



MESAS Newsletter

Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society

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Fall 2001

Farmer to Chef Network Links Tourism and Agriculture

One aspect of the Locally Grown Foods Project at the Hancock County Planning Commission (HCPC) is a pilot project that brings local farmers together with local (largely seasonal) restaurants and ultimately makes the connection between tourism and agriculture.

Hancock County's 50,000 year-round population hosts 5 to 6 million visitors each year, and "tourists travel on their stomachs," says Ron Poiras, HCPC's Director of Economic Development, who heads up the project with Allison Gladstone. Hancock County has the second highest number of restaurants in the state, many are high-end and most are on Mount Desert Island where there are only two local farmers.

Basically the project is a pick-up-and-delivery service which helps restaurant chefs—who wanted fresh produce but had trouble getting it—and small farmers who had a hard time supplying distant restaurants.

From two pick-up points in Blue Hill and Hancock, produce is delivered twice a week to restaurants along Route 1 between Steuben and Bucksport and to points as far away as Winter Harbor, Stonington on Deer Isle, and the Cranberry Isles off Mount Desert Island. The project has hired a driver and a cooled truck.

Some farmers are using the service to deliver to their existing restaurant clients, others have developed new clients, and still others broker their surplus through the project. Farmers deliver clean produce, packed in wax cartons and labeled as to contents and destination. Restaurants pay weekly, farmers are paid weekly, prices are based on local fresh produce, and Allison Gladstone is the contact point for orders. The service is free to farmers this year.

The HCPC project responds to Hancock County's need to expand local agriculture through new local marketing opportunities. Affordable pick-up and delivery is viewed as an important part of the necessary infrastructure. The typical large-scale for-profit wholesale/distribution system may take as much as half of the food dollar compared to 20 to 25 percent for cooperative and non-profit systems.

The project's participating restaurants are members of the Hancock County Fresh, Locally Grown Network (of restaurants, farms and food producers), and many are also members of the new Downeast chapter of the American Culinary Federation, which actively encourages and supports agriculture in the region. Face to face contact between chefs and farmers happens at biennial meetings. Upon project completion in October, HCPC will prepare a detailed report on the economic feasibility of continuing such a service beyond the project.

The HCPC project is funded by grants from the Maine Department of Community and Economic Development and the Maine Community Foundation. For more information contact Ron Poiras or Allison Gladstone at HCPC at 667-7131. ▲

Farm Profile

(The farm profiles appearing here are drawn from interviews conducted as part of a SARE grant project in the summer of 2000.)

Sandy River Farms Farmington, Maine L. Herbert ("Bussie") and Brenda York



At the 2001 Eastern States Exposition, the Yorks received the prestigious New England Green Pastures Award which goes to one dairyman in each New England state who excelled in individual contributions and farm management in terms of cropping, conservation and self-sufficiency. The above photo shows Brenda and Bussie with the 1996 Maine Dairy Shrine Award for excellence in dairying.

Bussie and Brenda York have been dairy farming in Maine for nearly half a century. But because they are committed to diversification, only half of their gross farm receipts derive from milk production. Bussie works with 560 acres of rolling bottom land in crops and forage and 800 acres of working woodland. He produces, mixes and grinds feed for his own 150-head herd. He sells grains, forage, hay, timber and commodity food crops, and he custom mixes feed for other farmers. Changes in York's operation over the years have been driven by a "market philosophy" within the constraints of maintaining a diverse production base and a healthy balanced soil.

"The health of the soil is not only what you put in for N, P and K," says York, "it's also the tilth of it, the organic matter." His corn/soybean rotation adds organic matter. He follows two or three years of no-till or mulch-till shell corn, which adds raw residue to the soil, with two or three years of soybeans which allows the organic matter to breakdown and "become much more effective."

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Mesas News

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Fortin Farm
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Executive Director's Message

By Stewart Smith

As usual the MESAS summer farm tour was enlightening. Seeing the work of the three farmers we visited this year, I was struck by the contrast with those we toured last year. This year's farms in Hancock County were small scale intensive vegetable farms, two with a livestock component. Last year's farms in Turner were much larger, and two had a substantial dairy component. Since all were practicing sustainable agriculture, one might wonder whether sustainable agriculture has a definition.

Gaining a better understanding of the boundaries of sustainable agriculture is a primary goal of a SARE-funded project administered by the University of Maine and MESAS. Several Maine agricultural groups identified 220 farmers they believed were practicing sustainable agriculture or implementing integrated farming systems, and 30 were selected for intensive interviews on audio tape several were taped on video for film presentations that explain sustainable agriculture in the words of practicing farmers. All will contribute to a better definition of sustainable agriculture in Maine.

Although the project's analysis is not yet complete, we see that sustainable agriculture farms in Maine seem to fall into three categories based on how they have developed. Those which we call "designers" developed as an integrated biological whole from the very beginning, integrating crops and livestock and scaling for intensive production. A second group we are calling "evolvers" began as conventional farms which transitioned, or are transitioning, to integrated sustainable agriculture farms. These farms tend to be larger and, in the case of dairy, may still specialize in a single commodity. The third group or "appenders" are the larger conventional farms which have adopted sustainable agriculture practices on a part of their operation—perhaps marketing some products directly to consumers, or transitioning part of their farm to organic production—but remain primarily a conventional farm which could be viable without the sustainable techniques.

Last year we toured two evolver farms and one appender. This year we toured three designers. Although these types of farms may look very different, they all fall under the rubric of sustainable agriculture. Understanding the differences makes it easier to understand the common principles of sustainable agriculture while appreciating the variety of sustainable agriculture farms in Maine. ▲

to King Hill Farm, where Jo Barrett offered a feast of fresh and prepared farm-grown foods including mutton sausage and farm-smoked mackerel. Before supper we heard from Ron Poitras and Allison Gladstone about the Hancock County Planning Commission's efforts to expand local agriculture (see article on page 1). After supper, thanks and kudos went out to Dennis and Jo for planning and hosting the event. MESAS directors stayed on for a board meeting.

All in all, it was an extremely successful third annual farm tour day. It not only demonstrated the diversity of sustainable agriculture in Maine but also, because of the local Hancock County focus, revealed how local farmers, farm groups, and local government agencies are working together to improve the county's farm-based community. ▲

MESAS Farm Tour a Pleasant Success

The 3rd annual MESAS farm tour on August 7 brought together 25 participants, including farmers, sustainable agriculture students, Maine Department of Agriculture staff and interns, and others. It was a typical Summer 2001 day—hot and dry.

The group met at King Hill Farm owned by Dennis King and Jo Barrett where a brief welcome by MESAS Executive Director Stewart Smith was followed by a round of introductions and a tour of the farm. While still maintaining a homestead focus and a mix of crops and livestock, the farm now emphasizes root crops rather than mixed vegetables, a shift facilitated by the new root cellar. They also raise small grains, sheep and some beef cattle, with livestock grazing together on New Zealand style pastures to better utilize pasture forage. Both pastures and grain crops suffered this year from drought and the onslaught of army worms, a pest which hit Maine hard this year on its 30-year cycle. The worms had stripped grain stalks of all leaves and devoured pasture grasses.

The next stop was Horsepower Farm in Penobscot where Paul Birdsall, whose wife Molly passed away last year, has been joined in partnership by his daughter-in-law and son Andy on this mixed vegetable and sheep farm with a 200 acre woodlot. Andy says he has a lot to learn, but he's enthusiastic about his new vocation. This farm, which is powered by horses, has gone one step beyond most low-input sustainable farms in replacing purchased fossil fuel inputs with farm-fed animal power. Our visit was cut short by a sudden thunder storm and we viewed the compost turner, which Paul owns jointly with Dennis King, from inside the vans. Both farms have extensive composting operations utilizing fish wastes as a nitrogen source.

The final farm visit was Scott Howell's Under Hill Farm where land unused for several years, but previously pastured organically, is coming back into production. A hoop house of tomatoes yields impressive revenues, as does mesclun mix which is harvested by hand, washed in large pans and spun dry in recycled onion bags dropped into an old washing machine set on the spin cycle. Under Hill's produce is marketed through the adjoining Organic Harvest storefront which Scott leases to the Hancock Organic Growers Co-op (see article on page 4).

After a tour of the store and an introduction to coop marketing by coop member Paul Volkhausen, the group returned

In general, York's four major crops, alfalfa hay, corn, soybeans and oats, are in various rotations of up to five years depending on the weather, the quality of the stand and markets.

Changes in York's operation over the years have been driven by a "market philosophy" within the constraints of maintaining a diverse production base and a healthy balanced soil.

Marketing

"Marketing has changed tremendously in the last 40 years," says York. His commodity food crops over the years have included sweet corn and shell beans for canning, dry beans, turnips, sugar beets, dandelions, beet greens, oats, corn, sweet corn for retail sales, everything except potatoes. "The really big challenge," says York, "is to try to get to a level where your labor force, machinery, land base, everything, kind of fits together so you don't get a big conflict.... We still do a lot of wholesaling but we're trying to work toward more direct marketing.... That's really the future, I think, to create that [direct marketing] type of system."

Sustainability

"I think you have short term and long term sustainability," says York. "I think if you keep looking at it long term, the short term will take care of itself." York attributes the sustainability of his operation to his long term commitment to utilizing "all of the assets on the farm in a diversified way." It's an integrated system that "is always evolving," says York. "Part of the challenge is to evolve without putting yourself through bankruptcy."

Diversification is York's insurance against "disaster," and farming in the same community for years has been his assurance for obtaining necessary financing. "The established farmer," he says, "will always have the preference from a lending institution." York keeps his equipment costs down by purchasing used machinery whenever possible and by pooling big specialized equipment, like the grain roaster—the first one in Maine.

The grain roaster project grew out of several Maine dairy farmers' desire for self-sufficiency in feed production, including protein concentrates. They were getting good yields with short season soybean varieties, but because they were feeding raw beans, the cows utilized only half the protein. A roaster seemed the easiest and least expensive way to increase protein bio-availability. The machine was portable, so it could be shared, but it still seemed too costly (\$30,000) considering it would only be used once a year. With Extension's help, the farmers wrote a grant proposal with a research component which would bring the roaster to Maine. They received \$10,000 from the Maine Department of Agriculture's grant

and loan program, and they added \$6000 of their own cash and \$11,000 in program loan funds. The farmers own the machinery, but the project participants include ag experts, industry and university people.

Policies and Programs for Sustaining Agriculture

York thinks too little effort is made to bring technology for small farmers into this State. This lack of appropriate technology is one of several areas that are critical to the sustainability of agriculture in Maine. He thinks statewide planning efforts should also; 1) pay more attention to long-term soil fertility and "total" soil health, 2) stimulate the development of agricultural infrastructure such as regional processing facilities, 3) attract more young people to agriculture, and 4) devise programs that give small farmers access to reliable farm labor. In general, York thinks anything that makes agricultural production more profitable will make agriculture more sustainable.

York is "not a big fan" of industrialized agriculture or globalization. In fact he says globalization "is a big danger nationwide and world-wide, because it allows a few entities to accumulate substantial control over a product to the detriment of both farmers and consumers.... I just don't think in the long term it's going to benefit anybody, except a very few that are going to get very rich."

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Advice to New Farmers

"Agriculture is changing," says York, "and you have to be willing to change. You have to understand what it is that is changing before you can incorporate it into your farming business...change for a certain reason...have a goal—short term and long term. Have a market driven, entrepreneurial philosophy. Do your homework. Seek out the best advice and resources available. Be willing to take calculated risks.... To sum it up, exhibit innovative thinking and then go out and have innovative execution of your thoughts."

"We've been fairly successful in most everything we've done," says York, and there isn't much he would have done differently. He thinks one key factor in that success is his land base which has allowed flexibility and change. Maintaining that flexibility has benefited his own operation, and when he sells out it will be attractive to a variety of people who might want to use it in a variety of ways. ▲

Another Record Breaking Year Breaking the Backs of Farmers

In 1999 U.S. consumers spent a record \$788 billion on food (\$618 billion grown domestically) at a record low percentage of 10.4 percent disposable income while food producers received a record low return of less than 20 percent of the food dollar. Consumers in most other countries pay twice that percent of disposable income for food. (Source: USDA statistics.) ▲

In the September 2000 issue of The Furrow magazine, Dick Thompson, a long-time alternative agriculture farmer in Boone, Iowa described the sustainable agriculture movement as "agriculture's quiet revolution" and a "peaceful, yet dynamic, transition that constantly challenges us to find better ways to farm."

Marketing Cooperatively in Hancock County

The Organic Harvest storefront on Route 172 near the Blue Hill fairgrounds has been retailing organic produce since 1986 when it was part of what is now Under Hill Farm. Today it is leased to the Hancock Organic Growers [HOG] marketing cooperative formally organized in 1996 by six organic farmers. Membership now numbers nine, and sales have increased to exceed \$100,000.

HOG also sells wholesale to restaurants and stores. They have a Food Guild, like a CSA, where customers who pay in advance receive a 15 percent discount. This year they participated in the Maine Farm Share program for seniors and have utilized Hancock County Planning Commission's pick-up-and-delivery service (see article in this issue).

At HOG's winter planning meeting, expected sales are allocated among members and the manager tries to buy accordingly throughout the season. Since the coop owns the produce, the coop manager makes the final decision about whether to buy or sell and at what price. The manager is also responsible for selling any farm's unexpected surplus, a decision taken after last year's glut of tomatoes in September. The coop buys some items unavailable from members such as maple syrup, honey, bread, mushrooms and chicken.

On the retail side, one big benefit for farmers is that none could adequately supply a farm stand on their own. All are small producers with a combined total acreage marketed through the coop of less than 20 acres and all have gaps in range or availability of products. Although all have some market outlets outside the coop, no member is allowed to sell to coop customers.

On the wholesale side, cooperative marketing saves each member having to call several customers. Customers also benefit from receiving a more consistent supply and talking to only one manager instead of several farmers.

In 1998-99 HOG was awarded \$30,000 in funds from USDA's Rural Business Enterprise program, which have provided for marketing assistance, business development, other technical assistance (such as accounting and legal organization), and purchase of equipment. Excellent deals on used coolers and display counters allowed them to stretch the funds, and they plan to add a processing facility in a couple of years.

"There's a lot of work involved in being a coop," says HOG member Paul Volkhausen, who feels the most difficult struggles are past. Now it's mostly learning how to work cooperatively together within a larger culture of individualism where most people are trained to look out for their own resources. In the cooperative model, says Volkhausen, "you can't necessarily look at what's best for your own farm—you have to look at what's best for the organization as a whole. And in the long run," he says, "that will be what is best for your own farm." ▲

MESAS Mentoring Program— Apply Now

Approximately 20 established sustainable farmers in Maine have already signed on as mentors. Brochures are available for recruiting mentors and farmers who want to learn. Anyone interested in participating as a mentor or as a farmer wanting to learn should contact Mentoring Program, MESAS, 5782 Winslow Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5782, phone: (207)-581-3135, e-mail: andrew.files@umit.maine.edu. ▲

Concerns Grow Over Corporate Control of the Food System

Farmers have long suffered from increasing corporate concentration and monopolistic collusion in the food sector, which squeezes them from both ends. The same corporations that control the market for their crops also control the supply of their inputs. Fred Stokes, a retired Army officer now raising cattle in Mississippi says it straight out. "The thing that bothers me the most is the Big Brother aspect of this deal," Stokes told *The Nation* (Nov. 20, 2001). "It's clear the government is more concerned with mining big profits for these corporations than it is with food security or family farmers. It's all about money for a handful of guys who will be the elites. The rest of us wind up swinging machetes. You talk about feudalism. This thing makes farmers indentured on their own land; they're going to be the new serfs."

Stokes, who says he's a Reagan Republican, advocates real competition. His Organization for Competitive Markets (OCM) (www.competitivemarkets.com) targets consumers, environmentalists, church activists, humanists and animal rights activists to "let them know they've got a dog in this fight" against megacorporations. Stokes and others like him say the political struggle involves much more than saving the family farm.

In Pennsylvania, lawyer Thomas Lenzey, with the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF), urges fellow public defenders not to be distracted by side issues like hog factory manure effluent but to strike at the bigger corporate heart by denying corporations judicial status as "persons." Several Pennsylvania townships have adopted Lenzey's anti-corporate ordinance (sample available at www.celdf.org). Pennsylvania's Family Farm Protection Act, which prohibits agribusiness corporations from purchasing farmland or engaging in farming activities (at www.pfra.org), is a replica of a citizen referendum passed in South Dakota in 1999 with 59 percent of the total vote (opposed by the South Dakota Farm Bureau) and is similar to statutes adopted in Missouri, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma. ▲

Energy Price Distortions Disrupt Food and Manufacturing

The effects of energy deregulation and price gouging, as in California, have broad repercussions in other sectors of the economy and other parts of the country.

In Central Washington state, for example, several aluminum smelters located in the high desert Columbia River plateau, where 29 publicly subsidized power dam projects provide cheap electricity for this high usage manufacturing process, are now selling power to the Pacific power grid instead of smelting aluminum. Kaiser Aluminum increased profits last year by \$350 million off the deal, which they say is good for shareholders, but several plants have closed and thousands of manufacturing jobs have been lost.

Farmers too, suffering from depressed crop prices, are receiving \$410 per acre to retire 15 percent of the region's irrigated land so water can be directed through power generators. In Grant County alone \$30 million bought back farmer's water rights on 73,000 acres. Energy traders profited to the tune of \$280 thousand, which they invested in 20 new diesel power generators, and the county made \$88 million on the deal. ▲

(Source: C-SPAN cable channel.)

Alternative Agriculture in Cuba

By Pamela Bell

The entire island nation of Cuba is going organic, aiming for food self-sufficiency with as few purchased inputs as possible, and the transition is attracting worldwide attention. A book telling much of the story, *Transforming the Cuban Countryside: Advances in Sustainable Agriculture*, was published in Havana, with an introduction by Food First's Peter Rosset and UC Berkeley's Martin Bourque, director of The Ecology Center. Food First will release an English edition later this year.

Preparation began in the mid-70s when the government saw the unsustainable effects of Green Revolution high-input technology—declining yields, worn-out soils, salinization, and increasing costs for increasing amounts of pesticides and herbicides. Implementation, which began in 1985, became imperative five years later when Cuba's trade relations broke down with the sudden collapse of the Eastern European socialist trading block and caused a 50 percent decline in the Cuban economy over a two-year period.

The Cuban agricultural sector—which was technologically similar to California—saw the availability of fertilizers and pesticides fall by 80 percent, combustible energy by 50 percent, and tractors, equipment and parts to virtually zero. Grain imports declined by 50 percent, average daily caloric intake declined 30 percent and hunger reared its ugly head. In a draconian measure to topple Fidel Castro, the U.S. Congress tightened the economic blockade against Cuba making it impossible for the country to receive food aid or find food trade elsewhere. Cuba had little choice but to rely upon their own human and natural resources to feed its 11 million people.

Ten years later the economy is back on track, the people are eating well again and the World Bank's 2001 edition of *World Development Indicators* shows Cuba topping virtually all other poor countries, and some developed countries, in health and education statistics. "They have done a good job," said World Bank President James Wolfensohn after the World Bank and IMF meetings last spring, "and it does not embarrass me to admit it." Cuba's economic policies are virtually the antithesis of World Bank policy advice for poor countries over the last 20 years.

Energy efficiency increased from 5 calories of energy producing only 1 calorie to where one calorie now yields 2 or 3 or 4.

To overcome the food and agriculture crisis, Cuba adopted modern sustainable practices and revived some traditional practices, including oxen for power. A pull-them-up-by-hand campaign eliminated noxious weeds nationwide. Energy efficiency increased from 5 calories of energy producing only 1 calorie to where one calorie now yields 2 or 3 or 4. Two hundred and eighty centers produce biopesticides, ranging from Bt and tricograma wasps to fungal and bacterial pathogens and beneficial soil inoculants and nematodes. Composting takes place at regional centers and on every farm large and small. Some sugar factories are powered by fuel made from sugar cane waste which is then returned to the land. Worms and worm soil, produced in small piles of "trash" that are watered and fed daily, are added to compost or directly to the soil.

Large farms—owned by the state, not by corporations—have been broken into smaller more resource-efficient parcels that are leased in perpetuity to cooperatives. Coops market commodity crops to the state for export or for domestic food programs, but each coop also has plots of traditional food crops for member consumption (auto-consumption is an integral part of the transition) and for sale in local markets.

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There has been a tremendous increase in urban market gardens, many built on top of converted waste land outside the cities which is leased to coops or individuals producing fruits and vegetables or "green medicine" plants that are processed and distributed through hospitals and pharmacies.

Cuba's staple grain crop is rice (wheat does not grow in the tropics). Today Cuba is producing rice organically—something they thought would be impossible—and they are getting twice the yields. Cuba is exporting certified organic sugar and seeking certification for higher value coffee and tobacco. One wonders what the organic premium might be on a box of Cuban cigars which already retails for \$360 in the duty-free shops.

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Cuba's new paradigm approach to agriculture, vigorously promoted through academic and public education, has made farming a more attractive and esteemed profession that is bringing people from the cities back into the countryside. Nonetheless, demand for fresh produce still outstrips supply, and even the farmers complain that prices are too high since fresh produce is too expensive for some workers and social security recipients, and farmers and their workers are making more than university professors. The government's plan is to bring prices down by increasing supply.

It appears that Cuba is doing all those things we veteran advocates of sustainable and organic agriculture have been envisioning for decades but have yet to see materialize beyond the dooryard of a few hail and hearty farm families living on the margin. The Cubans admit it's a long hard struggle, they haven't solved it all, but they know they are on the right track, and they suggest we be patient—if not for us in this generation, they say, then surely in the next. It will happen, they believe, because the big problems with modern industrial Green Revolution agriculture "are not just in Cuba; they are worldwide."

Nancy Galland and Richard Stander, recently retired organic farmers in Stockton Springs, cite Cuba as "a lone symbol of defiant self-determination in a world driven by U.S. based corporate domination." I am fortunate to have friends in Cuba, have visited twice this year, and hope to return in December for an agro-ecology conference. ▲

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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.

The MESAS Newsletter is published 4 times a year by the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society. This edition is supported by funds from the Northeast SARE program of the USDA. To be placed on the mailing list contact MESAS through the addresses on the mailing label. All other correspondence should be sent to Pamela Bell, Editor, MESAS Newsletter, 21 Centre Drive #7E, Orono, ME 04473 or call Pamela Bell, (207) 866-4859. We welcome ideas and input of all types from readers.

Grant Writing Assistance for Farmers

USDA's Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program is providing funds through the University of Maine Cooperative Extension to help farmers apply for SARE's farmer/grower grants. Graduate students in the Sustainable Agriculture Program at the University are available to come to the farm to help farmers with project development and the grant writing process.

The goal of the Farmer/Grower grant program is to develop, refine, and demonstrate new sustainable techniques and explore innovative ideas developed by farmers across the region. The Farmer/Grower grant program supports producers who want to try something new on their farm such as a technique for adding value, a new crop, or a method of direct sales. It helps farmers explore sustainable and innovative production and marketing practices that are profitable, environmentally sound, and beneficial to the community. Projects can address a broad range of agricultural or farm-forestry-related production or marketing issues. Successful proposals define a problem and offer innovative solutions. Examples of past grants can be viewed at the SARE web site at www.sare.org.

In 2001, Northeast SARE awarded about \$192,000 in Farmer/Grower grants. The average grant was \$4,150. The smallest was \$551. The cap in 2002 will be \$10,000. For more information about assistance in designing a project and preparing a proposal contact Rick Kersbergen, UM Extension Educator at 1-800-287-1426. ▲

JOIN MESAS for sustainable agriculture

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