

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

# Flash Back, Flash Forward



Events are accelerating. Recently, discussing the early years of many of today's food co-ops, a friend remarked how much faster things seem to be occurring. The pace of change can also reveal

the interconnectedness of events. Undertaking a review of much of the best previous work by food co-ops (at [www.cooperativegrocer.coop](http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop)), I was reminded how much has been done to get us to where we are.

Consider organics. In co-ops and the marketplace at large, organic production has grown and received increasing support, at least until recently. Yet public revenues supporting organics are still tiny—compared with subsidies for corn and bean commodity production, organic gets much less than its proportion in acreage, and much less than its benefits would warrant. Conventional commodity production, on the other hand, gets the subsidies but is neither ecologically nor financially sustainable.

Now, the Department of Agriculture has outraged organic advocates by betraying earlier promises to restrict plantings of genetically engineered (GE) alfalfa, a major feed crop that readily cross-pollinates. Given genetic drift, over time seed without GE components may become less available. Consequently, some organic dairy and livestock producers may not be able to maintain certification since organic standards prohibit genetically engineered ingredients. Unregulated alfalfa strains—plus sugar beets, in violation of a court order—will be added to GE crops in corn, soy, canola, and cotton. Organic advocates are fighting back, but industrial dominance of the food economy continues—diminishing soil, water, biodiversity, and rural culture.

That damage contrasts with the green shoots of local and organic farming. Cleaner, more diverse, and less-energy-intensive food production continues to gain more recognition. Along with farming and community gardening, many allied projects that are focused on education and organizing public demand are helping build the foundations of healthier food economies.

Food co-ops continue to extend those foundations. Reports in this issue offer examples of outreach to co-op shoppers, schoolchildren, and the community. And in our next issue, we'll highlight co-ops supporting local growers.

The Department of Agriculture has outraged organic advocates by betraying earlier promises.

## What's the message?

For more interconnectedness, consider Egypt, where as I write (early February) a brutal dictator has been forced out. A nation with a growing population and high unemployment, a large recipient of military weaponry and money, it is importing most of its food and is now a net energy importer as well. Add inflating costs for fuel and huge increases in food prices, and you have a recipe for revolt.

The U.S., like Egypt, is dependent on cheap oil and cheap electricity, made possible by socializing much of the costs. But the price of those fuels is growing, and more costly fuel results in more costly food. Here again, the U.S. is NOT exceptional, despite that enduring myth. Denial is not just a river in Egypt.

The food industry, with USDA support, is using almost all the corn and bean crops for ethanol (39 percent of corn in 2010) or livestock feed. This makes food for human consumption more expensive while accelerating resource depletion. Meanwhile, the system generates speculator profits, supports massive consumption of grain-fed meat, and encourages driving as if there were no tomorrow.

Despite the dominant system, many local food economies are rising on a wave of interest in better health and better communities. The U.S., too, faces resource limits and must change social practices, including distribution of wealth.

During this economic decline, people are stressed and communities are threatened. We need solutions based on solidarity and cooperation, but necessarily with less consumption and less debt. Arguably, life can be better that way—but conveying the message is a marketing challenge and a political challenge.

It's all one world. Finite resources, from soil and water to fossil fuels, are becoming more costly to extract. Conservation in fuel use and food production is an immediate as well as a long-term remedy. If we really want people not just to shop but to “think globally, act locally,” co-ops must help explain why as well as how. Food provides plenty of avenues for those conversations.

On many critical issues, leaders are afraid to present a call for conservation. In avoiding that, they just further burden the future. Warnings of problems, and demonstrations that better practices are available, are the responsibility of organizations whose leaders and members are willing to speak up and deepen the conversations. ■

## CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS ISSUE

**Ava Churchill** graduated from UC Davis in 2009 with a B.A. in World Trade and Latin American Studies; she hopes to use skills acquired as an intern at the California Center for Cooperatives to develop worker cooperatives in her community ([ava@cofed.org](mailto:ava@cofed.org)). **PAGE 6**



**Julie Cross** is education coordinator at Davis Food Co-op in Davis, Calif. ([jcross@davisfood.coop](mailto:jcross@davisfood.coop)). **PAGE 18**



**Thane Joyal** practices law in Syracuse, N.Y., and provides support and training to cooperative boards through CDS Consulting Co-op ([thanejoyal@cdsconsulting.coop](mailto:thanejoyal@cdsconsulting.coop)). **PAGE 26**



**Jeanne Lakso** is a marketing program specialist at the National Cooperative Grocers Association ([jeanne.lakso@ncga.coop](mailto:jeanne.lakso@ncga.coop)). **PAGE 14**



**Mark Mulcahy** is a consultant with CDS Consulting Co-op, working on produce operations and management training ([markmulcahy@cdsconsulting.coop](mailto:markmulcahy@cdsconsulting.coop)). **PAGE 12**

Adam Schwartz is vice president of public affairs and member services at the National Cooperative Business Association ([ASchwartz@ncba.coop](mailto:ASchwartz@ncba.coop)). **PAGE 22**



**Carol Spurling**, the outreach and ownership coordinator at the Moscow Food Co-op since 2008, is also a freelance writer, poultry-keeper, cheesemaker, and cinema buff ([outreach@moscowfood.coop](mailto:outreach@moscowfood.coop)). **PAGE 16**

**Susan Stewart** is the organic certification and sustainability coordinator for the Wedge Co-op in Minneapolis, Minn. ([orcc@wedge.coop](mailto:orcc@wedge.coop)). **PAGE 10**

**Dave Swanson** is an attorney in Minneapolis, Minn.; a partner in the firm of Dorsey & Whitney, LLP; and an active member in several cooperative associations ([swanson.dave@dorsey.com](mailto:swanson.dave@dorsey.com)). **PAGE 26**

## Thanks to our sponsors for their additional support

**CDS Consulting Co-op**  
802/387-6013 • [www.cdsconsulting.coop](http://www.cdsconsulting.coop)

**CROPP Cooperative/Organic Valley**  
608/625-2602 • [www.organicvalley.coop](http://www.organicvalley.coop)

**Frontier Natural Products Co-op**  
319/227-7996 • [www.frontier.coop](http://www.frontier.coop)

**National Cooperative Business Association**  
202/638-6222 • [www.ncba.coop](http://www.ncba.coop)

**Once Again Nut Butter**  
888/800-8075 • [www.onceagainbutter.com](http://www.onceagainbutter.com)

**Additional sponsors needed**—contact Dan Nordley, [dan@cooperativegrocer.coop](mailto:dan@cooperativegrocer.coop), 612/436-9177