

# MESAS Newsletter

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

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Fall/Winter 2002

## Farm Fresh Connection Full Speed Ahead

A project first conceived of by MESAS's Adrian Wadsworth, and initially referred to as the Institutional Buying Project, has come to fruition three years later as the Farm Fresh Connection: a program of the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society. FFC is currently linking the food services at Bates and Bowdoin colleges in Lewiston and Brunswick with local farmers in the area to provide healthy food grown in healthy ways for students who care about what they eat. The project looks toward expanding into Portland, still with the core market being institutions of higher learning, and eventually working with hospitals as well.

With assistance from Common Good Ventures, an affiliate of the Maine Community Foundation, Martha Putnam of Portland prepared a three-year business and work plan last spring, a plan leading to self-sustaining profitability for the project at the end of three years.

*"Local food translates into fresh, which translates into quality," says Jon Wiley at Bowdoin College. "But the important point," Wiley says, "is what we're doing for the local economy" and the environment.*

Common Good, acting as a "venture philanthropist" for nonprofits with a social mission (more jobs created, more hungry children fed, more family farms saved, etc.), forges multiyear relationships with organizations to achieve sustainable returns by combining philanthropic dollars with long-lasting business and management coaching, meeting with partners several times each month. Follow-on funding is focused on measurable results and accountability culminating in an exit strategy based on an effective, more self-sufficient nonprofit organization that no longer needs CGV support. CGV is also a partner with Wolfe's Neck Farm (see MESAS Newsletter, Vol.1, Issue 4) and Stone Soup.

In October, Martha Putnam joined FFC as full time Operations Director, building on her experience managing a vegetable stand serving 30 growers at the Portland Public Market. Meetings Putnam organized and held in November brought together Bates and Bowdoin people with potentially interested farmers in the area to clarify the expectations and needs of all parties and begin building the essential relationships and trust between growers and buyers.

"Start small and do it well" is Putnam's approach to developing this regional marketing opportunity for farmers and devising a system that can eventually be replicated in all different areas of the state. "My job," says Martha, "is to make sure the institutions' expectations and the farmers' expectations are matched and work well for both businesses" and that FFC does the best for the farmers and the institutions in supplying an excellent quality product.

At the purchasing end it appears that food quality is not the only advantage afforded the institutions. "Local food translates into fresh, which translates into quality," says Jon Wiley at Bowdoin College whose dining service was voted 5th best in the country by the *Princeton Review*. "But the important point," Wiley says, "is what we're doing for the local economy" and the environment. Purchasing locally grown foods reduces transportation costs and fuel usage, simplifies the recycling of cardboard packaging and employs local labor and businesses in producing the food, which keeps people in jobs. Students are involved in the project through the Sustainable Bowdoin program which works to reduce the environmental impact of Bowdoin's presence in the community.

Wiley says Bowdoin has always used locally produced foods purchased from independent vendors, but he anticipates a significant increase in the scale of purchases with FFC as the nonprofit "middleman." By coordinating supply, demand, delivery, quality control, packaging, ordering and invoicing, FFC eliminates the need for buyers to deal with many individual vendors and delivery trucks.

Wadsworth sees the Farm Fresh Connection becoming a "key piece" of a farmer's business — like having a CSA — and an opportunity which over time may demand investments in expanded season vegetable production. "It will be a time of change for participating farmers," says Putnam, who views FFC's function partly in terms of risk reduction for farmers who contemplate entering this new market.

For more information contact Martha Putnam at 207-939-4748 or [putnammartha@yahoo.com](mailto:putnammartha@yahoo.com) ▲

## Maine CSA In the News

Community Supported Agriculture in Maine made the July issue of *Vegetarian Times* with an article by Aurelia C. Scott, a "city dweller" and CSA partner with Snell Family Farms in Bar Mills. She had filled her shopping bag to bursting and was disappointed to learn that Snell's early spinach crop had succumbed to bad weather. Ramona Snell was also disappointed and hoped the second planting would be better.

Scott had a choice, she could do without spinach this time or she could buy it at the supermarket. She chose the former, remembering her promise as a CSA member to "assume some of the risks as well as reap some of the rewards" along with the farmers. Buying somewhere else "wouldn't feel — or taste — right," she wrote, and it would be disregarding the bargain she had struck.

Community supported agriculture programs were started by Japanese family farmers who felt threatened by large corporate farms. CSAs came to North America in 1985 and now number more than 1100 in the U.S. and Canada. Scott's loyalty is one reason for the success of the movement.

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## President's Message

*By Adrian Wadsworth*

The exciting Farm Fresh Connection partnership between MESAS and Common Good Ventures (see article this issue) creates a new marketing operation that will connect MESAS members and other farmers with institutional markets in central Maine. During the initial phase we will work primarily with Bowdoin College, Bates College and Central Maine Medical Center, the three institutions that participated in our business plan development and which continue to help blueprint the type of infrastructure that will fit into their buying plans. These three institutions serve approximately 50,000 meals a week during the school year and represent a largely untapped market for Maine farmers.

There are three major challenges which this project willingly and knowingly faces; the market's significant need for products during the farmers off-season of production, the fact that it's a price-sensitive wholesale market, and the need for the project to become self sustaining within three to five years.

With regard to the off-season product demand, some investment in season extending structures may be necessary. This may not work for every farm but for those who want to make the investment, FFC's role is one of reducing risk by providing a secure market for a quality product.

As a wholesale market, farmers should not expect retail prices, but the institutions' demonstrated desire to do business locally and bring local food to their tables, assures participating farmers steady and sustained sales at a known price and a fair return on dollars invested. For most farmers the institutional market will be a portion of their business, just as a CSA or a farmer's market might be. Participating farms will benefit from the market diversification without the normal overhead costs of marketing.

For this program to meet the challenge of self sustainability within three years, we must build and maintain significant sales volume in order to meet the institutions' buying plans. Strong sales volume will also allow us to keep our non-profit operating margins low relative to sales. Everything depends on the institutions getting a quality product and the farmers receiving a fair price.

We are beginning Farm Fresh Connection with three core partners. As sales grow we anticipate approaching additional health care and higher education institutions, and we also see the possibility of becoming a market of choice for restaurants not currently buying from Maine farmers. It is not our intention to compete with local farmers but rather to be a marketing agent that increases farmers' opportunity for local sales, contributes to farm profitability, and strengthens our rural communities.

In life you seldom climb any higher than you reach. We hope that Farm Fresh Connection's reach will be an effective rung in the ladder that leads to the continuing improvement of Maine agriculture. ▲

## MESAS Awarded USDA Grant For Farm Fresh Connection Project

In late October MESAS received the good news that \$108,000 in USDA funds will be made available to support the Farm Fresh Connection project (see article elsewhere this issue). The project supports a program of the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society, formerly known as the Institutional Buying Project, that will link central Maine institutions with local agricultural producers to tap the emerging institutional market for locally grown foods.

MESAS, the lead institution for the project, will work in partnership with Common Good Ventures, which had already committed funds and business consulting services that were instrumental in bringing the project to the point of maturity and development deemed worthy of USDA funding. In addition, Common Good Ventures, with support from MESAS, will match the USDA funds with a 1:1 cash and in-kind contribution.

The award comes through the USDA Rural Development Value-Added Agricultural Product Market Development Grant program, which gave out roughly \$33 million in funds nationwide with Farm Fresh Connection being the only award made in Maine. ▲

## Ecologically Grown Rice Makes Economic Sense

Takao Furuno, a Japanese rice farmer of 24 years, grosses more income from his six-acre farm than Texas rice farms gross from 600 acres. His rice yields exceed those of his conventional Japanese neighbors by 20 to 50 percent, and he does it all in a closed system without external inputs.

Furuno grows rice in paddies where ducks and fish graze on weeds, weed seeds and insects at the same time they fertilize the rice crop and stimulate the plants to produce stockier stems. After the rice is harvested, Furuno spreads compost and plants wheat as a cover crop followed by two years of mixed vegetables. His crops are sold retail to 100 families on his delivery route.

His ecological system of production, called Aigamo after the cross-breed of duck he uses, evolved over several years of careful experimentation with help from local extension. It is estimated that nearly 10,000 Japanese farmers have adopted Aigamo, and the method is spreading to other rice-growing countries.

"Some of the things I'm doing have been done in Japan for 500 years," he said at a presentation in Iowa following his participation in the World Economic Forum in New York in February. He advises Iowa farmers to "look at how crops used to be grown in the state to see what worked."

Furuno's story is told in *The Power of Duck: Integrated Rice and Duck Farming*, published in Australia by Bill Mollison's Permaculture Institute and is available through the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania or Seeds of Change in New Mexico. ▲

# MESAS NEWS

## Executive Director's Message Counting MESAS' Successes

By **Stewart Smith**

MESAS continues to build a base to benefit Maine agriculture. The Farm Fresh Connection (FFC) project that links Maine farmers with major food buying institutions in central Maine is our most recently initiated project. FFC will assist buying institutions to divert a portion of their purchases to local farmers, who must meet certain production and delivery standards. Martha Putnam, FFC Operations Director, can be reached in Portland at (207)-939-4748 or putnammartha@yahoo.com. Common Good Ventures is partnering with us on this project, and we recently received USDA funding to get the project up and running the first year. We anticipate making FFC a model for developing opportunities with similar institutions for farmers in other parts of the state.

The FFC project builds on a number of earlier projects, starting with the Baseline grant provided by USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. That project resulted in a video film for the non-farm public featuring seven Maine farmers discussing sustainable agriculture. It was aired on public television,

and more than 50 copies have been sold or loaned. The MESAS newsletter and mentoring program were also part of that project, and we need to find ways to continue the newsletter after grant funds run out this year.

We will also be publishing papers describing the condition of Maine agriculture generally and sustainable agriculture specifically. Information from a survey many of you will receive this winter will contribute to that publication. The survey is being sent to a random sample of the total farm population and takes about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. We would appreciate your completing and returning it if you should happen to receive one.

As some of you recall, much of the information in the first video was generated from thirty intensive on-farm interviews. We had much more excellent information on tape than we could use in the first video and were able to get additional SARE funding to develop that material into video segments that address specific issues of sustainable agriculture. We have shared those tapes with Farm Service Administration and Extension personnel and they have been well received. The tapes are available to use free of charge or can be purchased. Contact Andrew Files at (207) 581-3108 or Andrew.files@umit.maine.edu to receive a copy.

MESAS is also participating in a major tri-state project to promote the integration of crop and livestock agriculture. The project was one of the largest funded from USDA's Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS), a relatively new and well received program that encourages the development of systems that will help farmers be viable into the future. John Dorman, a MESAS founder and current director, who integrates his potato operation with neighbor Bob Fogler's dairy operation, serves as MESAS' farmer representative to the project. John's participation in the IFAFS project meeting in Michigan this past summer was extremely helpful in keeping the project well aligned with farmer needs.

MESAS continues to participate at the annual Maine Agricultural Trade Show in Augusta. This year we will offer programs on both production and marketing strategies. Pesticide management credits will be available from the production program. We welcome your participation at presentations and in the annual members' meeting that follows. You may find that MESAS is an organization that can support the kind of agriculture that you are doing or might like to do. Like the opportunities we have found as an organization, we think sustainable agriculture has a pretty bright future. ▲

### MAINE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE SOCIETY

#### 2003 Maine Agricultural Trades Show Program

Augusta Civic Center  
Tuesday, January 14, 2003  
1:45 – 5:00 p.m.

Please note that this year's program will be held on Tuesday instead of Wednesday as in the past. The afternoon begins with a review of the Maine Department of Agriculture's Senior FarmShare Program and an overview of local agriculture in Maine by Commissioner Robert Spear. The program then focuses on local marketing opportunities and pest management through crop choices.

#### Maine Senior FarmShare Program

1:45 – 2:15 p.m.

Deanne Herman, Marketing Manager, Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources

#### The State of Local Agriculture in Maine

2:15 – 2:30 p.m.

Commissioner Robert Spear, Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources

#### Marketing Opportunities for Local Agriculture

2:30 – 3:35 p.m.

Moderator – Rep. John Piotti, Director, Maine Farms Project

Eat Local Foods Coalition – Russell Libby, Coordinator

Buy Local, Eat Fresh Delivery Service – Ron Poitras, Hancock County Planning Commission

Farm Fresh Connection – Adrian Wadsworth, President, MESAS

#### Pest Management through Crop Choices

(Attendees are eligible for one pesticide applicator re-certification credit)

3:40 – 4:45 p.m.

Moderator – Stewart Smith, Executive Director, MESAS

Role of Crop Rotations and Managing Soil Borne Diseases – Tim Griffin, Research Agronomist, USDA/ARS – New England Plant, Soil and Water Laboratory

The Benefits of Cover-Cropping and Crop Rotation on Weed Management – Chris Reberg-Horton, Sustainable Agriculture Specialist, University of Maine Cooperative Extension

On-Farm Experiences with Pest Management – Rob Johanson, Goranson Farm

#### Annual Meeting

4:45 – 5:00 p.m.

Officers' reports and election of Directors. All attendees are welcome.



# Farm Profile

## Nutkin Knoll Farm Newburgh, Maine Len and Nancy Price

When Len and Nancy Price purchased their 60-acre Nutkin Knoll Farm in 1988, they wanted to manage the woodlot, produce Christmas trees, and gear their sales to the local retail market to take advantage of their close proximity to the urban Bangor market. Their primary goals were “to make some money” working the land, have their children (now aged 8 and 14) involved with nature and the farm, and leave the farm better than they found it. They have since purchased another 15 acres of fields and 35 acres of woods. The general decline in local agricultural land use has provided economical opportunities to use other landowners’ fields and woodlots for additional Christmas tree or sugarbush acreage. “People enjoy having their land used sustainably,” says Len, “but most don’t have the time and inclination to do so themselves.”



They now have 20 acres of Christmas trees and 10 acres of Balsam fir for Christmas wreaths, selling wreaths, garlands and center pieces. They manage a small flock of sheep for freezer lamb and have intensively thinned a 10-acre sugar bush for maple syrup and candy sales. May through October is wholesale cut flower season, and Len is now selling lumber, firewood and logs.

The couple earns off-farm income from teaching, Len full time and Nancy part time. They both enjoy the work, which provides security, benefits and health insurance and time off during school breaks to work on the farm and grab a little “play time.” The farm provides a large percent of their income and allows saving for retirement and the children’s college educations.

### Growing the Farm

Nutkin Knoll’s farm system is driven primarily by the desire to spend family time together on the farm, limit the need for off-farm help, and keep equipment and purchased inputs to a minimum. Choice of crops and volume of production are determined by the availability of their own labor during the different seasons. They hire high school students to help during the Christmas tree harvest season and Len enjoys working with them year after year and seeing them grow up.

*The couple sees greater demand for their products than they are able to supply. “The potential is amazing,” says Len*

They chose mail order and on-farm sales rather than farmers’ markets because they preferred being at the farm, though they are now selling maple products at one farmers’ market. Local Christmas trees sales are retail and cut-your-own, but trees are also sold mail-order shipped in seven-foot boxes to customers who get them cheaper and fresher than local street trees. Two wholesale customers each purchase a truckload of Balsam fir trees. One Boston buyer takes Fraser firs at the same per-tree price as local retail customers. The Frasers, which require specific soil conditions, command top dollar since they don’t compete with the Canadian Balsam tree market or the Canadian dollar.

Most advertising has been word of mouth. Nancy brings school kids to the farm in the spring to plant a crop that they return to harvest in the fall. The kids tell their parents, who tell their friends, and “we have grown very fast that way,” says Nancy. The couple sees greater demand for their products than they are able to supply. “The potential is amazing,” says Len.

Len says their key for success is having a “quality product” and getting people to come to the farm by making it an attractive and enjoyable place for people to visit. “People enjoy the experience,” says Nancy. “They like to come back.” Because it’s important to attract people to the farm, the Prices appreciate marketing programs such as Maine Maple Sunday and “Get Real, Get Maine.” They also favor the Christmas Tree Association’s idea of a Maine Christmas Tree Sunday and think a statewide open farm day is a good idea.

### Sustainability

Harvesting wreath brush and tapping maple trees fits Len’s definition of sustainability because it requires minimal purchased inputs and allows continuous harvesting year after year. Having seasonal enterprises, maximizing use of the farm’s resources and recycling are other aspects of Nutkin Knoll’s sustainability. Integrating livestock by rotating sheep and horses on the same pasture eliminates the need to worm sheep for internal parasites. No chemicals have been needed to treat for sheep keds (ticks) since the chickens have been running under the barn where Nancy is sure they eat the eggs. “It’s been a real treat,” she says, “because we don’t like having to use any chemicals on the animals, especially the lambs that we sell for meat.” Manure and waste hay are composted for cut flowers and for their home garden and orchard.

Two keys to economic sustainability, says Len, “are producing a quality crop that’s in demand” and matching the crops’ needs to soil types, local growing conditions and spatial location. He prefers crops and varieties native to the area because of the existing balance between pests and predators in contrast to imported species which usually bring problems that cost money to solve.

*Nutkin Knoll continued on next page*

### Finding Information and Financing

Len figures they were lucky to have purchased the farm before local mortgage lending became a thing of the past. Their land was more valuable for development than farming and the buildings were run-down, which meant the mortgage couldn't be sold on the secondary market as consolidated lenders prefer these days. Len realizes that "for somebody else to do something similar in future years is going to be even more difficult." A good down payment kept mortgage payments low enough that both Nancy and Len wouldn't have to work off the farm full time, and they have worked to upgrade the place with "sweat equity."

*"We've chosen a particular lifestyle in which money is not the primary measure of success."*

Neither Len nor Nancy grew up on a farm, and their college educations have been applicable to farming only indirectly. For how-to farm information they attend many association meetings and trade shows. Their primary source of information has been farmer-to-farmer contacts and on-site farm visits throughout New England and in other parts of the country. Len applies the intensive land use practices he observed in Europe during his year overseas after college. "The Europeans really encourage the use of agricultural space," he says, "not just for the farmers' benefit in making a living, but for the whole community's benefit."

The Internet, too, has been "very useful" for finding information, people and appropriate technology for small operations. Len found people using the Shropshire sheep breed to mow Christmas tree fields without harming the trees and a solar kiln design for lumber from the University of Wisconsin. Having his lumber sawn on-site gives local portable saw mill operators a piece of the business and kiln drying adds value for small woodlot owners like himself. Both the kiln and the Shropshires are on Len's agenda for the future.

"We've chosen a particular lifestyle in which money is not the primary measure of success," says Nancy. "A lot of people spend their summer vacation in Maine, one week, enjoying the weather, being outside, being in the woods, or on a lake and swimming.... We and the kids get to live here 365 days a year where we can ski, skate, swim, chase bugs, pick berries.... I mean every day there are so many neat things to do." ▲

### Briefs

- The European Commissioner for Agriculture has introduced a reform measure similar to the needed but failed payment limitation reform sought during the Farm Bill debate here in the U.S. The European proposal places a lid on the huge subsidies going to large farmers with savings redirected into rural development initiatives to revive rural economies. More specifically, the proposed reform would cap subsidies to large farmers, reduce subsidies to large farmers by three percent a year over seven years, and shift policy away from rewarding overproduction and toward farming methods that enhance animal welfare and the environment. Britain and Germany are leading the member states supporting the change and France is leading the states protecting the status quo. ▲
- Since 1984, the real price (adjusted for inflation) of a USDA market basket of food has increased 2.8 percent while the farm value of that food has fallen by 22.4 percent. ▲

## New Maine Governor Bodes Well for Maine Agriculture

By Stewart Smith

The 2002 elections are decided. Maine has a new Governor-elect, former U.S. Senator John Baldacci, and soon will have a new administration with policies and programs that will affect Maine agriculture generally, and the mission of MESAS and sustainable agriculture specifically.

If we draw from Governor-elect Baldacci's campaign issue statements (see: [www.baldacciforgovernor.com/issues](http://www.baldacciforgovernor.com/issues)), it seems that Baldacci has it right. He honors the proud tradition of Maine agriculture while recognizing the profound changes taking place, especially in a globalizing marketplace. He notes that commodity-producing farms will continue to get larger and fewer as they use economies of scale to stay competitive in national and international markets. He calls for the state to help these farms by providing market development and assistance, supporting a strong processing capacity, and helping farmers to adopt new technologies.

But commodity farming is only one part of Maine agriculture. Baldacci also acknowledges the importance of the agricultural sector that produces and processes local foods for local consumers. Many MESAS farmers also recognize the potential for this kind of agriculture, where local production systems rely on local or farm-produced inputs rather than purchased inputs from industry, and where farmers sell to local consumers, either directly or indirectly. By capturing more of the marketing margin, this approach is proving financially viable even without achieving economies of scale. Baldacci calls for growing a vibrant local agriculture by providing appropriate technical support, adopting marketing techniques that focus on local consumers, and helping farmers add value to their production.

By recognizing the important differences in Maine agriculture, a more effective State agricultural policy can be developed. This is not to suggest that the commodity versus local distinction is absolute on every farm. Indeed, many Maine farms lie somewhere along the continuum. Nevertheless, it is important that state policy recognize the distinction and develop policies and programs accordingly.

It should also be noted, as reflected in the Baldacci statement, that some farming problems and solutions are common to both types of farms. Both need access to adequate water supplies, adequate farmland in areas of development pressure, and adequate labor, especially during seasons of heavy need. It is encouraging to me that the Governor-elect understands that these are common problems shared by Maine farmers across the spectrum.

Admittedly, the distance between campaign positions and policy implementation is often great, but I believe MESAS members and friends of sustainable agriculture may expect some positive moves. The intent and direction of the Governor-elect's vision and approach appear consistent with MESAS' mission and should contribute to the strengthening of Maine's agriculture and our rural communities. ▲

### MESAS Mentoring Program

We still have approximately 20 established sustainable farmers who are willing to work in a mentoring capacity with farmers who want to learn. Anyone who might like to lend a hand in getting the program rolling at the administrative end should give Andrew Files a call. Anyone interested in participating as a mentor or farmer should also contact Andrew at 5782 Winslow Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5782, phone: (207) 581-3135, e-mail: [andrew.files@umit.maine.edu](mailto:andrew.files@umit.maine.edu). ▲

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The Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society is a nonprofit organization of farmers and others who support the sustainable agriculture concept and its application to the production of food and other agricultural products. Our mission is to explore, develop and promote agricultural systems and practices that allow Maine farmers to retain a greater share of consumer expenditures for farm products.

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## Resources

ATTRA—Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas—is a national sustainable farming information center operated by the private nonprofit National Center for Appropriate Technology. ATTRA was brought to our attention by Jim and Kate Cook at Skylandia Farm in Grand Isle, Maine. “It seems to be the best kept secret on the planet and shouldn’t be,” says Kate, who describes ATTRA as “the most approachable” of all her resources and ATTRA’s material as “written for the layperson.”

We checked out ATTRA’s website and found more links to more sources of information than we’ve seen anywhere else, including databases that institutions pay hundreds of dollars to subscribe to. You can get summaries, or even reprints, of Extension and professional journal articles on every topic remotely related to agriculture. A phone call request to ATTRA’s 800 number brought the Cooks a thick looseleaf notebook chock full of information about growing potatoes. The material arrived quickly and if there’s something you don’t understand, Kate says another phone call will put you directly in touch with an expert in your area of interest who will help you.

To contact ATTRA: [www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org); 1-800-346-9140; P.O. Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702.

## JOIN MESAS for sustainable agriculture

**Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society**  
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**5782 Winslow Hall**  
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\_\_\_ Farmer Member—I depend on farming activities for a substantial portion of my livelihood.

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