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ORGANIC RUSH

Asilomar site of ecological farm meeting

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Organic farmers used to find it an easy enough task to paint themselves as participants in a David-and-Goliath struggle against conventional agribusiness.

These days, said Claire Hope Cummings, things aren't so simple.

Wal-Marts and Costcos across the county sell organic produce alongside their conventional choices, and the organics market is booming as more consumers seek out pesticide-free produce through vehicles as varied as restaurants and farmers markets to supermarkets and CSA boxes.

"Sustainable agriculture is the way forward to the future," said Cummings, an environmental journalist from San Rafael who writes about environmental, political and cultural implications of food choices. She is also a former environmental lawyer.

Cummings served as moderator for an opening workshop Thursday at the Ecological Farming Conference at Asilomar Conference Grounds, for a discussion on "Ecological or E. coli? The Future of Organic Farming."

Cummings described an industry at a crossroads, where rapid growth has changed everything from who's doing the farming to where it's being sold -- and increasingly, in what country it originates. Coupled with public fears about food safety in light of E. coli outbreaks, Cummings said there are serious questions facing the industry.

"Eating is an act of faith," said Cummings. "The question is, whom do you trust?"

Cummings and panel speakers Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm in Guinda, and Walter Robb, co-president and chief operating officer of Whole Foods Market, each touched on the need for the industry to address those questions.

These days, organic land acreage, market share for organic products and the number of organic growers are climbing, said Redmond, and a large number of books and articles since last year's Eco-Farm Conference have fueled awareness about what America eats. At the same time, questions are being raised about the industrialization of organic farming and its shift into the mainstream, where organic produce can be found in nearly every supermarket and discount retailers.

Organic growers need to start a discussion among themselves about the ethics of the industry, as well as issues relating to the environment, immigration, labor practices and culture, Redmond said. It's the responsibility of growers not only to stand up for ethics in their own practices, she said, but to keep big retailers from going after "sweatshop" produce grown with Third World labor.

Redmond called for what she called "cross-budding" issues with teachers and members of the labor movement and the medical community, all of whom share a stake in the issues of food production and consumption.

"We need to look beyond our movement," she said. "We need to look beyond food and farming."

Robb said it is time for the organic community to reset its compass in a changing environment, where organics are growing at triple the rate of conventional products and have collective sales of \$50 billion.

Yet all those food sales combined represent a minuscule percentage of food sold and produced, he said.

Robb said 10 percent of organic produce consumed in the U.S. is being grown overseas, a situation he described as "a ticking time bomb" in enforcing organic standards.

As a result, it is time for organic farmers to find consensus and address broader issues affecting their industry rather than quibbling over farm and retail sizes, said Robb. He said he didn't see any inherent reason why big business cannot be responsible.

"The definition of a progressive firing squad is you form a circle and shoot at each other," he said. "It's time to find an era of common purpose."

While there has been tremendous growth in organic farming, Robb said there is room for the market to grow, and in new directions. How workers are treated, what ethics support an organization, are real-world issues in business today, he said.

"There's new stakes in doing business in the 21st century," he said. "Ultimately, it's the consumer driving those changes. It's time for us to reseed ourselves, to resoil ourselves, and to re-soul ourselves as to where we're going."

In its 27th year, the annual Eco-Farm Conference continues its tradition as an event as much about information and updates as it is about networking, through bulletin boards announcing job offers and internships, through an exhibitor marketplace, receptions, mixers, seed swaps, and organic wine tasting.

Mornings start out with yoga sessions and meditation, and a healing center offers massage, Rolfing and other bodywork for participants.

There are Dirt First T-shirts for sale, and Eco-Farm is a place where organic pears sell for 50 cents alongside date bars. Scuffed boots and sweatshirts are more prevalent than suits and ties.

But despite the levity, it's serious business, with workshops on E. coli, biodynamic viticulture, land tenure, grass-roots marketing and immigration.

The conference continues through Saturday morning.

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