

At the Farmer-to-Farmer Breakfast-- Tilth Producers President Speaks on WTO Issues

By: Anne Schwartz

Washington Tilth

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Thank you for being here and bearing witness to this historic time. I am very pleased to be here with all of you as we voice our concerns about the ongoing WTO negotiations and share our vision of a better future for the farmers of the world.

My name is Anne Schwartz and I, with my husband, Mike Bondi, farm fruit, vegetables and nursery stock on 15 acres in the Upper Skagit Valley, 100 miles northeast of here.



Anne Schwartz, center, with Keith Dittrich of the American Corn Growers Association, left, and Jose Bove, French Farmer Activist, right, at WTO Farm Forum, Seattle, Dec. 1999

(Photo by brightspirit)

I've been a food and farm activist for over 20 years and for the past seven, have served as President of Washington Tilth Producers, the sustainable and organic growers association. I am here on behalf of over 400 farmers from our state and have been asked to also represent the farmers and members of the Natural Farmers Association of New York.

We are here to give voice to small and family farmers and to question the inevitability of a vertically integrated food system owned by a handful of giant corporations. We are here to insist that the so-called "non-trade issues" of environmental protection, food security, family farm viability and social justice are included at all levels of international trade negotiations.

It is not in our best interests as the leading industrialized country to destabilize smaller countries by destroying traditional cropping systems and displacing farmers and rural culture. This is especially true when we look at our current farm crisis, and the multitude of illnesses born from the mainstream American diet of highly processed, high-fat foods. Our industrial food model is failing to adequately feed our own nation, has miserably failed to support our rural and farm economies and should not be imposed across the planet to all other nations.

In our own country, with all of our access to democracy, the US Senate recently refused to support a temporary moratorium to halt the alarming increase of corporate mergers. If our legislators are unable to limit the intrusion of corporate power and control into our food system, it may well be impossible for smaller, or less democratic nations to prevent this same concentration of ownership by a few transnational corporations.

The USDA itself has acknowledged that our food and ag policy has led us into the worst farm crisis since the 1930s. In its report, "A Time to ACT," the Small Farm Commission lays out a blueprint of policy recommendations to address the accumulated inequities of a century of corporately biased national food policy.

Many of the report's recommendations are incompatible with the formal WTO talks going on as we speak. In fact, throughout this country, and alive and well in the Northwest, is a very different world view than the one put forward by the WTO. Though it represents only a small part of our overall food system, people are beginning to understand that the way they spend their money is a vote for what they believe in. People are committing themselves to supporting local and often organic farmers. This trend is growing in popularity: among young people as they search for meaning in their lives; among university extension faculty as they address the different research needs of organic and direct market farmers; and in our regional agriculture paper as it covers the Farm Crisis and its impact in the Northwest. Across the nation, sales of organic foods are increasing 20% a year as more people vote for a food production system that respects the Earth. According to USDA surveys, there has been a 50% growth in the number of farmers markets in the US in the past two years. Here in Washington, sales of farm products sold through our 70 farmers markets increased 20% from 5 million dollars in 1997 to 6 million in 1998. Growers are diversifying to supply these markets and are receiving a reasonable return for their labor. Growing consumer support for smaller, local markets is providing opportunities for new farmers to get their feet wet. These markets bring people together in ways that celebrate all cultures and revitalize downtown areas that host them.

Across the US, the Community Supported Agriculture or CSA model of food production and distribution continues to grow in numbers and types of farming operations. Dedicated members and growing demand are helping to establish new partnerships, especially to include organic livestock. The need for food security reaches out across the urban landscape as well. One exciting effort is the Tahoma Food system in nearby Pierce County, which sponsors projects to preserve farmland and develop community gardens. Its Youth Food Works project helps inner city kids gain entrepreneurial skills through raising and selling produce at the Farmers Markets.

The Puget Sound Fresh Campaign is a growing effort to help educate people about where their food comes from and how their purchases can invigorate or deplete the communities that surround them. Working with local growers and merchandisers, they have developed advertising programs using a distinctive Puget Sound Fresh logo that has been well received by customers. They are also helping to establish new farmers markets.

Chefs and restaurant owners have spearheaded the Chefs Collaborative 2000 project and are working with regional growers to buy as much local and organic food for their menus as possible. In King County, the FarmLink project has been established to match retiring farmers with the next generation of interested farmers. FarmLink provides a tool to preserve the traditional handing down of wisdom and resources so farm ownership remains in the hands of large numbers of farmers.

Supported by non-profit foundations, ag groups and local ag extension individuals, the newly formed Cascade Harvest Coalition is actively promoting regional agriculture through sponsorship of harvest fairs and farm tours that show people where their food comes from. In March of 2000, it will join the WSU Cooperative Extension Food and Farm Connection Team in sponsoring a Foodshed Conference to raise awareness and encourage dialog about the importance of supporting local agricultural products produced in a sustainable manner.

The recently formed Washington Sustainable Food and Farm Network has brought together a coalition of environmental, consumer co-ops and agriculture groups to actively work to promote

sustainable agriculture. Working with the Network, we at Washington Tilth have forged new relationships with administrators at WSU and the US and State Departments of Agriculture to strengthen Sustainable Agriculture programs and to develop a Small Farm Program at the Western Washington Research and Extension Center in nearby Puyallup. These initiatives are garnering support from people who want to know about the source of their food. There is a growing commitment to buy food from local farmers who are using sustainable methods, thus helping preserve local farmland, protect the environment and ensure local food security. As farmers, we must continue to both grow our crops and educate people about why it is important to support local farmers.

We can and must promote decentralized family farming if we are to truly improve food security and quality of life across the planet. Together we must demand that values other than corporate profits dictate policy goals and objectives, As Wes Jackson so eloquently put it, we need more eyes on the land to ensure that the earth is treated with the care and respect needed to maintain the health of people and our communities.