

CONVERGENCE CONFERENCE DRAWS STANDING ROOM ONLY CROWD

AUGUSTA, Maine, January 13 -- What most observers thought would be a modestly attended conference played to a standing room only crowd at the Maine Agricultural Trades Show. The Maine Farm Bureau teamed up with the Maine Department of Agriculture, the Maine Pomological Society and the Maine Vegetable and Small Fruit Growers Association to present the program entitled "Convergence = Sustainability: Beyond the Organic – Conventional Rift."

The idea behind the program was to find ways to bridge the gulf between organic and conventional farmers over the use of biotechnology in farming. In, Maine this struggle has pitted farmer against farmer for more than 15 years. Recently, farmers have been quietly talking about how to get past this confrontation. "This workshop is just a continuation of farmers talking together," said Jon Olson, executive secretary of the Maine Farm Bureau, in his opening remarks.

Keynote speaker Jonathan Foley, director of the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota focused on the need for a doubling of farm production to feed the 9 million inhabitants that will be on the planet by 2050. "Feeding the world is not optional," Foley said.

Foley also highlighted the environmental impacts of farming which he called "the single most powerful force in the environment." According to Foley, "We have to increase production with lower environmental costs."

Foley is championing the idea of a second, "Green" Green Revolution. "We need to forget about these two camps. We need a new paradigm, something that takes the best of both worlds."

Joining the conference via a video hookup were Pamela C. Ronald and R.W. Adamchak, authors of "Tomorrow's Table – A Marriage of Genetic Engineering and Organic Farming." Ronald, professor of plant pathology at the University of California Davis, and Adamchak, market garden coordinator also at UC Davis, argue that both genetic engineering and organic practices have something to offer in the quest to increase food production. "Without good science and good farming, we will fail to feed the world in an ecologically responsible manner," Ronald said.

The program wrapped up with a panel discussion in which four Maine farmers talked about farming from their individual perspectives. The panel included an organic grower, a conventional grower, a grower who uses both methods and a permaculturist.

Apple grower Steve Meyerhans, who farms both conventionally and organically in his orchard, spoke bluntly about Maine's battle over genetically engineering. "The critical

thing for Maine agriculture is that all farmers work together and not beat each other down.”

Conventional vegetable grower Penny Jordan echoed Meyerhans’ remarks. “I get frustrated with ‘Are you organic or not organic?’” she said. “We are stewards of the land. We’ve been farming for five generations.”

Permaculturist Lisa Fernandez sounded an optimistic note in her remarks. “This forum needs to be about collaboration and how we can feed the people of Maine,” she said.

Organic vegetable grower Ralph Turner echoed the sentiment. “From our perspective we are all in this together. We have to be able to sit down and talk to each other. We have to work together,” Turner said.

Also speaking at the conference were Margaret Elizabeth Smith Einarson from Cornell University and Leonard Gianessi, director at the Crop Protection Research Institute. Einarson presented an overview of genetic engineering as it is used in agriculture while Gianessi reviewed pesticide use in agriculture, with specific information on its use in Maine, based on his extensive database.

In closing the conference, Olson promised that the organizers of the conference would continue to work on turning the confrontation over genetic engineering in Maine into a productive conversation that will benefit all farmers.