

OATES Newsletter

supporting a local sustainable food economy



Volume 1, Issue 1

July 2001

First Issue

Welcome to the first issue of the OATES Newsletter. It is being distributed to organic and sustainable producers in the Sussex and surrounding areas. The purpose of the newsletter is to provide updates on the OATES project and related activities to support sustainable farming, local marketing and access to local healthy food.

Katharine Rayner and
Topsy Jewell

About the OATES Project

OATES (Organic Agriculture Training in East Sussex) is a Common Cause programme promoting and supporting training and access to information in organic agriculture and horticulture. The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation is funding a 15 month project (Sept. 2000 to Dec. 2001) to assess the needs of organic agriculture in the Sussex and surrounding area. The aims are to:

- Increase understanding of how best to promote organic farming and sustainable rural development at a local and regional level.
- Act as a catalyst to set up ways for farmers to exchange information and access information.
- Assess the local and regional investment needs to support

sustainable agriculture.

- Access further funding to support sustainable agriculture.
- Network with the farming community, local authorities and community and environmental projects.

Research visits have been made to the Organic Centre Wales and East Anglia Food Link and visits are planned to Picardie and Brittany in northern France to find out how organisations in these regions are promoting organic farming.

The benefits of regional support for organic farming are clear and Common Cause is working with Plumpton College and other organisations to set up a regional Organic Centre (see page 2).

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New dates for Co-operative Marketing and Compost Training

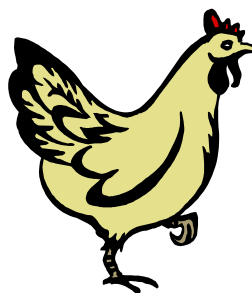
The **Co-operative Marketing Training** day planned in March had to be cancelled due to the foot and mouth outbreak. We are now rescheduling two alternative dates: Tuesday 16th October and Thursday 8th November, 9.30 am to 4.30 pm. The venue is still to be arranged. If you would like to register for this free training please send in the enclosed registration form or contact Common Cause for more information.

The training is a one-day seminar and workshop examining the practicalities and operation of co-operative production, distribution and marketing systems. The principal aim of the day is to provide ideas and information to assist the development of co-operation between organic, converting, sustainable farmers. The day is principally aimed at farmers and processors but will be relevant to retailers and consumers interested in developing closer links with organic food producers.

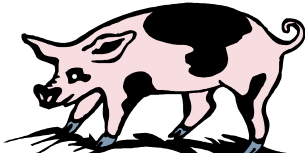
The training will be given by Clive Peckham of East Anglia Food Links. Clive has had wide practical experience of working with direct and co-operative production and marketing systems in the UK, Eire, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Compost Training

Compost has many benefits including slowly releasing nutrients, increasing organic matter, and suppressing plant diseases with beneficial bacteria and fungi. Charlie Trousdell of TJ Composting Services Ltd. promotes and manages compost schemes to farmers across the country. He will be delivering a training on farm scale composting for the OATES project. The date for this free training will be in early October (still to be confirmed), 7- 9 pm. Please send in the registration form if you would like more information.



OATES is a project of
Common Cause
Co-operative



Open Meetings on Organic Farming

Common Cause ran two Open meetings on Organic Farming at the end of January this year at Plumpton College.

The meetings were held as part of the OATES project and their aim was to give farmers in the region an opportunity to find out more about conversion and management of organic farming. It was also an opportunity for us to find out what sort of local support farmers would like when converting to organic and the ongoing advice and training support needed locally.

Guest speakers attended from the Soil Association, the local organic farming community and a composting company. They gave short presentations and answered questions. There was also a facilitated discussion to explore issues in more detail in smaller groups.

Thirty Six farmers attended the two meetings. Key issues raised included the need for marketing support, including co-operative marketing, a widespread interest in more training sessions, interest in setting up farmer groups and local farm visits, and increased access to low cost, local advice and information. Areas where farmers felt more advice is needed include:

- Information on local farms including existing organic farmers and those converting.

- Marketing ideas to help with conversion.

- Form completion for conversion/ application of funding.

- Suitability of farm for conversion.

Data Base of Local Organic Producers

Farmers attending the Open Meetings on Organic Farming agreed that they wanted the opportunity to exchange information and experiences with other farmers growing organically or who are in the process of conversion. The problem is knowing who these "other" farmers are.

We are proposing to set up a data base of farmers in the area with informa-

tion about experiences with crops and livestock, conservation schemes, composting schemes, etc. The aim of the data base will be to help initiate farmer networks and groups. No information about farms that is not already publicly available will be given out without the owners permission.

We look forward to your help with this.

- Specific advice relating to farm type and situation

- Problem avoidance, ie. weed control, worm and disease control.

- Information on support services for organic farmers, abattoirs, vets, seed source, markets.

- Long term crop rotations.

- Financial advice.

The OATES project identified a number of ways that it could develop in the short term to support farmers in the area including organising local/regional farm visits, providing information on support services, running co-operative marketing and other training sessions, setting up a local farm network, setting up a web site, and supporting existing campaigns to save local abattoirs.

In the longer term the OATES project is working with Plumpton College and other organisations in the area to develop an Organic Training and Information Centre for the south east region. The planned site is at Plumpton's Out Centre near Battle in East Sussex. The Centre would support farmer groups and networks, manage a web site, support provision of specific on farm advice for conversion and on-going organic production, set up consumer, retailer and producer links, maintain information provision on support services and market outlets, develop new local market avenues, and run courses on specific farm skills.

Sow the Seeds local organic catering

The refreshments at the Open Meetings (see above) were provided by **Sow the Seeds**. The menu was entirely organic and grown or reared locally at Boathouse Farm, Isfield, East Sussex. It included meat dishes as well as vegetarian and vegan delicacies!

For more information tel. *Sow the Seeds* on: 01273 814188

Local Vets Survey

We have surveyed vets in East and West Sussex to find out which surgeries treat livestock on organic farms and which vets offer a homeopathic service. More details to follow.



Organic School Meals

In northern Italy, a local authority has recently passed the first law in Europe that requires the public catering sector to use organic and local produce. £1m has been allocated to subsidise schemes in the region. The aims of the law are to promote local food, health of children, and the local economy. Schools in northern Italy have been serving organic and local school meals for the past ten years led by parental pressure to improve the quality of school food. In southern France, the *Manger Bio* (Eat Organic) Project currently serves 300,000 organic school meals daily largely supplied by about 20 small-scale, local organic producers.

Topsy Jewell from Common Cause attended the *Good Food for All: local and organic food in public sector catering* Conference in Reading on May 23rd. The Conference was organised by East Anglia Food Link with Somerset Food Link and West Dorset Food and Land Trust. Speakers from Italy, France and the UK discussed how the public school meals service can be a route to improving health, supporting organic farmers and promoting the rural economy.

Somerset Food Link has recently completed a feasibility study to identify the opportunities and obstacles to linking local producers and school meals. The biggest obstacle in all the EU countries is the competitive tendering law that prevents public caterers from specifying the country of origin of food supplies (i.e. they can't specify 'local produce'). In Italy and France the local authorities have got around this by specifying "organic" and produce that is "typical" to a region.

In Somerset they found the key issues are the lack of a supply structure, the need to mobilise parental support and pressure and the need for policy support from the local authority.

Their next step is to set up a working group with all the key players, to establish a distribution company and look at what is needed to change the tendering policy. The Local Government Act's "power of well being" and "best value" could be used by local authorities, for example, to support sourcing from local producers to provide best value and well being for the whole community.

Common Cause has been following developments in organic school meal provision for a number of years. We are members of the School Food Action Group, a group set up by the Community Action for Food and the Environment, CAFE, Project (supported by the Health Authority and Countryside Agency) and chair a working group on school meals and local producers. We have recently co-ordinated a research project looking at healthy eating initiatives in schools in the UK and in particular in East Sussex and Brighton and Hove (see box below).

We are currently developing a 3 year project to assess the feasibility of linking school meals with local and organic growers and to pilot some schemes in East Sussex. The project is part of a partnership Healthy Living Centre bid led by East Sussex County Council.

Are you interested in supplying school meals?

Our research has identified schools in the area who are self managing their catering and are interested in sourcing local food. We would like to help these schools by providing a list of producers interested in supplying school meals. Producers can be either organic or growing in a sustainable way. If you are interested, please fill out the questionnaire and return it to us. Thanks.

International Co-operative Trading

There is a relatively large production base of organic growers who don't want to sell to supermarkets and who mainly sell direct (through box schemes, farmers markets, small shops etc). Increasingly, these producers are suffering from competition from supermarkets and are not expanding their sales or are even losing sales (in spite of an annual 40% increase in consumption of organic produce in the UK).

One way that these producers can improve their competitiveness is to increase their product range by importing quality out of season fruit and vegetables. There are also enormous gaps in publicity, advertising and training support. Regional food link projects including East Anglia Food Link (EAFL), Dorset Food and Land Trust, Devon Food link, Somerset Food Link, Common Cause Co-operative, and the Soil Association are interested in working together to support local producers in their regions through direct trade

links between regions and with producer co-operatives in Italy, Spain and France.

Producers in East Anglia have already visited growers in northern Italy. They were very impressed with the quality of the produce and want to set up direct trade links. EAFL is planning to pilot the transport of mixed pallets of produce from Italy to East Anglia this Autumn to evaluate costs, feasibility, etc. In the longer term, there is a proposal to establish a distribution co-operative which would administer trade between producers both regionally and internationally and provide publicity, advertising, and training support for local producers in the UK.

We are looking at European funding to help establish and support this scheme. If you are interested in making international or regional trading links, contact Common Cause.



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About Common Cause

Common Cause Co-operative was established in 1991 in Lewes, East Sussex. It is a not-for-profit co-operative company limited by guarantee. Common Cause supports activities that have long term social, economic and environmental benefits. One of our objectives is to support sustainable food production and consumption.

Recent activities have included setting up and running the Lewes Farmers' Market (since 1998) and the OATES (Organic Agriculture Training in East Sussex) programme. Phase I of this programme, in 2000, was a partnership project

with East Sussex County Council and Plumpton College running a course in organic horticulture for unemployed people. The project was funded by the European Social Fund and SEEDA. A second phase of the OATES project which runs until December this year is researching the needs of organic agriculture in the Sussex area (see page one for more details).

Common Cause is also working with the School Food Action Group developing a project to explore the feasibility of linking local producers with school meal provision (see article on page 3).

GMO Trials Update

Farmer Jeremy Courtney of Crouch's Farm, East Hoathly, East Sussex, has pulled out of the first GM crop trial site proposed for Sussex as a result of local opposition. The crop was GM spring oil seed rape tolerant to glufosinate. At least one organic farm was within 4 miles of the trial site and in danger of losing its organic status if GM contamination had occurred. The Soil Association requires that organic farms within a 6 mile radius of a GM site must undergo a risk assessment for contamination.

Farm scale trials for GM fodder maize, spring and winter oilseed rape and sugar

and fodder beet began in 2000 and will run until 2003. In 2000 there were 71 sites involved and 8 farmers withdrew because of local opposition. More sites are proposed for 2001 because of the difficulties encountered in 2000.

Useful Contacts:

Sussex GenetiX Action for local information Tel: 01273 628441
Soil Association for a "GM Information and Action Pack" and advice for farmers.
Genewatch for information on GM crops and trials 01298 871898, email: mail@genewatch.org

Bicycle Power

For this year's Food Fair, Common Cause commissioned the construction of a bicycle powered blender to make delicious milk shakes. By peddling a series of bicycle wheels, children could wizz-up fresh strawberries, milk and ice cream. The "blender-bike" also turned a "parasol" with cows that slowly rotated above the bike and a wheel made farm yard noises.

The bike was part of a number of activities for children organised by the CAFE Project to raise awareness about the

benefits of eating fruit and vegetables.

The blender-bike will now be available for use as a fun way to promote eating fresh fruit at Farmers' Markets, children's events and local produce promotions.

The Food Fair is an annual event organised by East Sussex County Council to celebrate local produce and raise awareness about the economic, environmental, health and social benefits of choosing local food and drink.

Funding Support

Common Cause has received grant funding for its projects from:

- Community Action for Food and the Environment (CAFE)
- East Sussex Brighton and Hove Health Authority
- East Sussex Brighton and Hove Healthy School Scheme
- Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
- European Social Fund
- DETR Local Project Fund
- East Sussex County Council
- Lewes District Council
- South East England Development Agency (SEEDA)
- Sussex Rural Community Council
- Sussex Enterprise
- local private businesses

The bike was built by Daniel Holloway and funded by Community Action for Food and Environment (CAFE). Bicycle parts were donated by "Dr. Bike" in Lewes. Strawberries were donated by Wapsbourne Manor Farm at Sheffield Park and milk by Bevendean Dairies near Brighton. Ice-cream was purchased from Willetts Farm, Tunbridge Wells.