

Why Do I Farm?

By Elizabeth Gabriel

Farming is so damn hard.

I've just walked inside after inspecting the fruitlets on our apple trees and very few, if any, are viable.

I'll back up for a minute. In 2013, a year after moving into a yurt on the land we are honored to inhabit - unceded land of the Gayogohó:nq̓ people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy - we planted a home-scale orchard of peaches, apples and cherry trees. Expanding it in 2018 adding more apple and peach varieties, apricots, plums and Asian pears, our 21-tree orchard has provided incredibly prolific harvests of peaches and Asian pears - enough to eat, preserve and give to family and friends - and enough apples to eat. We let the birds enjoy the fruit from the single remaining (and struggling) sweet cherry tree (3 others died over the years, seemingly unhappy in our rocky and clayey Appleton silt loam).

I've always taken care to prune and mulch the trees, with our farm-made compost and woodchips or sawdust, and planted a plethora of beneficial pollinating plants in and near the orchard, but did little to manage the orchard otherwise. Yet, after getting hit in 2021 with brown rot resulting in a complete loss of our peach crop, I finally took it upon myself to manage our orchard. I've been learning to observe for pests and diseases and developed an organic spray program with Melissa, my friend and orchardist who runs Open Space Cider. In 2022, Melissa helped me manage for tree health and for survival from the major spongy moth outbreak. But this year - this was to be the year to manage for fruit! This would be the first year of apricot and plum harvest (near perfect timing now that our 3-year-old is mostly on a fruit-only diet and our 10-month-old is eating solid food), plus we were looking forward to an abundant apple, pear and peach harvest.

And yet, despite being organized and monitoring the trees, despite learning to identify insect larvae stages, and despite having sprayed the right spray at the right time balancing the bud and flower stages of the trees - even if it meant spraying with a headlamp after the kids were sleeping - there won't be any peaches, apricots or plums this year. They never even flowered because of April temperatures near 80 degrees and really cold early-May temperatures. And now, the decaying apple fruitlets I'm seeing as I cut a dozen in half show me the 26 degrees we had on May 18th hit them really hard.



Wilted apple flowers hit from frost. Image provided by author.

This record-breaking late May cold snap followed a record-breaking warm spell in mid-April - a combination that destroys most fruit crops.

The loss of fruit is so disappointing. We have grown to depend on our orchard to eat fresh fruit and store plenty for the year. It's also nutritious and saves us a fair amount of money on groceries. Though, fortunately for us, our farm business's viability doesn't depend on our orchard. For others, this type of climate-weirding weather is devastating to the business.



Apple fruitlets damaged by frost with questionable (top) and no (bottom) viability. Image provided by author.

In many areas of the Northeast, the late May frost caused more than a 50% loss of the grape crop and even upwards of 90% on some varieties of Chardonnay. In Connecticut, vineyards were hit so hard, that Gov. Ned Lamont submitted a request to USDA Secretary Vilsack seeking a federal agriculture disaster declaration for the entire state. Locally, here in the Finger Lakes, I've heard several accounts of farmers losing most of their early crops of lettuce and salad mixes - high-end crops relied on for early-season revenue.

Farming is so frustrating. *No matter how much effort and care we give, we often have no control over the outcome.*

As the record-breaking temperatures of mid-April subsided, a solid week of cold temperatures and near-steady rain rolled into the Finger Lakes. And with the rains, our lambing season started.

At dusk, I noticed a mama ewe with some seemingly normal discharge. She was still grazing and all was well. When I checked her again a couple of hours later, post-dinner and children's bedtime, expecting to find her nursing 2 or 3 healthy lambs, it was clear that the discharge was a tail. The lamb was breech. We've been raising sheep since 2014. While most of our Katahdin's lamb independently, we've had our fair share of births needing assistance, but have never had a breech baby.

Now it was dark and pouring rain. (Of course, it was.) I called our vet and when she explained the maneuver required to turn and pull the baby so baby (likely, babies) and mama would have a chance of surviving, I asked her to come. I know my limits when it comes to my hands inside a live animal and this sounded beyond those limits. (It was the right choice because the vet could also give the mama an epidural, which made this procedure far more humane).

Less than an hour later, all of us soaking wet, our vet pulled out the breech baby - a beautiful grey lamb

- dead, followed by two more - one white and one grey - both dead. The wetness of the dark night was heavy with sadness. And regret. What could I have done differently? Why didn't I realize it was a tail and not normal discharge? I should have checked on her labor progress sooner, but I was alone with the kids that evening so what would I have done anyway? Maybe I could have called the vet earlier had I known or had a neighbor watch the kids. Could have, would have, should have - the babies are dead. It felt like my fault.

The next day, the rains continued. And so did the births. While we have several moveable shelters, we have limited indoor facilities, so we lamb later in the spring when they can usually be born on pasture without trouble. Wet, cold new babies quickly lead to dead babies. We brought shelters to the pasture and put a new mama of triplets, all nursing and doing well, in their own shelter so they could get and remain dry. We led the other mama and her twins to our temporary nursery in a high tunnel.

At first light, relieved to see that the rain had stopped, I went to check the sheep. The rains were so heavy the night before that the saturated fields pooled water in all of the ruts in the ground, even under the shelter. Two of the triplets were nearly dead, stuck in one of the small wet ruts inside the shelter. Mama was baaing, communicating to her babies to get up and eat. I quickly picked up the three babies and walked, as mama followed, to the high-tunnel nursery. Inside I laid the lambs under a heat lamp and tube-fed them. They died later that day.

As the lambing season continued, another second-time mom gave birth to a lame lamb who couldn't pick up his head or stand. I've read about this but never seen it. After three days of treating him for various possible illnesses/diseases and tube feeding him, it was less cruel to slaughter him - a perspective I hate having to have. Another third-time mom had a seemingly quick and normal birth but her baby was stillborn. Another seasoned mom gave birth to two strong babies but the third needed to be pulled because her labor wasn't progressing. And lastly, a lamb from a set of strong triplets all nursing and enjoying time in the high tunnel nursery, was dead one morning - with no explainable cause.

All in all, we had seven lambs die under our watch. At least a few of these were avoidable.

Farming (not unlike being a parent) requires radical acceptance and reflection. *Is the season pushing our limits? Are we too distracted raising kids to raise sheep properly? What needed to be done differently?*

The comforting routines of the season eventually were underway. We were training new, curious employees. Lambs frolicking on green pasture reminded me of the joys of this work. Yet, just as the repetition of moving sheep fences every two days felt grounding, the dusty air of drought started to coat the landscape.

What was May's usual overabundance of grass is now mediocre forage. Fields are dry and cracking; even perennial plants are wilting. It's not even June but it's been nearly 30 days since our last rain, with temperatures in the mid-80s, and the 10-day forecast offers little promise. We struggle to find the time to water the several hundred trees and berries we planted earlier in the spring. Forest fires are sparking nationwide and the air quality impact of their smoke is being felt worldwide. Farmers across the

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Cover Photo Credit: *Leonardo Gomex cuts green lettuce in a field in the Coachella Valley, a 2-hour drive north of the border with Mexico, 2017, by David Bacon.*
Throughout this issue, please enjoy images from David Bacon's new book, *More than a Wall*, reviewed on B-20.



The Natural Farmer covers news of the organic movement nationally and internationally and features stories about farmers, homesteaders and gardeners, especially those from the 7 NOFA member states, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, and Vermont. TNF is provided to direct subscribers and as a perk to NOFA members and is mailed quarterly to over 6,000 homes.

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A Note from the Editor

After a first look at the hazy skies before heading out on the farm today, I excitedly thought some rain might disrupt this drought. It turns out the sky has an orange haze from the wildfires in Canada (wildfires around the globe are increasing because of climate change) which are causing air quality issues across half of the United States with the most unhealthy areas being here in the Northeast. Not long after I started animal chores, my throat started to itch and a cough developed. I chose to tend to the animals, do the bare minimum farmwork outdoors and spend the rest of the day doing administrative work on the computer. On the cusp of this issue going to print, I am more than ever keenly aware of the privilege of this choice - as a farm owner and a part-time farmer. Fortunately, here on our small diversified farm with just two part-time employees in addition to my partner and myself, nobody had to work today, but this is not the typical farm and farmworker situation in the U.S.

Across the country, farmworkers provide the labor, skill, and care that make most farms possible - from small diversified organic vegetable farms to large-scale animal confinement operations. Agriculture is a labor-intensive industry; farm owners depend on a workforce for the success of their businesses - not to mention the health of animals, plants, soil, and more. Farm owners perennially struggle to find and keep employees from season to season, while farmworkers struggle to find work that is safe, humane, and pays a fair wage - and it's even harder for those seeking a long-term career in the industry.

These owner/worker challenges are complex and have deep roots. As was published recently in a toolkit for farmers called Farming into the Future by Centering Farmworkers, these challenges are "deeply intertwined with the history of agriculture and the value of labor in this country. Our agricultural legacy is one of dispossession and enslavement, of white heteronormative land ownership, and of what many recognize as 'a stunning erasure' that obscures the contributions of farmworkers. Over centuries, agriculture has profited [and continues to profit] immensely from the exploitation and oppression of

farmworkers, and one of the most impactful means of achieving this has been through federal legislation."

With more than 80% of hired U.S. farmworkers being migrants, the "exploitation and oppression of farmworkers" is inextricably linked to the continued horrific treatment of immigrants - particularly Black and Brown immigrants - in this country. We're seeing this right now in how the "migrant crisis" is being handled as border policy Title 42 expires and more than 65,000 asylum-seekers arrive in New York City. Because of federal policy (not to mention fight for political power and general squabbles) it is illegal for these people to work and numerous (Republican) counties throughout the state are declaring a State of Emergency, basically making it illegal for residents in these counties to help these asylum-seekers with housing, shelter, jobs or other basic provisions.

There was hope for improvements in the working conditions as farmworker exploitation gained media attention at the height of the pandemic when supply chains collapsed, grocery stores were empty and the general public realized migrant labor is the backbone of our economy and the food we eat. While farmworkers gained the stature as "essential" workers, this classification didn't come with the protection of their health, safety, dignity, fair pay, and dozens of other humane provisions that it should have.

It seems like it should be simple and come down to basic human rights - there is potential value and goodness in every human being and we each should be treated as such. Yet capitalism is more potent than human rights. (Despite air quality hazards, essential farmworkers don't get to choose to take an administrative day.)

We can do better. No matter what we produce, the size of our farm, if we hire migrant workers through the H2A program, a small crew of American-born beginning farmers, or oversee an apprenticeship program - we must do better. I hope you'll keep reading through this issue to learn more about the history of agricultural working programs and present day

experience of farmworkers - anybody who farms on somebody's else's land - in this country. Our NOFA vision of "interconnected healthy communities living in ecological balance" can't happen without care for the people - that especially means for the farmers and farmworkers who grow the food.

Consider submitting articles and stories about your farm or a farmer you know. And reach out anytime with comments, ideas or criticisms, TNF@Nofa.org.

Elizabeth Gabriel
TNF Editor, Trumansburg, NY

Further learning:

Read personal stories from people farming on somebody else's land: Not Our Farm blog and Toolkit, notourfarm.org

Challenge yourself to do more: Get Agricultural Justice Project certified

Learn what farmworkers really value, Farming into the Future by Centering Farmworkers toolkit, notourfarm.org/resources/

Watch "Farmworkers: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver"

Read examples of resistance: Milk With Dignity campaign and Coalition of Immokalee Workers to name only two



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Chapter News

CONNECTICUT NOFA

News

CT NOFA is proud to announce its participation in TOPP, the Transition to Organic Partnership Program. CT NOFA joins regional partners here in the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast region to help develop a unified, programmatic system to help farmers transition to organic growing methods. The program will be developed over the course of the next several years, but CT NOFA expects to commence the Mentorship portion of it during the 4th quarter of 2023. This will involve connecting paid mentors (experienced organic farmers) to mentees (farmers seeking to transition to organic) for one year to assist with the transition process. Additionally, CT NOFA staff will assist with helping mentee farmers navigate the organic certification process.

Policy

Under the direction of CT NOFA Director of Advocacy, Dr. Kimberly Stoner, CT NOFA and partners have introduced HJ 37, a Green Amendment to the state constitution that would equitably protect the rights to clean air, water, and soil, a stable climate, and a healthy environment regardless of race, ethnicity, tribal membership, gender, socioeconomic, or geography.

Thank you!

After many years as a member of CT NOFA's board of directors, John Pittari Jr. is stepping down from service. Pittari is the founder and owner of New Morning Market in Woodbury, CT, a natural and organic food store that has been serving Connecticut residents since 1971. He is also the 2022 winner of the Bill Duesing Organic Living on the Earth Award, presented annually by CT NOFA.

Openings:

CT NOFA is also happy to announce that it is seeking new leaders from our community to join our board and help steward the organization into the future. CT NOFA has always been driven by the community it serves. Our board members come from all walks of life – farmers, entrepreneurs, academics, activists, and more – and we look forward to continuing to build a leadership team that is both ethnically and professionally diverse. What we all share is a desire to see organic agriculture and landscaping flourish in Connecticut within a fair and equitable food system for all. Please direct inquiries to board@ctnofa.org.

Contact Information

CT NOFA: ctnofa.org, (203) 408-6819, ctnofa@ctnofa.org

NOFA MASSACHUSETTS

News

NOFA/Mass is in the home stretch as we finalize details for the 49th Annual NOFA Summer Conference. This year's conference will take place July 24th-29th, with a mix of online and in-person at Worcester State University, the long-time home of our Winter Conference. We're also in the midst of some major organizational growth, as we launch the first active year of the Farm Share program across Massachusetts, and hire several new staff members for that program, as well as regional collaborations around climate-smart practices and transitioning to organic. It's a year of major growth at NOFA/Mass! Policy

The Massachusetts State legislature is considering several bills which would move our Commonwealth away from reliance on toxic biocides like glyphosate and toward life-honoring solutions for landcare and agriculture. Awareness and support among legislators has grown significantly and new science continues to emerge which validates our movement. We are urging legislators to support these high-priority pesticide reform bills: Create a Pesticide Reform Task Force (S.521/H.783): A bill to create a "pesticide control modernization and environmental protection task force"; Return local control over pesti-

cides (S.540/H.814): This bill would return power to communities to protect their families from harmful pesticide exposure; Modernize Pesticide Reporting AND protect children from pesticide exposure (S.487/H.825): This combined bill would create an online portal and database for pesticide use reporting records with clear, online public access to the annual data.

Welcome

NOFA/Mass has welcomed several new staff members to support our growing programming this year. Renee Scott, Pollinator Network Coordinator, co-founded Green & Open Somerville in 2014, where she has advocated stopping the installation of artificial turf; led depavings, invasive weed pulls, and the planting of native pollinator gardens; and worked on strengthening and creating stronger environmental standards. Amanda Iglesias, Food Access Coordinator for Eastern and Central Mass, works alongside partners to develop urban gardens or farm share access to fresh, organic produce and support programs. Valencia Andrews, Food Access Coordinator for Western Mass, works closely with NOFA's Agricultural Youth Scientists, teaching them about urban farming, sustainable agriculture and community engagement.

Upcoming Events:

Bi-monthly Soil Health Call, August 7, 2023, 7:00-8:00pm, Online: Chat with fellow farmers and farm advisors about tillage reduction and soil health in an open, roundtable environment.

NEW! Bi-Monthly Go Nuts Call, July 11, 2023, 7:00-8:00pm, Online: During this call, we will discuss all things related to agroforestry, from planting and tree establishment to infrastructure and consumer access.

Walking Through the Season with Dan Kittredge, June 25th, August 27th, October 8th, 9:00am-5:00pm, North Brookfield, MA: Join us at the farm of Bionutrient Food Association founder, Dan Kittredge, for

a series of 4 full-day workshops to walk through the practices he uses to maintain a thriving ecological system each season.

Contact Information

NOFA MASS: nofamass.org, (413) 561-0852, info@nofamass.org

NOFA NEW HAMPSHIRE

News

2023 was a record-breaking year for NOFA-NH's Annual Spring Bulk Order, a collective buying program for organic farming and gardening supplies that invites small-scale gardeners and large-scale farmers alike to participate. With the help of our committed volunteers, we sorted and loaded nearly 3,000 individual items weighing over 51 tons. As always, we are deeply grateful to our generous site hosts who donate space, time, and forklift services to this annual program - the Bellettes in Andover, NH, Country 3 Corners in Weare, NH, and Spaulding Industrial Complex in Rochester, NH (owner of the Stove Barn in Concord, NH). This program is possible only through the collaborative efforts of our vibrant community. Well done and see you next year!

In March NOFA-NH's Operations Director, Nikki Kolb, attended a Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) Core Partner Meeting in Pennsylvania to discuss strengths, establish goals, and dive deeper into the planning and implementation of this important project. NOFA-NH is still seeking farmers in all areas of production to join the Transition to Organic Partnership Program as mentors and mentees! Mentors will be paid an annual stipend. Mentees will work with experienced organic mentors, and receive access to technical assistance, and other educational and networking opportunities. If you are interested in becoming a mentor or mentee,

(continued on next page)



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Chapter News

(Chapter News - from A-4)

please reach out to info@nofanh.org.

NOFA-NH is delighted to share that our “Feeding the Family” Organic Gardening Series was attended by 150 community members over 5 weeks this spring. The series, which ran weekly from March 30th - April 29th, included topics such as the science and art of tomato culture, protecting edible crops from deer damage, understanding the forest and garden impacts of invasive jumping worms, integrating nitrogen-fixing plants into diverse settings, and truly no-till beds with sheet mulching. Thank you to our knowledgeable instructors and generous sponsor, Merrimack County Savings Bank, for making this fantastic program possible!

NOFA-NH's staff once again participated in Food Solution New England's 21-Day Racial Equity Building Challenge from April 3rd - April 23rd. We deeply appreciated this opportunity to learn, expand our understanding, and reflect on the ways that we can work towards a just, equitable, and sustainable NH food system for all.

Policy

On April 18th, NOFA-NH's Board President Julie Davenson, Policy Committee Member Jim Riddle, and other invited community stakeholders met with Congresswoman Annie Kuster at a Farm Bill Listening Session hosted by UNH Cooperative Extension in Concord, NH. Julie and Jim spoke on NOFA's Farm Bill policy priorities and advocated for a 2023 Farm Bill that supports the small, family farmers that define agriculture in New Hampshire.

Welcome

Please join us in welcoming Ken Koerber to NOFA-NH's Board of Directors! Ken got his start in farming in the early 1950's working the family garden. The garden was less than 1000 square feet and located on the edge of an abandoned farm that abutted the postage-sized lot in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. It was his job to fork in the annual load of cow manure! Fast forward; after graduating from college (yes, he even kept a small garden in Cambridge, MA during a summer semester) and marrying his wife, he started his career as an engineer working with NASA and military systems. It was at this time that “Silent Spring” alerted people to the pervasive residues of pesticides on their produce. Ken and his wife decided to purchase a farm so they could grow their own food. That decision led to the acquisition of a 150-acre farm in Dunbarton, NH, where he currently runs a cut-flower operation utilizing several hoop houses as well as an open garden. Ken has always been passionate about sharing knowledge and encouraging people to grow something to stay in contact with the natural world. When he retired he took the Master Gardener training which led to taking the lead on the development of the teaching garden at the NH Audubon Massabesic Center and the rejuvenation of the Herb Garden at Shaker Village. His farm has hosted WWOOFers for many years and is a destination for apartment dwellers seeking a day in the garden. In his spare time, he hopes to complete a post & beam blacksmith shop to finally have his own forge!

Thank you!

After six years as Board Treasurer, Steve Forde's term on NOFA-NH's Board of Directors has come to an end. Steve kindly, thoughtfully, and passionately stewarded NOFA-NH in his time as a Board Member, helping to expand our staff, budget, and programming. Going above and beyond in each of his roles, Steve served as the finance committee chair, as a member of our quality assurance committee, winter conference committee, and executive committee. He managed, counseled, and interviewed staff members, drafted and monitored our annual budget, moderated panel discussions, hosted a virtual CRAFT farm tour, co-led our Farm Share Program in its inaugural year, piloted an operating reserve fund, created numerous financial policies, put in countless hours of heavy lifting in preparation for some of our largest events of the year, and so much more. Thank

you for your invaluable service to our organization and community as a member of NOFA-NH's Board of Directors! Learn more about Steve and his wife Dawn's passion for certified organic agriculture at hopnhenfarm.com.

Openings:

NOFA-NH is always seeking passionate farmers, gardeners, eaters, educators, and activists to join our dynamic volunteer Board of Directors and our numerous committees! Please contact us to learn more at info@nofanh.org.

Upcoming Events:

NOFA-NH's The CRAFT of Farming:
- Intensive Rotational Grazing and Grassland Management, August 3, 2023, Callie's Creamery, Peterborough, NH
- Strategies for Growing Potatoes on Small and Medium Sized Farms, August 24, 2023, Mink Meadow Farm, Etna, NH
The CRAFT of Farming: Visit www.nofanh.org/craft for more information and updates.

Contact Information

NOFA-NH: www.nofanh.org, 603-224-5022, info@nofanh.org

NOFA NEW JERSEY

News

NOFA NJ's Farmer Wellness Fund is taking shape. 5 participating farmers have received free Mental Health First Aid Certification training to establish our peer support network, and plans are being made for a Farmers Wellness Day event in the Fall of 2023. Meanwhile, staff and board members are busy with our annual farm tours, workshops, farm dinners, special events, and, of course, several exciting grant projects!

Policy

NOFA NJ has facilitated the application process for the newly-created NJ Organic Farming Board, housed within the NJ Department of Agriculture. We are actively engaging with NJDA to advise their Organic, Sustainable, & Regenerative Agriculture (OSRA) offerings, and constantly staying engaged with federal and state representatives on issues including the 2023 Farm Bill, the NJ State Budget, and more.

Welcome

NOFA NJ welcomes Jenna Karahalios to the team! Jenna and her partner Jon operate Two Barn Farm in Pittstown, NJ, growing mixed vegetables and specialty crops. Jenna is taking on the role of Membership & Programming Coordinator, and her work will ensure NOFA NJ is staying connected to our membership and delivering high-quality programming (including our JourneyPerson Mentorship Program).

Openings:

NOFA NJ is seeking additions to our Board of Directors, preferably in Northern or Southern NJ, as we seek to expand our reach and presence throughout all of the Garden State.
Upcoming Events:

Wild Ridge Plants Farm Tour, 7/15, 10AM, Wild Ridge Native Plant Nursery (Pohatcong Township, NJ), Join Jared Rosenbaum of Wild Ridge Plants for an inside look into the native plant nursery and restored native landscapes on their farm

FesTomato, 8/12, 12PM, Ironbound Farm (Asbury, NJ), Join NOFA NJ at Ironbound Farm for a day of tomato-loving fun: tomato tastings, farm tours, live music, local food and cider, and a community vendor marketplace, fun for the whole family!

Tony & The Trees, 7/28, 6-9PM, Ironbound Farm (Asbury, NJ), Come enjoy local libations and the sound of NOFA NJ's own Tony Kennette and his band, Tony & The Trees!

Contact Information

NOFA New Jersey: nofanj.org, 9083711111, nofainfo@nofanj.org

NOFA NEW YORK

News

NOFA-NY is proud to announce that we are one of the nine core partners in the Mid-Atlantic/Northeast Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). This program provides technical assistance and wrap-around support for transitioning and existing organic farmers. We already have educators and mentors in the Central New York, Hudson Valley, and Long Island regions of the state who provide farmer-to-farmer mentorship, technical assistance throughout the application process, educational workshops, and additional resources. We are now accepting applications for all of our Organic Transition Programs. Farmers who are seeking guidance in evaluating their production practices or assistance with their certification application are encouraged to apply at nofany.org/transition-programs.

Policy

During NY's extended budget process, NOFA-NY joined allies across the state calling for increased investment in soil health programming, climate action, farmland protection, farm-to-school and healthy school meals for all. As the legislative session continues, we are working in coalition to support the Birds and Bees Protection Act, a bill that limits the most harmful uses of neonic insecticides in NY; the Good Food NY Bill, which revises NY law to enable public institutions to adopt values-based buying practices; and the Climate Jobs and Justice Package, a package of bills that serve as a legislative roadmap to rapidly decarbonize NY. Sign up for NY action alerts for opportunities to support these efforts at nofany.org/advocacy/sign-up.

In March, two NOFA-NY staff members, and a farmer/board member joined the National Organic Coalition Fly-in in D.C.! In meetings with our NY Congressional representative's offices, we called for increased research, technical assistance, and support to facilitate the shift to organic agriculture in the next Farm Bill. We've also continued to partner across the NOFA chapters to develop a NOFA Farm Bill campaign that demands climate, land and food justice for all which can be found at nofany.org/advocacy/farmbill.

Welcome

Please join us in welcoming Rebecca Heller-Steinberg to NOFA-NY's Board of Directors! Rebecca is an herbalist, gardener, and plant nerd whose stomach led them to food and ag work. Rebecca is a current member of the NOFA-NY Equity Committee and worked for the organic certification arm of NOFA-NY for seven years. Prior to that, Rebecca ran a local food business, did gardening and local food education and promotion, and was an employee/board member/volunteer with VINES (an urban agriculture, community gardening, and food access non-profit in Binghamton, NY).

Samuel Rose has joined NOFA-NY as the Hudson Valley Organic Educator! Sam will work closely with education and certification staff to support producers as they transition to organic production as well as provide technical assistance to certified farms and build a mentoring network in the Hudson Valley. After a decade of working on outdoor education and urban farming projects in Mexico, Sam was recruited to the region to manage a diversified vegetable and livestock operation. In 2020, he pivoted to his current farming initiatives on 220 acres of leased land. SunRunner Farm LLC focuses on the production of heritage small grains and Four Corners Community Farm focuses on food insecurity and community building.

(continued on A-7)

Opinions

Farmworker Housing

By Ernest (Buster) Caswell

As I continue to advocate for housing for agricultural workers across the State of Vermont, multiple parties have worked tirelessly to address this important factor of our population's livelihood. In the past few months, at least three meetings concerning the subject were held at UVM, and Gov. Phil Scott recently issued an executive order to study the long-term viability of the state's agriculture. Despite this traction, however, we have yet to see an organization willing to take a stand and push toward affordable housing for our agricultural workers.

The push for support comes in light of recent federal cutbacks, as evidenced by reports from the National Rural Housing Coalition. In their Fiscal Year 2021 budget proposal, the United States Department of Agriculture plans to eliminate farmworker housing loans and grants as authorized by Sections 514 and 516 of the Housing Act of 1949. Similar cuts to the Multifamily Preservation and Revitalization, the Mutual Self-Housing, and the HOME Investment Partnerships Programs are planned as well. Between the dependence on funding from the USDA and an average annual income of \$13,112, these reductions would place a financial burden on rural American tenants and would neglect over 470,000 housing units. In addition, the proposals would remove over 100 self-help organizations nationwide, abandoning over 50,000 families in need of housing assistance; and depleting funds necessary to repair existing housing units.

This burden disproportionately affects our country's most vulnerable populations; with over 64 percent of Section 515 tenants being elderly or disabled; over 32 percent of households headed by persons of color; and over 71 percent headed by women.

Where does Vermont fit into this matter? Simple: to say that agriculture plays a vital role in the state's economy would be an understatement. The USDA's 2019 State Agricultural Overview showed about 1.2 million acres devoted to farm operations, with almost 7,000 farming operations across the Green Mountain State. In the same year, Vermont's farms produced over 2 million gallons of maple syrup, almost 2.7 billion pounds of milk, and almost 1.4 million tons of corn; yielding a net profit of over \$265,000,000.

Unfortunately, Vermont ranks fifth in the affordable wage/income gap, and affordable housing in the state is more challenging for those in its agricultural community. How can a state which celebrates its farming heritage and promotes the consumption of locally produced goods leave the hands that make it all possible bound and empty? Furthermore, the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic has now, more than ever, demonstrated the significance of Vermont's agribusiness sector.

So, as a proud member of the agricultural community, I fervently recommend the creation of a task force committee to address these issues. I ask our legislature, as well as Gov. Scott to please prioritize this matter so that our agricultural workers, our essential workers, are assured adequate housing both on and off the properties they make their living on.

Ernest Caswell is a farmworker in VT and many times farmworkers are left out of the conversation that affects their lives.



Solutions to Replace the Destructive International Neoliberal Agricultural System

By George Naylor

Life becomes more precarious day by day because of multinational monopolies' priorities for cheap labor and raw materials. We farmers see industrial agriculture destroy biodiversity right before our eyes and our rural communities lose so much viability. Metropolitan areas sprawl with traffic gridlock and more

and more of our citizens join growing populations of workers with low wages or no jobs at all. Inevitably, we are all inclined to dream of utopias that would be so much better. There's nothing wrong with that. Each one of us probably has a utopia that changes day by day as we learn more and more about the history of humanity and the deadly trajectory we find ourselves in. Sharing our utopias and the wisdom of Indigenous peoples can open new vistas and will be vital education in itself.

But do we have time to agree on an ultimate solution, and won't change come one step at a time? Given the potential for imminent chaos and growing authoritarianism, maybe preserving our rights to free speech and association to be defended by all our fellow citizens becomes our first priority. After all, the widespread debate must be the immune system of our democratic future. If "might make right" becomes the norm, how much longer will it take before we can no longer live in fear and resume our quest to make our planet a peaceful and safe home for humanity?

I believe to make a difference and to concretely get us on track we need to get everybody to see the big picture and to think BIG! The members of La Via Campesina grasp the big picture and know intimately how the current international economic and political system discounts the beauty of all human beings and cultures and the most basic ecological relationships we must rely on.

George Naylor at the IVth International La Via Campesina conference in Chiapas, Mexico in June 2004 in Sao Paulo, Brazil, edited for TNF

So, I'll now offer my proposal for our first steps for everybody on the planet to see the big picture and to think big. Si se puede! We must demand an international treaty to immediately end the destruction of pristine land, ecosystems, and homelands of Indigenous peoples for any purpose, but especially for conversion to industrial agricultural production. At the same time that members of La Via Campesina suffer from low commodity prices and witness the usurpation of livestock production by corporations, we see on TV the Amazon rainforest being burned and bulldozed to produce more cheap corn and soybeans to feed corporate-owned livestock in inhumane feedlots and confinements. All the citizens of this planet will recognize this has to stop immediately!

We must also end neoliberal free trade and restore universal food sovereignty so countries can democratically design new agroecological farming systems to protect their natural resources, produce healthy culturally appropriate food supplies, restore economic opportunity, and create food security reserves. Progressive movements like La Via Campesina must regain the lead in abolishing free trade, or reactionary movements will co-opt this issue with inauthentic right-wing opportunistic politicians like the situation in the United States.

The law of economic gravity in a market economy is as real as the physical law of gravity. The law of economic gravity dictates that over time, the buying power of wages and commodity prices will fall, fall, and fall unless we establish economic democracy to create laws guaranteeing fair prices for farmers and living wages and safe conditions for workers. These living wages and fair prices must be paid by employers and buyers of commodities, livestock, and fruits and vegetables, rather than letting the government pick up the bill which is only a subsidy to employers and food processors. The guaranteed prices and living wages must be indexed to inflation, or once again workers and farmers will experience the hardships of declining standards of living.

In the US, minimum wages haven't been increased since 2009 and are the lowest in real dollars since 1945! Prices for commodities in the US were supported and indexed to inflation from 1941 to 1952 because of workable policies established during President Roosevelt's New Deal. Farmers in the US have suffered under a "market-oriented policy" ever since, which explains the evolution of US agriculture from diversified farms into mono-cropping of corn and

soybeans to furnish cheap feed to corporate livestock operations and cheap feedstocks to biofuel production. The system of fair prices was called Parity. The thousands of Indian farmers protesting in recent years likewise demanded a minimum support price (MSP) which should be the demand of all farmers around the world. This also coincides with La Via Campesina's Geneva Declaration, June 28, 2022: "We call upon governments to build public food stocks procured from peasants and small-scale food producers at a support price that is just, legally guaranteed and viable for the producers."

Once food sovereignty and the guarantees of parity prices and parity wages are achieved, other reforms, including land reform, rural resettlement, local food systems, and reparations will be possible. We can make agroecology the holistic basis of all our agriculture. The public will enthusiastically support efforts to bring young people and landless farmworkers back to the land, recreating rural communities with opportunities and meaningful work to be the foundation of our societies.

Our demands are simple and easily understood:

1. An international treaty requiring that every country stop, by whatever means, the destruction of land, natural ecosystems, and indigenous homelands used to profit from extractive industries including industrial agriculture.
2. The immediate end to free trade agreements and the tyranny of the WTO enforcing free trade rules designed to abolish nations' sovereignty, particularly food, labor, and environmental sovereignty.
3. International commodity agreements to stop the relatively few major exporting countries from exporting commodities at disastrously low prices—disastrous for their own farmers, their environment, and, in fact, their own economies. US history shows how this can be achieved in every one of the major exporting countries by comprehensive parity policy which would include parity price supports (not government payments), marketing agreements, supply management, food security reserves, and import controls. Since Big Data, robotic farm machinery, and land speculators are also bringing about the elimination of "big farmers" in these countries, these farmers will support our proposals of transformation so they can see a future that will end the treadmill of growing more and more for less and less.

La Via Campesina will lead a giant movement with the big picture in mind and new standards of democratic governance. Is there any other choice? Globalize the Struggle! Globalize Hope!

George Naylor, he/him, has been farming his family's farm since 1976 choosing to never raise GMO crops. George and his wife Patti began 7 years ago transitioning the farm to organic. Last year the family celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Naylor Farm. Their new farm project is an organic cider apple orchard. George was a member of the first Iowa Corn Promotion Board, was active in the 1980s Iowa Farm Unity Coalition and worked on a farmer team writing the Harkin-Gephardt Farm Bill. In the early 2000s, he served as president of the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) and was a lead plaintiff in a national lawsuit against Monsanto. He currently serves on the boards of the Center for Food Safety and Family Farm Defenders. This essay was published on the NFFC blog. contact - funky pintobeam@gmail.com.



Let's Talk: Land Access for Beginning Farmers

By Sarah Greenberg

In a speech delivered in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. discussed the distortion our government imposes when asking Black farmers to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. Access to land was at the heart of his remarks and is at the core of human survival yesterday, today and into the future. Farmer access to a secure land base is fundamental to not just the food security of our society but also to our national security. We are in a time of unprecedented land transition. 10% of all farmland, or 93 million acres,

(continued on A-15)

(Chapter News - from A-5)

Thank you!

NOFA-NY would like to thank Liz Bawden, Frank Cetera, Maryrose Livingston, and Patty Lovera for their service on our board! We are so grateful for the contributions they have made to NOFA-NY and wish them all the best in their future endeavors. We are also grateful to everyone who supported our Farm Share Program this spring. Together, we were able to provide half-priced CSA shares to 50 families or individuals across the state who may not otherwise be able to access fresh, local food! The success of this year's program was made possible by the generosity of our community, a matching donor, and our participating farms which include Garden of Eve Organic Farm & Market, Kingfisher Farm, Sang Lee Farms, and Thorpes Organic Family Farm.

Openings:

NOFA-NY is currently hiring a Fund Development Manager, a Bookkeeper, and a Member Communications Associate. For more information or to apply today, please visit our website at nofany.org/about-us/careers.

NOFA-NY is always seeking passionate members to join our committees. Please email us using the contact information below if you are interested:

- Education Committee: Crystal Stewart-Courten at cls263@cornell.edu
- Equity Committee: Kaitlyn Sirna at kaitlyn@cadefarms.org
- Fundraising Committee: Kaitlyn Sirna at kaitlyn@cadefarms.org
- Policy Committee: Wes Gillingham at weskeeper@gmail.com

Upcoming Events:

NOFA-NY is planning to host a series of Regional Events this fall. Events will include farm tours, speakers, meetups, family-friendly entertainment, local vendors, and more. Please stay tuned at nofany.org/upcoming-events.

Contact Information:

NOFA-NY: nofany.org, 315.988.4000, info@nofany.org

NOFA RHODE ISLAND

News

NOFA RI has a great series of On-Farm Workshops lined up for the upcoming season. Our next workshop will be at Long Lane Farm in Warren. Check below for the (almost) full list of farms and topics. We are all very excited about showcasing so many of these great farms and farmers here in RI.

The NOFA/RI Organic Farm Advisor Program provides free technical guidance to commercial farmers wishing to implement organic methods on their farms and in their marketing efforts.

Our program exists thanks to the efforts and hard-won experience of our farm advisors. Mentorship has long been a cornerstone of the ag world: NOFA/RI aims to facilitate these connections while providing an additional income stream for its advisors during the shoulder seasons.

USDA Announces Signup to Help Rhode Island Farmers Transitioning to Organic. Apply by June 15th for FY 2023 Organic Transition Initiative funding, farmers.gov/your-business/organic/organic-transition-initiative

Many local plant sales are coming up as well, look out for the list below. Wishing you a lovely Spring planting and growing season!

Openings:

NOFA RI is seeking new board members. Please reach out to Jan at nofari@live.com for more information.

Upcoming Events:

June 4th: Windmist Farm - keeping things going (equipment, business, intergenerational efforts)
 July 13th: Little Rhody Bee Keeping - supporting native bees over honey bees, especially in urban farm environments
 August date TBD: Elwood Orchard - organic apple care experiments
 October date TBD: Osamequin - Co-op Model + Water on the farm.

Contact Information

NOFA-RI: nofari.org, nofari@live.com

NOFA VERMONT

News

This spring, we opened up registrations for our Farm Share program, which provides subsidies for CSA shares. We have continued to see demand for this program rise over the past few years. For the summer CSA season, farms around the state will provide over 380 people and families with lower-priced CSA shares. In this win-win program, more members of the community gain access to a regular supply of local food and farms are still fully compensated for their labor.

Our Farmer Services team continues to support farmers around Vermont with business and transfer planning, organic dairy cost of production analysis, and production and marketing technical assistance services. We also recently announced a new round of Resilience Grant recipients. This year, 63 farms will receive grants to fund projects that will improve the longer-term resilience of their operations. Applications for Resilience Grants are anonymized and reviewed by an independent committee of Vermont farmers and farmworkers.

Other recent events include distributing Crop Cash materials (coupons that double WIC spending power at farmers markets) newly translated into eight different languages across the state and enjoying the workshops and on-farm socials we've hosted so far for our annual summer event series.

Policy

We were busy this spring tracking bills and pushing for organic dairy farm relief in Vermont. You can find up-to-date information on our state policy work at nofavt.org/state-advocacy. We also co-hosted a number of "Small Farm Action Days" with Rural Vermont. These events provided opportunities for farmers and others in the food system to testify to the legislature on important issues like land access, payment for ecosystem services, and the right to repair. Welcome

Welcome to Lauren Griswold, our new Local Food Access & Farm to Institution Program Director! We are so excited to have her on the team.

Thank you!

Openings:

Volunteer with us at a summer event! Find the details at nofavt.org/volunteer.

Upcoming Events:

We're hosting our annual on-farm summer pizza socials and workshops at farms across the state! See the full lineup on our website.

Are you a local Vermont farmer? Show off your skills at Farmer Olympics on August 16th, an annual mid-season extravaganza competition. At this silly event, individual farm teams will compete in events ranging from physical to cerebral to plain ridiculous.

Contact Information

NOFA-VT: [Nofavt.org](https://nofavt.org), (802) 434-4122, info@nofavt.org



BIODYNAMIC YEAR-LONG COURSE September 2023 - June 2024

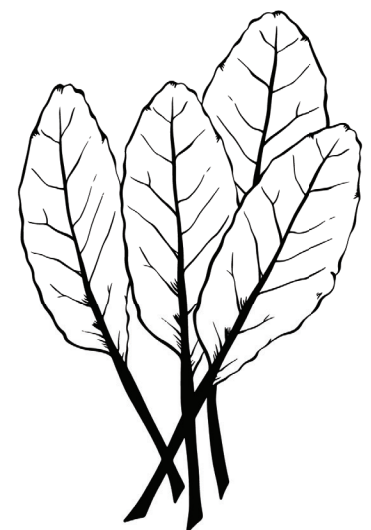
The Pfeiffer Center at Threefold Community Farm offers the biodynamic course for the 27th year in a row.

This year-long part-time training covers the basic principles of biodynamic agriculture according to the seasons, in thirteen full-day workshops.

260 Hungry Hollow Road, Chestnut Ridge, NY

For more information and to register, visit:
threefoldcommunityfarm.org/learn/pfeiffer-center-biodynamic-course/

threefoldcommunityfarm.org hello@threefoldcommunityfarm.org



2023 NOFA Summer Conference: Celebrating Harmony with Nature and Community



By Jocelyn Langer

We are excited to announce the 49th Annual NOFA Summer Conference, coming up on July 24th-29th, 2023! This year's conference theme is Buen Vivir: Celebrating Harmony with Nature and our Communities. Buen Vivir is a contemporary philosophy originating from Indigenous Andean traditions of land stewardship and harmonious co-existence. Both online and in person programming will be available.

Our 2023 Summer Conference welcomes all to gather for a week of engaging with farming technologies, practices, and thoughts centered around vital and just living at the community scale. We have once again chosen a hybrid format and a sliding scale fee structure as part of a working effort to increase inclusivity and accessibility of our conferences. The conference begins online on Monday, July 24th, with the NOFA Interstate Council annual meeting, followed by a keynote panel exploring Rights of Nature work in Ecuador and the US, and how it intersects with organic farming and land care. The online portion of the conference continues from Tuesday - Thursday, July 25th-27th, with online workshops in the evenings. On Friday the 28th, we'll join together in person at Worcester State University (WSU) for dinner and salsa dancing. Saturday, July 28th is a full day of workshops, discussions, celebrations, caucuses, a fair and more, all in person at WSU with live streamed workshops and discussions also available online.

Workshop Highlights:

Workshops cover a range of topics including climate change resilience, soil health, regenerative production strategies, pollinator and ecosystem health, food justice, organic transitions, fair wages and well-being. Online programming throughout the week feeds into larger discussion around central themes when we're together in person on Saturday. Some returning presenters include Dani Baker on permaculture principles and practices and how she has integrated them into her farm and food forest, Richard Robinson on how he grows some of the biggest, tastiest garlic we've ever encountered, Leslie Rodriguez and the Cultivemos team on farmer wellbeing through the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network of the Northeast (FRSAN-NE), and Al Johnson on reducing farm inputs through on-site practices. We are also excited to welcome new presenters and initiatives including Tortilleria La Semilla on restoring local native food systems through heirloom corn and nixtamalization, partners from Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) and American Farmland Trust on climate change adaptation, and an incredible lineup of Indigenous leaders from throughout the hemisphere on youth ecosystem restoration work, farm-based education and healthy food access as a human right.

A Meeting Place for Regional Partners

The seven NOFA chapters have collaborated on several USDA-funded programs in recent years, building on existing programs and branching out into new ones. This year's Summer Conference provides a gathering space for regional partners involved in the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP), which is working to develop a farmer-to-farmer

mentorship network to help non-organic farmers become certified; and the Climate Smart Agriculture project, which expands soil health testing and provides farmers with funding and support for implementation of regenerative farming practices. The NOFA chapters are partnering with similar organizations across the Northeast on both of these programs, and we invite our collaborators not only from the NOFA states but from Maine to Pennsylvania to West Virginia and North Carolina to join us at this year's Summer Conference.

Another major region-wide collaboration is the expansion of the Farm Share program to all of the NOFA states, with support from a multi-year FMPP grant. Inspired by the existing Farm Share programs run by NOFA-VT and NOFA-NH, which offer subsidized CSA shares to income-eligible recipients, CT-NOFA kicked off their own program in 2022. Other chapters are launching their Farm Share program for the first time this year, and we're excited to be expanding access to nutritious, local, organic food to our constituents across the region. Conference goers can support the NOFA/Mass Farm Share program through joining our "Organic Salsa" salsa dancing fundraiser on Friday night of the NOFA Summer Conference.

Equity in the Food System

NOFA is committed to integrating equity practices into all of our programming in an ongoing effort to dismantle racism and oppression and build a more just food system. Once again this year, the Summer Conference includes a workshop track in Spanish with interpretation into English, as well as time for caucus groups to further our racial equity work through facilitated conversations. In addition, many NOFA staff and presenters have participated in the Food Solutions New England 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge earlier this Spring, and we will continue this work leading up to the conference through the 21-Day Racial Equity Indigenous Challenge. We are particularly excited about how the Indigenous Challenge will inform our conversations on this year's conference theme, Buen Vivir, as we explore its roots in the Indigenous concept of Sumak Kawsay. We invite the NOFA community to participate in the Indigenous Challenge with us throughout the summer. Contact Ulum Pixan Athoh'il at: ulumpixan@nofamass.org for more information.

Free Microscopy and Soil Test Analysis

Want to stop guessing what is going on in your soil? NOFA soil tech staff will have tables set up in the vendor area of the Summer Conference with soil technicians ready to look at your soil samples under a microscope and offer analysis and recommendations. Bring a sample of your soil along to the conference and visit the Soil Health table to see your soil under the microscope. Or, bring a recent soil test report for some feedback on amendments you may want to try. Find out if the soil health management practices you've been trying on your farm or in your garden are paying off, and talk to someone on the Soil Technical Services team about how to encourage the right microbial populations for your growing goals.

Registration Accessible for All

In an effort to make the NOFA Summer Conference accessible to everyone, we offer sliding scale registration rates, as well as full scholarships. Sliding scale options range from \$50-\$250, with a recommended rate of \$130. We are also offering special group rates, with priority given to groups who have existing, ongoing relationships with NOFA. The Worcester State University campus is easily accessible by car and public transportation, and a link to coordinate carpooling with other conference goers is available on our website. Contact Lili Elena for more information at: registration@nofamass.org.

Sliding Scale Ticket Pricing

\$250	\$175	\$130	\$90	\$50
Super Supporter	Supporter	Recommended	Reduced Rate Entry	Super Reduced Rate Entry

Child Ticket price is \$45

Visit nofasummerconference.org for more information or to register.

About the Venue - Worcester State University

Location Accessibility

After decades of holding the NOFA Summer Conferences in Amherst, MA, we have decided to move our largest event of the year to Worcester State University, long-time home of the NOFA/Mass Winter Conference. Those who have attended the Winter Conference know that the campus is easily accessible by bus and train through Worcester's Union Station, and centrally located for easy access by car, with plenty of parking on site. The heart of the conference will be outdoors on the quad between Sheehan and Wasylean Halls and the Student Center, where all day Saturday, June 29th, you'll find a fair, exhibit tables, and NOFA's friendly staff, vendors, and community groups.

Local, Organic Food

One of the many reasons we are excited to be gathering at Worcester State University is their commitment to quality local food through their partnership with Chartwells catering. Chartwells has been committed to using locally sourced ingredients for decades, and they look forward to offering a fully organic menu for NOFA once again this year. Chartwells has implemented many initiatives that, at their core, reflect the need to advocate for small-

scale community farms, workers' rights, and the need for widespread access to healthy food. They were instrumental in the creation of the Fair Food Program (FFP) – a coalition of workers, growers, and buyers that advocate for a mutually beneficial and ethical supply chain. According to Worcester State University, Chartwells is “a food-service provider that shares [their] commitment to healthy eating, diversity, fair trade, sustainable food practices, recycling, and conservation.” As an organization, we feel happy that this year's conference theme, Buen Vivir: Celebrating Harmony with Nature and our Communities, will be reflected not only in the workshops and discussions taking place over the course of the week, but also in the food we'll be sharing together.

Meals are available Friday evening and all day Saturday. All meals will feature delicious organic produce and will be served buffet style in the Sheehan Dining Hall. Meal tickets are available for purchase as “add-ons” when registering for the Summer Conference.

Housing

We welcome conference attendees to spend the night Friday, July 28th, at Worcester State University. The rooms are centrally located in Sheehan Hall above the dining area overlooking the vendor quad. Rooms include attached private bathroom facilities with a

shower. Linens are available as an add-on, or you can bring your own.

The 49th Annual NOFA Summer Conference promises a wide variety of informative, accessible, and inspiring events for all ages. Whether you're a long-time conference attendee, or considering joining us for the first time, networking with like-minded community is one of the most important components of the Summer Conference. This year's schedule, with online workshops throughout the week, leading into the in-person conference, gives each participant the opportunity to take in more programming, and offers the best of both virtual and in-person programming. We hope to see you there!



CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

ONLINE ONLY

Monday July 24 – Thursday, July 27

MONDAY / ONLINE

7:00–7:30 PM	Online NOFA Interstate Council Annual Meeting
7:30–8:45 PM	Online Keynote Panel

TUESDAY / ONLINE

5:00–6:15 PM	Online Workshops
7:00–8:15 PM	Online Workshops

WEDNESDAY / ONLINE

5:00–6:15 PM	Online Workshops
7:00–8:15 PM	Online Workshops

THURSDAY / ONLINE

5:00–6:15 PM	Online Workshops
7:00–8:15 PM	Online Workshops

IN-PERSON AND ONLINE

Friday July 28 – Saturday, July 29

FRIDAY / IN-PERSON AND ONLINE

5:00–7:00 PM	Dinner
6:00–7:00 PM	NOFA Interstate Council Meeting (also Online)
7:00–9:00 PM	“Organic Salsa” Salsa dance fundraiser for Farm Share

SATURDAY / IN-PERSON AND ONLINE

8:00–9:00 AM	Breakfast and Welcome
9:00–10:15 AM	Workshops (also Online)
10:45–12:00 PM	Workshops (also Online)
12:00–2:00 PM	Lunch
12:45–1:45 PM	Caucus Groups
2:00–3:15 PM	Workshops (also Online)
3:30–5:00 PM	Fair and Open Mic
5:00–7:00 PM	Dinner



Visit nofasummerconference.org for more information or to register.

NOFA Farmer Profile: Elizabeth Henderson of Peacework CSA in Newark, New York, Land of the Seneca

Interviewed by Holli Cederholm

People feel connected to NOFA because of our shared love of the land and farming and because we've gotten to know each other over the 50 years we've been around – from gathering at conferences to sharing best practices on farm tours to reading about each other's farms. We at The Natural Farmer want to highlight the people who make up NOFA and hope we can feature at least one interview in every issue. We're starting with The Natural Farmer Advisory Committee, so you can get to know the folks behind the pages of your paper.

Want us to share your story? Have a farmer you'd like to interview? Contact TNF@NOFA.org if you'd like to be interviewed or interview somebody and get published.

TNF: You farmed for over 30 years. Briefly tell us about your farm.

Elizabeth Henderson: I started farming in Gill, Massachusetts in 1979-80, then moved to Rose Valley Farm in Rose, New York. My partner David Stern and I started the Genesee Valley Organic Community Supported Agriculture (GVOCSA) in 1988-1989. In 1997, I left Rose Valley and the CSA came with me to Peacework Organic Farm on land in Wayne County that belonged to the Kraai family. Greg Palmer, who had been working at Rose Valley, came with me as a partner, and after a while, his wife, Ammie Chickering, joined us. Most of our customers were in the city of Rochester. We had a pickup place there, first at a church and then at the Abundance Food Co-op, and that's where the CSA pick-up still is today.

TNF: How many acres did you have in production?

Henderson: At Peacework, we initially leased 15 acres, and then when Doug Kraai passed away, his wife offered to sell us the farm. Two members of our CSA core group were also on the board of the Genesee Land Trust. They arranged for us to do a joint fundraising campaign, which we called Preserving Peacework. We raised enough money to buy the 109-acre former dairy farm — the Humbert Dairy Farm — from the Kraais for the Genesee Land Trust, which leased it back to us with a 25-year rolling lease.

TNF: You mentioned that the farm is now managed by someone else. When did that transition happen?

Henderson: I retired when I was 68 in 2013. My slightly younger partners, Greg and Ammie, continued for a while and then sold the farm business to a couple who took over the leasehold from the land trust. The CSA core group continued running the CSA but switched to getting the vegetables from Ruth Blackwell's Mud Creek Farm in Victor. So, from being the farmer, I became a member of the core group. From the very beginning, the GVOCSA was a separate legal entity: an unincorporated association, like a buying club, with its own bank account and members. The core group did a lot of the administrative tasks for the CSA. They helped recruit members. They arranged for the schedule of pickup and distribution. There are lots of things that other people can do at least as well as the farmers that takes the burden off them. In my book, *Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture*, there's a chart that shows all the jobs that someone has to do to make a CSA function. The unincorporated association still exists. At some point, they changed the name to Peacework Organic CSA after the farm.

TNF: How did you first get involved in agriculture?

Henderson: I taught Russian language and literature, but after my husband died in a car accident, I became more and more unhappy about being in academia as an assistant professor at Boston University. Then the university got a new president, who wanted to change it to be a training place for middle-level corporate functionaries and downplayed the liberal arts. At that time, I asked myself, "Well, what do I want to do?" With some friends, I bought a farm in

Western Massachusetts, in the town of Gill, and that's where I started. For a while, I was able to continue teaching through the Beacon College prison education program. Our students were people who were either Black Panthers or SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). They were really political prisoners. When the funding for the basic education opportunity grants was cut, Beacon College could no longer continue that program, and that's when I found myself already at the farm having done a couple of years and realizing that I loved doing the farm work and that I would try to make my living that way.

TNF: Who inspired you to get involved with land-based work?

Henderson: While I was teaching literature, I was able to travel quite a bit, and I saw beautiful market gardens and farms in France that were very inspiring. Learning how to grow food first on a garden scale and then realizing that I could do it on a larger scale led me to think of that as a possible vocation. I wasn't inspired by any particular individual, but once I moved to Gill, I became close friends with Wally and Juanita Nelson, an African American couple who were tax resisters and lived at the Traprock Peace Center. I got to know them and was deeply inspired by them in so many ways.

TNF: How did you access the land you were farming and what resources did you find helpful?

Henderson: At Rose Valley, David Stern, my partner, owned the land. While I was there, I was co-owner with him, but when I left I did not own any land. So first I rented, and then the arrangement with Genesee Land Trust was tremendously beneficial because it meant that Greg and Ammie, and I did not have to borrow money and take on a mortgage. The land trust arranged the best possible financial arrangements that they could to make farming accessible for us on what we were earning from the farm. I highly recommend working with a land trust — and that way the land is preserved in perpetuity. The E.F. Schumacher Society (now the Schumacher Center for New Economics) was very helpful in developing the lease language with the land trust, and so was the Institute for Community Economics.

TNF: A lot of images of small-scale organic farming depict it as idyllic. We know farming is lovely, but it's also really hard! What was the biggest challenge you faced as a farmer?

Henderson: I stand with Wendell Berry on the question of the hardness of farming. When people talk about hard, they're thinking about the physical labor. There are actually people who like to use their bodies. I trained as a modern dancer and rode bicycles, hiked, and things like that. Using my body has always been connected with enjoyable outdoor activities, and farming can be one of those. The hard part has not, for me, been that. The hard part is that the prices that farmers can get are so inadequate that you can never hire as much help as you would like. For me becoming a farmer was like taking vows of poverty: you sign up for a lifestyle that just won't have much cash. That's why Wally and Juanita were so inspiring — they had a very rich way of life based on community and conviviality with people and just wonderful relationships, and very little cash.

TNF: If you did it all again - if you built a farm again, would you do anything differently from the start?

Henderson: One of the most important lessons I learned, painfully, is that we need to have a conflict



Liz Henderson in a NYS glen. Image provided by Liz.

resolution process that everybody agrees to use. I did not have that with my partners, and so resolving conflicts was difficult. I would want to have an agreement that we would have a way of resolving conflicts that would take our disagreements and make it possible to learn from one another about why we had different points of view so that we could strengthen our partnership rather than build up anger and frustration.

TNF: Farmer stress is real. How did you manage stress and what did you do to support your well-being and the well-being of the people who worked with you?

Henderson: Our farm traded shares with alternative practitioners. We had a neighbor who was a chiropractor and he would come and give a workshop for us at the beginning of the season on how to use our bodies correctly. And then when we did pull something, we could go to him and he would unkink it.

Throughout my adult life, I have had a regular practice of spending half an hour to 45 minutes almost every single day doing a combination of modern dance and yoga stretches and exercises. I think what people forget is that our main machine is our body. People are good about changing the oil in the engine of their tractors, but they don't look after the juices that flow in their own bodies.

TNF: Our country's history is sadly one of land theft and unjust treatment of people of color. What do you think our role is as small organic farmers, or for us as NOFA or similar farming organizations, to support people of color who are farming or who want to farm?

Henderson: This is an issue that has been dear to my heart throughout my life: the issue of social justice and civil rights. I was an anti-war and civil rights activist before I became a farmer. Since I've been farming, I have tried to keep an eye on what was going on in communities of color. I've tried to play the role of encouraging the NOFAs to invite people like Rosalinda Guillen, Malik Yakini, and Will Allen to be keynote speakers at our conferences to open ourselves to hearing from the People of Color who are doing amazing things in organic agriculture. With the domestic fair trade policy subcommittee, starting 15 years ago, I got the NOFAs to provide guidance to people giving workshops at NOFA conferences to think about their language and not just assume that farmers were white entrepreneurs — to think about farmworkers and who they might be, and the issues that people who are working on farms face. I think it's important that we do that and be aware.

TNF: A common charge against organic food is that it is too expensive for lower-income people to afford, that it is "yuppie food." Do you think organic farmers have a role in making food accessible to lower-income people?

Henderson: From the beginning, our CSA had a sliding scale payment schedule. Farmers usually can't afford to give scholarships to their CSAs; they need to get the full value for their crops. With a sliding

(continued on next page)

(Farmer profile - from A-10)

scale, you invite people who can afford it to pay more so that other people can pay less. Then you arrange to accept food stamps. We always did that. And we also participated in farmers' markets that were organized by the Politics of Food in the city of Rochester that sold our vegetables at a lower price than they were sold at stores.

In addition to including lower-income people in our own farms, organic farmers can play a role in pushing for policy that makes sure that farmers get prices that cover the full costs of production. That's why I've participated in the Disparity to Parity project. It's a campaign to ensure that farmers, once again, get parity prices paid by the markets. There were a lot of things wrong with the New Deal parity system, but I think it would be possible to redesign parity for the 21st century so that it addresses the social injustices that were built in to make sure that the markets and not the taxpayers pay for the work that farmers and farmworkers do so that we can afford to pay living wages to ourselves and to all the people who work on our farms.

TNF: What two books/blogs/podcasts/resources do you suggest people read about farming or land use?

I highly recommend exploring the *Disparity to Parity* website. Every organic farmer should read *Soil and Health* by Sir Albert Howard. Of recent books, *Healing Grounds: Climate, Justice, and the Deep Roots of Regenerative Farming* by Liz Carlisle examines Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Asian farming systems, their origins and contemporary flowering, and shows us how much we can learn!

Holli Cederholm is TNF Advisory Committee Member and works at MOFGA.



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(Why do I Farm - from A -1)

Northeast and Midwest dependent on irrigation are quickly depleting their ponds.

Farming can make you feel so defeated. *We've experienced droughts mid-summer but in the spring? Even when you think you're prepared, nature throws a curveball.*

I could go on... The air conditioner in our CoolBot broke last week when it was 80 degrees, threatening the 100+ pounds of fresh mushrooms waiting to be delivered to CSAs and restaurants. One of our new employees showed up late for the 5th day in a row, but it's more complicated than just firing them. No matter what natural treatment I've tried, the potato bugs keep killing the cucumber starts and are starting on the lettuce.

Farming is exhausting.

Farming offers more than an endless list of to-do's - the to-dos are actually one of the exciting things about farming - but it's the endless list of challenges that make farming so damn hard. For every to-do, there are at least a few things that can go wrong from something that needs to be fixed to a living being that's trying to die to something like the weather that's entirely out of your control.

So, why do I farm?

Yes, I love being outside. I love using my body and feeling strong. I love taking part in cultivating the abundance of the landscape, of plants and of animals. I love feeling like I'm part of an (eco)system much larger than myself. I do - I love all these things. But if you're looking for that essay about the labor of love of farming, this isn't it. Although I've been farming on and off for nearly two decades, I'm starting to wonder if I feel like I'm farming or if I'm being farmed. This season has tested me and taken from me - it's tested my trust and taken my time, my energy, and my heart. Yes, it's impossible to separate my feelings at this moment about farming from my mid-40-year-old self or my mother of two small children self which also accounts for my exhaustion and feeling of endless giving, but either way, farming used to fuel me, nourish me and give me hope and I now question if it does.

And so, if I'm being honest, I don't know why I farm - but I do know, I'm not ready to stop. Not yet.

Elizabeth Gabriel runs Wellspring Forest Farm with her family, is editor of TNF and an organizational equity consultant.



A healthy and happy flock grazing beneath blossoming apple trees prior to the May 18th frost. Image submitted by author.

Changing the World— One Chicken at a Time

By Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin

The chicks have arrived! A 6 a.m. phone call from the Northfield, Minnesota, post office alerted Eric Foster and others at the Main Street Project to the arrival of the first training flock of 2018. A new cohort of aspiring Latino farmers from the south-central region of Minnesota was about to start their poultry-centered regenerative agriculture training.

Their mission? To become part of a southeastern Minnesota cluster of farms designed to change the way poultry is produced in Minnesota and beyond, by joining dozens of other families in the region who have received similar training from the Northfield-based Main Street Project.

Why Do We Need to Change How Poultry Is Produced?

The current poultry production system has failed ecologically, economically and socially. It has caused ecological destruction, displacement of rural people and destroyed ancient resilient and healthy food security systems for communities worldwide. It has loaded animal production with pharmaceuticals, then hidden this information from consumers. The system has also built a massive global exploitative infrastructure that cheats farmers and consumers.

Today's system never intended to deliver solutions. It was designed and structured to be extractive, degenerative and profit-driven. Through massive, well-funded campaigns, today's poultry producers create the illusion that they can deliver large amounts of healthy food at very low prices. But the true cost of industrial food is hidden behind the convoluted systems the industry has created.

Some of those costs are obvious, yet we have no legal recourse to demand payment. Who pays for the ever-expanding list of food-related diseases? Or water contamination? Who pays the social cost of pushing

food and agriculture workers into poverty?

The Real Cost of Cheap Food

Consumers pay the real cost of our food through a vast array of channels that have become untraceable, from our taxes that primarily subsidize a handful of large corporations through the Farm Bill - a cyclical federal agricultural subsidy program - to the public subsidies, volunteers and local taxes that go to clean up rivers, lakes and even oceans polluted in the name of feeding the world.

Some of this cost materializes when residents of cities where agriculture runoff has now impaired drinking water are taxed to pay for the cleanup of toxic levels of nitrates and other agricultural chemicals.

We need to change the system: It is not in its DNA to change itself. We, the billions of small farmers, consumers, scientists and students, need to reclaim control of our food production and redeploy under a regenerative design. In my book, *In the Shadow of Green Man*, I describe the life experiences and pathways that led me to this work and to this point in my life.

In this autobiographical book, I lay the foundation for why we need to fight for large-scale change, and why we should always look with distrust at anyone or any structure that seeks to degenerate the foundation of our well-being through our food, the most sacred foundation of nutrition, health and well-being.

Even before publishing *In the Shadow of Green Man*, I laid out the principles for how we are redesigning a new poultry system. Our design process takes us back to the source of how nature provides a magnificent blueprint for energy transformation processes that deliver food out of air and soil.

Defining a Regenerative System

A regenerative system is one that can continually recirculate the natural energy from the soil and air to deliver not only a healthy environment but also healthy foods, fiber and other vital outcomes of a regenerating landscape. Livestock on the landscape is critical to this process. And when it comes to live-

stock, chicken reigns supreme.

Poultry production offers the shortest economic cycle and the lowest up-front investment cost. It is the only livestock that is accepted culturally in every region of the world. It is a healthy protein source and is easily scalable. If we design a system according to the chicken's natural jungle environment, poultry can also serve as the foundation for a massive new agroecological and agroforestry model, capable of reforesting and restoring large amounts of conventionally farmed and degenerated landscapes.

We looked at the chicken's original natural environmental blueprint in the jungles of southeast Asia and followed it across the world. The ancestors of the modern chicken (*Gallus gallus*, aka red jungle fowl) have adapted to most ecological conditions. Like most other animals, chickens were never meant to be confined indoors - and they don't have to be.

The only reason to confine animals is for ownership and control and to maximize profits. The industry did this, whether intentionally or not, at the expense of the welfare of the animals, the health of consumers, the environment, farmers and workers.

As a child, I watched a big fight roar around us as the Guatemalan civil war carried on. That was the Guatemalans' way of attempting to remove from power the oligarchs and their army that ruled and controlled the land, under a system based on extraction, exploitation and abuse. As a child within this environment, my stories were defined by poverty and hunger and the need for more food. My understanding of its value and our right to it grew out of that environment, as did my desire to work for this inalienable right.

Today, as I hear Native American elders talk about food sovereignty as one challenge to their freedom, it confirms my decision to spend the rest of my life dedicated to this fight. One freedom that should not be compromised is the freedom to collectively own and control our food and agriculture system. Today

(continued on A-16)

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NOFA Farmer Profile:

Emma Bliss, East Hill Farm, Vermont

Interviewed by Maddie Kempner

This spring, NOFA-VT welcomed Emma Bliss as a Policy Intern to support our state advocacy efforts and get familiar with the state legislature.

Emma Bliss co-owns and operates East Hill Farm in Andover, Vermont and is a student in Vermont Law and Graduate School's Master of Food And Agricultural Law and Policy (MFALP) program. She is also the co-researcher on a Farm and Food System Assessment sponsored by the Brattleboro Town Planning Department. Emma has been working with NOFA-VT in the state house during the 2023 legislative session, tracking and reporting on a number of bills including the Right to Farm, Community Resilience & Biodiversity Protection, Small Farm Diversification and Transition, Agriculture & Nutrition Education, and more. We are so thrilled to have Emma working with us this session and are excited to share a bit more about her with the NOFA-VT community.



MK: In addition to being a student at Vermont Law and Graduate School, you operate a small farm. Can you tell our readers a little about your farm, what you grow, and your goals for the farm and its future?

Bliss: We grow diversified vegetables on one acre and are going into our third season running a CSA! I run it with my mom, growing on land that's been in my family since the 50s—we are truly a family farm and are navigating all the challenges that come with multigenerational succession planning! Over the last couple of years, we have been converting our vegetable operation to a no-till method; we want to grow in a way that feels more aligned with our values of biodiversity protection and be more adaptable to the growing unpredictability of climate conditions. We have really begun to feel the impact of climate instability in a practical sense, and it feels essential to incorporate climate-smart farming practices into our planning. If you want to see more, visit our website easthillvt.com.

MK: What are your favorite parts of farming? What are some of your challenges?

Bliss: As someone who hopes to dedicate my life to promoting and protecting the work of local producers and their access to land/resources, it's important to me to practice the thing I'm protecting. Beyond this ideological commitment, I love the magic of fostering a living thing from seed form into something that feeds my community—it truly feels like a miracle every time, and is rewarding in a very fundamental way. There are of course so many challenges to the local food system, and so many of them come down on the heads of producers. I am very privileged to have access to land, something many aspiring farmers do not, but I struggle frequently with a lack of financial capital one needs to grow a business, including building needed infrastructure. Farming is not only hard physical work but also incredibly challenging from a business and planning perspective. Although I've been a hired farmhand for many years, it's a whole other ball game to run my own!

MK: What inspired you to enter the MFALP program, and

what's one major takeaway you have so far about food and agriculture law and policy in the U.S.?

Bliss: Law and policy underpin much of the practical work within the food system. It can create barriers and complications or can make pathways for more effective work. Having worked on farms and at food nonprofits for almost a decade, I have frequently felt the ghost of this structure, how impactful it is to daily operations and yet mysterious to untangle. I want to understand this system so that I can advocate for laws and policies that support the wonderful work that is possible and is already underway. Fundamentally, becoming a student in this program is part of my dedication to a food system that supports farmers, feeds people equally, and protects our natural world.

MK: What's one thing that surprised you during your time working in the legislature this session?

Bliss: Having studied both the federal legislative process and Vermont's legislative process, I feel a lot of hope about the capacity this state has to address the needs of producers and communities. Viewing Vermont from the perspective of the national local food movement, it's amazing to see how radical, inventive, and vibrant the agricultural sector is in this state. Much of this is due to grassroots organizing and industry innovation. Seeing how much impact stakeholder testimony has on the drafting of laws in committee sessions is encouraging—it appears as though Vermont representatives really recognize the important role agriculture has not just for the identity of the state but also its potential role as a significant contributor to economic stability and growth.

MK: How do you think policy is currently impacting small farmers in Vermont, and how do you hope it can shift in the future to better support farmers and keep our communities fed?

Bliss: Access to land and capital for new and beginning farmers is a flagship issue that many in the agricultural side of the Vermont legislature feel will be essential for the continued growth of the local food system and is of particular interest to me. I think that this one issue has the power to make or break the future of agriculture in this state, especially as a whole generation of farmers looking to retire. What will happen to their land and who will have the financial resources to buy it? There hasn't been a clear solution presented yet, but it continues to be an issue that is raised consistently, with many feeling the pressure to ensure that more prime agricultural land is not lost to development. I truly believe that Vermont has the capacity to be on the cutting edge of food system innovation, but it will need investment from the legislature to develop the needed infrastructure and eliminate barriers like land and capital access. I will be watching and working to ensure agriculture continues to be a cornerstone of Vermont's identity, economy, and land base!

Maddie Kempner is the NOFA-VT Policy Director.



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Hatching the Great Chicken Rescue

By Casey Merkle

When I was 9 years old, I wanted to save all the chickens. I wanted to rescue all the eggs from going sunny-side up on someone's breakfast plate, running between two pieces of burnt toast. Maybe there were two sausage links slipping around in the yolk. Wishing I could save all the animals from this fate, I knew I wouldn't be able to usher an entire pig through the woods searching for freedom.

On my first attempt to rescue chickens, I had two assistants. They were my tried and true group of neighborhood rascals. We were young girls at the time, writing our own rough and tough guidebook, called "How to Survive a Woodsy Suburban Bubble; Navigating a Curated Nature." We looked for our own ways to break the clean, organized aesthetics of a suburban neighborhood; surrounded by a shallow pond and packed with oak, maple, elm, and mulberry trees. One of those ways was to pick and eat the mulberries, which would usually end in a dodgy game of whipping the berries at each other's faces. Is it considered a game if there are no rules?

Each summer, I got to join my friend Meg who visited her family's cabin on Washington Island, off the peninsula of Door County, Wisconsin. It was my favorite place to go. The island still pulls me back every few years.

I blame Meg for hatching this rescue plan. She always wanted to be a vet and adored all animals, holding a snake like it was a soft puppy. Her plan was to grab as many eggs as we could from the Washington Island Farm Museum which was a 5-minute skip down the road from her cabin. The question was who would be the one to jump the fence? I hesitantly raised my hand, "I'm willing to try if you two keep a lookout for the farmer."

We'd been to the farm museum many times before. Our favorite was the rabbits that were kept

in a small cage next to the pig pen. We would grab bunches of grass and feed them all day. This time we had a mission. Wearing our bell-bottom jeans and deciding our SOS signal was to tap loudly on the walls of the chicken coop, we were ready for anything. Meg and Casey (yes, we both were named Casey) were on lookout duty.

The farm came into view and we turned right, towards the animal pens. Our stride was confident, and our arms were hooked side by side. Together we were stronger, we could do this. A short walk past the pis, the goats, and then we were there. The chickens started coming up to the fence where we stood on the other side, frozen. I took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh hay and manure. The bright-colored goldenrod marked where Casey and Meg would hide to keep an eye on the farmer's long dirt road to their house. I looked back over to the goat's pen, trying to make eye contact. I paused, and one of them looked back at me. I called her Midnight. She was the goat that I had always wanted to adopt and take back with me to our Chicago suburb.

I have always wanted to have a farm, where the animals and I could care for each other. I still love goats, and someday hope to have my own. I was told once that goats are just like a mix between deer and dogs - it's true! They are incredibly playful, like dogs. And, can be annoyingly skittish, like most deer.

It wasn't until later in my young adult life that my family got chickens. It was winter break of my sophomore year in college. I came home to find my sister, Edy, crouched over a bin that was tucked inside the cupboard under the stairs. Her long blond hair could not hide the glee on her face. That mischievous smile turned to look at me.

"I did it," she whispered.

"What did you do?" I laughed.

"I ordered chickens on Amazon and we need to make sure each one of them survives. Gee, I'll hear it from dad."

"You didn't."

"I did! We need to reduce our carbon footprint and having chickens helps! I swear!"

I didn't doubt Edy or argue with that. She is passionate and self-determined in the fight against big agriculture. Staring down at our new feathered friends in disbelief, I became teary-eyed. They were adorable. Anything small and vulnerable has that advantage in my cultural upbringing. Their soft little peeps turned my nurturing dial to full max. My disbelief turned to excitement. We were going to raise chickens! I felt empowered and renewed with a sense of purpose.

The challenge with raising chicks was that my sisters and I had to face and accept the circle of life. Not all chicks will make it to adulthood. Five of our chicks died within two months. The first one was the most difficult. I found Edy curled up on a large chair in the living room with the lights off. It was dark. Her face was red with tears, tilted down over her lap where she cradled a small chick. I had one of those moments that felt surreal. The chick blinked slower and slower until it dozed off into another life. Edy let out a snuffle and cleared her throat, "I didn't expect this part to be so hard." I gave her a hug and cupped my hands so she could gently place the chick in my palms. Edy stood up straight and tall, wiping the tears from her face. I made my way outside, carrying the tiny soul to be buried alongside her sisters.

There have been several animal misfortunes within my family. All ending in a lesson in resiliency and nurture. One of the many summers on Washington Island, it was just me, my mom, and my two younger sisters, Edy and Gracie. Our hearts melted looking at one of the tiniest bunnies we had ever seen at the Ostrich Farm. The farmer noticed our interest and mentioned they were up for adoption. Meg and Casey had already adopted one each, and I was hoping to join them. A small persuasive argument from all three girls to my mom and a few days later we were driving home with a baby bunny named Oreo.

Keep in mind, Gracie was only three years old at the time. She was sitting next to the tub where we were keeping an eye on Oreo. I was staring out the window watching cows pass by. When I looked back toward Gracie, I saw her dancing with the baby bunny! She had her by the front limbs swinging

(Continued on A-19)



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(Opinions - from A-6)

was transferred from 2015-2019. At the same time, access to land is the number one challenge beginning farmers face. Despite these challenges, there are transformative and substantive solutions. There are many elements that contribute to the difficulty farmers face in accessing land. In qualitative interviews with Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) beginning farmers three themes emerged:

1. current systems of land ownership are failing new and aspiring farmers
2. current systems of access to capital are failing new and aspiring farmers
3. new and aspiring farmers have urgent calls to action - sustainably supporting their communities and families.

“Owning the land is the issue of farming,” says Alex Ball, of Old City Acres. “Farming is hard, but that initial push to own the land is the hardest part of the business.” His words align with many other farmers. Frequently, beginning farmers start by renting land and spend considerable time rebuilding soil health, and building infrastructure only to lose access to that land down the road. Access to secure and affordable land, where a farmer is able to make a deep connection, stability and confidence is the foundation of a successful farm operation for many young farmers. While options of renting or leasing land may be appealing in the short term, there is less security and often more money and labor input required, which makes land ownership a more enticing long-term investment. The historical disenfranchisement and systemic challenges of land ownership for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color make the call for pulling oneself up by your bootstraps even more ludicrous. Land ownership in America is rooted in dispossession. From Indigenous land removal to slavery to sharecropping and tenant farming, the settler colonial construct that land is a commodity that can be bought and sold remains true today. This is “not a good option” says Alex. It prevents people from building equity and strips them of fundamental human rights. Restructuring our perception of land ownership towards a path for mutual flourishing and care for stewardship will allow farmers to regenerate their community’s food system. An alternative land management system may include accessible and secure opportunities for community cooperatives, land trusts, and conservation easements, where the health and care of the community and land are central to the farmer’s success (check out the New Communities Land Trust).

Land ownership provides the base to build financial equity, but access to capital is what is needed to open the door to that opportunity. Jonathan Greer, the owner of Eden’s Blessings, emphasized the importance of accessing land grants, rather than loans because it provides the opportunity to acquire more capital. Unfortunately, most government agencies do not serve smaller and specialty crop producers very well. Jonathan would like to see the distribution of these grants by organizations like OEFFA, so smaller farms have the ability to expand and thrive. For him and other BIPOC farmers, economic mobility is the key to success after being stripped of generational wealth and ownership for centuries. “Systemic racism is not a farce” and the nepotism and resource advantage white farmers have is a dependability BIPOC farmers don’t have the comfort of relying on. This is why for Jonathan, taking the penalty on his 401k was his only way to buy farmland.

It is not uncommon for beginning farmers to have a source of off-farm income, in fact, it is the norm. It could be in the form of another full-time job, part-time job, or donating plasma twice a week. Dana Hilfinger, from Roots, Fruits, and Shoots, feels this larger discussion of a standard of living for farmers is often suppressed and stigmatized, which does not benefit the mental and physical health of overworked farmers. With market uncertainty and high costs of production and investment, beginning farmers require more monetary support to strengthen their operations and futures. It’s also necessary to expand the parameters of access to capital for beginning farmers to address affordable housing, paying off student loan debt, access to healthcare, and maintaining a livable wage.

Land access is the key for beginning farmers to

answer their calls for action. Their motivation to be a part of the farming community should not be neglected. They are often rooted in addressing the climate crisis and building a more socially just future for generations to come. Farming provides a tangible way for them to connect with the fruits of their labor, empower their communities and increase local food access. Farmland can be utilized as a classroom to educate community members on food sovereignty, which can in turn lead to more economic mobility and empowerment. Confidence and security in land tenure are imperative for their individual and communal long-term sustainability. To make the profession lucrative to young people, there must be a goal toward addressing barriers that limit these motivations.

In an agricultural system in need of more beginning farmers, I often wonder how viable and inviting a future in farming is. Why should young farmers continue down a career path that is set up for their failure?

To allow the growth of collective young farmer visions, we must hope that the systems upholding the limitations of beginning farmers are not static. We must be bold in envisioning a different farming reality, and after listening to other beginning farmers there is a collective vision that a better, more just and resilient, system is possible. The policy should match this vision. Beginning farmers should be supported by society so that we can thrive and, in turn, support our communities, and not be in conflict with the system’s design. If I were to ask a legislator to consider being a farmer with the current passion, urgency, and resources of a young Black farmer, would they want in? Why are they likely to decline such an offer? What do we need our food system to be in order for this farmer’s standard of living to be worthy of a legislator’s consideration? In the time leading up to the Farm Bill’s reauthorization, it is imperative that we give attention to what beginning farmers are facing and empower their future with meaningful change. Structural transformation is paramount for beginning and BIPOC farmers. Current structures for land ownership, access to capital, crop insurance and consolidation need to be reestablished to reflect farmer’s needs. If we hope to maintain a right to nourishing food, we must listen and redirect, toward resilience. In a system demanding fortitude from an individual, I am asking for justice... for the collective.

Sarah Greenberg, she/her, is a Policy Intern for OEFFA and a current farmer in Portland, Oregon, and can be reached at sarah.m.greenberg@gmail.com



What Materials Qualify for Use in Organic Production? The Role of OMRI

Editorial note: Soon after the National Organic Program launched its accreditation of organic certifiers, those agencies realized that it would be much more efficient if there were one central organization that evaluated materials for use in organic production instead of each agency trying to do it themselves. The Organic Materials Review Institute performs this function.

By Roger Plant

What in the world is OMRI anyway?

Headquartered in Eugene, Oregon, OMRI (the Organic Materials Review Institute) is in the business of helping ensure the integrity of inputs for organic use.

At OMRI we follow the science showing that organic farming practices are good for the planet, for people, and for the farmer’s bottom line. OMRI does not take political positions or sides in the debates concerning organics. We see needs and opportunities and focus on the known facts when it comes to input materials for organic production. We see that there is a growing number of consumers who want food grown without a bunch of synthetics. We see agriculture operations that want to be gentle on the soil and water that they and their neighbors rely on. OMRI strives to meet the needs of both consumers and the Ag industry.

OMRI works to develop clear information and guidance about input materials so that producers know which products are appropriate for organic operations. Created over 25 years ago by certifiers, OMRI is a nonprofit that provides an independent review of products, such as fertilizers, pest controls, livestock health care products, and numerous other inputs that are intended for use in certified organic production and processing.

Over these 25 years, thousands of operators (organic and non-organic) have used OMRI Listed® products because they are credible and meet the rigors established, regulated and enforced by the USDA.

OMRI’s mission is “to support the growth and trust of the global organic community through expert, independent and transparent verification of input materials.” By focusing on exclusively reviewing input materials, we make certifiers’ jobs simpler and the certification process more efficient for organic producers. The expert scrutiny we bring to the sector helps to minimize fraud and errors. We work hard to help the industry maintain an impartial, level, trustworthy playing field. If you want a greener product—be it more nutritious, more ecologically sustainable, or more socially responsible—we have a role to play in making it possible.

But it’s not an all-or-nothing proposition.

Maybe you consider yourself staunchly pro-organic. Or maybe you’re more focused on particular values within organics, than the movement as a whole. Maybe you simply want to avoid fouling up the water because you love to fish. But no matter your level of organic enthusiasm, ask any farmer and you won’t get a debate on this one point: “It’s not easy being green.”

In the world of ag, organic operators have the ongoing challenge of what input products (fertilizers, soil amendments, compost, livestock feedstocks, sanitizers) they can use, without risk of losing their USDA organic certification. Or if they’re not certified, maybe operators are simply seeking a cleaner or more environmentally benign product. In either case, it’s often a difficult, time-consuming hunt to find the right products.

OMRI works to make being green a little easier.

Part of what OMRI does is help operators find that elusive truth by making sure input products with organic integrity are easy to find and identify.

By developing clear information and guidance about input materials and re-evaluating our processes on an ongoing, regular basis, OMRI helps assure our stakeholders which products are appropriate for organic operations. Our information is definitive. Our data is truthful.

We support producers and input manufacturers by reviewing their products against the organic standards to assure that they meet those manufacturer’s goals. Acceptable products are then OMRI Listed and appear in the printed OMRI Products Lists® and on OMRI’s free website searchable database, so it is easier for farmers, inspectors and certifiers to find organically compliant input products.

The OMRI.org online database, available in English and Spanish, is a powerful resource for those seeking inputs to meet their or their client’s needs. We even have a YouTube video (tinyurl.com/4xeaxtb7) that explains how to best utilize our website database search engine. The video shows how to browse and verify that you are using OMRI Listed® products, as well as how to find generic materials allowed for use under the U.S., Canadian and Mexican organic standards.

So, we think organics really matter and that there should be help in making it happen. And maybe the sky isn’t falling. And definitely, farmers can make a difference. And whether you are currently active in organic production, transitioning to organics, or are just looking to keep the fish happy, OMRI can give you solid information you can count on.



(One Chicken at a Time - from A-12)

we have a new plan, and as you may have guessed, it starts with a chicken-led revolution.

Starting From the Bottom Up

At Main Street Project, the focus on Latino families as a strategic starting point for launching regenerative poultry and grain systems was not coincidental. It became key to our strategy for movement building and market development. It was important to start with the natural geo-evolutionary blueprint of the chicken. But it was equally important that the starting point takes into consideration the natural ability of immigrant farmers, especially Latinos, as a social impact foundation of our theory of change.

Each production unit that now serves as the foundation of this system was designed from the perspective of an aspiring immigrant or low-income farmer. We believed that by taking this approach, we would make the system structurally compatible with any farmer in the world and especially in the U.S.

The key was to design the production unit as simple and as complete as possible so that any farmer could start, grow and scale production systemically under a controlled and managed process. To analyze existing ideas, we developed a set of core principles, criteria, indicators and verifiers that guided the discovery of what others were doing, while also guiding our own design process.

Establishing the Foundation of the Poultry-Centered Regenerative Design

To design, you need a standard. But to get to a standard, you first need to know the departing and destination points. From the beginning, in 2007, we were clear on two things. First, we were going to design from the perspective of nature to the extent that we could decipher it. Second, we wanted to design with people in mind: consumers, farmers and farmworkers as the primary beneficiaries of the system.

If we did these two things right, we would get the farm economics right. Contrary to what some believe, we don't get regenerative farming right by getting only the economics right. As Charles Wal-

ters of Acres U.S.A. said in 1970, "To be economical agriculture must be ecological."

Following this logic, we used our system-level principles, criteria, indicators and verifiers to organize an ecological, economic and social high-impact design framework. The production unit details result from this process and give the farmer a concrete project-level engagement platform.

We base the farm-level strategy on the number of production units a farmer wants to deploy on their farm. A region of farm clusters within a state serves as the foundation for building support infrastructure such as processing facilities, value-added products and distribution. Clusters linked and structured within a larger multistate regional strategy anchor the building of industry-level infrastructure such as trade, commerce, financing and governance.

We don't create the process by which one organizes an industry; we simply weave our system into existing and known processes, with the proper adaptations, to lead to our own predefined destination—a regenerative agriculture and food industry. Critical to this process is the fact that a farm is not a system.

A farm is a project that if properly designed and aligned, can become part of a system design. For this to happen, the farm must meet a set of standardized practices, procedures, accountability, scientific protocols and measurable outcomes. It must consistently produce a predictable scalable output (food or raw material product) no matter where it is located. Then, production can be aggregated with other producers and form the basis for a system design.

The Poultry-Centered Regenerative System Standard Our standard fully integrates the environment for the chicken, the social foundation for the system deployment and the economics of farming and food industry management. Starting with nature's blueprint, we weave the economic and social together to build a framework that delivers an integrated standard.

By design, our poultry production model breaks out of the traditional mold of the fossil-based industrial revolution that delivered us the current system. We have created a blueprint for a broad and synchronized model that can integrate fully with the new "Internet of Things" revolution.

Similarly, global trends are rapidly coming to life as a "third industrial revolution" emerges out of Europe and China. What this does is link the ecosystem's benefits while integrating tracking and management technology that can aggregate ecological, social and economic data at virtually no aggregated costs to the system. This delivers a fully transparent system that consumers, farmers and everyone else can access.

The Production Unit

A production unit (PU) represents a snapshot of the system at a point where the farmer can make basic economic and social sense of what he/she is about to deploy. Ecologically, the PU allows the farmer to calculate the inflow of energy into the production process in the form of feed, grain and other inputs, and the amount of outflow of energy in the form of eggs, meat, nuts and fruits.

This forms the foundation for business planning at all levels. The PU comprises a shelter, two fenced-in paddocks, perennial and annual crops and other common poultry-related infrastructure to manage feed and watering. The paddocks are designed to vertically integrate as much production as possible while providing a multitude of other benefits that will be outlined later.

The PU is critical when calculating ecological impact. Anything that goes through the production process can be measured across the board no matter if a PU is in Minnesota, Mexico or Guatemala - wherever operations are already underway and the PU design has undergone full adaptation to those specific ecological, economic and social conditions. The cornerstones of the PU are the:

- Shelter: primarily protects the chickens during the night and during inclement weather
- Paddocks: provide a ranging area
- Protective perennial and annual canopy: directly defines the distance the chickens roam from

their shelter and creates the foundation for the management of chicken behavior. This includes stress management, ranging distance and temperature to name a few

- Sprouting systems: probably the most important of all, given that the cost of raising a pound of meat or a dozen eggs is significant (upward of 70 percent of the total cost)

How Cheap Grain Has Influenced America's Food System

To understand this last point properly, it is important to clarify the role of cheap grain in the takeover of America's food system. Taxpayer-insured grain production - mostly corn and soybeans - keeps feed grain prices low for conventional farms.

The "external costs" are passed onto future generations in the form of degenerated landscapes, polluted groundwater systems and health issues related to the use of toxic chemicals. Taxpayers foot the bill under a system that transfers all the costs to society, and all the benefits to industry.

As for farmers, today's farm bill failure doesn't really help farmers. Instead, it encourages overproduction with a systematically structured flow of public funding that primarily enriches agribusiness disguised as a public benefit. Farmers across the country are left holding the risky part of the farm industry. According to Christopher Leonard, author of *The Meat Racket*, only about 5 cents of the price a consumer pays at the store for a pound of chicken ends up reaching the farmer.

The rest stays in the industrial chain. From that meager operating income, the farmer has to pay for the full cost of production such as their own salaries, farm labor, the interest to the bank, and building improvements and fixes - some of them mandated by the industry. This system effectively creates a firewall so no one can accuse a corporation of getting direct payments from the government.

Shifting the process by how grain is turned into eggs or meat, and how farmers, farm and food-chain workers benefit from the system is critical to redesigning any sector of the food industry. Along with proper engineering and careful integration of natural efficiencies, we can deliver a blueprint for a different way of producing poultry that can be standardized and replicated, and that is fully adaptable to the regenerative nature of different ecologies, cultures and economic landscapes.

The Importance of Protective Canopy When Raising Free-Range Chickens

Each PU we design, and the standard that goes with it, has been carefully structured to deliver ecological, economic and social returns on investment. It is from that position of strength, transparency and integrity that we plan to launch a "chicken revolution" as our Guatemalan counterparts have renamed this idea.

Chickens are extremely responsive to and aware of their environment. As we fine-tuned the production unit's management process, we learned that the canopy was not only essential for them to relax and roam most of the day outside but also to protect them from aerial predators. The canopy also cools the soil by blocking the sun, which increases the relative humidity.

When all of these conditions are added up, the result is a perfect environment for large-scale natural sprouting of grain exactly where the chickens want it. Not only did we find ways to scale that source of food, but the chickens also supplement their diet more significantly by taking in more biomass, nutrients and water volume from sprouts, thus reducing the extra feed that they need when free-ranging.

By eliminating the need for industrial GMO grain production, this system not only reduces pollution but actually mitigates it. The trees' uptake of nutrients from the soil reduces and eventually eliminates pollution of water, soil and air. Trees also add value by helping to reverse climate change. The chemicals they emit into the atmosphere help stabilize rain patterns. In addition, trees sequester carbon from the atmosphere and produce oxygen, fiber, fruits, nuts

(continued on next page)

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(One Chicken at a Time - from A-16)

and many other foods and ecological benefits.

A Return to Slow-Growth Poultry Breeds

For meat bird PUs, we selected slow-growth breeds that range well rather than the genetically degenerated industrial chickens. The industrial meat bird has lost its ability to properly range and live a healthy natural life. These birds are bred for confinement. Their body proportions and the way their organs develop make them unfit for free-ranging systems.

They have an incredible capacity to gain weight and with it, the need for a sedentary confined life. All of these characteristics are counter to the foundational principles and concept of regenerative agriculture.

In our system, the maximum stock density per PU for broilers is 2 square feet per bird. No more than 1,500 birds are permitted in each building. In northern cold climates, up to three slow-growth flocks (harvested at 70 days on average) can be raised delivering a total of around 4,500 birds per PU. For the Midwest ecology (different outdoor spacing and density are required for different ecologies), each bird must be allowed at least 42 square feet of ranging space or a total of 21 square feet per paddock.

In general, the unit must be laid out so that the farther corners are not further than 200 feet from the shelter's exit doors. Ranging paddocks with perimeter fences farther than that will require more weed control, and birds will exceed the expected use of the areas closer to the shelter. Feed is not allowed indoors except during their four-week brooding period and during inclement weather. The rest of the time, feeders are fanned out farther and farther from the building to encourage ranging.

For egg layers, the PU consists of 3 acres of ranging area divided into two paddocks. Shelter requirement is set at a minimum of 1.8 square feet per bird. Maximum flock size is 3,000 hens. Shelter must be equipped with perches and other related infrastructure that is spelled out in the production manual provided to farmers after they complete their training.

A Farmer's Cluster

With the PU defined, farms can be designed and other parts of the system integrated. First comes poultry processing or egg processing, then value-added processing and then distribution. In most of the country, there are no small custom processors that can handle more than a few thousand chickens a day.

Most of the processing infrastructure in the country is owned and controlled by the industrial system and is unavailable to serve alternative systems. The need to plan clusters of farmers instead of single-farm operations emanates from these challenges.

Compared with a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO), one of our clusters represents a small number of animals. Unfortunately, the weakest link defines the strength of the whole chain, and so it is with food chain design. In the case of our regenerative poultry and grain system, the weakest link is processing.

Under the current system, it is impossible to dream of setting up a large-scale poultry processing facility. However, it is possible to design a starting point that allows for a group to focus their energy on this area for each farm cluster.

Taking the System to Scale

As we approach the 2018 growing season, we sit on a significant number of accomplishments. We moved from prototyping and proof-of-concept to the launch of the Main Street Project's central farm in Northfield. This farm will train and develop the capacity of a new generation of farmers throughout the Midwest with a focus on training the first farmer cluster in Southeast Minnesota.

Another important achievement we are ushering in this year is the launch of Regeneration Farms, the first commercial farm utilizing the system.

But we still face some challenges when it comes to scaling up the system. To scale means more than deploying a regional cluster of farmers. We can't just assume what scale in the poultry industry is - it has to be studied, measured and defined. The magnitude of each little detail in the industrial poultry sys-

tem is simply breathtaking, from how many tens of thousands of birds are confined in a building to the millions of egg layers that go into a single caged egg production facility.

We studied this model and came to the realization that in order to scale up, we also need to organize at scale. Back in 2015, I became a founding member of Regeneration International, a global network of scientists, farmers, business leaders and grassroots organizations that also saw the need to organize at scale with an industry redesign at the center of their thinking.

In Late October 2017, and throughout the first quarter of 2018, in partnership with these new organizations, we started organizing Regeneration Midwest. The operating goal of this initiative is to organize a 12-state coalition to bring together a regenerative agriculture industry leadership team. This team will then set forth the direction and assemble the infrastructure to bring regenerative agriculture to scale in the Midwest.

To accomplish its purpose, Regeneration Midwest will seek to move resources and acquire market presence at a scale sufficient to unleash not only a Southeast Minnesota farmer cluster but a multitude of clusters networked and supported across the 12 Midwest states. The blueprint for each of these clusters is the same, and the only limit is the market and the combined ability to expand, capture and sustain it.

The Regeneration Midwest platform also brings together other regenerative agriculture sectors and combines them for a higher impact across the region. Within the Regeneration Midwest organizational structure, a larger team has been engaged to organize and deploy regeneration chapters in each state. From this effort, we are now engaging farmers in Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Other states are also in the process of organizing and consolidating their state-based coalitions.

Our current estimates are that with at least one farmer cluster per state, and 250 meat chicken production units per cluster, we can reshape the flow of around \$450 million of poultry-centered commerce. To this plan, we would aggregate the economic impact brought about through grain production and the integration of other regenerative sectors such as grass-fed cattle, pork and turkey.

How You Can Participate in Building a Regenerative Agriculture System

You can help us finance the people working to organize this system by making sure you know your farmer, know your food and "vote with your fork." Consumer choice is the foundation of the path to a better system. No matter where our compass places us, we need to start investing our daily food dollars, our retirement funds, our school, university and hospital budgets in a different system.

Every year, farmers are joining the regenerative movement because consumers choose to support them. Some start by buying from their local Community Supported Agriculture programs, farmers' markets and the like. Others start urban gardens or switch to organic foods, or become members of a food cooperative.

For farmers who want to join the system or nonprofits willing to engage in state-level organizing within the Midwest states, please reach out to the organizers of Regeneration Midwest by emailing Info@regenerationinternational.org. You can support Regeneration Midwest by making a tax-deductible donation to Regeneration International.

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin is the chief strategy officer at Main Street Project and a founding member of Regeneration International. Ronnie Cummins is board chair of Regeneration International and international director of the Organic Consumers Association.

This article was originally published on Mercola.com.

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(Chicken rescue - from A-14)

her in a rapid twirl. I quickly placed my hands on Gracie's shoulders and said, "Gracie, bunnies do not like that!"

"But, we're dancing!"

"Put her down!" Edy chimed in from the back, her voice panicking.

Gracie put the bunny back into the tub and immediately we could sense something was wrong. She was breathing rapidly and collapsed to lay on her side.

"Gracie! You killed it!"

Gracie immediately got quiet and retreated.

Writing this makes me so sad, because of how guilty I know she must have felt. But, she was only three years old! You can't blame a young child for wanting to dance with her friend.

Unfortunately for the bunny and for Gracie, the bunny did end up dying and staying with us in the car for two more hours until we got home. Gracie was feeling all the guilt in the world – as a three-year-old, this is traumatic! Damn, we were cruel to her. I wish I could change that.

—
My sisters were not with me the summer Meg, Casey, and I hatched the plan to break into the chicken coop. It was one of the first times I was away from family for an extended period of time. With no sisters to watch out for, it was my summer to get in good trouble.

Meg and Casey stood guard behind the coop where they could alert me if the farmer came down the dirt road. I went up to the fence and hooked a foot in the chain links, hoisting one leg over the other landing in the chicken pen. All the chickens flocked to me looking for food. "Shoo!" I waved them away, "You're drawing attention to me! I'm trying to rescue your babies!" Their clucking made me nervous that the farmer would hear, "Shush!"

I pushed through the chickens toward the coop. Finally, I stepped up to the heavy wooden door and leaned in. It scraped open across wood shavings and loose dirt. I stepped into darkness on chicken poop and was surrounded by fifteen calm hens, staring at me with their black, skeptical eyes. No one moved an inch, including me.

I had no plan for once I was inside. What was my next move? Do I touch them? Won't they peck at me? Slowly moving towards one with orange and white fluffy feathers, a Rhode Island Red, I brought my hand up to her belly. She wasn't budging. When I realized I would have to pick them up, I noticed there was a net leaning against the wall next to me. I figured this must be how you get the hens off their eggs.

Grabbing the net, I started to poke at the hens. They did not like this. Eventually, I think my annoying persistence made them start to stand up ready to attack. "Rap, rap, rap!" I whipped my head around. Meg and Casey were too short to reach the window, so I poked my head out. Their heads were reaching around from behind the coop. I looked back at them with wide eyes.

"I'm almost there! Is she coming?"

"No! We just wanted to test you!"

"Okay... next one is for real!"

I marched back inside with determination. I was convinced now that I had the power to do this. I had to prove it to myself and to Meg and Casey that I wasn't afraid. Grabbing the net with white knuckles, I nudged the chickens gently.

With a little perseverance, and speaking softly to them, the chickens began to stand up. When their breasts were a few inches off the nest, I quickly swiped my hand underneath feeling for a smooth, warm egg. I grabbed them gently, holding them in my palms for a pause and then sliding them into my sweatshirt pocket. Soon, I had an overflowing pocket of eggs. I held some in my left hand and was interrupted... "SMACK!" Meg and Casey sent a reverberating tap on the window, louder this time.

I stepped quickly outside, dropping the net clumsily.

My legs began to weaken as I made my way over to hop the fence and get myself out of sight. I missed a step and grabbed the fence with both hands to stabilize myself. "Crack!" A wet, cool sensation began to drip up my arm from my hands.

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Meg!? Casey!?"

They didn't answer.

I looked up and could see the blue truck coming down the long dirt road. It was getting closer, billowing dust-up in its path. In a few moments, I would have my chance as the road turned toward the woods. I tucked both my hands up into my sleeves. As quickly as I could, I leaned against the fence, flipping my legs over my head, and landing in a heap on the other side. "Crack!" Oh, no not again.

The blue truck came out from around the corner of the woods, just as I was standing up. My legs were numb at this point and I couldn't find my voice. I waved my arms awkwardly, trying to keep the broken eggs from spilling out. Egg yolk started to drip further up to my armpit. The truck came to a slow stop.

The farmer swung the door open wide, turning its loud rumbling off. I saw her boots touch the ground first. They were worn, with straws of hay stuck to the heel. Does she know?

"Hi, there! Come to check the chickens before me, huh?" she smiled.

The tone of her voice reminded me of my elementary school principal, firm but fair. She had the power to make you feel guilty with a phrase as simple as "I'm disappointed."

Say something! I was frozen so I just spread my arms out low and shrugged my shoulders. I raised one corner of my mouth into a half smile and kicked at the dirt. My eyes stared intently at a single chicken feather that was skipping slowly across the ground. Could I act any more guilty?

She walked closer, "Would you mind waiting for a second? I have something for you. Follow me." With ease, she pushed open the chicken gate. Hadn't that been locked before? I followed her back in, stepping around the chick poop. We passed the net on the ground.

"Huh... I don't remember leaving this here." She grabbed it and tucked it in its rightful place leaning against the coop.

Looking at me she began, "So! Every morning, I come to check for eggs. We usually have eggs and toast with strong coffee. Nothing like a fresh sunny-side-up egg to wake you up!"

I nodded and remained silent. Guilty.

"Anyhow... let me check the girls to see if we got any." Inside the coop, she fearlessly grabbed each chicken from underneath. Some let out a loud cluck, but otherwise, they seemed unbothered by the disruption.

"Well, that's interesting. Usually, I can find at least six." Looking around with a puzzled look, she shrugged, "Hmmm... oh well, better luck tomorrow. At least, I've got one I can send home with you."

My eyes went wide. "No!" I blurted. Realizing my utter outburst, I recoiled, "I mean... No, thank you! I don't eat baby chicks!"

She laughed, "Oh honey! These aren't going to hatch. Ever!" She saw the confusion on my face, "These eggs aren't fertilized, because there is no male rooster. I keep my rooster over there, separate from the hens." She pointed towards the front of the farm at this vibrantly colored bird, standing tall but alone.

"Fertilized?" I was starting to wonder if the eggs in my hand had baby chicks, their broken bodies spilling from the shells. I wanted so badly to come clean, so she could quell my worry.

"Okay? So, you want to take this one home and eat it for breakfast?" she stuck out her hand, cradling the egg.

"Sure." I reached out my hand with it tucked inside my sweatshirt sleeve. She looked puzzled by the gesture, but gently laid the egg on top of my hand. I quickly slid the egg into my sweatshirt pocket, where I could feel the yolk from before soaking through the fabric, just below my belly button. Did she notice the bulge and wetness of my sweatshirt pocket? And, where were Casey and Meg?

I hear a twig snap behind me. The farmer looked past my shoulder, "Oh! Yancey's kid! How's it going?" She shouted towards the coop.

Meg, already looking for a way out of the farm, replied with a higher-than-usual pitch, "Oh! Good... fine, really! Ya!" Casey grabbed Meg's hand and pulled her past us, "We have to get home!" I looked desperately after them.

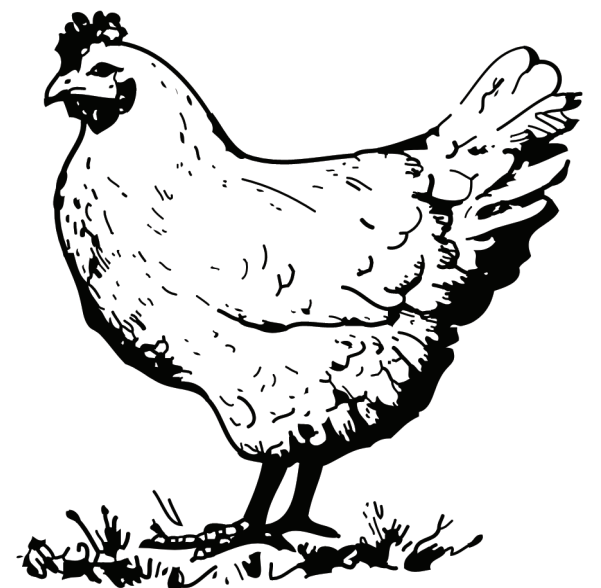
The farmer realized that was my crew. She nodded and waved me off, "Come back tomorrow and we'll see if we can get more eggs!" I replied, "OK, thanks!" I could hear Casey and Meg whispering ahead as I ran to catch up. They shouted out both in unison, "What happened!?"

When we returned to the house, Meg, the aspiring veterinarian, started toward the backyard where she had set up a home for the baby chicks. Did I have the sense to tell her these eggs will never hatch? No, I did not. But, later that day the question would come up. And, her mom, the "nature lady", would explain to us why we needed to give up our rescue plan.

By the end of this adventure, I learned two important lessons. One, it is often more effective to show, rather than tell. I would bet my favorite pen, that the farmer knew the entire time what we were up to. Rather than telling me that I was wrong and that we were never going to hatch the eggs, she showed me. She welcomed me in, showing her connection to everything going on inside that fence. When she said each morning she has sunny-side-up eggs and toast, the guilt crept up from my stomach. When I was stealing the eggs, though I didn't know this before, I was stealing her food. Two, never go poking around in someone else's chicken coop Oh, and bonus number three is that Meg's mother taught us a bit about the birds and the bees.

I am thankful for these lessons. The day marks an important memory because it contributed to my curiosity about the connections between people and nature, specifically about the ways small farms hold relationships with worlds that are happening all around them. The world of the chickens that are clucking around day and night, having their own conversations, feelings, and relationships. These are aspects of life that I am only just beginning to understand more as I learn to see closer. I am closing in on my third decade here and am observing the happenings around me with my eyes and heart wide open.

Casey Merkle, she/hers, is a volunteer coordinator at the Barrington Farm School in Barrington, RI.





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- High Falls Food Co-op, High Falls
- Kingston Food Co-op, Kingston
- Newburgh Food Co-op, Newburgh

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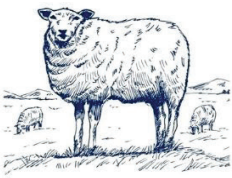
- Urban Greens Co-op Market, Providence

VERMONT

- Brattleboro Food Co-op, Brattleboro
- Buffalo Mountain Food Co-op, Hardwick
- Caledonia Food Co-op, St Johnsbury
- City Market, Onion River Co-op, Downtown & South End, Burlington
- Co-op Food Stores, White River Junction
- Hunger Mountain Co-op, Montpelier
- Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, Middlebury
- Morrisville Food Co-op, Morrisville
- Plainfield Food Co-op, Plainfield
- Putney Food Co-op, Putney
- Rutland Area Food Co-op, Rutland
- Springfield Food Co-op, Springfield
- Upper Valley Food Co-op, White River Junction

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