

Panel Discussion

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I'll just talk about our own farm. We have a certified organic farm that we started getting certified in 1993. We had our first land certified in 1995 and we got the whole farm certified in 2000. So we have a 250-acre farm, we rent 25 acres of hay land, we sell most of our products directly. We grow about 10 acres of potatoes. We keep cattle, pigs, chickens, and have a few ducks and geese running around just as pets. We grow a couple of acres of cole crops and mixed vegetables. We have a couple of acres of small fruit too, so we have quite a diverse farm. What we saw in switching into organic agriculture is that maybe the biggest change for us was to learn that we had to start actually feeding the soil and not feeding the crops. When I was growing up my father had a custom spraying business, so I used to hitchhike home from school early on the warm days and jump on the tractor and go spraying. We did all that. I've seen both sides. Herbicide is easy—no question about that. You just spray it and the weeds are gone. So what we had to do was learn quite a different way to manage the farm.

One of the things I've noticed this afternoon while listening to the speakers is that in an organic system we need to look at feeding the soil and not feeding the plants. We have to get out of the idea that we're just going to add so much N and so much P and so much potash and that the soil is just there to hold the plants up. In actual fact, what we're finding on our farm is that we took quite a dip in production when we switched from conventional to organic—there's no question. For a little while we grew weeds as high as my head and tiny plants, and we had to switch it around so that we were growing bigger plants and smaller weeds. It worked by learning how to do some things and getting the nutrient levels different, but I had the feeling that we need to do more research, obviously, and we have to look at a different system. We have to look at feeding the soil system. The whole organic system is really not about just switching from using chemical fertilizers to chicken manure. It's actually switching to making a healthy soil. So that's one of the things I wanted to mention.

I think one of the problems we've had that we are facing here on PEI and other areas as well has been this idea of trying to achieve 100% control. I noticed that on a lot of the slides that people were showing there were these perfect fields with straight rows of potatoes with nothing else in the field, so there's nothing for the insects to eat but potatoes because that's the only thing in the field. I think we need to say, "Well, we can have a few weeds."

I think we need to get into a whole different way of looking at how we farm organically compared to conventionally. Try not to worry about having a little bit of insect damage. We've had variety trials of potatoes growing in our fields for years, and we have some potato bugs every year but they don't defoliate the field, and they don't really impact on the yield as long as you can keep them down. If you can't hear them eating from the house, they're not necessarily hurting them. It's the same thing with weeds. It's hard to do. You walk through the field and you see weeds and you see dandelions. I had a fellow helping me dig potatoes this fall and he was really complaining about the dandelions. But, you know, the dandelions aren't really that bad a thing to have growing in the fields.

The other thing is that our yields are considerably higher. I think it's important to not just take a field out of conventional production and try to grow it using organic inputs and then use those yields as data to compare organic to conventional. I think what we need to do is make sure

we're taking good fields that have been in organic production for a while and have soil that is working, and take yield samples from those fields and compare it against conventional. Otherwise we're always going to have it looking worse.

I have a friend who is a conventional farmer. I help him out quite a bit, and he continuously tells me that I shouldn't be using our yields from our fields as a comparison to other conventional fields because our fields have been treated better. I said, "Well, maybe you should treat your fields better. Then we can compare." So I think we just need to be careful when we're comparing two things back and forth that we don't warp the results one way or the other.

Q: What varieties of potatoes do you grow?

A: We had about 7 acres of Fabula this year, which was the biggest amount we had, and they did actually very well. We're selling them wholesale and also at the farmers' market and from the door. My father was involved with potato breeding for a long time and I'm doing that as well, so I have a whole bunch of different kinds that aren't named that I'm trying and doing variety trials on. We grow Island Sunshine. In our variety trials we take about 15 different varieties to the farmers' market and then we ask people to come back and tell us what kinds they like. We're finding that there is quite a customer preference. One customer likes a dry potato, another one likes a wet potato, and one person's dry is another person's wet. It's really funny. It's hard to get something... This year everybody is buying red because they think they're lower in carbohydrates, which is really kind of strange because there are as many different kinds of reds as there are whites. But it's just that somebody got that out there.