

An Update on Sustainable Agriculture—Winter 2010

From Senator Bernie Sanders

Dear Fellow Vermonter,

We should all be proud that Vermont is one of the leaders in our country in terms of sustainable agriculture. In my view, we have got to do everything we can to combat industrial factory farming and protect and expand family-based sustainable agriculture. I look forward to working with you as we go forward on this extremely important issue. I did want to mention that Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack will be visiting our state. Among other events, he will be speaking at the Vermont Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) at 11:45 a.m. on February 13 at the University of Vermont's Ira Allen Chapel. Thank you and I hope you find this newsletter helpful.

Sincerely,

Bernie

Bernie



David Robb and Lila Bennett of Tangletown Farm in Middlesex give Bernie a tour of their family owned, thriving, organic farm.

A New Food System

In Vermont and across the country, more and more consumers are paying closer attention to the food they eat, what is in it and where it comes from. People are concerned that many countries, like China, have lower food-safety standards than the United States. Consumers are realizing that shipping food vast distances from farm to fork wastes energy, hurts the environment and worsens global warming. Americans want to know more about the ingredients in their food and are starting to understand that high levels of corn syrup, salt, and trans-fats are causing a nationwide obesity epidemic. Clearly, for national policy, we need a different way of thinking about food production and our diets. As a member of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Bernie will continue playing a very active role in that process.

Moving Forward to Expand Local Food Production

In recent years, significant strides have been made toward turning American agriculture in a new direction. Across our state and the nation, consumers are rejecting the corporate agriculture system and focusing on local food networks. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is an increasingly important part of Vermont's food infrastructure. Farmers' markets are proliferating. Consumers can buy fresh produce, often organically or sustainably grown, directly from farmers. Local markets yield more money for farmers than they make selling massive amounts to big grocery store chains. The number of farmers' markets in the U.S. mushroomed from 1,755 in 1994 to 5,274 in 2009. The most recent Farm Bill included \$33 million over five years to improve and expand farmers' markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture programs, and agri-tourism activities. It also boosted funding to help food stamp recipients buy fresh produce at farmers' markets; and it includes strong provisions to promote organic food production.

Increasing Food Safety While Protecting Small Producers

Congress is considering legislation to improve the safety of our nation's food supply. Some 76 million Americans – one in four of us – are sickened by food-borne disease each year. As a member of the Senate health committee, Senator Sanders is working to make sure the legislation improves food safety without harming small farmers and processors by burying them in paperwork and choking them with registration fees and administrative burdens that huge corporations can handle but mom-and-pop operations cannot. Senator Sanders is working with organic and

sustainable farming supporters in Vermont and nationally to include provisions in the bill to fund training and outreach to small-scale farmers, producers, and processors so they can improve their operations to make sure they comply with the new law. He wants legislation that treats smaller facilities fairly based on the real-world health risk of their products. We need to do everything we can to make our food system safe while supporting family farmers, producers, and processors who are such an important part of Vermont's economy and character.

School and Community Gardens

Senator Sanders secured \$1 million for an innovative pilot program he created in the 2008 Farm Bill to provide grants for non-profit or public organizations to develop gardens in low-income communities. The gardens – planted, cared for, and harvested by students – would offer lessons on good production practices and diet. Produce from the gardens also may be used to supplement school lunches, donated to a local food bank or senior center, or given to children to take home to their families. This program will also be a great complement to President Obama's new Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food program that promotes sustainable local and regional food systems that will support small and mid-sized farms and ranches, strengthen rural communities, promote healthy eating, and protect our natural resources.

Under a separate Sanders initiative, dozens of public schools across Vermont will offer farm-to-school programs to demonstrate healthy and nutritious living while teaching new generations of students about the importance of locally-grown foods. The senator secured \$120,000 to expand the farm-to-school programs by establishing a state-wide, school-based summer gardening initiative that teaches children and youths how to grow fresh produce using land on or adjacent to school campuses. Friends of Burlington Gardens will administer the statewide pilot program, a model for similar programs in other states.



Bernie samples some of Vermont's finest blueberries at Charlotte Berry Farm.

Buy Local

All across America consumers and farmers are banding together in a growing grass-roots movement to remake our food-production system. Organic and sustainable farmers and their advocates have been at the forefront. They want to move away from the heavily-subsidized corporate agriculture system that relies on harmful pesticides and fertilizers. Instead, they want greater focus on small-scale, family-based agriculture and local food production and consumption. This approach is better for our planet, our health, and our local economies. Buying direct from a farmer ploughs 90 cents of each dollar back into the farm. Increasing farm income, in turn, helps the economy of local communities.

Turning Back Consolidation

Over the last few decades there has been increased consolidation in farming and food processing which has had a negative impact both for family farmers and consumers. The merger of Suiza and Dean Foods created a dairy-processing behemoth that controls more than 70 percent of the New England milk market. The consolidation left Vermont farmers with fewer places to sell their milk, and that lack of competition contributed to the lowest prices for farmers in 40 years. Unfortunately, this disturbing trend also is evident in the pork, beef, poultry, corn, wheat, soybean, cotton, seed, fertilizer and other markets. With large conglomerates like Monsanto, huge swaths of the agriculture industry are dominated by a handful of players charging high prices for the basic materials farmers need.

In response to this growing concentration of ownership in agriculture, Bernie and other senators urged the U.S. Department of Justice Antitrust Division to review anti-competitive practices in the dairy sector and

other commodities. And action is now taking place. The department has launched a full review of the dairy industry and, in a very promising sign, on January 22, 2010, a lawsuit was filed against Dean Foods over the dairy processor's acquisition of Foremost Farms. A day earlier the Justice Department fined two large pork conglomerates (Smithfield and Premium Standard) because of anti-competitive practices they engaged in during a merger. Monsanto and the agricultural seed industry also are being probed. The justice and agriculture departments also scheduled joint workshops this year across the country to hear directly from farmers regarding competition in agricultural sectors, including dairy, poultry, and livestock.

We are beginning to make some progress, but clearly more needs to be done to restructure our food-production system so that the focus is on maintaining and growing the number of family-based farms that provide American consumers with fresh, safe, healthy, and locally-produced food.

Promoting Smart Energy Alternatives

Vermont farms are not only sources of food and economic engines in our state, but they also are helping to unshackle us from our dependence on fossil fuels by relying more on sustainable and renewable energy sources. Senator Sanders has secured \$492,000 in federal funding for the installation of two methane digesters – one on a Vermont farm and another at Vermont Technical College. While helping to heat the campus barn and provide hot water in the complex, the college digester will be a useful hands-on tool to teach farmers how to operate digesters and to test out different techniques. Both projects will demonstrate ways for farmers to save energy and money, and protect the environment at the same time.