

Farmers and Consumers Together

N.E. Farmers Union and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association

BY ERBIN CROWELL

At the annual winter conference of the Vermont Northeast Organic Farming Association earlier this year, author and activist Bill McKibben congratulated those gathered on a cold, windy day in Burlington, Vt., for their work in building more sustainable local economies. But he also made an appeal for us to think more broadly in terms of our potential impact on the debate around local economies, sustainable farming, and climate change. “We need you not only out in the field,” he said, “but we need you working politically.”

Our food co-ops have long been leaders in community economics, local food systems, and, as illustrated in the most recent issue of *Cooperative Grocer* (“Showing the Love to Farms and Producers,” #154, May–June, 2011), developing more collaborative, mutually supporting relationships with local farmers. At the same time, we know that lasting change in the food system will depend on stepping outside of the store and engaging in the public dialog on food, economics, and the government policies that shape agriculture from the national level to our own communities.

On the horizon are two major opportunities for the food co-op community to make our voice heard. How will we take advantage of the opportunity presented by the United Nations and its declaration of 2012 as the International Year of Co-ops to communicate the potential of cooperative enterprise to respond to needs and opportunities across our economy? What are the key opportunities for co-ops and their members to impact debate around the Farm Bill, which will also come up for negotiation next year in an atmosphere of budget cuts and partisan contention? And how can we collaborate with farmers and other producers in this work, amplifying their voices as we strengthen our own?

Farmers and consumers, together

The Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA), a network of more than 20 established and startup food co-ops across Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, has gained momentum over the past year, moving beyond dialog and into action around our shared vision of a thriving regional economy, rooted in a healthy, just, and sustainable food system and a vibrant community of cooperative enterprise. As a growing community of more than 80,000 co-op members, we contribute to this vision every day through our own purchasing decisions and through the long-term relationships that our co-ops build with farmers and producers.



More recently, the NFCA has been working with like-minded organizations to begin to influence government policies that affect agriculture in our region. As part of this effort, we have joined our collective voice with that of producers in our region by becoming an affiliate member of the recently launched New England Farmers Union (NEFU). A regional chapter of the National Farmers Union (NFU), NEFU is a grassroots organization working to protect and enhance the lives and livelihoods of family farmers, fishermen, and foresters.

The NFU is a national association of over 200,000 members—farmers and nonfarmers—founded in 1902 to advance the voice of family farmers in the United States. The organization has a long history of progressive policies for rural communities, and prides itself on its organizational symbol: a triangle with “education” at the base, and “legislation” and “cooperation” on each side.

It is this common bond of cooperation that makes the Farmers Union a unique partner for food co-ops and other cooperatives active in the food system. And in our own region, food co-ops have been instrumental in helping NEFU get off the ground as founding organizational members, joining individual farmers and consumers, producer associations, and cooperative partners such as Organic Valley.

Food system education for food system activism

“There is a gap in what is being heard at the policy level in Washington,” said Chandler Goule, vice president for government relations at the NFU, referring to New England’s unique perspective and agricultural traditions. “Creating a strong New England Farmers Union can help you get your voice heard.”

Goule was speaking during a three-day tour of Vermont and New Hampshire last August, co-sponsored by the NFCA and attended by more than 100 farmers, food co-op members and staff, activists, and legislators’ representatives. The listening sessions, which focused on federal dairy policy,

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were hosted by NFCA member co-ops including Brattleboro Food Co-op, Concord Co-op Market, Hanover Food Co-op, Hunger Mountain Co-op, and Littleton Food Co-op. Financial supporters of the tour included farmer co-ops such as Cabot Creamery Co-op and Organic Valley.

The opportunity presented by this kind of dialog across the food system led to an additional tour focused on discussion among farmers and farm advocates, food co-op staff and members, and public health officials on agricultural policy. And as we look toward 2012, NEFU has begun a series of talks on the Farm Bill in collaboration with our food co-ops as partners and hosts and food co-op members as policy advocates.

Education leads to action and, last year, representatives from NFCA member Co-op Food Stores (Hanover Consumer Co-op) traveled on an NEFU sponsored “fly-in” to Washington, D.C., lobbying lawmakers on policy issues that are of particular importance to agriculture and rural communities in our region. “While there is much that remains to be done to keep our nation’s family farms, ranches, and small producers from being run over by big business interests, our time among our New England members of Congress left me hopeful and encouraged,” said Rosemary Fifield, director of education and member services at the Co-op Food Stores, reflecting on the trip. “It also reinforced, for me, the importance of making personal contact with our ▶

◀ legislators as concerned consumers and voters.”

By adding the voices of our food co-ops with those of producers, we can increase our shared impact, speaking to legislators as stakeholders in the food system as a whole. As part of this effort, the NFCA is encouraging individual member-owners of our food co-op to join NEFU as well.

“We have a story to tell,” says Annie Cheatham, NEFU president. “The launch of the New England Farmers Union makes it possible for people to amplify the voice of agriculture in our region—the farmer and the consumer—so that policymakers understand our unique needs and goals when they write farm and food policies. Together, we can realize our vision of preserving New England’s capacity to feed and fuel itself.”

A common cooperative bond

NEFU’s mission is complementary to the vision of the NFCA and includes increasing the economic viability of family farms and fishing operations, fostering the development of sustainable food production, investing in nutrition education, and increasing connections between farmers and consumers. But there is something else about the perspective and history of the Farmers Union that makes it a unique partner in the food system: “The National Farmers Union has been working for more than 100 years to preserve the cooperative business structure and to provide cooperative support



and education,” says NFU President Roger Johnson. “And we will continue to be an advocate for cooperative business.”

In fact, the Farmers Union played a key role in the passage of legislation in the 1920s that protected farmers’ rights to join together through agricultural co-ops and thus increased the bargaining power of producers in the economy and food system. For food co-ops considering how they may collaborate with family farmers seeking to sustain their livelihoods and communities, it is worth noting that a majority of the country’s 2 million farmers are members of about 3,000 agricultural co-ops. Looking toward 2012, this represents an opportunity for enacting the cooperative principle of collaboration among co-ops and for dialog on a more just, sustainable, and cooperative food system.

As an affiliate member of NEFU, the NFCA and our member food co-ops collaborated in the development of the organization’s first policy statement in December of 2010, covering everything from food safety and quality of life to climate change and international trade. Significantly, the policy statement points not only to the important role of co-ops in sustaining the livelihoods of family farmers across generations but also recognizes the “unique role that food co-ops have played in our

region in developing markets for organic, fairly traded and locally sourced foods, and partnering with producers to strengthen local communities.”

This statement also provided a common platform for the NFCA, NEFU, and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-ops to work with allies to successfully challenge controversial “Limited Co-operative Association” legislation that was introduced in the Vermont State Legislature earlier this year. More recently, the NFCA and NEFU have approved resolutions on the United Nations International Year of Co-ops, setting the stage for 2012 and opportunities to “raise the profile of cooperative enterprise, to demonstrate the benefits of co-ops in building local ownership and wealth, and to apply the cooperative model to new challenges and opportunities in our communities.”

Looking forward

“New England Farmers Union is proud of our alliance with NFCA, particularly since both of our organizations are founded on the principle of building collective power to create change,” says NEFU Executive Director Winton Pitcoff. “As we look toward 2012, we are already working together to mobilize farmers and consumers around the Farm Bill and the Year of Co-ops, and we are looking forward to working together closely as we educate and advocate for federal policy that supports New England farmers.”

As an association of food co-ops with a combined membership of more than 80,000 people who care about food and farming, the NFCA can be a powerful voice for change in our region. And by joining together, consumers and farmers can have a stronger influence on the policies that affect our food system. Imagine the impact we could have on food policy and cooperative development if we were able to collaborate on the national level. The International Year of Cooperatives may be just the opportunity we need. ■

For more information on the NFCA and our collaboration with the Farmers Union, please visit www.nfca.coop.

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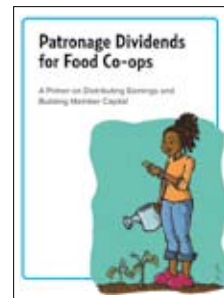
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