

Tour Objectives: To provide a direct and compelling experience of the progressive biodiversity enhancement practices that are driving sustainable agriculture forward in the 21st century, to provide access to scientists and other specialists who are helping us understand the importance of on-farm biodiversity for the quality and yield of agricultural crops, to identify some of the constraints that may limit the potential for the full benefits of these practices to be realized, and to provide relevant insights for future discussions on agricultural policies that encourage on-farm biodiversity.

Sponsors of the tour:
The USDA Western Region IPM Center Functional Agro-Biodiversity Work Group (FAB Work Group) members include:

Rex Dufour, National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), CA
Gwendolyn Ellen, Oregon State University
Mace Vaughan, Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation (Xerces), OR
Marsha Holt-Kingsley, Portland Metro
Joe Williams, USDA, NRCS, Plant Materials Center, Corvallis OR
Mike Russell, Oregon State U
Rebecca Sweet, Van Duzer Vineyard, OR
Dana Higgins, NRCS, OR
Allison Kutz-Troutman, Sound Horticulture, WA
Bob Bugg, Biohaven, CA
Deborah Clark, Oregon State U
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John Lambrinos, Oregon State University
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Western Integrated Pest Management Center,
Xerces and NCAT

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Biodiversity Working for Farmers Tour July 21, 2009 Corvallis, OR

A tour that brought regional policy makers, conservationists and industry personnel together with farmers and researchers to highlight the importance of agricultural biodiversity



What was done

Three established, ecologically rich Willamette Valley farms (totaling over 800 acres combined) were visited by 35 regional policy makers, regulators, industry personnel, conservationists and researchers. Farmers led the group to rich, bio-diverse areas of their farms highlighting the habitat enhancement practices they have implemented and their impacts on farm production, economic viability and quality of life for them and the future generation of farmers. Members from the USDA Western Region IPM Center Functional Agro-Biodiversity Work Group (the FAB Work Group), specialists in agricultural biodiversity from industry and non-profits and farmers that meet on a regular basis to develop and promote adoption of ecological practices in the western region, led discussions on other studied impacts of on-farm biodiversity such as biological pest management, increased native pollinator populations, farm resiliency to environmental degradation such as soil erosion and water quality and regional contributions to local agricultural sustainability.

What was learned

All three farmers, Peter Kenagy of Kenagy Family Farms, Jim Caulkin of Heavenly Harvest Farm, and Dave Buchanan of Buchanan Family Farm/Tyee Vineyard identified the following restraints they face while enhancing on-farm biodiversity:

- high costs in terms of time to plan and implement the practices, labor of creating and maintaining the habitats and land taken out of production for the habitat;
- very little regionally relevant information on the long-term impacts of these habitats on their farm production systems and;
- scant technical information on what plant selections to make for optimal beneficial organism enhancement (i.e. insect predators, parasitoids, native pollinators, predator birds).

These farmers, masters, or soon to be masters, of conservation ecology and adapting practices to fit within their farm ecosystems and production systems do so because they strongly feel on-farm biodiversity can:

- improve the quality of their products or;
- create new, alternative farm products or;
- make their farm production systems more interesting or;
- support ecological product labels and certification or;
- conserve the biodiversity of the farm landscape and;
- preserve this biodiversity for our future generations.

A major conclusion made by both the participants and farmers alike is that increased communication among all represented should occur to identify and create new policy opportunities that support the conservation and promotion of on-farm biodiversity and fund the participatory research and technological development that supports its implementation on a regional level.

Tour Outcomes:

Finally, this tour had an important impact on the discussion of pending food safety legislation. Both Xerces and Oregon State University were mentioned on July 30 during Congressional testimony related to the HR2749 food safety bill, prior to its being passed. (Unfortunately, neither NCAT, the lead on this project, or the Western IPM Center, the funder, was mentioned.)

Congressman Blumenauer of OR made a colloquy, asking Congressman Dingell, the main author, if he will ensure that the bill does not harm wildlife and biodiversity. Unofficial transcript below from <http://www.recipeforamerica.org/>:

Congressman Blumenauer: I thank my colleague Mr. Farr for his statement and for the yielding of his time and I would like to echo both his praise and his concerns. Like Mr. Farr, I recognize the need for food safety reform. This is a very important issue that must be addressed by the House, and I appreciate the efforts of the Chairman to address some of the concerns of small and organic farmers. I have pushed for food safety reform since being elected to Congress and am proud that this is the year we will finally see it receive the attention it deserve. However I am concerned about the impact of this bill on the small farmers in my state and across the country. Over sixty percent of Oregon farmers make their living from a farm that is smaller than fifty acres. I echo Mr. Farr's concerns regarding the fairness of some of these requirements for these farmers.

I am also concerned about the language regarding interaction between wildlife, livestock and farming practices. ***Biodiversity is a prerequisite for a healthy farm and not something we should penalize farmers for. Last week in my state, staff from Oregon State University and the Xerces Society led a tour to four diverse Oregon farms where farmers are utilizing techniques such as naturescaping, floodplain restoration and natural hedgerows to encourage crop health, control pests and invasive species, and enhance soil quality. I am concerned that these practices, which are cost effective and bring benefits to the farm and local wildlife, would be in jeopardy under this legislation.***

I believe we should target reform and safety efforts towards practices which have been directly linked to food disease outbreaks, rather than limiting approaches that farmers have used for centuries to reduce their dependence on pesticides, herbicides and other carbon intensive farming techniques.

I would like assurance from the Chairman that as the Food and Drug Administration develops these criteria, they will consider the needs of small farms and the practices of organic farmers.

Congressman Dingell: With respect to the National Organic Program, it is my expectation that FDA will work very closely with the NOP as it implements this bill to ensure there are no such conflicts. There is direction within the bill for the FDA to consider small farms, organic practices and conservation methods, and I trust that this will be followed. The intention of this bill is not to harm farming practices that have existed for centuries with minimal documented health risk.

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