

Recent Initiatives by USDA to Strengthen Research and Education Programs on Sustainable Agriculture

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I would like to welcome those attending the Third International Conference on Kyusei Nature Farming. I had fully intended to be with you in person today. I regret that a last-minute congressional responsibility prevents me from being in Santa Barbara.

We are engaged in a reorganization of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As a part of that, we will organize our USDA efforts around six main missions. Our objective is to focus our resources on those missions to make things happen. One of those missions is to emphasize our Nation's conservation programs and our care of natural resources. Another is to ensure food quality and safety up and down the line from farm to table. Another is to strengthen our USDA research program, including our research on sustainable agriculture.

One result of this reorganization is that environmental issues will have a higher priority in USDA agencies and across the Department. We are establishing a special office of environmental policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and the Environment.

We will use that special office to be proactive on environmental and pesticide issues. It will be a focal point in USDA for such things as Integrated Pest Management and Sustainable Agriculture.

Just two weeks ago, I testified at a Joint House-Senate Committee hearing on new Administration policies concerning pesticides. I testified jointly on positions agreed to with the heads of the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. The policy calls for the Department of Agriculture to assume an expanded leadership role to help American agriculture move into an era of profitable agriculture with less reliance on chemical pesticide use.

Our goal is to help protect the health and safety of the food supply, with full concern for the diets of infants and children. We are also committed to help protect the health and safety of farm families and workers who are using chemicals, who are eating the same farm-produced foods as other consumers, and who are using local drinking water largely from wells on the farm.

We intend to work closely with farmers to help make farming methods environmentally sound, economically viable, and safer for farmers and the public.

The heart of the Administration's pesticide proposal is to establish a single, strong, health-based standard that will apply to all pesticide residues in food. This would replace the Delaney standard, which applied only to carcinogens in processed food. The single standard is one that provides a reasonable certainty of no harm to consumers of food. The reasonable certainty standard will be based on the best available science. Meantime,

USDA will be actively doing its part. We will step up the development of alternative pest management tools, strengthen our food consumption surveys to more accurately assess the diets of infants and children, broaden our pesticide surveys to have better information on pesticide use, strengthen our research on sustainable practices, emphasize the development of biological pest control methods, expand the program to collect data supporting minor crop registrations, establish on-farm research and demonstration projects in areas of high pesticide use, and work toward a goal of having 75 percent of the Nation's acreage in a biologically-based Integrated Pest Management Program by the end of the decade.

Many of you here today are interested in what the U.S. Department of Agriculture is doing to implement the Organic Foods Production Act. The National Organic Standards Board is now developing draft recommendations for the Secretary of Agriculture on the operation of the Organic Program. We are also developing regulatory language, plans for accrediting State and private certifying agents, and plans for hearings on livestock products.

In carrying out the Organic Program, USDA will be working closely with the Food and Drug Administration, which is in charge of most food labelling. We will also be dealing with the Bureau

of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, which labels wines and alcohol.

Our goal is to establish a reasonable Organic Program in close cooperation with growers and others in the organic industry. This program is administered by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, which operates on a fee basis - thus the legislation requires that AMS collect fees from certifiers for accreditation. We want to develop a program that will result in a fee schedule that will not be an undue burden on the organic industry. The industry is small and growing and we want to encourage that growth.

The organic community has operated with a great deal of trust in the past. We should all work together to preserve that, knowing that from a practical standpoint if the trust is violated it will invite - if not require - more rigorous enforcement provisions.

Our hope is to work with the industry to maintain the integrity and credibility of organic products in a way that will give proper meaning to the term "organic" with the consuming public.

Along with that, we will cooperate to see that the U.S. organic food production industry is fairly and accurately represented to overseas customers. We trust that the organic certification program will offer U.S. organically-grown products a market identity in overseas countries.

I would also expect that as other countries establish organic labeling requirements, we will be able to work with them on international standards and accreditation that will ensure free movement of organic products in trade. As equivalency is achieved among countries, we can expand our understanding and trust-and diminish the paper work required for the international marketing of organic products.

I wish you success in your conference and in your organic agricultural activities.