

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

'Alternative agriculture' guru ousted

The USDA backed him, but some at the National Research Council found Dr. Benbrook a little too kooky.

With little to cheer about as the old year ended and 1991 began, we are glad for one piece of news: In late 1990, Dr. Charles M. Benbrook, the executive director of the Board on Agriculture of the National Research Council (NRC) was removed from office. This is a happy development for anyone serious about farming and eating.

There are a few other, similar signs that agricultural science is not hopelessly beaten down by kookery and superstition.

Benbrook presided over the issuance in September 1989, of an NRC publication called *Alternative Agriculture*, which was devoid of science, but was endorsed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and intended to be the Ten Commandments of "low-input" agriculture for the 1990s. It was released at a press conference with much fanfare, and sent to agriculture ministers all around the world. The book was the signal for a wave of propaganda against the use of any and all chemicals, mechanized farming, and infrastructure for food production (irrigation, water project development, expanded electrical power, etc.).

The book in fact was an apologia for the policy of the cartel companies that are underpaying farmers and controlling food distribution. *Alternative Agriculture* provided rationalizations for how farmers should live with low incomes, primitive technology, and like it. The message for consumers was to fixate on food "purity," and never mind the fact that people are starving.

But the book was such a laughing stock that Benbrook has finally been ousted. The press releases on his departure do not state that outright; the reason offered is that there were "differences of opinion" between Benbrook and other scientists at the cooperating institutions. But the meaning of his exit is clear: The NRC has some reputation to preserve, since it is a branch of the prestigious National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine.

Alternative Agriculture included 180 pages of case study descriptions of farms in the United States that used low-cost, low-input "alternative" farm techniques. There were no proper measurement techniques employed, which would have shown that the soils and infrastructure were being cheated of maintenance, the productivity potentials lowered, and the farm families exploited.

In July 1990, the Iowa-based Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) published a "scientists' review" of *Alternative Agriculture*. This was undertaken at the request of Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress, who had been feeling the heat of public ridicule. Critiques of *Alternative Agriculture* were solicited from 44 scientists and specialists, and 41 of them were published in the CAST booklet. Within six months, Benbrook was fired.

The CAST summary states, "*Alternative Agriculture* recommends agricultural practices that may sig-

nificantly reduce food supplies, thus placing a severe financial burden upon low income consumers and intensifying world food shortages. Also, higher food prices have nutritional ramifications that are especially acute among the poor."

There are other encouraging signs of fight against farm and food kookery and chicanery. On Nov. 28, 1990 Washington state apple growers filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against CBS television, the "60 Minutes" show, and a Washington, D.C.-based Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), for creating the scare over the use of the chemical Alar in treatment of apples.

The growers filed a class action suit on behalf of the 4,700 growers of red apples in Washington, charging that they lost more than \$100 million following the orchestrated news release, Feb. 26, 1989, of a report by the NRDC called "Intolerable Risk: Pesticides In Our Children's Food."

Though the report had no scientific standing, the news of its assertions was broadcast so widely that apple sales plummeted, some school districts removed apples from lunchrooms, etc.

Washington state applegrowers account for 60% of the nation's super-market fruit, and were devastated.

Also named in the suit is the Washington, D.C. advertising firm that planned the NRDC campaign, Fenton Communications, Inc. Steven Berzon, an attorney representing the NRDC, complained that the applegrowers' lawsuit is having a "chilling" effect on public "activism."

On the contrary, more such suits would create such a chill that we wouldn't have to worry about the Earth heating up because of the "greenhouse effect" and similar kook scare stories.