

FARM FORUM HELD AT COKESBURY, Feb. 26, 2014

Three local agricultural experts discussed farm issues at an engaging forum held at Cokesbury Village.



Ruth Linton is owner of Highland Orchards, a farm of less than 6 acres located north of Wilmington. Highland grows everything from asparagus to zucchini, satisfying the choice of those who like their veggies grown locally and who want to know what goes onto their produce. They raise chickens

for their eggs. They interplant, growing 3-4 crops per year in each space. They look forward with dread to the proposed federal farm bill which would add a huge paperwork load to their farm work. The bill is designed to eliminate e coli and salmonella by so carefully tracking the planting, harvest, storage and distribution of each crop that if any crop reaching the consumer has cleanliness issues it can be traced immediately and the product eliminated.

Very few insecticides are used on Highland produce. The growers depend greatly on cold winter weather to kill insects. Mild winter weather is actually then the enemy of farmers. Fungus and mold are sometimes a problem in the summer. Kaolin, a harmless and washable clay, is sometimes used on fruit to combat fungus and mold, though usually the farm uses nothing on its produce.

Highland Farms runs a community supported agriculture program, or a CSA, preparing bags of seasonally available vegetables and fruits for consumers who pay for this service. In addition, they sell produce out of their barn and deliver to some restaurants in Wilmington and Philadelphia.

Ms. Linton expressed dismay at the ever-increasing difficulty in getting farm labor. She predicted that the comparatively cheap vegetables and fruits grown in the U.S. will rise in price because farmers will soon be obliged to pay \$20 per hour for labor.

Bill Powers, a farmer and a New Castle County councilman, says that he raises beef, pork, and lamb on his 50 acre farm, although calves are low in number this year. A particular challenge for his farm is the precipitous rise in grain prices caused by a drought



in the Plains States where the grain is grown. He said that many Texas farmers are even selling off great portions of their herds because of the high cost of grain. Mr. Powers said that his soil is excellent, even though laboratory tests indicate a need for a bit more nitrogen. He says everything

grows well on his farm.

He noted that it is increasingly difficult for farmers to compete with development for land. In spite of this competition for the land and in spite of the cost of labor, however, he expects that his farm will stay intact and that his son will continue to farm the land, a fact which obviously delights him.

Mr. Powers' farmer friend, Stuart Ramsey, added to Bill's comments. He said that he is also happy that his son wants to carry on with farming. He echoed concern on the issue of greatly increasing land prices. He says that he will stay where he is, even though land may be cheaper up in Pennsylvania; he finds it much easier to add to his tillable acreage in Delaware because people know him here, and are willing to rent land to him since they know he will respect the land. He said that dairy farms in southeastern Pennsylvania pay in the \$400 per acre range to rent farmland. Farming is not his primary source of income. He is primarily an agri-tourism farmer, providing hay rides and farm tours to tell school children about enlightened farm practices.

Another of Mr. Powers' farming friends, Gary Warren, added to the conversation on farming in New Castle County. He decried the fact that even though 50 cents of every farmland acquisition dollar in the state comes from this county, we get only 13 cents back. Mr. Warren pointed out that funds for farmland acquisition come from real estate transfer taxes. A statewide issue which concerns Mr. Warren is that the Governor is recommending only \$2 million for farmland preservation in the next budget, while state code requires that the fund be replenished at the level

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agriculture industry should not be treated so shabbily, according to Mr. Warren.



Prof. Sherry Kitto, Professor, Soil and Plant Sciences at the University of Delaware, introduced her topic by showing a cartoon prepared by professional staff at the University. The film depiction of a “transgenic plant” showed how a desirable genetic trait

can be transferred to another plant. Prof. Kitto said that we have been eating genetically engineered (GE) vegetables for over 20 years. Gary Warren interjected that genetic engineering in plants is nowhere near as harmful as food additives. Prof. Kitto pointed out that our Food and Drug Administration does an excellent job of keeping foods safe, a service not available in the U.K. which has had a history of hoof and mouth disease and mad cow disease outbreaks.

Prof. Kitto said that the major crops which are genetically engineered are corn, papaya, cotton, and canola, but not wheat.

Scientific research comes down clearly in favor of the genetic engineering of plants, Prof. Kitto said. The cons of the naysayers are based largely on ideological concerns, such as altering nature being un-Christian, and a general opposition to activities of big business. The “input” vs. “output” traits conundrum is also a problem for consumers. An input trait is one which helps the plant or farmer, while an output trait benefits the consumer directly. Input traits are not in favor with some consumers, since they do not provide a clear-cut and direct advantage to him/her. One pro of the practice of genetically engineering plants is that tightly regulated safeguards are in place due to the vigilance of the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and others. Scientists say that food security and lowered food prices on a worldwide basis also add to the attraction of GE products. Pesticide use has been greatly reduced because of GE.

One listener agreed that although genetically engineering plants is an intelligent addition to the choices available to farmers and consumers, the real and compelling issue is in the area of genetically modifying animals.