

Workshop Title: Plenary: 15 Years- ACORN Beginnings- Panel Discussion

Speaker(s) and their titles:

Moderator: Gary Ogle, Vesey's Seeds

Panelists: Karen Davidge, Alan Stewart, Reg Phelan

Special guest panelists: Frank Oulton, Lucy Bernard

Executive Summary:

Through their recollections of the beginnings of ACORN and the organic movement in the Maritimes, as well as their hopes for the future, the panelists brought forth several important themes.

- 1) Past successes have come from determined individuals holding true to their values and committing to keeping the organic movement going forward; this will likely be the basis of future success as well.
- 2) The importance of striking a balance between holding on to the ideals of "organic" but at the same time being tolerant of the ideas of others to avoid getting bogged down in petty disputes.
- 3) Developing connections within the region and beyond it has been a crucial factor in the success of ACORN and this work should continue to be done.

Detailed notes:

Panelist bios:

Karen Davidge – Karen and her husband Brock have been farming since 1980 at Good Spring Farm in Keswick Ridge. Their certified organic operation consists of table stock and seed potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, and eggs from three types of heritage breed chicken. In 1987, Good Spring Farm was one of the first of six farms to go through the certification process in Atlantic Canada. It has been a stallholder at the Boyce Farmer's Market in Fredericton since 1980.

Alan Stewart – Alan is a sixth-generation farmer in Hortonville, NS. Like Karen, he is a pioneer of organics in our region, converting his farm to organic practices in the late 1980s and enhancing it ever since. His core philosophies are centered on maintaining on-farm fertility, and direct marketing of his products. He has been certified organic in NS and selling at the Wolfville Farmer's Market longer than anyone else. Alan is also the pioneer of Horton Ridge Malting Company, a new venture to start a barley malting facility to support the organic craft beer industry.

Reg Phelan – This year's Gerrit Loo Award recipient, one of PEI's pioneer organic farmers; growing vegetables, wheat, cattle, and blueberries for more than 30 years. He and his wife, Stella, live in a 150-year old farmhouse located in Morrell, PEI. Reg is also very involved in many farm organizations, including Via Campesina and the National Farmers Union. He is currently a director on the National Farmer's Union Board.

Gary: Before the beginnings of ACORN, what did organic farming look like in the Maritimes?

Reg: Because of the small size of the island here in PEI some farmers started mostly exporting organics off the island. The Halifax Farmer's Market was one of the first ones to get started and was the biggest as it probably still is. There was a farmer's market that started up here on the Island in the late 80s.

We had a grower's cooperative here, marketing a lot of vegetables – some into the States and to Montreal. They had a weekly delivery out of Montreal shipping vegetables from there down to Pennsylvania then across to Chicago then back to Montreal and so we got into that loop for a number of years. We all took our turns supplying that market; we had a tractor-trailer truckload every couple of weeks or so, so we shipped a fairly large volume of stuff out of PEI in the 80s and into the 90s.

We came into some problems in the 90s because of the PBYN situation where we couldn't ship out anymore which struck a blow to us. We started to concentrate more on processing to try and

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get around that. Most things leaving the Island, especially potatoes, had to be sprayed with a chemical, Sproutnip, which was incredible, people having to eat potatoes with chemical spray directly on them.

So we came through that, which would have been just before ACORN. We started to get a little bit of support from the government. It was interesting at the time one of the earlier conferences on the Island was instituted in '79. We even had Wendell Barry speak at that conference, many people have heard of him; one of the most written and quoted in terms of developing organics.

Alan: In Annapolis Valley there was a small group of very dedicated people, mostly not from the farming establishment. People like Phil Ferraro. My entrance into organics was that I saw a little ad in the paper of a fellow giving an organic gardening workshop down in Greenwood. I went to that and Phil was the instructor; he had an organic farm up on North Mountain. So it was people like him and Michel Palmer and Neil van Nostrand. This small group of people was very determined to change or at least divorce themselves from the way agriculture was developing at the time.

Reg mentioned a conference or two; there were some very well managed conferences: one in Wolfville and one in Fredericton. A very prominent name at the time was David Patriquin who was a professor at Dalhousie and two of his more illustrious students were Rupert Jannasch and Av Singh. There was a good level of support from academia and David would have led the charge.

So the idea of getting organic folks together on a regular basis to have conferences probably led to the concept we have here today.

Karen: In NB, there was an organization called "SAVE" in the St. John River Valley ecosystem, Stu Fleischhaker was a leader and some of us had joined that organization. Then there was a decision made by folks including David Cozac and Jim Garitson from Maine, to look at certification, mainly to be able to prove to the public that we were what we said we were. So out of that sprang the OCIA (Organic Crop Improvement Association) chapter, which was the only international OCIA chapter in OCIA international. That chapter covered certification in NS, PEI, and NB. The first year was 1987 and there were 6 farms at that point in NB. It was a peer-reviewed system, which has now gone into extinction, it's sad that it had to go that way. Organic certification and the organic sector started to have problems as a result of its own success.

Alan mentioned we started having some workshops; conferences and then we started thinking in terms of a regional organization. At that time governments really weren't taking us seriously at all.

Interestingly enough the acronym ACORN came from Daphne Harker who manned the OCIA chapter here in PEI. Daphne always had a big garden but was never a farmer. She was very active in various aspects of agriculture in PEI.

Gary: So Karen, what do you think were the main motivations for starting ACORN in those years and who all was involved aside from Daphne Harker?

Karen: We realized that there was enough of a foundation of producers and we were starting to get the attention of government and departments of agriculture. That helped solidify the organic sector. At that time neither the technology nor the science had caught up with all the positives of organic production.

Gary: So Alan, looking back to 2000 how do you recollect hearing about the formation of ACORN?

Alan: In 2000 I was a dozen years into organics. I participated in some of the organizations we've heard about that were necessary for keeping something like this alive. When 2000 came along I was actually not part of ACORN formation, but I heard about it and it made a lot of sense to me. My feeling was that it occurred because of a critical mass, it was time to get organized on a regional level. The first ACORN conference that was here was the only one I really missed.

Gary: And Reg: you were here on the Island and I think Kevin Jeffries was another name at that time, what are your recollections of the beginnings?

Reg: I remember a number of meetings we had earlier, there was Maritime connection beforehand in terms of certifying bodies, and we had that association within the Maritimes. We also had Seaspray Organic Coop, which was a Maritime-wide group. We had Clark Philips and Norbert Connel and others from New Brunswick. So there was that connection in terms of marketing between both these groups.

We had approval from government or some indication that they'd be willing to support the organic movement so there was some momentum in that way. It became a little bit frustrating in terms of dealing with the departments; we had more success with some of the politicians than with the bureaucrats in the department of agriculture and others who didn't have a general understanding and appreciation of organics even though we had a lot of little seminars that were well attended.

We thought we needed an organization in order to keep the organic movement going forward. We came out with quite a few points in terms of what we wanted to do. Kevin Jeffries took the agenda and went to meet with some government people. They said they would be willing to support such a movement in the area but that their support would be limited as they didn't want to get involved in certain political aspects that we'd hoped ACORN would be involved with. So then a number of people agreed to work with the ACORN approach, and others wanted to work on some other issues.

Gary: Reg, what would you say were the priorities of ACORN at that time? Do you think they have achieved those goals since that time?

Reg: Yes, I think they have. Most of the goals that we were looking to get financing for were educational goals in terms of workshops, etc. which is very important for developing organics here. It is wonderful to see some of the younger people here, it is a great way to meet each other, it gives us a lot of encouragement to see this happening. So it seems the growth is there and I think ACORN has quite an important role in trying to promote that.

Gary: And Alan, what are your comments on the growth of ACORN over the years and how it achieved some of the goals that it set out to have?

Alan: Yes, I concur with Reg that the big goal was to provide a forum for organic growers to get together and share knowledge and have some social time together. The ACORN conferences have always been that way so 15 years later I think they are still on the mark with respect to that goal, for sure.

Karen: If you wonder if ACORN's history has been a smooth path: it has not. I remember at one point I thought it was going to implode. The individuality of the different personalities involved, at times, became a hurdle. As always it comes down to people and there are two people I want to mention who helped us set and achieve the goals that we have.

One was Clark Philips, who had a strong personality, but he had ability in creating policy and in seeing how the sector could deal with government. ACORN became a vehicle to help those of us who were, at various times, dealing with government, trying to set policy and move the sector ahead. He was extremely helpful in that area.

The other was Beth McMahon who was hired as an executive director. I was fortunate to be part of the hiring committee at that time; Fred Dollar chaired it. Technology was very different than it is today. We had a conference call phone set in the middle of the table but it was the first time I had ever been part of hiring someone over the phone. I remember saying: "This lady really sounds like what we need, but I can't see her eyes; I can't get the body language feedback". In the end she brought from her non-profit, non-agricultural experience, so much to lay a next-step basis for this organization. Because she didn't have organic experience, she was able to make decisions and rise above the small politics.

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Yes, I believe the organization has met its goals; it will be people again who carry it forward. The one thing I will say is that we don't want to ever become lackadaisical and feel that we've "arrived" because the non-organic entities out there are never going to let up. So "keep it rolling".

Gary: And Alan, what would you say about the milestones of ACORN and the industry in general over the last few years?

Alan: In my mind there are three milestones that I'd like to talk about. They are somewhat related in that I agree with Karen that hiring Beth was a very good move (whether you could see her eyes or not) and I think currently we are in a really good spot with Theresa keeping the ball rolling.

The other milestone that I'd like to talk about is that in the early days all three governments supported the organic movement. I don't know what the dollar value was but it was probably quite significant. Each province put in a certain amount of money and they had always told ACORN that that money was not always going to be there and that "this is enough to get you started" and that money is going to disappear with time, and it did come and it did go. I think that one milestone of the organization was, that it was able to thrive and not fall apart when that happened.

The other milestone was that, in the early days we all had a clear idea about what organics was, that small group of people, direct marketing, composting, a view of organic that I hold. As time went on "organic" meant many different things to different people so there were some tough times as people tried to put forth their version of "organic" over another and the ACORN conference is always a great place to do that. Beth, again, in her abilities to manage that situation, kind of kept everything going and honored the various nuances of "organic" rather than allow somebody to triumph with their version and have the organization disappear. So I think that was a good milestone that we weathered that storm, and I don't see or feel that same kind of tension that there may have been in the past.

Gary: Reg, you've witnessed ACORN's growth and seen how it's attracted new members, both organic and conventional growers who are getting interested in the organic industry. What would you say have been some of the milestones, and have they achieved those goals?

Reg: Yes, it's been quite a while. It's great to see the crowd that's here, it's always been pretty good attendance. The conference last year in Halifax, I think was a milestone because there was involvement with Food Secure Canada with which we had some great workshops and involvement with people right across the country.

I think building those alliances is very important. We're quite involved here on PEI with food security network and involvement with others, besides us as organic producers. I think that's where we will hopefully put more emphasis in the future because it is very important. There are a lot of allies, people who support the organic movement and ecological agriculture Island-wide, Maritime-wide and right across all spectrums of society and I think we've got a real opportunity to develop and build a movement from making those connections.

There are a lot of things going on. In terms of PEI, we have the deep well issue now, which is pretty important to the future of agriculture here and I'd like to see the organic movement be more involved in these issues. There are a lot of others here who are quite vocal about it and we've had probably the most letters to the editor in a long time due to it, which has really sparked an interest in these issues across the province.

There's also the Lands Protection Act, which we've had here for over 30 years and is important in keeping the smaller producers going and supporting the type of agriculture we'd like to see.

So we've come a long distance but there's still a long way to go.

Gary: And Alan what are your hopes for the next 15 years and what advice would you give to new ACORN members?

Alan: Picking up on my previous conversation, obviously we have to be true to what we perceive to be the organic ideal and work hard to make it meaningful to the people eating the food, but at the

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same time I think we have to exercise a certain amount of tolerance to someone who may have a slightly different version of “organic”. As an organization, I think ACORN has done that, so it’s just walking that line between striving for integrity but being a little bit tolerant to a view that may conflict with our individual views and not let that be something that colours the organization.

Gary: Karen?

Karen: Before I wrap up, one other milestone that I’d hate to see missed is: because of ACORN and the activities going on in each of the provinces, the governments became aware of the fact that we were serious enough that they needed to have organic specialists in the departments of agriculture. So the folks that we have today, and that we have had as ACORN was doing conferences and rotating between the provinces, they put massive amounts of work into supporting us.

So just to finalize, I would bring it down a bit more personal because it began with personal beliefs and from beliefs you get values and from values you get actions. This organization has been a demonstration of that: ACORN is only here because of each of you and what you stand for at home and on your farm, and how you produce and how your actions walk out to the consumer and the public who keep us in business. So, I expect that that will continue to be part of the success of ACORN and our farms.

Gary: I’d like to invite a couple of special guest panelists up now. Are Frank Olton and Lucy Bernard in the audience?

So Frank, how old are you?

Frank: Eight

Gary: What do you do on your mom and dad’s farm?

Frank: Uhm, I feed the pigs sometimes.

Gary: So, can you tell us, what are your hopes for organic agriculture in the next 15 years?

Frank: Uhhhhm, I want more people around to do Acorn . . . to do organic because it’s better to eat . . . and it’s better for Mother Nature and you don’t use much spray.

Gary: and Lucy how old are you?

Lucy: Eight

Gary: Do you help your mom and dad with the eggs and all sorts of other chores on the farm?

Lucy: Yeah.

Gary: Do they pay you?

Lucy: No.

Gary: but it’s fun though, right.

Lucy: huh.

Gary: So Lucy, what are your hopes for organic agriculture over the next 15 years?

Lucy: I hope that more kids will take over their parents’ farms and they’ll care about the soil and turn it into an organic farm.