

LOCAL CO-OPERATION AMONG SMALL FARMERS

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The homesteading movement in the North Country has begun to move to a new level of cooperation between small farms, with the formation of the Natural Farmers Association of the St. Lawrence Valley. Sharing of work and tools has existed for years at the neighborhood level, with the three most distinct areas being Old DeKalb, Pierce's Corners, and Rossie, with some folks scattered in between.

Though most homesteaders see a need to cooperate more regionally on information sharing, bulk purchasing, and group marketing, these things are very slow in coming. I think the two main obstacles are distance and inexperience.

The first three meetings of the "NFA" were attended by people from as far north-east as Winthrop and as far southwest as Rossie, a range of 60 miles. Moving the meeting location around will help a lot with attendance, but the distance is still inhibiting—especially when you think about the pre-auto days, when folks rarely related to other farmers outside a radius of five miles.



The word "inexperience" might be misinterpreted here. What I mean is that most of us started relatively from scratch with an old run-down farm or just a piece of land, few tools and machines, a tiny fraction of the capital that is invested in the average dairy farm, and a wealth of ignorance. Those who began with a little more capital are now at the stage of providing much of their own needs from working at home and perhaps even selling some vegetables, hay, milk, steers, heifers, honey, cedar posts, maple syrup, firewood, wool, pork, etc. A good deal of trading goes on, too. Those with mortgages or other debts have worked at "straight" jobs, some enjoyable, some not.

At any rate, the whole thing is quite a struggle, and getting things together on the home front is time consuming — immediate survival of the farm is a higher priority than developing cooperative systems with other farms outside of one's neighborhood.

The paradox, of course, is that the benefits of cooperation are important for getting things together on the home front. I will give examples from the three areas mentioned at the beginning:

Information sharing — Here lie the most immediate benefits of getting together and talking. At our three meetings so far, everyone has learned a lot about other people's methods, tools, varieties, markets, sources of supplies, etc. The

ROCK PHOSPHATE BULK PURCHASE

This March we will again be putting together a group order of **Soft Rock Phosphate (SRP)**, which will come directly to Canton (or possibly DeKalb Jct.) from Florida in a freight car. The minimum order is 40 tons, maximum 60. In 1976 we got 45 tons at a cost of \$55/ton. I expect it won't be over \$60 this year (\$3.00 per 100 lbs.). This would include my approximately 10% for organizing the order, cleaning the car, and other expenses. I should have a fairly accurate price and a delivery point by February 1.

Please give me an estimate of your order by February 10. All checks should be in my hands by February 25, and then I will send a bank check to Natural Organic Farmers Association in Vermont, which has the New England dealership and special rates for members. The phosphate should arrive within two weeks of sending that check. We will have two days to unload the car.

The phosphate comes in 50 lb. bags, but I would like to have a minimum order of 100 lbs. We have a couple large orders

meetings have also provided a forum for trading and seeking of surpluses, machinery parts, animals, and other farm products. How do you plant, space, cultivate, market such-and-such a crop? How do you cool your milk? Does anyone know of sap buckets and tanks available? What kind of peas do you like to grow? Did you ever order from so-and-so?

Bulk purchasing — In 1975 I organized a purchase of 16 tons of hard rock phosphate and in 1976 we got 45 tons of soft or colloidal rock phosphate, at very cheap rates, through the Natural Organic Farmers Association in New England. NOFA now purchases about 40 different kinds of soil amendments, feed grains, field seed, tools, and soil test kits, with an annual order each February.

We will be doing another rock phosphate order in February (see separate article). I'm also hoping to buy liquid seaweed in bulk, if we have the interest. Any other suggestions for this year's order would be appreciated — sources, price information, etc.



Marketing (and processing) — This is a difficult area for most of us who want to grow cash crops or animal products. Though most food eaten in the North Country is "imported" from outside and could theoretically be replaced by locally grown foods of many types, the distribution and marketing systems are complex, large scale, heavily regulated by the government, and slow to adapt to new sources of supply. How do we "break into" that system and sell more directly to consumers?

The main answer, I think, is trial and error, and persistence. You sell where you can, keep trying new places, gradually build your reputation, skill, contacts, and consistency of supply. You begin by retailing in the farmers' markets and/or a farm vegetable stand, and eventually you learn where there are wholesale buyers willing to try home-grown, and you learn about quality, grading, and consistency.

Another possible answer for the future is group marketing. In its simplest form, this could mean some amount of specializing and group wholesaling. For example, you grow a, b, and c, and we bring our x, y, and z to you and you take them to your four outlets, and we pick up your extra a, b, and c, and sell them to our outlets. The promising outlets are farmers' markets, co-ops, independently-owned grocery stores, and college dining services. The main disadvantages would be transportation and difficulties of coordination. The advantages would be the possibilities of specializing in your favorite products and the ability to provide a consistent supply for a longer period — a must for dealing with wholesale buyers. Also, those who are closer to the better markets could share some of the excess potential market with more distant folks.

I have assembled some information on marketing and plan to send a wholesale

NEXT MEETING: At the farm of Sue Sel-
lew and Wayne Dunlop, on Cooper Road near
Pierce's Corners, north of Gouverneur, on
Saturday, February 18, weather permitting.
Call me (386-4852) for directions or to
check whether the weather is permitting
enough. One of our main topics will be
swapping info on vegetable varieties and
methods, and the possibility of some co-
ordinated marketing.

so far, but we need more to make the mini-
mum carload. Thus, there will be a \$3/ton
discount for orders of three tons or more.
It seems likely that we will only have
enough demand for SRP to order every other
year, so keep in mind that you may have to
get by for two seasons on what you buy this
spring.

The function of SRP: Soft rock phosphate
also contains lime, and both parts will
help to sweeten your soil (raise the pH).
Phosphorous, a major plant nutrient (the
middle no. on NPK fertilizers such as 5-10-
10) tends to be deficient in most soils in
the Northeast. It is also deficient in
horse and cow manure, especially from milk-

vegetable, honey, and syrup questionnaire
to a few selected wholesale buyers in the
area. If you need markets, come to our
next meeting, or write or call me (Birds-
foot Farm, Canton 13617, 386-4852).

Other ideas and projects that have
surfaced at our meetings include:

1. **Grains** — Clyde Morse has suggested
that we run test plots and pool information
on best varieties for our conditions. Con-
tact him if you are interested (DeKalb
13630). Most people have found soft winter
wheat to be the most dependable. Rye is
another for dependability. Triticale
(spring sown) and flint corn have also been
grown successfully. Oats and barley, both
with hulls, are good for animal feed, and
for seeding down new grass-legume hay-
fields and pastures. Weeds are generally
the greatest obstacle to organic grain
growing. That's why the fall-sown grains
on well-worked fields are the best bet. I
don't think a spring grain is worth it un-
less the annual weeds are well under con-
trol and you can plant before May 1st and
use at least two bushels of seed. I know
good sources for eastern-grown spring
wheat, flint corn, and triticale. Clyde
says we should stop dreaming about large
plantings of organic grain until we have
more experience with varieties and methods.

One problem with one or two acre plantings
is the unavailability of small machinery
adapted to harvesting, drying, and pro-
cessing small grain plantings.

2. **Pesticides** — The present costs of
growing crops are highly dependent on the
use of herbicides and insecticides. The
balance sheet of agribusiness is falsified
because the costs of lowered soil quality
and damaged eco-systems (and damaged human
health) are not included. These things are
important tools, or capital, used to pro-
duce a product — food. A business that
uses up its capital shows short-term pro-
fitability but eventually dies.

It is in our interest as ecological
farmers to reveal the damage of pesticides,
not only for health reasons, but to make
agriculture face the future and to get the
price we deserve for farming more realisti-
cally. We should investigate and publi-
cize the uses and dangers of toxic chemi-
cals — perhaps a survey of chemicals used
locally followed by publicity of their
known short-term and probable long-term
effects.

3. **Education and publicity** — Some of
our marketing problems can be solved
through pamphlets and articles on the need
for ecological farming, local food systems,
higher quality food, the social institution
of the small family farm, etc. I have
written outlines and articles on these
topics, could use other peoples' writings,
ideas, and efforts to organize and present
such material.

4. **Processing** — Community canneries,
root cellars, and grain mills are in opera-
tion in New England. We should watch their
pioneering ventures and hopefully we will
eventually start something of our own.
They seem essential to the formation of a
real, locally-based food economy.

ing animals or young stock. It tends to
be present in most soils in unavailable
forms, especially if your pH is too high
or low, or if you have low organic matter
content.

Phosphorous is necessary for all
types of plant metabolism, but especially
for maturation (fruit and seed formation)
and root development. Rodale says it also
improves resistance to winterkill and di-
sease, and bolsters vitamin content.

SRP contains 2-3% soluble phosphate
and another 18-20% which is insoluble and
will gradually be released in the soil,
chiefly through microbial action. In the
absence of a reliable soil test with con-
version ratios for the use of rock phos-
phate instead of superphosphate, North
Country gardens should have 10 lbs. SRP/
100 sq. ft. every 3-5 years.

If you would like to purchase soft
rock phosphate, contact Doug Jones, Birds-
foot Farm, Canton, N.Y. Tel. 386-4852.

Editor's Note: Lack of space does not
permit us to print this article in its
entirety. If you would like more in-
formation, please call Mr. Jones.