

# Hippie agriculture makes it to the big time, will create food shortages

by Robert L. Baker

Suppose you wanted to kill off millions of people, and plunge the world into a dark age of drudgery and despair. If you were also smart, you wouldn't advertise your grisly goals, but would hide them behind propaganda about your good intentions. So it is with the new, official push for "alternative agriculture" in Washington, D.C.

A grouping of international financial and commodities interests is promoting schemes that will impoverish agriculture and starve people. From their warped viewpoint, the world is overpopulated, millions of "excess persons" should be eliminated, and productive farmers and abundant food eliminated. With that in mind, look at how the "alternative agriculture" campaign is being promoted.

On Sept. 7, the Washington, D.C.-based National Research Council (part of the National Academy of Sciences) released its 450-page study, titled "Alternative Agriculture," which charged that federal agricultural policies work at cross purposes to the nation's environmental policies, and discourage adoption of "alternative agricultural systems." A 17-person committee formed by the NRC claimed that mixed crop-livestock operations, crop rotations, certain soil conservation practices, and reduced applications of fertilizer and pesticides, are all discouraged by current federal policies. "Well-managed alternative farms use less synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and antibiotics without necessarily decreasing . . . per acre crop yields and the productivity of livestock systems," the committee stated. "Wider adoption of proven alternative systems would result in even greater economic benefits to farmers and environmental gains for the nation."

Immediately following the NRC press conference, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Charles E. Hess held a press conference to praise the report, and announce a full-scale commitment by the USDA to "alternative agriculture" methods.

## Media hype, scare tactics

In the following days, all the major media played up the new "shift" to low-input farming, including front-page coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, and so forth. The *London Times* wrote, "The EPA has identified agriculture as the largest non-point source of pollution of lakes, streams, and rivers." The *Baltimore Sun* quoted Hess as saying that the NRC report "could be unpar-

alleled" because it has been issued "at a time when society is highly concerned about issues such as food safety and water quality."

On Sept. 11, a group of supermarkets announced that it would not take pesticide-treated fruits and vegetables, and five U.S. and Canadian supermarket chains pledged to stop selling fresh fruits and vegetables treated with supposedly cancer-causing pesticides by 1995. Representatives of the small grocery chains in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Boston, Massachusetts said the move is designed to shore up consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply and utilize market forces where the regulatory system has failed.

But representatives of the nation's largest supermarkets and produce growers denounced the campaign as an unwarranted and irresponsible attack launched by "misguided zealots" in consumer groups. In the Washington, D.C. area, spokesmen for Safeway Stores and Giant Food, Inc. said that, while they would agree to talks on reducing pesticide use, the government should assume responsibility for food safety issues.

At the end of September, the NRC plans to release another report on what the new directions for agriculture research should be. This can be expected to be more pseudo-science to justify low-input farming, under the rubrics of "environmental protection for groundwater" and "concern for food purity." The goal is to replace conventional farming (based on income-secure family farms using modern technology) with "alternative farming."

Where is the fire behind all this environmentalist smoke? There is none.

## Junking scientific principles

"Alternative agriculture," or LISA (low-input sustainable agriculture), is the fad name that encompasses many farming techniques that experienced farmers already use anyway, but taking them to extremes and adding to them measures that are unscientific and unnecessary. By creating a media sensation, and making statements that sound scientific but are not backed up by hard data, the ecology lobby has found a way to cripple scientifically sound food-growing practices, by stampeding the public into thinking there is a real problem.

The sinister side of this flim-flam, is that food output will drop and American farmers will be split between those who

are poor and backward, and a few high-tech mega-farmers controlled by the food cartels.

The individuals and groups expressing enthusiasm and soliciting support for LISA state various noble-sounding objectives, such as preserving the family farm, conserving soil and other natural resources, and improving environmental quality. In general, private firms that manufacture and market inputs for agriculture have not been enthusiastic about LISA, for both technical and economic reasons.

Some LISA enthusiasts downplay the need to maintain high levels of agricultural productivity. They argue that even if the LISA approach resulted in higher prices for farm products, the impact on the consuming public would be minimal. After all, they say, U.S. consumers spend only 15% of their income for food, and only 25% of that expenditure reaches the farmers.

When U.S. food expenditures are analyzed by income class, however, it is evident that 30% of families spend over 50% of their incomes for food and 50% of families spend 30% of their income for food. Any policy that results in lower productivity in U.S. agriculture is the equivalent of a tax levied on the consumers of agricultural products.

According to Dr. E.T. York, Jr., chancellor emeritus of the State University System of Florida and former administrator of the Federal Extension Service, USDA, "There has been phenomenal progress in food production since the middle of this century. In fact, from 1950 to 1984, global food production went up 2.6-fold, making possible a 40% increase in per capita cereal production—despite rapid population growth during that period.

"Today, many are questioning our ability to sustain such increases in food production—or even maintain current levels. Since 1984, per capita production of cereals, worldwide, has declined each year—for a total of 14% over the four-year period. Global grain reserves are projected to be at the lowest level this year since immediately after World War II."

The Council of Science and Technology in Ames, Iowa, formed a task force in 1980 to compare organic and conventional farming. They estimated a 15-25% drop in cereal production with a switch to low-input systems. There would be a major reduction in grain acres, as legumes would be added in crop rotations with grain, to provide part of the nitrogen requirement. It has been estimated that for each 1% decrease in crop production, there would be a 1-5% price increase, depending upon the type of crop. The study indicated that a conventional farming system using best management practices, including adequate fertilization, will increase the production of organic residue and enhance the effects of that residue on the soil's productive capacity, and that low-input systems, like conventional systems, result in a net loss of nutrients from the farm when products are sold.

According to Dr. Don Holt, a scientist and director of the Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station, "LISA is being interpreted by many to mean that there is some system of

agriculture that is productive and competitive, and, at the same time, requires only low inputs per acre or per farm. I believe there is strong evidence that agricultural systems involving low variable inputs per unit of fixed assets, e.g., land, cannot sustain themselves in a mature agricultural economy."

Dr. Holt indicates, "Failure to estimate the degree to which alternative systems can be successfully adapted in global agriculture can lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, the proposal that forage-livestock systems should replace grain systems in order to reduce soil erosion and decrease nitrogen (N) inputs fails to take into account the relatively inelastic demand for red meat and other products derived from ruminant animals."

In other words, America's cattle herds have been declining for almost 20 years, so to expand forage-livestock systems as proposed would only drive down prices paid to the farmer, unless a parity price regulation were passed to ensure him a fair return.

According to studies done in 1988 at North Carolina State University and in 1987 at the University of Maryland, animal manures are so variable in nutrient content, storage methods, application management, and availability for use on cropland, that there would have to be a tremendous increase in animal herds and a huge cost in labor, energy, and equipment to get the manure in place for optimum use. Large amounts of animal manures are required to provide needed plant nutrients in many cropping systems, but manures in such quantities are not available to most farmers and would pose a serious pollution problem if applied in the amounts required to make "alternative agriculture" successful.

While crop rotation may help in the control of some pests (in apparent validation of the views of anti-pesticide advocates), nevertheless, serious pest problems can develop despite the use of sound rotation practices. Many farming systems do not lend themselves to the types of rotations that might offer the greatest advantages from the standpoint of pest control. Perennial fruit crops, for example, pose special problems.

One further problem with the LISA approach is the failure to recognize the increase in risk associated with many of the changes being encouraged. Much of the "proof" to indicate that such changes are beneficial is anecdotal in nature and does nothing to assess risks, beyond the occasional admission that a particular practice failed. Most of the contents of the new NRC "Alternative Agriculture" report are case studies of selected organic farms, not valid scientific comparative analyses.

The anti-science bias that characterizes the present "sustainable" agriculture movement gives away the true intent behind it. In the end, those truly interested in the betterment of the food-producing environment would at least be demanding fair "parity prices" that would keep food producers in business.