow instructions and spray on a regular schedule. Instead, we were going to look at the fields and see whether or not they needed an application of spray. If the weather pattern wasn't favoring a disease situation, we didn't spray fungicide. If the bugs were not up to a certain level, we weren't going to spray. The first year we did this, we saved forty percent on our chemical costs."

Here we have a practical example of Integrated Pest Management.

NEW MARKETING AND FOOD SECURITY

The Hudson Valley has an opportunity — and a responsibility — to supply New York City and other nearby urban areas. If our farmers do not do so, who will? Will it be California or Chile? U-pick operations may be recreational for some customers, but we may get back to the days when farmers deliver produce to customers' homes. This is being done successfully in other places, such as metropolitan Washington, DC.

Some farmers may be able to concentrate on niche marketing. They can develop ethnic markets within the large Asian, Hispanic and European populations in nearby metro areas. "Buying Clubs" — whether a Clientele Membership Club as advocated by Dr. Booker T. Whatley, or a Community Service Agriculture — seem to be a good way to forge a solid link with customers. The New York State government could take a more active role in promoting New York-grown farm products and helping farmers develop markets. Massachusetts and Texas were cited as examples of states taking the lead in this area.

A shift in crop mix requires new approaches to marketing. For example, if a farmer diversifies into fresh fruits and vegetables, the people in the spreading suburbs suddenly become a ready-made market. By selling directly to consumers, especially people in nearby towns and cities, and even metro areas, within easy driving distance, a farmer can bypass the middleman. Supermarkets are now very happy to get our **local fresh** produce. They feature local farmers in their ads.

NEW APPRECIATION EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

Americans today are amazingly uninformed about agriculture and where their food comes from. Many city children have never seen a farm except from the inside of a car traveling 65 miles per hour on an interstate highway. They think milk grows in half-gallon cartons on supermarket shelves, that hamburger and beef cattle have nothing in common, and that vegetables originate in the grocer's freezer section.

What little our children do learn in school about farming comes mainly from books like "Little House on the Prairie" and "Charlotte's Web." Meaning no disrespect to Laura Ingalls Wilder or E.B. White, such books romanticize a style of farming that disappeared from this country more than half a century ago. Students at all levels, especially beginning at the elementary level, need to learn more about our food systems and why issues like soil erosion are important to them.

The members of the conference agreed that one way to increase public understanding of agriculture is to make sure that consumer advocates are represented at future meetings like this one.

NEW INTERFACE URBAN MEETS RURAL

The growing urbanization of the Hudson Valley can be both a blessing and a curse. All the counties in the Valley are what the U.S. Department of Agriculture calls metro counties, which means they are somewhere in between rural and urban.

The resulting rapid growth in population is going to affect farmers' markets and also their labor supply. It may also bring the need for more intensive agriculture because of higher property taxes. There can also be problems with vandalism and with neighbors who complain about the use of sprays and odors from manure. An increase in job opportunities will result in more competition for labor and higher wages. As the number of farms decreases, machinery dealers, feed dealers, and farm service dealers either go out of business or expand to provide for other needs of urban residents, making it harder for the remaining farmers to be serviced.

On the other hand, there will be marketing opportunities which farmers will find beneficial — niche markets, direct markets for fresher produce, reduced transportation costs and ready access to supermarkets.

"The Call for Action" in this report lists opportunities for reduction of the impact of increasing land taxes.

THE CALL FOR ACTION

In order to have a healthy agriculture, we must understand that we are inextricably bound together with what happens with agriculture in other parts of this country and the rest of the world.

While the old ways and ideas are under assault on all fronts, that does not mean that agriculture in the Hudson Valley or any similar area is doomed. In fact, just the opposite may be true, for the conditions now perceived by many as problems for farmers also represent incredible opportunities for new prosperity, diversity and, perhaps most importantly, permanence.

If we lose pesticides, we are going to lose agriculture, **unless we have alternative methods for dealing with pest problems.** The Geneva (New York) Experiment Station is investing the majority of its annual budget in the development of better and safer pest-control agents, because it predicts that this issue is going to control the future of agriculture in the Northeast.

In the 21st century, the sprays that are available are going to be dramatically different from what we have today. Now is the time to start looking for new methods to solve our production problems.

Growing food for people, rather than grain and fodder for livestock, holds great potential for farmers. More food should be grown where it is consumed. Diversification holds much promise.

THE CALL FOR ACTION

New approaches to marketing must be tested. By selling directly to consumers, a farmer can capture a greater share of the housewife's dollar. Supermarkets are now very happy to get local produce.

Large savings in costs of frequent spraying can be achieved by obtaining advice on the latest developments in Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

Students at all levels need to learn more about our food system and why issues like soil erosion are important. Requiring basic horticulture classes for beginning college students would help the public to appreciate the role of farms.

As urbanization spreads, it is necessary to devise ways of maintaining the agricultural support businesses on which farmers depend. Methods of maintaining a lower tax cost for farms include:

- Taxing the land on its type of use, rather than its potential development value.
- Easements as agreements to keep land in agricultural use for a specified period of time.
- Sale of development rights to a land trust which agrees that the land remains in agriculture or open space in perpetuity.

The best way to preserve farmland is to make farming profitable again. We can learn from Europe about establishing a symbiotic relationship between our farms and towns.

CONFERENCE LEADERS

CONFERENCE CHAIRPERSON:

George DeVault, Editor, New Farm Magazine

SPEAKERS, in order of appearance:

John C. Howell, Jr., regional tobacco and vegetable specialist with the Massachusetts Cooperative Extension Service.

Dr. Robert A. Plane, Director of Cornell University's New York State Experiment Station in Geneva, NY.

Daniel Tawczynski, owner and operator of Taft Farms, who raises potatoes, strawberries, sweet corn, green beans and a variety of vegetable crops on 200 acres in Great Barrington, MA.

Dr. Gerald Bell White, Associate Professor and Department Extension Leader in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

MEMBERS OF THE PLANNING GROUP FOR THE SECOND DIALOGUE:

Sherret Chase, Emeritus Professor of Biology, SUNY Oswego, NY.

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PARTICIPANTS

Approximately 100 area farmers, Cooperative Extension and Farm Bureau personnel, landowners, public officials, business people and concerned citizens met on November 17, 1989 at Mohonk Mountain House to discuss the current situation and examine practical answers to the growing challenges facing American agriculture.

THE SETTING

Mohonk Consultations holds meetings at Mohonk Mountain House because the setting is conducive to careful deliberation and free exchange of viewpoints. Other meeting sites in the area are sometimes used.

Mohonk's long tradition of meetings on subjects of local, national and global importance conveyed a continuing spirit of support for the participants in this Second Dialogue, with its concern for issues of vital importance to the entire region.



Mohonk's New Conference House

THE SPONSORS

Cornell Cooperative Extension has been serving the needs of the people in counties of the Hudson Valley for over 70 years. It is an organization which is ever changing to meet current issues with the latest technology and research-based knowledge from Cornell University and the land grant university system.

Mohonk Consultations on the Earth's Ecosystem was established in September, 1980. Its purpose is to bring about a clearer understanding of the interrelationships of all life on earth, to emphasize the need for the sustainable use of all the earth's resources, and to develop practical means to do so. As a non-profit organization, Mohonk Consultations is supported by contributions of individuals and organizations which believe in the immediate relevance of these objectives.