

Agriculture Needs to Speak Up

An intent crowd listened to three thought-provoking speakers at AGCare's Annual Meeting "It's All About Food Safety" on Tuesday, February 11th, 2003. Overall the resounding message heard is that agriculture needs to continually speak up.

Mary Lou Garr, AGCare Chair spoke about 2002 – The Year of Change and Challenges, highlighting the triumphs and challenges of AGCare and agriculture in the past year. Mary Lou ended her address by stating 'regretfully this is my last official engagement with an agricultural organization' as she stepped down as Chair and from other involvements to pursue personal interests.

John VanderBurgt, Certified Crop Advisor and owner of Blue Water Crop Care, led the keynote speakers list with his 'one-man's opinion' of the effects of the Nutrient Management Act (Bill-81) on the agricultural industry with a special emphasis on the horticultural industry. John highlighted numerous concerns with the proposed regulations that he felt would adversely affect normal farming practices: N index restrictions, culls, vegetable wash water containment and spreading, buffer strips, on-farm storage, Group A soil and the Short Form qualifications.

John stated that farmers have been doing environmentally safe, economically sound nutrient management for years without any regulations. Farm families live on the land they steward, drink water from nearby sources, grow crops for consumption by all and dispose of agricultural wastes in environmentally safe way for generations. With the implementation of the Nutrient Management Act, farmers are being asked to foot the whole bill for any changes that must be made in order to be

compliant with the regulations, yet they won't see any payback for meeting these standards. 'Society should pay 75-80% of the upgrades on farms to meet the standards of the regulations for the peace of mind for the general public' felt Mr. VanderBurgt.

"Challenges and Opportunities for the IR-4 Program in a New Century" was the theme for Dr. Robert Holm, Executive Director of the U.S. IR-4 Program. Following an overview of the 40-year history of the Interregional Research Project No. 4 – a national agricultural program to clear safe and effective pest control agents for minor uses, Dr. Holm emphasized the projects planned for the 2003-growing season. Many of these up and coming projects will be jointly approached by Canadian and American agencies to ensure greater cross-border harmonization and to increase pest control options for low acreage crops.

Consumers, food processors and growers all benefit from the search for and research into reduced-risk crop protection products and integrated pest management solutions for growers of minor crops. Dr. Holm mentioned that 'Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) is the world's largest selling bio-pesticide'. Bt is the natural pesticide that has been genetically engineered into some species of corn, potatoes, and cotton reducing the need for pesticide application, reducing agricultural worker and environmental risk.

Dr. Jay Lehr from The Heartland Institute feels that consumers lack understanding of how their food is produced and how agriculture operates. During the first of his two addresses, Dr. Lehr stated that 'the biggest challenge facing agricultural producers today is helping people understand what agriculture is all about'. Emphasizing

that public education should be the primary concern of a farm organization like AGCare, "we can no longer assume that the public thinks well of agriculture". Many of the regulations that agriculture faces today are the result of environmental activist organizations targeting agriculture all over the world because it is a worldwide industry that has no voice.

Activist movements have taken hold in the minds of the general population as the science behind innovations in the agri-food industry has out-stripped the scientific knowledge of the consumer. For example Dr. Lehr explained that when determining acceptable levels of contaminants in our air, soil or water, the science was reported in parts per million, then in parts per trillion, now in parts per quadrillion. Technology has advanced laboratory determination so that we may now count minute amounts of every known element in the world. Ignorance in the relationship of what the figures mean and the basic chemistry creates a fertile environment for fear.

Dr. Lehr summed up his presentation on 'The Reality of Environmental Regulatory Impacts on Agriculture' by stating, "the best crop being produced by farmers is the next generation of farmers. We need to maintain farms and our crop of farm-raised children".

In his second presentation, Dr. Lehr went about dispelling misconceptions about biotechnology and food safety. Dr. Lehr stated that every crop has been improved during the history of mankind, thus every seed that is planted in 2003 will have been bio-engineered from its original wild state. Gene manipulation has been occurring at light speed in recent years with field results of increased

AGCare – An Environmental Group?

By Owen Roberts (reprinted by permission of author)

If your organization listed biotechnology, pesticides and nutrient management as its top three priorities, would you call it an environmental group? Absolutely. That's the story behind AGCare - Agricultural Groups Concerned About Resources and the Environment - an organization with a new leader to help carry the torch. At its annual meeting in Guelph recently, AGCare, which comprises 16 farm organizations representing 45,000 farmers -- chose Guelph-area cash-crop farmer Greg Hannam, 33, as its new chair. He's the latest in line of superb chairs - including Mary Lou Garr, Jim Fischer and Hillsburgh-area farmer Jeff Wilson - who've dedicated their few available non-farming hours to trying to help people understand why farmers use pesticides, why they need biotechnology, and how they manage nutrients (manure) in the environment. That's a big job, and as farming increasing comes under scrutiny, AGCare's role grows in importance. But to Hannam, who represents the Ontario Soybean Growers, it's also a good-news job.

"As farmers, we're proud of what we do," he says, "and we want to inform consumers about the good news about our industry."

For example, farmers are proud of the fact that the new technologies they're using are much, much easier on the environment. A great deal of Ontario's biggest cash crops, soybeans and corn, are now biotechnologically

outfitted to either resist pests so farmers don't have to spray them with chemicals, or to accept the application of pesticides – Roundup being the most popular, by far – that's easy on the environment.



Greg Hannam, AGCare Chair

The good news is no, or fewer, chemicals. The reason is sound science. "Our messages are built around sound science," says Hannam. "We think we have a balanced message, and hopefully it will offer another perspective to consumers."

It will, if it's consistent and persistent. And that's where the work comes in. Sound science doesn't draw the kind of fear-laden headlines that have come to be associated with biotechnology. So, media pays less attention. That's why farmers consider the work of groups such as AGCare so important – no one else tells their side of the story. When the rhetoric dies down, ultimately the media will listen

to compelling messages...particularly if they're coming from farmers, who Canadians continue to rank highly among the most respected professions in the country.

That's one reason Hannam's optimistic farming's good-news message will get a fair hearing from consumers. "It's not going to be a hard task to tell people about the good things farmers do, but it takes a lot of work to build a trust level with consumers and win their confidence," he says. Telling an honest message is easy when truth is on your side.

Under Hannam's guidance, watch AGCare position farming as the solution to problems. Canadians want affordable food, and farming is one way to get it. Canadians want food with fewer chemicals or more innocuous chemicals, and science-based farming is the way to get it. Canadians want great care taken with their environment, and science-based farming – using technology, for example, to pinpoint where fertilizer is needed on a field, and where it's already there in adequate amounts – is one way to get it.

Informing consumers -- rather than scaring them -- is a respectable approach that "environmental" groups such as AGCare believe in. Farmers have Canadians' respect, and can deliver messages with immense credibility. Now, watch Greg Hannam deliver.

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yields, decreased pesticide use, reduced input costs and increased benefits to the environment.

Crop biotechnology is very precise - in fact it is done with almost surgical precision – one trait in one gene in one transfer, followed by volumes of testing for allergens, yet there still remains the fear by the misinformed that harm will arise.

The potential of biotechnology to produce plants that are: drought resistant, free of allergens, enhanced

nutritionally or hosts for pharmaceuticals is beneficial for the whole world. Once again, Dr. Lehr, emphasized that agriculture has been not been vocal enough in promoting the good aspects of biotechnology and normal farming practices to ensure a good quality food product on the table for consumers.

Dr. Doug Powell, Scientific Director for the Food Safety Network then moderated the panel discussion on 'It's All About Food Safety'. Dr. Lehr, Dr. Holm and Dr. Powell repeatedly mentioned that every one in the farm to fork food chain has an obligation to reduce risk. In order to achieve this end agriculture must ensure that they have

cleaned up their own operations while developing and continuing public information programs that boast of the good aspects of farming. If every member of every farm organization in the province spent one hour a week educating the public about agriculture the job would become exponentially much easier.

AGCare and other agricultural organizations have their work cut out for them now and in the future to ensure that consumers are aware that Ontario producers are doing their part to protect our soil, our water, our air and our food.

Nutrient Management Act Update

Recently the provincial government made an announcement that efforts have been made to make sure that the proposed regulation is clearer and more flexible. Information and insights gained by the Ministry from public consultations, information sessions, written submissions to the Environmental Bill of Rights Registry and direct meetings with agricultural organizations and concerned parties have allowed for the changes.

Minister Johns is committed to making the regulations practical, as the Nutrient Management Act will have a huge impact on agriculture within the province. The intent of the act is to allow farmers to remain in business and

ensures the long-term competitiveness of Ontario's agri-food industry and protect the environment at the same time.

The announcement also contained the news that new or expanding livestock operations will be required to comply with the regulations immediately and all other operations could be phased in by 2008, based on recommendations put forth by the to be formed provincial advisory committee on specific nutrient management issues and availability of cost-shared funding. This is good news for many producers in the province.

Many concerns of field crop and

horticultural producers surrounding no-till operations, vegetable wash water, vegetable culls, lack of baseline data in minor use crops,

Those operations that apply only commercial fertilizer are Category 8 farms. These can be field crop, fruit or vegetable farms of any size. Currently the proposed phase in date to do a nutrient management plan is 2008. Those cash croppers who also take manure will be classed as a Category 1 to 4 receivers and are subject to the regulations that goes with those categories, with expect phase in between 2005 and 2005 depending upon the volume of manure that is received.

Food Systems 2002 – How did we fare?

Food Systems 2002 was launched in 1987 as a partnership between agricultural producers, researchers and government with the goal of reducing agricultural pesticide use by 50% by 2002 while maintaining productivity. While not all the figures are in yet it looks like this initiative has been a success.

The Ontario Pesticide Survey, benchmarked by 1983 data, is performed every 5 years. 2002 data is being compiled and should be available within the next few months. The most recent survey, 1998, showed that agricultural pesticide usage is down by 40.7% (as measured by active ingredient). Pesticide usage is down in all sectors: fruits, vegetables and field crops, while there has been a simultaneous increase in crop yields.

Environmental risks has declined by 39.5%, with reduced risk to farmers and farm workers, consumers and the ecology. These reduced risks have arisen from the implementation of Integrated Pest Management

techniques, new target specific environmentally benign products, herbicide tolerant and insect resistant crops and an education program for agricultural pesticide users.

Agricultural producers have taken an active role in reducing pesticide usage and risk. In 1987 they were instrumental in establishing a training and certification course (administered by Ridgeway College). Every 5 years growers are required to re-certify in order to purchase and apply pesticides on their lands. In the last 5 years 27,268 growers were certified and every year over 1,000 new growers are certified. Since 1991 this certification has been a mandatory regulation under the Ontario Pesticide Act.

In addition to this education program producers have been involved in the collection of obsolete and waste pesticides and the recycling of pesticide containers. Over 24,000 Ontario producers have participated in the Environmental Farm Plan

program. The EFP is a voluntary program that allows producers to systematically assess the strengths and weaknesses of their farming operations, relative to the environment and prepare a plan to address any concerns. Farmers are committed to reduced use and responsible use of pest control products.

While making many advances in the reduction of pest control products, Ontario's farmers have been faced with many challenges: municipal pesticide bans that include agriculture, new alien pest invasions for which there are no pest control products available, lack of cross border harmonization of pest control products and a lack of variety of pest control products. These challenges while hampering a farmer's ability to produce a plentiful, high-quality food product have not prevented him from voluntarily being a good environmental steward.

Labelling: Is there a stalemate??

Since November 1999, many organizations have been involved in the Canadian General Standards Board process to create a Standard for the Voluntary and Advertising Labelling of Foods That Are and Are Not Products of Genetic Modification.

There has been an over-riding spirit of cooperation and constructive discussion from all parties involved and as a result many goals have been accomplished over the past three plus years. The committee is in the final stages of completing the Standard with only some technical issues to be resolved, despite the media attention to the contrary.

The committee consists of 53 voting members and many other interested parties. General interest groups, producers and users along with government officials, academia and trade organizations have all been a part of this process.

The outstanding issues

The defining of a truthful and meaningful standard is a very complex issue and has not been dealt with lightly by any organization involved with the setting of a standard. Some of the more difficult issues are:

- How to identify those products that have been derived from GM material but do not contain any protein or DNA like oils, alcohols, starches and sugars.
- Ensuring that positive labelling terminology (e.g. product of genetic engineering) is utilized
- Processing aids (any substance that is intentionally used in the course of manufacturing or manufacture of a food unit, food ingredient or food itself to fulfill a certain technological purpose during treatment or processing and which is not present in the finished food product or is present at insignificant or non-functional levels)
- The amount of GE material that is allowed in foods (ie adventitious material), Multi

ingredient foods, 5% if composition by weight

- Basing a labelling system of “products of” and “derived from” as opposed to “contains” is not a truly verifiable system. Without an adequate trace back system in place for presence labelling, consumers cannot be assured there is adequate verification proving that the labels are truthful and not misleading
- International trade is a strong issue. The Codex Alimentarius is working towards a labelling guideline for all international food products and they face the same issues as the Canadian General Standards Board.

Whole goal is to provide consumers with valid information that is non-confusing about the food they eat. Allowing consumer choice! Consumers interested in consuming only non-GE foods are mainly interested in those foods labelled non-GE. A non-GE label should be reserved only for those foods that clearly have no ingredients that are products of genetic engineering. Strict guidelines for non-GE claims can be used to give consumers confidence in their ability to make informed choices based on the methods by which their food is produced. This is the primary advantage of a voluntary labelling standard.

AGCare strongly supports the principle of providing more information to consumers about the ways in which their food is produced, and believes that labelling is one method for providing such information. However, it is imperative that the information that is offered to consumers be truthful and not misleading.

Noteworthy News

MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North Centre) has submitted a private members bill (Bill C-410) calling for mandatory labelling for genetically modified food. Details of this private members bill can be found at: http://www.parl.gc.ca/37/2/parlbus/chambus/house/bills/private/C-410/C-410_1/C-410_1/C-41-_cover-E.html

About AGCare

AGCare (Agricultural Groups Concerned About Resources and the Environment) is funded by all major Ontario farm organizations involved in crop production. Over 45,000 Ontario horticultural and field crop producers are represented on agricultural pesticide use, crop biotechnology developments, nutrient management, water quality and quantity and related environmental issues through 17 member groups:

Christian Farmers' Federation of Ontario
Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario
Flowers Canada (Ontario) Inc.
Ontario Bean Producers' Marketing Board
Ontario Beekeepers' Association
Ontario Canola Growers' Association
Ontario Corn Producers' Association
Ontario Federation of Agriculture
Ontario Flue-Cured Tobacco Growers' Marketing Board
Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association
Ontario Potato Growers' Marketing Board
Ontario Processing Vegetable Growers
Ontario Seed Growers' Association
Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association
Ontario Soybean Growers
Ontario Wheat Producers' Marketing Board
Seed Corn Growers of Ontario



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